

TOM SWIFT and the Lunar Volcano

BY
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Book three in the Lunar Colony Saga that began with
Tom Swift and His Space Battering Ram
Tom Swift and the Cometary Reclamation

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By Thomas Hudson and Leo L. Levesque

The Emperor Shangri-La died trying to attack the Earth; the Empress—his twin sister—died trying to attack Tom Swift. Now, it seems the very Moon on which they built their Shangri-La colony of slaves is on the brink of being attacked by the ground under their feet.

Harlan Ames, former Swift Enterprises Chief of Security has been the Administrator of the now free colony but is getting anxious to take his twin children back to Earth. Their safety may depend on it; their mother was the much hated Empress!

But, something bad is happening inside the Moon.

He hopes his old boss can figure things out before it is too late. In the meantime, he leaves his children in the care of Lola “Grandma” Reyes at the lunar colony while he heads out to see if there is anything to discover at the former “Master’s” ruined fortress in the Philippines.

It is a race against time to see if clues can be found to help avoid a catastrophe.

This book is dedicated to teamwork. If you’ve ever been in the military, you know how important it can be. If you’ve ever worked for a large corporation, you know there are companies out there that charge big bucks to come in to tell everyone how important it is. If you’ve ever tried to write a story (or two or three) with another author, you absolutely know it is mandatory. Here’s to teamwork and the great results you can achieve when you have it going for you!



With a thunderous rumble felt seventeen miles away in the colony, the lunar surface erupted and the first lava shot out. — **Page 226**

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Tom Swift and the Lunar Volcano

FOREWORD — Tom Hudson

Leo Levesque and I have written two books plus this one you hold in your hands or are reading on some sort of electronic screen. As you can see, it really is a trilogy now! But, look for a fourth volume in late 2015 or early 2016, (*Tom Swift and the Killing Moon.*)

Unless this is sometime after 2024 when scientists at a small company in San Jose, California, have cracked the floating 3D image thing and you are reading this as it floats about four feet above the floor or hovers over your bed at night. Congratulations on purchasing the real life embodiment of Tom Swift's 3D Telejector!

While this story can probably stand alone, it really might be best if you begged, borrowed, bought or ripped off the first two. It is, after all, a trilogy, so far, and you've missed a lot of good, old fashioned fun.

Being one of the authors, I *hope* I can thank you for actually *buying* them. "Petty Thief" or "The Defendant" are such an ugly monikers to carry around the rest of your life.

This story follows close on the heels of number two, *Tom Swift and the Cometary Reclamation*, carrying on the story of the lunar colony and how Tom Swift is inexorably entwined in its success. Or, failure!

It is always a pleasure to write with Leo. And, we get better at it. The first one took months, the second weeks. This one ought to have taken us a long weekend, but things never work the way you hope they will.

It took longer, but was, as always, a work of joy.

This and the first books are not your old fashioned, everybody is wonderful, Tom Swift stories. They are grittier and feature more action. I just want you to they are not *for adults only*, but use caution in readers under the age of 12.

Thomas Hudson

Tom Swift and the Lunar Volcano

FOREWORD — Leo Levesque

Some novels come out fast and furious, and others take time. This one was started even before all the editing of book two was done. In fact, Tom had a couple of chapters done and the graphic for the book cover even before I had my last half chapter out of my head and shinning back at me from he computer screen.

If that's not a case of the cart before the horse I don't know what is. Such unabashed enthusiasm has to be rewarded. So without taking a breath, I took his two chapters, looked at where he was going with them, and made my outline for the story.

Tom can jump back and forth with his writing, but I must have a map to follow. Not that I stick to it, I just need a point of reference to go back to, or I'll land us in another dimension. The case in point is that I already have two series of books that are going down that path.

This will be the last book that features Harlan Ames as a lead character. Not that he won't be in the next one; he'll just be more in the background helping Tom solve a new mystery. He's going to have to let his protégés take this one and find the way to save the now plague-ridded Cordillera City...

Leo L. Levesque

Tom Swift and the Lunar Volcano

Chapter One: Burbling

The raised tower barely poked up over the rim of the wide, dark crater located on the far, or dark, side of the Moon. From one of the five seats facing the surround of view windows—finally replaced with clear tomasite panes so they could not be shot out as had happened once—and looking to the lunar surface west of the crater, anyone could see the white shaft that disappeared into lunar orbit.

It had been a construction feat never before contemplated or attempted, and had been a success. Now, it sat, or stood, silent and unused.

Chunks of a captured ice-laden comet had been chipped off as that solar body raced above in a low lunar orbit, transported to the very top of the tower, and lowered to the surface, twenty miles below. The water they contained had been absolutely mandatory to the continued use and occupation of the colony below the tower. Water was a commodity the thousands of colonists had precious little of and had been losing at an alarming rate.

At the same time, the colony was the only place to process the radioactive water so it might be used elsewhere. That being the state of California that had backed itself into a wall on overuse of its available resources.

It had been a dangerously dry wall at that.

After one-million gallon batches of processed water had been pumped back up the inside of the space elevator tube and loaded into a giant, gleaming golden spacecraft, it had been delivered to the blue and white planet a quarter of a million miles away and forced down a pipe floating above the countryside.

As improbable as it all seemed, the scheme had worked. For every million gallon load raining down from a height of ten

miles, upper atmospheric moisture had been pulled out in a nearly equal amount to water the land below.

Months had been necessary to bring the state back from the brink, but they absolutely owed their lives and livelihoods to two things: the lunar colony and Tom Swift!

The other thing anyone sitting in the tower could see was the forever unchanging surface around them. With no weather, no atmosphere around to move things, and minimal light, only the occasional small moonquake made it anything other than monotonous.

* * *

TOM SWIFT had managed to find time, nearly an entire month, to take off to be with his wife and to just enjoy life. A life he still did not speak of as it concerned nearly losing it to the Empress, the one-time co-dictator of the Shangri-La colony.

That colony, with her death, had been renamed Cordillera II by the occupants in honor of the home mountains in the Philippines where they had once been kidnapped and forced into being manual laborers for the sibling pair calling themselves The Masters.

Albinoid twins, the brother had perished during his attempts to hurtle an asteroid at the Earth in the hopes of killing enough people that they could plunder the planet for whatever the colony needed or desired.

The sister had secretly made it back to Earth after a prolonged and near-fatal six months of floating in space heading toward a fiery death in the sun.

The Swift's former Chief of Security at Enterprises, Harlan Ames, left his position on Earth to take over as Director of the lunar colony he had helped to set free. And, when a chance encounter with the Empress' derelict spaceship by a Swift space probe lead Harlan to believe that the Empress Shangri-La was still alive and now on Earth, he had gone to find out the truth.

Near the supposed crash site of her escape pod in Tibet he found a woman suffering from a head injury who mostly believed herself to be named Maggie, a young girl in a woman's body. He saved her life and, at the same time, saved her alter ego, the Empress. Even in those moments

when the Empress' mind and memories came forward, he found himself falling in love with Maggie.

They married, moved to the Moon, and while he tried to give her a normal life—keeping her dark secret from the very people she had once subjugated—the Empress had secretly gained greater and greater control over Maggie's personality and the shared body.

It was only when she had tried to kill Tom that Harlan realized the evil Empress would never be totally controlled. Maggie must have realized this as she scrambled her own brain in such a manner that she did not die—that would have ended the double pregnancy she so hoped to complete—but it had effectively ended her life.

Only medical miracles kept the body alive long enough for the identical twins to be born. Then, and with dignity, Harlan sat holding Maggie's hand as the equipment was turned off.

Tom was still suffering pangs of guilt for what he felt was forcing Harlan to choose between his wife and his old boss.

His own wife, the former Bashalli Prandit, sensed something was bothering him, but she stopped asking after a few, "It's nothing," answers from him.

They traveled for two of the weeks visiting Scotland—during which time she discovered she was not a fan of whisky but liked the dish known as haggis—and then to France where both of them decided that the heavy sauces coming with most dishes were just too much for their tastes. Finally it was on to Ireland on their way back home.

Ireland had been wonderful. As nice as the Scottish people had been (in comparison to the French Parisians who lived up to their snooty stereotypes in Tom's opinion) the Irish were ultra-welcoming.

Tom was recognized wherever they went, but little other than a pleasant nod, tip of a cap, or a few small kisses to his cheeks by young girls, happened to make them feel anything less than in a very good place.

He discovered that the offer to purchase a round of drinks in any pub would land him in the position of having to refuse the return of twenty or more drinks from grateful patrons.

Bashalli quickly hit on a plan. "Either buy your round at

the end of the evening after nursing one or two beers, or offer your extra drinks to anyone coming in after we do.”

It endeared them both to an even wider group of people. Soon, helpful locals were pointing out incoming people who were less well-to-do and who truly appreciated the offer of a free drink.

But, now the trip was behind them, their internal clocks had time to reset, and in another day they would both go back to work.

They spent most of that Sunday morning in bed, laying in each other’s arms listening to the many song birds that seemed to have moved into their back yard during their vacation.

It was the next morning, and as Bashalli fixed him a breakfast of leftover Chinese food from the night before mixed in with scrambled eggs, he realized it was time to go back to work on something serious.

“Will you miss the vacation, Tom?” she asked as she picked up his plate.

He had to think a moment. “No. Not so much the vacation as the time I got to spend with you,” he finally said.

That earned him a generous helping of kisses.

With the weather as beautiful as it was in early April, he announced that he was going to walk to Swift Enterprises, the four-mile-square industrial and aeronautic complex there in Shopton, New York.

He stopped seeing her shaking her head and making a tutting sound.

“Uhh, no?” he inquired.

“No. May I remind you that father Swift dropped my car off for a tune-up the day before we got home and it won’t be ready at the mechanic’s shop until tomorrow? And, you promised to be at my beck and call as personal chauffeur, and toy boy, today and tomorrow?” She giggled.

Tom grinned. “Tom’s toy boy chauffeur services leaving in five minutes, ma’am. Go get ready.”

He dropped her off at a building bearing the sign, “*Shopton Advertising*,” before heading out of town to Enterprises.

“Hello, Tom,” the young gate guard greeted him. “Glad to

have you back. Hope you and the missus had a great trip.”

“Thanks, Davey,” Tom answered with a smile. He drove to the left and to the parking lot for the Administration building, pulling up next to a recognizable sedan, one owned by his parents and generally driven by his father, Damon Swift.

Damon was the CEO and president of the Swift companies as well as being an incredibly talented scientist and inventor. With Tom working at Enterprises, he secretly hoped to be able to hand things off to his son in another dozen years.

“Well, hello there, Tom,” the male secretary sitting outside the office Tom and Damon often shared.

“Hey, Trent. A mustache?” The usually clean-shaven man was sporting about two weeks of growth.

Munford Trent smiled, “Yes. As I have explained to your father I lost a wager and must wear this for two months to repay the debt. And, don’t ask; it was a stupid bet that I’d rather forget.”

Tom opened the heavy door and stepped into the office, a grin still on his face.

His father was sitting in one of the overstuffed leather chairs to the left of the door in what was considered to be the conference area of the nearly thirty-by-thirty foot office. In front of him, floating above the low table, was a three-dimensional image.

“Well, stranger,” the man in the image greeted him. “Long time no see. I hope you and Bashalli had a good month off.”

Tom, on seeing the man in the 3D image, had a sudden urge to run away, but he smiled. “Hello, Harlan. You’re looking pretty good yourself. In fact, if I didn’t know better I’d say you’ve spent some time on a beach somewhere getting a tan.”

Harlan smiled and nodded. “Got it in one, skipper. Saclo and Magadia took over up here again and they and Doc Simpson made it clear I wasn’t to reappear on the Moon for at least two weeks. Doc has a friend with a cottage on the island of Maui so I spend fifteen days there. Before you ask, I’m fine. Really. I hope you are, too.” He looked meaningfully at his former young boss.

Tom sat down next to his father before answering.

“I’m still feeling uncomfortable to tell you the truth. I don’t like the way I handled things.”

Ames nodded but his smile didn’t disappear.

“I understand, but I’ve come to terms with it all and I want you to. Besides, Uncle Tom needs to come up and see his niece and nephew. I felt terrible leaving them up here when I came down but, as Magadia and Doc told me, there is no way they will ever remember that and will never hold it against me. I’m back and they are beautiful and I would hope you can come up and hold them.”

He winked and added, “I have a motive. Magadia and Saclolo have agreed to be godparents, and I would love it if Bashalli and you can come on up and be co-godparents.”

Tom’s face broke into a big smile. “I didn’t know that twins needed two sets of godparents?” he teased.

“Under the circumstances, I think two sets are better than one. One on the Moon, and one on Earth.”

Tom had to grin. “Not to worry, Harlan. She told me up front that babies are not to be discussed in the Swift household for at least five or more years. She likes holding them but loves her job and wouldn’t want to take time off for a pregnancy. I’m not sure how long it’s going to take us to get back into the swing of things down here, but I’ll tell her about the honor and the invitation and let you know.”

The three men talked for another five minutes before the connection was broken. Before signing off, Harlan’s eyes turned to Damon.

“Please consider it, Damon. I don’t know how to swing it here, yet, but I just know it is becoming important. Thanks!”

“What was that last bit about, Dad?” Tom asked as they rose from the comfortable chairs and stepped over to their own desks.

“Well, our old Security Chief was wondering if we could do a trade. Phil Radnor is a great Security man, but he is not a natural manager. He’s the first to admit it. And, he has no issues with us bringing in someone above him to do the paperwork.”

Tom knew about this. Phil had been Harlan’s number two man and the obvious choice to replace him, but ran into

troubles with the enhanced duties within a few months.

“So, what is the trade?”

Damon smiled. “Harlan is suggesting that he and his family come down here for six months out of the year to manage Security from the local office and then manage remotely from the Moon with Phil as his proxy the other six months. As they grow up, he wants his children to spend at least half their time on the Earth and learn to live in both places. As it is, he already asked our Uniforms team to create pairs of the artificial gravity garments for them to wear up there so they live with near Earth gravity.”

The garments, typically worn by anyone who wanted or needed to have some apparent gravity holding them down were a complex weave of fibers and metals that reacted to an array of specialty repelatron emitters attached to ceilings, acting only on the metal fibers. With the downward forces surrounding a person’s body, they didn’t feel any individual spot pressing them down; their whole body felt as if it were affected by real planetary gravity.

“Is he just thinking about the gravity thing?” Tom asked. “Because I could up the power in the a-grav system in their quarters to Earth normal.”

His father shook his head. “I have the impression Harlan is thinking more along the lines of reality, not gravity. The reality of the colony on the Moon is quite different from that on the Earth. Up there it is one government and one way to live. Fairly utopian. Down here—”

“—It is totally different. Unfortunately. I get it,” Tom finished his father’s thought. “What are you going to do?”

Damon Swift shrugged. “What can I do? First thing is to see how Phil really feels about the possibility of a little knock back in the pecking order. Then, there are the logistics of the lunar colony’s Administrator being absent half the time. There is still a hidden nest of those so-called Elite vipers to be cleaned out. The problem is that nobody knows exactly who they are. They could be hidden in some secret part of the colony, like the former Empress’ quarters, or are blending in with the general population, waiting.”

It was an unfortunate truth that a small group of people, most cruel and heartless thugs, had been brought willingly to the Moon to serve as slave drivers to the many thousands

of Filipinos and other people snatched from their villages and forced to work to build and maintain the colony for the former Masters.

When both of the albino dictators had been eliminated, only about seventy of the estimated remaining one-hundred Elite had been captured and taken back to prisons on Earth.

Even in the best of times nobody other than the Masters knew who all the Elite members were. No list or other indication had been discovered. There could still be more of them, hiding and biding their time in hopes they might one day seize control of the colony.

Harlan's attentions had been otherwise engaged with the illness, revelation of her true self, and death of his wife, Maggie.

Now that he was back in his office full time, there were so many other things to occupy his time that he assigned his two chief assistants, the husband and wife team of Saclolo and Magadia Reyes, to work with Gary Bradley and his Security team currently on temporary lunar assignment.

"I suggest that you make arrangements to go up to see Harlan, and discuss everything you can about what his intentions really are. I don't want to sound as if I believe he has an ulterior motive, but you do have to admit that the last time he came to us with a plan, that was only supposed to include him hunting down the Empress and either capturing or killing her. Not falling in love with her alter ego and marrying her."

Damon looked at Tom in a meaningful manner.

The discussion with Phil Radnor went much better than either of them might have expected. When he arrived in the office ten minutes later he took a seat, listened to Damon detailing Harlan's plan, and only raised his hand once.

"When can we get him back here to take the reigns?"

"Are you that eager to give up command, Phil?" Tom asked.

"As they say, I've enjoyed it right up to here..." he raised his hand, palm down to a point a foot above his head, "...and find I can't stomach any more enjoyment. Yeah. I'm ready to go back being number two. That is," he now looked at Damon, "if *that* position is still an option. I know Gary—"

“Gary has been contacted and thinks the world of you, but says he’s good with the demotion—as long as he gets to keep the salary increase!” Tom smiled.

* * *

Harlan greeted the inventor and Bud with wide-open arms giving them warm hugs the moment they stepped in from the airlock and had tossed their helmets back over their shoulders.

“Boy, I’ve missed you two,” he admitted.

“As have I,” a voice came from behind the Administrator.

“Hey, Doc!” Bud called out grabbing the former Enterprises physician in a bear hug and spinning them both around twice.

“Put me down, you big goof!” Doc ordered. He smacked the dark haired young man on the shoulder, causing the flyer to grin broadly at him.

Dr. Gregory Simpson had relocated to the Moon to both provide an increased level of medical support for the residents, and to start a Space Medicines University.

The colony’s former chief medical man had been offered a management and teaching position in the school which he seemingly accepted. No sooner had he been sent back to the Earth to try to locate several other teaching surgeons who might like to be part of the school, he disappeared. Or, so it was believed for a while. In reality he coerced a co-worker into taking the Earth-bound flight for him, but had given the man a slow-acting poison.

That left the renegade doctor free to assist the Empress in here scheme to destroy Tom Swift... but he had been the one who died.

“Ah, but, Doc, I’ve missed you. We all have,” Bud stated.

“Ah, but, Bud. While I miss you and Tom, and especially patching him up after all his various attacks and accidents, I threw my back out a week ago and that hug hurt like the dickens!” He was rubbing his lower back.

Bud reached out to pat Doc on the shoulder, realized it wasn’t going to help the situation, and pulled his hand back. “Sorry.”

“If old home week is over, I’d love to get the boys settled and then over to meet my kids.” They turned to Harlan.

Harlan led them to the hospital unit, accompanied by Doc, where he ushered them into the suite of rooms he and Maggie had once occupied. Harlan had, on her death, moved back to the former VIP quarters he once occupied, giving up the second bedroom to become the nursery.

“There are three bedrooms in here along with two bathrooms, the living room and kitchen. Everything was made ready for you.” Harlan looked at his watch. “Listen, guy. I have to go take care of a little business in the offices, but why don’t you get settled and then come up to see the twins and me in an hour. Room VIP-2 on those locators sitting on the counter.”

He excused himself and, after checking out the accommodations, the boys did rock-paper-scissors to see who would take the largest of the rooms with its king size bed. The other two rooms only had the equivalent of queen size mattresses.

Bud won but shook his head. “Nope. You take it. “I’m not certain what I would do with all that space without Sandy here to take over ninety percent of it. You can’t imagine how long her legs get after midnight. Arms, too!”

“Yeah. I know all about that. Not with Sandy, of course, but Bash is kind of a bed wanderer in the middle of the night. I end up with my behind hanging out over the edge most mornings.”

They laughed at the thought and agreed they would each take one of the smaller rooms.

When they met up with Harlan they decided to not bring up the subject of sleeping with a spouse no matter how humorous; it might cause too much distress.

Instead, they accepted his offer to take a tour of the lowest of the underground domes to see how his changes were being implemented.

“For starters we finally got the fabric looms up and running. Before that the only clothes the people had were those they either wore up, or the single second set the Masters...” He took a deep breath and continued, “...the set the Masters assigned them. Both were pretty much in the

state of falling apart. With the looms going, we now have an around-the-clock workforce making new fabric from old, and another team using the sewing facilities that had been sitting idle.”

Bud smiled. “I was going to remark that people seemed to be dressing a bit snappier. A lot less clutching at the gaps, too.”

Harlan snorted. “Yeah. Progress, indeed. But at a cost.”

Tom’s brow scrunched into a curious look. “Cost?”

Harlan nodded and looked back at him, weariness evident in his eyes. “Uh-huh. It’s probably putting back our efforts to ferret out the Elite. Now, it’s even easier for them to mingle. They’ve always had clean and newer clothing than the rest of the colonists. I—”

He stopped suddenly when the ground underneath their feet shifted nearly a foot to the left and then back to the right knocking Bud to his knees.

Around them in the huge agriculture fields of this dome, and hundreds of farm workers on the five dome levels either fell down or stumbled. Dust rose from everywhere that had not been watered that day.

“Earthquake?” Bud asked in horror, getting to his feet.

“Lunarquakes are what we’ve been calling them,” Harlan corrected him. “We’ve had two others this past month with a strength of about four-point-four and four-point-one. That one was stronger. I’d guess maybe a five-one.”

“Impacts?” Tom asked. The back side of the Moon had been frequently bombarded by incoming objects from outer space since it first formed. Much of this had disappeared when Tom’s Attractatron mule fleet had been dispatched to intercept anything in danger of hitting the Earth—at least anything that might survive the fiery plunge into the atmosphere—as well as protecting the Moon from the same things.

“No, and I think you need to come see and hear something.” After assuring himself that the people around them were fine and starting to get back to work, Harlan led the boys to the nearby elevator and took them through the complex and up into the observation tower.

“Take a seat, guys,” he directed, pointing at two of the

eight chairs around the perimeter of the observation and control room. "I need to locate the proper files."

A moment later he had what he was seeking and brought a graph up onto the monitor nearest them. As it played they saw that this was a seismograph of the area from the past full year. A vertical line swept from left to right moving through more than ten months. Then, a spike broke the nearly flat line. And, another plus one marking the event from this day.

"Nothing before that?" Tom inquired.

"Nothing of much consequence once the mules were up there protecting our butts."

"How about records from before that?" Tom was hoping that some sort of pattern might be spotted.

"We have records only going back to about the time this tower was erected. Perhaps nineteen months. Nothing back then, either. But, I want you to listen to the input from a series of buried microphones under the deepest of the domes. They are inside air bubbles and pick up small noises from the surrounding rocks."

He turned to the computer and with a few taps had an audio file playing. Both Tom's and Bud's eye went wide.

"Bubbling? Sounds kind of like indigestion," Bud stated as Tom motioned for Harlan to replay the sounds.

"It does sound like the Moon is having some sort of intestinal distress," Harlan admitted.

"That's no intestinal sound. I've heard that before. In Hawaii and Rhode Island and elsewhere. Those are the sounds of lava making its way around deep under the surface!"

"That's impossible," Bud declared. "The Moon's core has been cold for millions of years!"

Yes, Tom thought, *but that doesn't make this any less potentially catastrophic!*

Chapter Two: Saclolo Has a Dream

TO ANYONE just seeing them, it would seem that Magadia Reyes was hugging her husband, Saclolo, in a death-like grip. Never before had she been this high off the lunar surface. The mountain range that they were flying over was several hundred feet below them. Even her first and only landing on the Moon now seemed less harrowing. At least that was what she was thinking at the moment.

The fact that there had been no way to see outside of the ship taking the just captured slaves to the lunar colony failed to come to her mind. Even most of the Elite, the people who had soon become the taskmasters and drivers of the captured people, were not provided with any view.

In retrospect, Saclolo decided this was because the Masters wanted nobody to know exactly where the colony was located.

Now greatly dimmed by the passage of time was the memory of being packed as tight as sardines in a tin can with twenty-nine other people who were as sick and traumatized as she was.

Magadia tried to bury her helmeted head into the air tanks on Saclolo's back. Never had the total emptiness of the Moon's surface bothered her like this. She had grown up in the Cordillera Mountain ranges on Luzon Island in the Philippines, so wide open spaces and dazzling heights were not new to her. But this strange, highly contrasted visage of blazing sunlight across the mountain tops and near total blackness without a single hint of gray in the shaded places below them made her want to scream.

She did.

Saclolo threatened to turn his radio off if she did that again and she clamped her lips together and contented herself with whimpers.

She had been on the Luna surface before, but always at ground level where things had a hint of being something that she recognized. People—though disguised by space suits—machines, the space elevator tower, the above-ground buildings, open vehicles such as the small wheeled

tubes used to move above ground, or the control tower sticking above the rim of the crater seemed more real than this soundless flying contraption with only a saddle to sit on. She never liked the idea of speeding along on a motorcycle, never mind something like this.

“Dia, relax a little,” Saclolo told his wife over the radio using her pet name. He was ablaze with excitement. The flying machines left behind by Tom Swift were an incredible way to get around. “You are in the vastness of God. Marvel at what he has created in the heavens above us. Or rather, below us. Enjoy the multitude and brilliant colors of the stars, and look... a crescent Earth!” He pointed to the far horizon that was before them. Earth was never seen at the colony for their location on the back side of the Moon.

“God,” she spat back in a low tense voice, “has made me a simple woman with a simple knowledge of the world. Mountains, forest and oceans I understand the need of, but this airless world...” she left anything more unsaid as she had to clench her teeth when Saclolo brought the four-man *Straddler* around and started his descent to the summit of a leveled-off mountain top. “I need solid ground beneath my feet!” she insisted.

Strapped in as they were, it was impossible for them to fall off the repelatron powered, motorcycle shaped, flying scooter.

Magadia whimpered again as she saw the dark spot at the top of the mountain currently rushing up at them. She began reciting a Philippine prayer for salvation of her soul. And it was only then that Saclolo realized how frightened his wife was. He slowed his high-speed, nose-down descent into what looked like a black hole in the middle of the leveled-off mountain top.

“Dia, I'm so sorry!” he apologized to her as the machine leveled and slowed to nearly a crawl. “But why have you never said anything before?”

“Never have you ever taken me higher than the very gates of kingdom come before. I'll be all right as soon as I get my feet back on lunafirma.” She was trying to make a joke out of the situations but he knew she was not in a jovial mood.

Saclolo landed the vehicle on the twenty-foot-wide, circular reinforced apron set into the left side of the

hundred foot diameter opening that pierced hundreds of feet down into the mountain. This had been planned to be the mouth of a water reservoir that the Masters had started and never finished.

The relatively low mountain range stretched both right and left of them, with several other long mountainous ridges behind those, closer to the front side of the Moon. But in front of them was an almost vertical drop off to the lunar plains far below them that were pockmarked with uncountable numbers of craters of all sizes and shapes. While most were round from direct hits, some were more nearly long skid marks that showed where an incoming rock had either just touched the surface, or they deeply dug themselves in.

Looking down and in the distance they could discern the large crater where the lunar colony was located. Although the back side of the Moon was called the “dark side,” the truth was there was some low level of light provided by the universe. Even with that, only the central control tower of the colony showed above the upper rim. There was now a growing number of smaller domes dotting the lower crater surface used to store oversize equipment and the surface vehicles. Most of those domes were once hidden under false hills and oversized man-made boulders. Now that Cordillera City was free, this pretense no longer had to be kept up and had been cleared.

The most noticeable feature was the red light atop the control tower that pulsed on and off, ten times a minute.

On the far side of the crater and separated by over two thousands feet were the two newest and largest of the colony’s domes. While the top surface area of the domes appeared to be only sixty feet across—and consisted mostly of loading docks that lead into airlocks that were also the freight elevators—the rest of the domes were actually several stories deep, greater than a thousand feet wide, and had the ability to expand underground as the needs arose.

One was the industrial and science dome, and it was humming along twenty-four hours a day, every day, making all the things that the colony needed. Only very basic materials had to be brought up from Earth, and those were mostly perishables. The Masters once used a mining spaceship—now destroyed—named the *RockHound* to

obtain most of their metals and basic refineable elements from the asteroid belt beyond Mars.

The other dome had been empty and unused until recently. It had never been completed because the final loads of slaves/colonists were never brought up. Now it was slowly becoming what everyone hoped would be the leading space medicine research center and a medical university. It was chaired by the former top doctor of Swift Enterprise's, Doc Simpson. He and his handpicked roster of international doctors were on the forefront of space and low gravity medicine. He also rented space to several pharmaceutical companies to offset the expense of maintaining the university. At least, they were breaking even.

Farther out was the ice/water space elevator tower that Tom Swift had built to get life saving water from a comet he once captured and placed into lunar orbit. It now sat waiting for another reason to be used.

The husband and wife team of Co-Directors under Harlan Ames' leadership were fast becoming the full-time Directors of the colony, even if they did not realize it. Harlan felt that he had paid too big of a price, both in mind and soul, and needed to break away. But he knew that there was unfinished business that must be taken care of first.

Saclolo untied a box from the back of the *Straddler*, and with a push of a button four spring-loaded legs popped out of the bottom of the case. He set it down facing toward the middle of the hole and unhooked the cover, placing it underneath.

With a few taps on the small control board, electronic meters started to register and little multicolored lights started to blink in some random fashion, or so it seemed. The little projection tube rose up several inches and turned automatically from one side of the mountain summit to the other several times.

Magadia waited patiently as the mechanism swept back and forth, but finally asked, "Why are you scanning the mountain top with the telejector?"

"I'm not, Dia. The telejector is measuring the distances between the mountain top and its surroundings. It's going to adjust the program I have installed in it already. It's almost done... *there*, it will start in a moment." The blinking lights now showed a steady green color. And, because the

telejector needed to reflect its presentation off something, a mist of minute particles now sprayed from the case. These were so tiny that gravity would require several hours to drag them down to the surface.

A haze of swirling colors manifested in front of them, and the entire summit was transposed into an elaborate scene. Even soft string music filled their helmets.

Magadia felt like she was standing with her back against a wall. She found herself, and Saclolo, in the most elegant five star restaurant layout she had ever seen. Tuxedo-dressed waitstaff and white shirt, bow tie bus-persons were busily serving five course meals and fine wines to their patrons. She could barely discern the clear dome cover that sealed the restaurant from the harsh, cold vacuum of space.

“Saclolo? Explain,” was all she could say.

“This is the future I see that will set us free from Earth forever.” He replied with a big smile on his face that she could see through his visor. “It’s only the start. Imagine two hundred hotel suites with balconies overlooking the colony and the crater-filled plains. Each one fetching two-thousand dollars a day. I know it is quite dark on this side of the Moon, but the protective dome can enhance the light out there. This is not all. There can be three hundred less expensive rooms on the inside of the mountain. Each charging perhaps one thousand dollars a day... and that is just for starters.”

Magadia stared at him, her eyes squinted a little as she tried to process the information and crunch the numbers in her head. Seven hundred thousand dollars in US money *per day*? Close to five million a week? She shook her head in amazement.

“And, that’s without the roundtrip ticket to get here and all the other entertainments that I have in mind,” he almost gloated.

“Such as?” she asked in wonder. She never knew that Saclolo could think on such a grand scale. Of course, merely trying to stay alive took so much out of you. And she knew this firsthand as well.

“I think we have a few things here that don’t need a lot work to fix up.” He pointed at the lunar tower that rose twenty miles into space. “See those guy wires?”

“Not actually, they’re a little too far off.” She laughed. “I left my telephoto visor back in the colony.”

“Well, if you could see them they would make excellent zip lines. What a thrill zipping down to this mountain top from twenty miles up then swinging around to zip down into the mountain crater itself. We could offer enclosed two or four person pods or even the option of only a spacesuit and harness. And at the end we could rig it so they fall out of the harness and free fall the last few thousand feet to the lunar surface.”

“Are you insane, Saclolo; they will have a heart attack, if the fall doesn't kill them!”

“Not if it's into moon dust. All controlled by one of Tom's mule's Attractatron beams.”

“Of which we only have the one from the mule that crashed,” she reminded him.

Saclolo didn't let that deter him in the slightest.

“We have the rail launch system that we ship up the Helium3 with to the *Genghis Khan* to take to Earth. We could turn that into a one orbit ride around the Moon with a very low trajectory path that just skims over one of the US lunar landing sites. A sling shot type of thing.”

“I thought that the acceleration gee force from the rail gun was too high, and that's why the Masters supplemented it with stolen repelatron technology. People do not wish to become compacted into a puddle just to see some old metal and faded flags.”

“On Earth that is right. But here on the Moon a lot less speed is needed, and if we are going for a low orbit, then the gun can be retooled to do it. We might have to lay down more track so a good, steady and non-lethal push can be provided, but we're equipped to do that.”

“The landing? How do you intend to safely slow down people and make a safe landing without killing them? And do not tell me they will free fall into Moon dust!”

“The technology from Tom's space mules can handle that as well. In fact he already agreed to try to fix the broken Attractatron unit from the little mule that crashed while saving our colony from that tower sabotage. He is the one who suggested it might be used to catch smaller things dropped from orbit rather than always needing to land a

ship. The Swift's have a tendency not to use their inventions, like the Attractatrons, to their full potential. I can see some of that back on Earth where various governments want to turn everything into weapons. But, space is basically a Tom Swift frontier. And as long as he is in control of inventions such as his repelatron emitter, he can keep that from happening. His technology assures the colony's safety while it can make us independent!"

"And, again I ask how? How do you propose to land people using a reclaimed piece of his technology?"

Saclolo turned off the telejector and the restaurant disappeared. "Okay. Consider the American game of baseball. I see this used like an electronic catcher's mitt. The eight or ten person pod is sent along the railgun and launched in an oblong orbit so people get close up and perhaps ten mile altitude looks at the Moon. Back at this end the Attractatron homes in on the shuttle and slows it gradually, finally bringing it completely to the ground, back on the launch rails, under control, ready for the next group. No worries!"

But Saclolo had one worry.

"Of course, one of these days someone will find a way to build their own repelatron systems, and then space will be wide open to anyone with a bank roll."

"Then how did the Masters make the emitters in the first place?"

"Like most things they did, they stole their first complete unit or finished designs stolen from the Swifts with help from Ralph McDermott. Ralph arranged for a shipment of six different types of single-compounded emitters to drift off into space while the *Challenger* was being unloaded at the Swifts' Outpost. They were supposed to be used for power consumption tests to see which of the different types of emitters were best for different elements."

"And?"

"The case they were in was too small to be located with radar when they went missing. Ralph had fitted the case with a tracking device using a directional beam away from the Outpost that tuned on automatically forty-eight hours later. A reusable delta wing spacecraft the Masters were using at that time picked the case up days later. With them

in hand the Masters made the launch system they used back home in the Cordillera mountain fortress and started the launches of the *Genghis Khan* and began to build the moon colony.”

Magadia was quite impressed that Saclolo knew so much of the Master's history. They only met after Magadia was brought up to the base from the Philippines. She was a work force slave, and while he too was a slave, he had a college education in electronics, but happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time visiting his grandparents in their mountain village the night it was raided for more slaves. A lucky capture the Masters thought at the time. Little did they realize he would become one of the key persons in their undoing.

“Then there is the tower itself,” he continued. “We could put an airlock on top and let the guests get their first glimpse of the Moon from up there. We could switch out the ice cages and put in sealed transparent units as elevator pods and then load the pods onto open flatbed trucks and drive them to the hotel. That way no space suit is needed and no worries of people doing stupid things in the suit that they have not been checked out on.”

“Could we put these would-be space cadets in some type of space camp on Earth before they get shipped up here?” she asked still not convinced that any of this was a good idea. “Perhaps it would be part of what they pay to come up?”

“Why not, and it can become mandatory for all first timers. It would actually add to the authentic value of the adventure. Good thinking, Dia.” He was pleased that she was trying to add to his dream.

Magadia stood looking at Saclolo for a few moments.

“My dreamer husband, how did you ever come up with this notion of turning our new city into the site of a theme park?”

He grinned as he reached into a pocket of his spacesuit. A piece of paper was removed and he unfolded it, handing it to her.

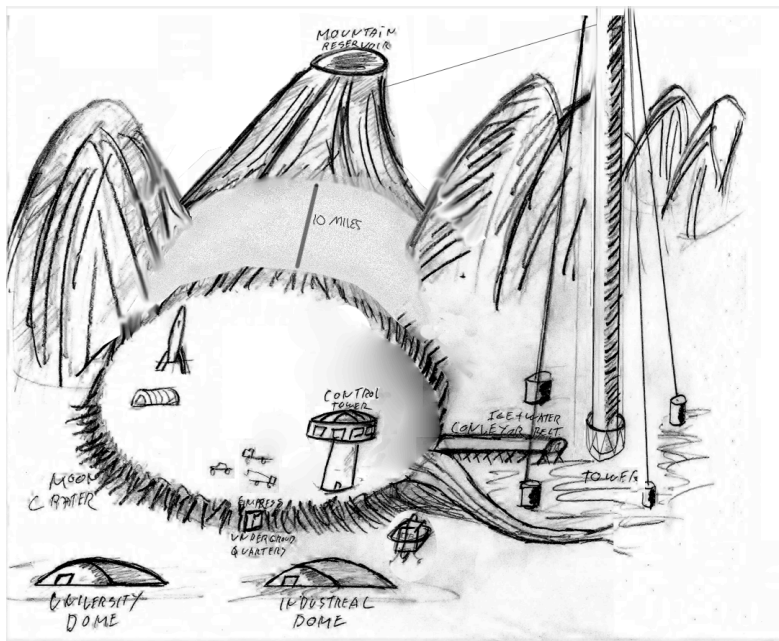
“This,” he proudly explained. “One night right after the Empress... I mean Harlan's wife, Maggie, scrambled her own brain to spare all of us I tried to think of something to

make all of this meaningful in some way. Also, I wished to make us economically free.” He tapped the page in her hands.

“That is the first drawing I made. I know it is like something a five-year-old might do, but I am not an artist. I am, as you say, a dreamer.”

“Not to put a damper on all this, but where is the money coming from to start this resort?”

“Well, I hope to get investors for that, or even one of those 'help me with my dreams' funds on the Internet that have become so popular.” He tried changing the subject by adding as a second thought, “There is always that Chinese proposal we once turned down. Do you know how many people have signed up just to go into low Earth orbit, never mind visit the Moon or Mars? Even with the several crashes and deaths, people still are attracted to space.”



Magadia shook her head no, and when he did not say anything she realized that he could not see that her head shook sideways in the helmet.

“How many?” she asked finally.

“Over a million since those flights finally started and

hundreds more each day. If we have half that success, and we will be charging less than the first twenty-thousand people did for that experience, we could be booked for years to come.”

“How would these intrepid travelers get here?”

“For that I’ll have to talk to Tom Swift. He has the only space drive system that can do it. His repelatrions are reliable and liftoff acceleration can be totally controlled. Besides, his ships can make a one way trip in three to four hours, with all the comforts of an airplane, if not better.”

“Will they build you a fleet of ships? I’m sure you will need several.”

“Three to start at least. And we can team up with Doc Simpson and deliver patients for him and take them back to Earth.”

“That is a great idea!” Magadia exclaimed.

“And, we have the agricultural and manufacturing sections, as well as the fish ponds to show off. But I think that if we can get backing for a lunar theme and water park we can really count on the people coming up. What would you be willing to pay to have five, family oriented, fun fill days on the Moon?” Saclolo asked his wife in earnest.

“That, my husband,” she laughed at him, “I already have. You need to asked someone from Earth who dreams of space and doesn’t have to live it every day.”

She had a point, and he told her so.

“Does Harlan know of this dream of yours?” she asked as he repacked the telejector.

“No, I have not told him, Dia. He seems so preoccupied lately, and it’s not just with his twins. The way he has been handing us much of the more important work, I’m beginning to think that he will not be staying with us. That he is going to return to Earth with his children. Not that I blame him with all the worst possible memories up here.”

Magadia heard him sigh. Together they carried and then tied the telejector onto the back of the *Straddler*. Saclolo took her hand and squeezed it.

“We’ll take the back way down that is twice as long to travel, but I can keep us next to the mountain and there is

only half the distance down. We'll come out from behind the mountain in the ravine that is between this mountain and the next one over and follow that down."

"I will still keep my eyes closed."

"That reminds me that I have to check out the possibility of regolith boarding and skiing down some of the slopes. The stuff is quite thick in some place."

Saclolo mounted the *Straddler* first, then Magadia took her place behind him.

"Just do one thing for me?" she asked in a sweet voice.

"Sure, anything you want."

"No glass elevators hanging on the outside of the mountain."

"Well... I was thinking of two, but there will be several interior ones as well."

"Good, because only when you get the inside ones working will I come back up here with you. Until then, don't ask me to come back. Personally, I hate the view!" She smiled though he could not see it.

"Dia, that I promise you." He laughed, reached around and gave her a little hug. "Let's go back."

* * *

Tom and Bud stood on the rim of the giant crater in which nestled the lunar colony. They were looking down, both lost in thought of how to save the thousands of people down there should the volcanic activity below their feet get out of hand.

Over the past few days the rumbling and burbling sounds had increased, now registering several times each day.

"I think I need to get an earth blaster up here," Tom said still looking over the landscape, "to dig a hole down maybe a thousand feet. We can't understand what we can't see."

"Okay. Now, tell your friend, Bud, why?"

"I think we need to get some good sounding and tremor measuring equipment down there. I have to tell you, Bud, I'm worried. Those noises shouldn't be happening, and if they're caused by some sort of volcanic activity we might

need to find a way to evacuate the colony.”

“They’ll never leave, you know,” Bud stated.

Tom nodded his head. “Yeah. I know. They may have been brought up here as slaves but the life they have now is far better than anything most would return to.” He sighed. “It’s some sort of human nature to want to stay to protect your property, even in the face of devastating odds.”

He was thinking of the many hurricanes and typhoons over the years where evacuations were mandated, only to have a stubborn few remain, many perishing. The same thing occurred near volcanoes.

Tom patted the case hanging around his neck. “Well, I brought these BigEyes out for a reason. Let’s get over to the elevator, fire it up, and get a bird’s eye view of what’s around us.

The BigEyes were a combination powerful binocular and computer enhancement system that could bring something—especially in the vacuum of space—fifty miles away into sharp focus as if it were only a few hundred feet in the distance. Tom had built-in low-light enhancement capabilities and would give them an “early morning light” view of their surroundings.

The elevator’s security system flashed its readiness as soon as Tom entered his code. It took nearly a minute, but the elevator ring normally kept fifty feet up came down and stopped one inch above the platform. They climbed on board, attached safety cables to their suits, and headed up. Tom intended to go up about three miles to get the best all-around view.

When they arrived at the stopping point, Tom pressed the button to halt, but the elevator kept rising.

“Not good?” Bud asked seeing Tom stabbing at the button a few more times.

“Not unless you think overshooting our stopping point by several miles is good. I only hope I can get control of this thing. I don’t want us stuck at the top with no way to get back down!”

Chapter Three: A Little Dig

TOM LOOKED at Bud. He had a grim look of determination on his face as he shook his head.

“I’m afraid that with this platform just sitting out here the controls may have frozen. Hang on.” Tom reached into a pocket of his suit and pulled out what looked like a plastic-wrapped piece of foil. He unfolded it, wrapped it around the control panel, and pulled a small tab on one corner.

“It’s nice and all of you to think of covering the panel to ward off the chill, skipper, but what the heck is that?”

“A self-warming emergency pad, Bud. Meant for just this sort of problem.” He lifted one corner, smiled and reached in to press the button again. The elevator stopped.

“Nice,” the flyer commented as Tom took the BigEyes out and began to sweep the area below them.

Three minutes later he handed them to his friend.

Bud repeated the sweep but also spotted nothing out of the ordinary.

“Oh, wait,” he said looking down and out just a few hundred yards. “Found the remains of one of the old anchors,” he reported.

The Empress, in one of her final attempts to sabotage Tom’s hopes of finishing and using his space elevator, had taken a pair of her minions—former members of the Elite who remained faithful to her out of fear and craving for power—had snuck out as the tower was being constructed, planted explosives on top of the anchor points and detonated them, severing three of the cables stabilizing the tower.

It had nearly worked. But, only just.

While it did cut three cables and blow at least two of the anchors out of the lunar ground, it had killed one of the men—the former doctor who supposedly had gone back to the Earth.

Tom took the BigEyes and pointed them where Bud indicated.

“Oh. Yeah. Pretty mangled and from the way it dug in.

I'm not surprised we couldn't see it from the ground. Well, it's doing no harm nor good out there, so I say we leave it for now. Ready to go back down?"

Bud nodded. "Just as long as your little heating blanket is still working."

Tom laughed. "Five hours of power in a flexible, thin polymer battery, flyboy." To prove it, he removed the blanket and pressed the **DOWN** button. They immediately began to drop.

By the time they got back inside the upper dome of the colony, both were thirsty and a little hungry.

They removed their suits and were heading out of the large storage room inside the airlock when a Filipino man approached them.

"Hello, Señors Tom and Bud. Did you see what you wanted to?"

"Hello, Saclolo," the inventor greeted the number two man in the colony's leadership. "We went a bit higher than I wanted to go—that little cold problem I told you I was pretty sure about—but got a good look around. Nothing is visible. No new impact points or anything to suggest an answer for the rumblings. At least, coming from outer space."

"Ah, it is as I suspected. Another mystery. But, I must tell you that there are rumors running through the domes. Rumors that have people saying it is all your fault. That you are bringing these rumblings to us to try to force us to go back." He shrugged.

Tom's shoulders sagged.

"Here we save you from the Emperor and Empress, find a way to bring you the water the colony needs to survive, and money to help you buy things, and *still* we are believed to be the bad guys?" Bud asked, incredulously. He turned to Tom. "What do you think they'd do if we just went home and left them to figure this out for themselves?"

Now, the inventor shook his head. "Can't do that, Bud. It might be a good lesson for the people who spread these rumors in the first place, but it also might sign the death warrants for thousands. So, we stay and put up with it, I guess."

“And, I will do whatever I can to try to put an end to these rumors,” their host promised. “Oh, and before I forget, Señor Harlan wishes to speak with you. He is in his quarters.”

Tom and Bud made a quick stop in one of the colony’s machine repair facilities to report the issue with the elevator controls.

“I’d say a small solar battery and my mini heating blanket with a timer to heat it a little every, oh, four hours,” Tom suggested. “We left one out there.”

By the time they had made it to Harlan’s office, the lunar Administrator/Director of the colony had coffee and some cookies waiting for them.

“A celebration, Harlan?” Bud inquired barely sitting down before helping himself.

Harlan shook his head, “Nope. Just a way of showing you how we have progressed in the past few weeks. Now that—” and his voice choked with sudden emotion. It was understandable as the hated Empress and his loving wife, Maggie, had been the same person. Now that she was dead, he still had a difficult time mentioning her.

“Sorry. I was about to say that now that the colony is really free, our cooks have been allowed to take some of the grain flours and make things other than basic bread. One of them was a pastry chef in Indonesia before she returned home in time to be among those kidnapped from her old village.”

Mouth full, Bud smiled. “These are great!” he exclaimed. “I’d better not tell Chow about them.”

Tom was also impressed, but he was more curious about being asked to come to the office. Harlan usually met them in one of the cafeterias or even the guest quarters.

“I sense there is also an ulterior motive, Harlan. You know that if we can do it, it is yours, right?”

Ames nodded and smiled. “Yeah, Tom. I do. Here’s the thing. A while back you said how it would be nice to have an actual landing and loading platform build down here in the crater. Even with the road you built for the water pipe and conveyor belt, it is still a real labor to trudge up, unload any supplies or people coming from Earth, and get them down here.”

“Oh. You want that built? Consider it done. As soon as I get home I’ll contact Jake Aturian at the Construction Company and see what can be done to send up it a do-it-yourself kit. It might take a month or so. Can you wait that long?”

Harlan laughed. “I was thinking you’d tell me it was a six-month project, and one sitting at the tail end of your to-do list. Heck. Take six weeks if you want!”

They shared a laugh before discussing some of the dimensions, weight loads, and needs for an elevator system.

“Where is it going?” Bud asked. “I mean, it obviously can’t be on top of the upper dome, and what with the other four major domes arranged around it, you don’t want to put something that’s going to have ships like the *Challenger* or even heavier transport ships sitting on top of them.”

Harlan held up his right index finger and smiled at them. After a pause, he told them his plan.

He first reached to the shelves behind his desk and brought around a roll of paper that looked like blueprints. They showed the arrangement of all the domes in the colony. From the upper, or control dome to the four arranged in a semi-circle around it to the two other domes farther out—one used by Doc Simpson and the other one the industrial center for the colony. Anything other than food and water for the inhabitants needs was constructed there.

“See that space?” he asked pointing at an area very close to the edge of the crater the five original domes were built in. When the others nodded, he added, “That is where... umm, *she* had her secret quarters. Both of the Masters resided there, and it has a series of access tunnels and elevators going to three of the nearest domes, plus one out to the newest domes.”

“Jetz!” Bud said, eyes wide. “That would be perfect for the platform and elevator, wouldn’t it, skipper?”

Tom grinned. “It most certainly would. In fact, that,” and he tapped the spot on the diagram Harlan had been pointing at, “place for the elevator is sitting with enough solid rock underneath and to the one side that I believe we can build it up against and even a little into the crater wall itself for added stability. It ought to make erecting the

landing platform there an absolute breeze!”

A small but noticeable tremor vibrated through the floor. It was over in about three seconds.

“Lightest one in a week,” Harlan told them.

Tom’s face scrunched into a frown. “We’re going to have to find out what’s making those, you know. Otherwise I can’t be certain to build a structure that will withstand them over time if this is an ongoing issue.”

It was more worrying to the young inventor than he wanted to tell either of his friends.

“Well, whatever you do, I have a request and a statement. Or, at least an offer. So, first, I know you can send up everything necessary to build the platform, elevator and airlock systems and all of that. And, you would normally send up a whole team of experts to put it together.”

Tom nodded and was about to say something when Harlan continued.

“But, it would provide a major sense of accomplishment for the entire colony if it turned out to be something our people could do. We wouldn’t turn away expert advice, of course, but it would go a heck of a long way toward making the people feel that they are in control of all our fates if we could do it ourselves. Is that too much to ask?”

Now, Tom laughed and Bud’s face split into a big grin. It was something they had discussed on the way up. No matter what the project Swift Enterprises might get involved in, Tom and his father wanted the residents at the colony in on every aspect of it.

“Harlan, that is not only perfectly reasonable of you to request, it is exactly what we will do. The hope is to make this mostly a kit, like having a prefabricated building ready for assembly. I’ll send you a list of specialists you will need to find among your population to perform all the surveying, core drilling, and those sort of things, and then I’ll also detail the functions and numbers of construction engineers you will want to locate.

“Of course, I need to finalize the plans but I’m pretty certain I have all of your specifications from the last time we spoke of this. That is,” he looked at the Administrator,

“unless there is something more.”

“No. We’re looking at having the platform sitting fifty feet above the surface to let chemical rocket exhaust shoot down, and then have a deflector system to send that out and away. The landing space should be about the size of a pair of football fields sitting side-by-side with the elevator system between them at the fifty yard line.”

Tom nodded and acknowledged that he had all the rest of the specs other than the depth the elevator would need to travel to get to the lowest underground distribution point.

“Three-hundred and eighty feet, skipper, including height above the surface. I’ve already got my people working on the upsizing and refit of all the tunnels and the elevators to the domes from that point. We’ll have that work finished in about six weeks.”

They sat sipping their now tepid coffees for a minutes before Tom spoke again.

“You mentioned the request *and* an offer?”

Harlan set his cup down and stood up. “Yeah. You see, and this goes to the whole idea that we are really and truly a free colony. Actually, a lot of people want to stop having us called that because it sounds like we are still a possession. The feeling is we ought to be called a city. We originally changed the colony name to Cordillera II, and I believe folks would like to just have us referred to as Cordillera City.”

“That’s not much of a request. Not really an offer,” Bud stated.

“No, it isn’t the offer, but I mention it to show you how serious folks are about having our own identity. So, here’s the offer. We managed to make a little over nineteen million dollars from the water clean up for California. We want to pay Swift Enterprises half of that for your services and the other half to pay for the landing platform and systems.”

Tom shook his head. “To begin, California payed Enterprises for everything we did. So, that money they paid you was for your part in the operation.” The lunar colony had used its water purification systems to clean, detoxify and remove radiation from more than one-hundred-million gallons of water mined from a comet. The state had been eager to pay for the services as it kept that west coast state open for business.

“Oh,” Harlan responded. “I see. Well, that means we can pay you what the platform and elevator are really worth, and not just what I guess would be about fifty cents on the dollar you’d tell us was the cost. You see, we don’t want charity, but we need help and support.”

Tom agreed to have the accountants and Purchasing folks figure out the real costs and to get them up to the Moon as soon as possible.

“Fine, then there is one other thing.”

“Name it, Harlan.”

“Okay. Right now we make some money by supplying Helium3 back to a few customers on Earth. We can’t make much but it is very valuable so we get top dollar for it. Most of the operational expenses of the colony are met by that today, but we believe we have less than a half year to go before our small operation goes dry. Or, empty. Is there any way we might work another comet ice deal with any other state or even another country down there? We could use the income.”

Before departing, Tom promised to look into possibilities.

Nothing had been mentioned about Harlan’s possible return to Enterprises or Earth, but Tom decided that it would be a topic of conversation only when the time was right for everyone.

He and Bud suited up an hour later, rode one of the two-man *Straddlers* up to the top of the crater and the five hundred feet out to where the *Challenger* sat, waiting.

“Are they going to have any money left over after paying for the platform, skipper?” Bud asked as he clicked his harness shut and settled in for takeoff.

“Well, let’s just say that dad already has okayed some, umm, *creative* accounting so they will be paying less than half of the money they currently have on deposit.”

“You, and your dad, of course, are truly good men, Tom Swift!” Bud told him, patting his friend on the arm as the *Challenger* rose into the lunar sky.

* * *

Sitting in their shared office the following morning,

Damon listened to Tom's report and the go-ahead for the prefabricated landing platform.

"Bud had a question, Dad," Tom said. "It has to do with our, well, discounting the landing stuff pretty heavily. He didn't say so, but I believe he is concerned what might happen if Harlan or anyone else up there learns about it."

Damon nodded and walked over to the table where their secretary always kept a hot carafe of coffee. He poured himself a cup and took a sip before replying.

"Are you worried we're doing something wrong?"

The younger man sighed. "No, but sort of yeah. Harlan made it abundantly clear that the people up there don't want handouts. And, you can check with Legal or even George Dilling in Communications, but I sense that public opinion hasn't completely come back our way. After all of those poisoned pen messages and pictures the Empress posted to the world at large, some people still see Swift Enterprises as the next usurper."

"Oh. Now I see the potential problem. Jake and I have been calling it 'friends and family discounting.' You're right, of course. And, while you and I know we only are trying to help a friend and all of those people once kidnapped and forced into slave labor up there, if we do too much—if we are *seen* to be taking too keen an interest in the affairs of the colony... sorry... of Cordillera City, then I suppose some people will interpret that as being a bad thing, and so *we* must be bad to be involved. Let me take a look at a few things. Perhaps we can say we're charging them 'favored customer' rates and make up the difference in some sort of ongoing trade agreement. I guess that sounds more like a business deal than a gift. Give me a few days."

Tom grinned and shook his father's hand. "I knew you'd see a way."

"Fine. Next subject. What is this about underground rumblings up there?"

Tom shrugged. "I'm not sure. Bud and I rode the elevator up a few miles and scanned the entire area. No new impact points. I also did some research and even the old Kranjovian base on the near side has been abandoned and mostly unusable. Bud and I overflew it and it looks pretty dilapidated. I doubt if they've snuck up and are setting off

demolition charges. Besides, with the density of the Moon, there would be practically no way to hear as much noise as Harlan's recorders are getting if it were on the other side."

"So, no ideas?"

"None."

* * *

"When Harlan learns of this dream of yours, what do you think he will want us to do?" Magadia asked as they walked to the Administration offices the day after Tom left for Earth.

"As I said before, I have not told him, Dia, so I do not know. He seems so preoccupied lately."

"I noticed it too. I was trying to think when his attitude changed. Perhaps it has always been a little different than ours." She softly laughed. "Different than yours, at least."

He ignored her comment. "I think I first noticed that it started to change when he decided to use the Masters' old hidden quarters as the area for the new loading dock." Saclolo was trying to put in all in chronological order for his wife.

"His personal ghosts still dwell in that place," she said.

"Hmmm... I think you're right. His attitude and the work load did increase significantly at that time. As if he felt he was running out of time."

"Not only that," his wife stated. "I had thought the new dock was supposed to be next to the control tower and the big airlock down at the base so we could use the old facilities and save the expense of having to build it from scratch."

"The new location will be better all around."

They were walking down one of the longer corridors heading near the Administration offices.

Magadia said in a soft voice so the few people they passed would not hear, "Now we have to enlarge all five tunnels under that area, put in emergency air-seal doors, cut out a thirty by fifteen foot hole in the wall that's right near the outer edge of the crater's ring, and excavate the outer crater wall to take the edge of this new loading dock."

He nodded. "That is correct, but it gets us much more

than we first thought. It was Tom Swift's idea to use the more structurally sound land in between the major domes. We are now going to be able raise the dock itself from ground level to up to sixty feet up. The dock elevator will unload into the refurbished living quarters that become the staging area for both incoming and outgoing goods. It does make more sense, but why Harlan has placed a sudden urgency to get it done is what I can't understand."

Saclolo stopped talking for a moment and looked at the doors to their offices before reaching for the knob.

"I think I must ask him to be straight with us. He might not be staying with us. We may wish that he does, but I think our future and Harlan's might be going in different directions. And, soon."

* * *

Deep below the lunar surface the burbling continued.

Unknown by anyone—living—one of the final attempts the former Empress had made to cause destruction and pain to those she felt had betrayed her, was building. As it built it became more dangerous, and as soon as it reached a critical point, it would be disastrous.

Before her final confrontation with Tom and Harlan in the water purification plant, she had managed to get to the mountains a few miles from the colony's crater and into the deep hole that once had been constructed to be the water reservoir. Though the walls and floor had developed cracks almost immediately and the space had been abandoned, the equipment to dig and shape it remained behind.

This included a fairly crude atomic drill patterned on stolen designs for Tom's own Earth Blaster.

As with many things the Masters did, slipshod manufacturing and shortcuts had made the atomic drill only good for digging holes, and those barely larger than the machine itself. The majority of the reservoir had been blasted using explosives to loosen things and manual labor to remove the debris.

Her use for the drill was to connect a debris-carrying sled to the back end of it containing a deadly cargo of a Uranium isotope along with a pressure container of the colony's precious Helium3 and to send it on a direct path underground to where it had been meant to drill into the

fresh water reservoir found and finished by Tom, thus poisoning the entire water supply.

And, people would not realize what was happening until it was too late and all had received deadly doses of radiation.

The drill never reached its intended target.

Instead, it had traveled unerringly for about half a mile before a small programming error crept in causing it to veer to the left about one degree. It was enough to do two things.

First, it would have eventually meant the drill and its cargo would have missed the reservoir and would have—ironically—pierced her secret chambers.

Second, it only traveled another four miles before it encountered a gas pocket left over from the Moon's formation. The pocket was narrow and very tall; in fact it was more than a half-mile deep.

It was just wide enough for the drill to get into, overbalance, and tumble downward dragging along its cargo.

And, it was that cargo along with the ruptured miniature atomic pile that started an underground conflagration that slowly heated the surrounding rocks, turning them into man-made magma.

It was the bubbles of superheated gas trapped inside the magma that slowly rose to the top and ruptured causing the noises and the rumblings.

Soon, it would cause a lot more than that!

Chapter Four: The Twins

HARLAN made his way to the old slave quarters of the Cordillera mountain people. Most of the middle aged and older people still lived there. The younger adults had moved into some of the vacated elite apartments and newly finished ones on a lower level. The young and educated Cordilleras were trying to move into better work positions in the city. This had, at first, upset the so-called white collar elite workers, but as time passed, friendships were made and an understanding that everyone was needed if the colony was to survive.

Harlan's insistence, backed by both Saclolo and Magadia, was that a work/trade program be initiated when he took over after the Masters deaths. Once the Elite saw and shared in the work load that the other Cordilleran's did, and how without the food they worked so hard to produce, they themselves could not survive on the Moon, most attitudes changed very fast.

Some of the people were so taken by it that they spent one or two days every week in the agricultural sections and livestock sheds. Thanks in part to people with that realistic perception, an acceptance was truly forged.

Harlan found his twins in the open food courtyard of the second dome. It consisted of a shared kitchen, dining hall and a play area for the youngest children that were not in school.

Saclolo's grandmother and grandfather had been captured along with him. His grandfather had died from the harsh treatment on the spaceship on the way up to the colony. It had been one of the events causing Saclolo to regard the former Masters as evil and despicable.

His grandmother, Lola Reyes, no longer a slave in the fields, was near the kitchen sitting at one of the long tables peeling vegetables for the noonday soup. The babies slept in a double-wide stroller beside her. She was helping a dozen other women who had taken on the responsibility of getting three meals cooked each day for the men and women working in the agricultural sections and maintaining the livestock. Three of the youngest mothers were watching over the dozen or so toddlers that were running around and

playing. It was always a very busy place.

Bending down, Harlan touched each of the babies' cheeks with a kiss and kissed Lola Reyes on her forehead as if she was his own grandmother. Not having any relatives left alive on Earth, he cherished the ones he now adopted on the Moon.

"Lola, you are well?" he asked first and then inquired about Magadia's and Saclolo's two year old girl, Teresa.

"Teresa is with the other young ones playing, and you need not concern yourself of my well being, my son." She spoke to him in Tagalog, one of the main Filipino languages. "I have strength enough to raise a dozen more of your children. So find yourself another wife and keep me and her very busy." If nothing else life in the mountains had made her a very blunt woman who spoke her mind as she saw it.

"Lola, I'm too old for you," he joked back in his still somewhat broken Tagalog. "You would use me up before we made it back home from the honeymoon." That reply always put a large smile on her old wrinkled face. In her younger days she had been one of the most sought after maidens in the mountains.

"Save your foolishness for someone that knows not what it is. Sit..." She patted the seat near her. "I will get us some of that evil-tasting coffee we grow up here and you can tell me what is on your mind." It amazed Harlan that she always knew when he needed to have a talk with her.

She sat down with two hot cups of black coffee and gave him one. "You may have noticed that the twins are in their Earth gravity clothes as you asked," she told him in perfect English. Before he could say anything she added, "When *are* you going to take my little ones back to Earth?"

Harlan chocked and spat out the coffee he was trying to swallow.

"How did you know?" he stammered as he wiped the coffee up. He looked around to see if anyone had heard this.

"You men think you are so above us women," she laughed at him and patted his arm in friendship. "It was only a matter of time. The way you are pushing the kids," she liked to call Saclolo and Magadia that, "and now the Earth clothes... I may be old, but I'm not senile yet!"

"Then, old woman," he smiled, "you know what I want to

ask you?"

"Of course I do," she smiled back. "Do not ask. I will go back with you and the children until *we*," she emphasize that word, "find an exceptional replacement for me, and until I find that someone, I will stay with them."

Harlan opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off once more.

"I will hear nothing else from you." She gripped the arm she had in her hand and squeezed it tight. "If you have more work to do, then go. If not, then take your *mga sanggol* with you and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Well then, I'll take them with me, but if today turns bad, you will come for them?" He had so little time with his own children during the day that it seemed like a holiday to have them during the regular work hours.

In Tagalog she replied "What are Lola's for? Go before I keep them forever." She gently pushed him away, picked up her vegetable peeler and started to wreak havoc on a carrot.

And so for the next few hours, Harlan pushed the stroller throughout the colony visiting all the domes, doing nothing more than seeing what was going on. He had to stop once and feed the twins. Then he changed their diapers before he set the self-propelled stroller to follow along behind him while he carried the wide-awake twins in slings that went around his shoulders and hung in front of him. The low lunar gravity made this a very comfortable method to carry them.

He was greeted warmly by everyone, for this was not the first time he had done this kind of strolling visits. Everyone knew that he was not out looking for trouble, but making himself available to anyone who wanted to talk to him. This approach of doing business had put out more small fires—and built more respect—than Harlan cared to remember.

The women especially came to him to take a look at his son and daughter. Everyone in the colony now knew that the Empress had been his wife and was the mother of the twins. While this left some of the people with a distrust toward Harlan, most knew that without Harlan they would be still under the lash of the diabolical Masters, the self proclaimed Emperor and Empress.

All knew, but few understood why, she had killed herself

rather than continue to destroy the colony. That had mellowed out some of the worst feeling that people had against her. They felt that Harlan had a lot to do about that outcome and why they were now free.

But the babies were a strange kind of reminder to all that they could have been living a different kind of life than the one they now had.

The boy looked normal, although he did inherit one of his mother recessive gene. It caused him to have *Ocuvar*, no pigments in his eyes, and it would probably cause some vision difficulties later in life.

The girl, on the other hand, suffered from the total gene defect of *Oculocutaneous*, no pigments to the eyes, skin or hair. Like her mother, Maggie, she was albinoid.

At least they didn't also have alopecia, the hair disorder their mother and uncle also shared, so they were not bald. A soft white fuzziness covered her head, as a light brown covered the boy's.

Harlan often wonder when he looked at the twins what else might be wrong with their DNA. Was it a contributing factor to the maniac/megalomania tendencies of their mother and Uncle, and was it in them? Harlan could only hope that the right upbringing with lots of love would keep that ugly spectre from rising.

By the end of his walk, Harlan wished he had made a sign that said no, he had not named the twins as of yet, and when he did all will be told. And yes, it would be soon!

For Harlan, the morning walk was a true success in that he now had received the whispered names of two more troublesome Elitist. Both were spreading the rumors about Tom Swift causing the lunarquakes. And he found out why they were doing it.

It seems they were not given higher job positions in the food labs analyzing potentially better, shorter growing strains of wheat, barley, rice and hay that took to the lower gravity of the Moon. Too many of the original Earth plants tended to grow too tall and thin because of it and wasted nutrients on over-large stem and leaf growth instead of growing the head and more grains or kernels.

The two younger Cordillera women who did receive the promotions had moved up the ranks with dedication to

their work and even harder study. They made use of all the educational resources available to them and to everyone else that wanted to learn.

The two men refused the positions had barely been out of college when they were recruited by one of the Masters' agents who had the job of finding smart, unattached people that would not be missed by others and sending them to the Philippines. Most of the people sent to the Masters never made it past the first evaluations and left without a hint of what was going on. For them it was just a job interview in a far away country the offered high pay for little actual work.

It was the men's reluctance to step up to the increased responsibilities that had meant no promotion for them, and they were both bitter about it.

The Masters never had a hard time weeding out those type of people. What they wanted were intelligent, hard working individuals who would want to carve a new life for themselves and were willing to answer to only one boss, the Masters. These people became the basis for the *Elite*, and many, like the two lab assistants, forgot that it was hard work that got them to the Moon.

After the colony had been established the emphasis moved onto more family-oriented people with both partners willing to work and have their children watched by others up to twelve hours a day, six days a week.

Even now, nearly a year after the death of the Empress, that ability to work was what kept the colony going. The only difference today was that they were doing it to keep their new homes and family together and not have to return to Earth where they would become a lost cog in the vast machinery of an overcrowded humanity.

Harlan opened the doors to the Administration sections and was greeted by several department heads who shared the area and secretarial pool. There was not enough space for each of them to have their own offices and staff. Even Saclolo and Magadia worked out of cubicles next to Harlan's office. He was the only one with a private room.

Harlan was quickly relieved of his children by co-workers who "just had to have time with the twins." Even Magadia had to wait for her turn with the babies.

Saclolo took the opportunity to follow Harlan into his

small office. It was now or never to talk to him about the future of the colony. Time was running out and things had to be settled before whatever it was below them exploded and sent them all hurling into deep space... or shook the colony apart, or whatever down there might do.

Harlan gave his desk a quick look to see how much was added to his in pile of papers, discs and memory sticks. He returned his gaze to Saclolo and could tell the other man was anxious about something and did not know how to approach it. If the only thing that Harlan learned while in the Secret Service, it was how to read faces, and he learned it well.

He pulled out the extra chair from the wall and sat down in it. He pointed to the other chair that was in front of the desk. With a half smile on his lips, Saclolo sat down.

“Saclolo, my friend, I have several things to tell you. Maybe, after I’m finished, you will then be able to speak your mind.”

“Señor Harlan, this is hard for me...”

“I know, and I have not been the best boss lately. Believe me when I tell you that I have the utmost respect for your wife and for you. You two are the most well-meaning and honest people I have ever met. Even after I was captured by the Masters and you took me before them you warned me to keep my cool and that escape was possible. You probably saved my life that day...”

“I was only looking out...” Harlan touched his arm and the Filipino stopped talking. Harlan was smiling at him.

“Let’s be honest. What you did that day made all of this possible. All our freedom, Cordillera City... my children even, were made possible by you trusting in a man that you knew very little about except that the Masters were afraid of me for some reason. You took the initiative to exploit that weakness and look what’s become of it.”

Saclolo sat back in his chair and didn’t know what to think. For him, helping Harlan was the right thing to do. He was not thinking of some future need at that time, only that Harlan could easily have been killed by the Masters if he stepped beyond a certain point as others had.

Harlan had looked the type who would willingly do just that rather than give in to the Masters and live to fight

another day. He knew that he needed this kind of man on his side if they were to succeed against the Masters' tyranny.

Saclolo felt that he risked nothing that day. That Harlan was the man who held it together. He even turned how the newly named Empress had tried to lure Harlan into her way of thinking back against her. Harlan was the unknown element that defied the understanding of both the Emperor and Empress.

"Kill your enemy, before he kills you," was always their motto. But the duo had been arrogant and felt they had to break Harlan first. Their vanity had to be appeased for all the trouble he had given them the past few months, and that was their downfall. That plus trying to cope with Tom Swift at the same time.

Saclolo still felt that it was more chance than planing on his part. That he was just a small piece of a larger puzzle. That he was in the middle of things, not really holding anything together. That the pieces around him did the work.

What Saclolo failed to realize was that *he* was the piece holding onto everyone while keeping things from exploding outward. Harlan recognized the strength and power he had, and that by adding Magadia's hold over the women of the former Shangri-La colony, together they were the perfect team to govern the colony. They just needed a push to get them started and that was what Harlan had been doing the past year.

Harlan was ready to hand over the reins, but Saclolo had to do one thing first, and until he did it, Harlan would need to stay and lead.

"Señor Harlan, I did what I did to help my family and friends survive a very difficult times. Times we had very little say in. But now," and Saclolo took a deep breath, "we are approaching a time when we must stand up for ourselves. To really take Cordillera City into the future."

"And what do you have in mind?" Harlan asked with fingers crossed. Would this be what he was waiting for?

"Well... two things. We need to have all the people decide what kind of government we want. We need to write some kind of Constitution and not continue to run this place as if it is a business and you are the CEO. Magadia and I are

Junior Administrators today, and it goes down from there.”

“Are you sure?” Harlan smiled. “I just took a walk around the domes and no one mentioned any dissatisfaction with the way I've been running things.”

“And you won't, but that is beside the point. Even heroes fall from grace in time. Just look at how fast they are willing to blame Tom Swift for the lunarquakes, and he did much to help free them. Then, he found a way to get us water. He's as much a hero in his way as you are in yours.”

“People like to blame their problems on outsiders. It is much easier than finding the real culprit among themselves,” Harlan replied somewhat disappointed.

“So you think that the Elite have something to do with the quakes?”

“No, I don't. I think that the Elite who are left are like the two men that I was told about today.” Harlan told Saclolo what he had learned.

“I want Security to pick them up, send them back to Earth to wherever they want to go with a thousand dollars in their pocket, and let them go free. Then let it be known that anyone else that wants to go back to Earth only has to step up and we'll do the same for them without questions.”

“Total Amnesty?”

“Total, but never to return. If no one has turned them in by now, no one will.” He watched Saclolo as he thought it over.

“Okay, but under one condition.”

“And that is?” Harlan asked with a smile.

“We will give people only two weeks to decide. After that it's the salt mines for life if they are caught harming the city.”

“Saclolo? We don't have salt mines,” Harlan said with a hint of curiosity in his voice.

“Perhaps not, but we do have years of hard labor ahead of us, and the capability to confine dissenters.”

“Try that one,” warned Harlan, “only if you're a duly elected government of some kind. Until then no more unilateral decrees without some sort of official bureaucracy. You might be seen as another would-be dictator. Are you sure you want to pursue this?”

“We have to. We need a way to assure that we can stand as a *united* people. With one government for all the people. Something that cannot be change whenever the leadership changes hands.”

“And what brings this urgency about?”

“You did!” the Filipino replied somewhat forcefully.

“Me?” Ames was a little taken aback, but he grinned.

“Don't act innocent. You have been grooming Magadia and me to take over. That means that you are planing to leave. Soon too, if I read you right. But you just can't simply hand it to us. Some day, people will realize that they have no say in the ruling of this city and all hell will break lose.”

Harlan asked, “Can't this wait another year or more?”

“No, I rather you start the process now. If Magadia and I have to finish it, so be it. But you can't hand the running of this place to us as if the people don't matter. That's a recipe for disaster,” Saclolo told him earnestly.

Without another word, Harlan went to his desk, opened the bottom drawer, pulled out a file and handed it to Saclolo.

“This, my friend, is my plan to hand over the leadership. If you like it, implement it. If you don't, make up your own and I'll do what you suggest.”

Saclolo didn't know what to say. Once again Harlan was prepared for the inevitable. He just sat there stunned.

“You said you had two things you wanted to talk to me about. What is the second thing?” Harlan eased himself into his chair and waited.

Saclolo closed the file he was paging through.

“Financial stability. We have very little of it. Our Helium3 won't last forever, even though we are looking for new areas to mine. The tower for our water purification is standing unused in spite of several areas on Earth that could use the water. They'll take it free, but would they pay for it like California did? Ha!” Saclolo shook his head, but added, “I've read that somehow a group of crackpot or so-called environmentalist have taken it in their heads that water from space will throw the Earth's weather out of balance and cause all types of havoc. The craziest among them say the planet will go off-balance from the added weight. Why people listen to them, while California is proving completely

otherwise, is beyond me.”

“That, my friend is caused by defeatists. Too many now believe that we are on our merry way to Hell in a hand basket, so they are letting it happen, even though they could stop it by putting in a little effort. Or, they want Tom Swift to pull out another miracle and save the world!”

This was a disturbing fact Harlan did not like about folks on Earth. Maybe it was caused by there being just too many people down there, and unlike the lunar residents too many of them felt that they were not needed.

“That may be, Señor Harlan, and it may be something we will have to watch for up here. *'A job for everyone, and everyone has a job,'* could be our motto, only if we have jobs for our growing population. And to that end I want to turn part of the city into a vacation resort.”

Harlan burst out laughing; he just couldn't help it. Not that it was such a bad idea, but to have the down-to-earth Saclolo think of doing that blew his mind. It was something that Bud Barclay might think of, and he would name it *'LunitiCity Theme Park: Above and Beyond the Rest'* or some such foolishness.

Saclolo stared at Harlan opened mouth. He never expected him to openly laugh at the idea. To be skeptical, yes... but to laugh at it... no!

Harlan rose and threw his hands onto Saclolo shoulders. “My friend,” he had tears in his eyes from laughing, “you have totally astounded me. Now tell me all about this brain storm of yours. I expect you also have either videos, drawings, or both to help convince me of this idea.”

Saclolo reached for the computer keyboard on the desk and started to call up some of his files and to remotely turn on Harlan's small telejector. And for the next hour he captivated Harlan's imagination.

And then, the ground underneath them gave a violent heave upward sending everyone in the colony flying in a *hundred different directions!*

Chapter Five: One Nasty Discovery

BY THE time the shaking ceased, Harlan was already on the public address system speaking to everyone in the colony.

“This is the Administrator. I want you to all stay on the ground until this shaking... oh! Well, it seems to have stopped, but let’s all give this a minute. Then, check yourself for injuries. If you are fine, just a little bruised, then please carefully get up and check those around you.”

He paused a moment as a small aftershock rumbled under them.

“During the next five minutes, please only report the more severe of injuries. We need to all help prioritize the use of our doctors and nurses. And, if you are uninjured please try to get to your living quarters and collect your family members. Anyone caring for children please get them home as quickly as you can. I’ll speak to you again in five minutes.”

He took five calls from panicking people before recording a short message advising calm.

Doc Simpson’s call at the four minutes and fifteen-second mark startled him. It came in on Harlan’s private line.

“The good news is that we only have about twenty broken arms, one broken leg and a lot of bloody noses. I’m estimating by the end of this I’ll need to report a dozen concussions.”

“And, the bad news, Greg?” Harlan asked bluntly.

“Two deaths. One of the oldest residents had a heart attack and we had one child squashed when a man fell on her.”

Harlan felt a wave of panic rising.

“Not one of yours, Harlan,” Doc assured him. “The man who fell did so onto his own infant. I’ve sent a nurse to heavily sedated both him and the mother. Can you make the call for anyone mobile and with lesser injuries to make their way down here and line up? I’ll have one of the Nurse Practitioners do triage and get them staged into a workable order.”

Harlan took a moment to compose himself. The death of an elderly resident—although he was at a loss as to why the Masters had ever brought up old people—was a sadness but not totally unexpected. A baby, though...

An hour later he picked up the radio headset that would connect him with Swift Enterprises down in Shopton.

“Enterprises? This is Ames on the Moon. Come in...”

“Harlan? It’s George Dilling. How are you?”

“Not so good, George,” he told the head of the Communications department. “It’ll have to wait. Can you get me either Damon or Tom *post haste*?”

“Coming right up. Sorry about whatever is bothering you. We’ll catch up later.”

It took two minutes before he was speaking with Tom.

“Skipper? We just had a doozy of a shaker up here.” He told his former boss about the injuries and two deaths.

Tom was disheartened by both of them and told Harlan how sorry he was.

“Not much we could do about it, Tom. The problem is we get zero fore-notice before these happen. Heck, you felt it when you were up here. One moment nothing and the next it’s shake, rattle and roll.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” the inventor said. “I’m coming up tomorrow with a series of those tremor sensors we built for the Stanford seismology team. At least down here they believe they can give nearly a half minute notice and be right eighty-three percent of the time.”

“Geez! Even fifteen seconds would be a real boon for us.”

Tom tutted a few times. “Oh, Harlan. We both know giving you notice isn’t a solution. At best it is a loose bandage that needs to be fixed as quickly as possible. Right now I have zero idea as to the why of it all, but I’m going to do my best to find out what is going on up there before it gets to be too late.”

“Umm, skipper? Too late, as in...?”

“Well, Harlan, too late as in leaving not enough time to evacuate the colony if there is nothing else to be done. Of course, if it is getting that bad, I doubt being brought back down here will be much of a help. If you do have volcanic

activity inside the Moon, it could explode and shatter everything up there without notice. I hate to think what the results would be if a large chunk came back to Earth!”

Harlan was quiet long enough that Tom was about to ask if he were still on the line.

“Yeah,” he finally stated. “On another note—and right now I don’t know if it is just a whistling into the wind thing—but Saclolo and Magadia have a very interesting proposition to put to you. I won’t spoil their party, as it were, so it’ll need to wait until you get up here.” He paused again. “Even at that, it’s looking like everything up here hinges on what’s going on under our feet.”

* * *

“What do you believe you will find, Son?” Damon Swift asked Tom as they sat discussion the forthcoming trip to the lunar colony.

“Honestly, Dad? I have no idea. There is nothing absolute to say that the Moon can’t still have deep pockets of magma, but there is also nothing ever measured that would indicate there is anything remotely warm up there either. I think I read a few years ago that one astrophysicist was of the belief that in the very core it might be three hundred degrees or so and just from the internal pressure, but certainly not hot enough to melt the rocks.”

Mr. Swift chuckled. “Sorry, and I know this isn’t the time to be laughing, but until we found out about the colony up there and got a few of our people to study their domes, nobody on Earth had ever dug more than about fifty feet below the surface. There might be a whole surprising world under there for all we know. What we do know is the crust and all the lunar dust are amazing insulators. What’s to say that a few thousand feet of that isn’t keeping mankind from discovering a molten core?”

“I guess you’re right, Dad, but this whole rumbling and shaking thing has come on too suddenly. I can’t help but think this isn’t a natural phenomena and that’s what I’ve got to find out. This trip up with a sensor network ought to help pinpoint where this is centered.”

“Well then, let’s keep our fingers crossed that it isn’t right under the colony, Tom. Otherwise that would lead me to believe that the Masters might have perpetrated one final

act of sabotage!”

A chill ran down and back up the young inventor’s spine and his body shuddered. A moment later he tapped the TeleVoc button under his shirt collar and began moving his mouth without making any sounds.

The pins worn by all Swift Employees allowed silent communication based on both jaw movement as well as brainwave scans. In real time, the recipient of a call heard the speaker’s “voice” inside their head.

Tom had subvocalized the name, Hank Sterling.

“Yes, skipper,” came the big Scandinavian’s voice inside his head.

“Hank, I need to add a few things to the list of what you are packing up for the *Challenger*’s next trip. Got a minute?”

“For you, many minutes. Shoot.”

“Okay, along with the sensor array and the broadcasters, I want a six-pack of laser rangers along with one of the two-hundred foot extendible reflector towers. I’m going to want to set up a thirty mile perimeter to see if we have any appreciable ground shift.”

“Okay. I’ll get that packed. What else?”

Tom thought a moment. “Oh, I was about to suggest pulling the Geotron model back out to take up again. I might want to do some deep dirt exploring, but it just hit me that it might be premature. So forget that one.”

“For now, you mean,” Hank stated knowing that if Tom had thought of it now he would want it later with near one-hundred percent certainty. “I’ll pull it back out of storage and give it the twice over. You just let me know when you need it.”

Tom added a couple other instruments to the list, then thanked Hank and disconnected the call.

“Just asking Hank for a few more items,” he explained to his father.

He was about to list them when a short knock came on the office door and it opened to reveal Bud.

“Your dad called to say you might need me,” he said as he grinned and stepped inside.

Tom's head swiveled around to look at his father, but the older man seemed completely absorbed in looking at a ball point pen he held in his right hand. Only Tom noticed the slight twitch at the right corner of his father's lips.

"Yeah, flyboy. And, remind me to invite you to his mind reading and vaudeville revival show next week."

Bud looked confused but rallied. "Sure. But don't sell yourself short on the precognitive stuff, skipper. There's been plenty of times you've seemingly read my mind. What's up?"

Tom filled his friend in on the forthcoming trip and the latest quake and damage.

On hearing of the two deaths, Bud sat down. "Rats! I hate it when that sort of thing happens. How's Harlan taking it?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid. He really wants to turn the colony over to Saclolo and Magadia Reyes as soon as possible, and he wants to bring his babies back here, but he's torn between that and feeling as if he could be seen as abandoning everybody up there."

Bud nodded. "I can see that, especially now. So, when do we take off?"

"Seven a.m. from here to Fearing and then 10 a.m. to the Moon. We'll make a slow orbit looking for any hot spots and then do a hover search about fifty miles in all directions from the colony's crater."

That evening Sandy asked Bud if she could go with them at about the same time Bashalli was making the same inquiry of her husband, Tom.

"I have made a few friends up there and would very much like to see them and to offer support to anyone who is feeling frightened."

"And, I can see in your eyes, Bash, that is exactly what you want to do, but it might not be safe. Remember when you got that bad knocking down when one of the Elite was destroying a piece of equipment?"

She placed her hands on her hips. "Thomas Swift, you darned well know it was you who shoved me to the ground bruising me." She tried to look stern but broke down and giggled. They both knew he did it to keep her from being hit

by a swinging sledgehammer.

“Okay,” he said taking her in his arms and giving her a hug. “You can go, but only if Sandy goes as well.”

“Oh, she will be going,” his wife assure him.

“And, how do you know this?”

“Because she is telling Bud right now about it and has promised me that she will make his life a misery if he says anything except for ‘yes.’”

Their phone rang. Tom reached over and picked the handset off its wall mount.

“How quickly did you lose the argument?” he asked instead of saying hello.

“About five seconds. So, it’s the four of us?”

“Four plus six. Hank, Arv Hanson, Red Jones, and three techs to help set up the sensor array.”

“See you around seven-thirty, then, skipper.”

“Right. Good night, Bud.”

Both Sandy Barclay and Bashalli said to their prospective husbands, “Good.”

The flight out to Fearing was made in the *Sky Queen*. Tom generally liked to make shorter trips in his SE-11 Commuter jet, or Toad as it was nicknamed, these days, but the load of things packed by Hank needed the hangar capacity of the large jet.

With Zimby and Red looking over their shoulders, the ladies were allowed to fly the jet from takeoff to landing. Sandy was well-qualified to fly anything, but Bashalli was still working on her multi-engine certification.

Tom, Bud and Hank spent much of the hour flight in the hangar looking through everything and making plans for what was going to be placed where on the surface—or in the case of eight self-drilling seismic and resonance probes—under the surface.

“So, assuming that these do detect some subterranean gurgling or movement, what’s the next step?” one of the technicians who had joined them a few minutes earlier inquired.

Tom turned to the young man, just a couple years older

than himself. “Well, Timothy, if we can determine that there is a central point, a core if you will, and finding that might require repositioning everything several times, then the next step would be to determine just how large the magma pocket is. We might be able to kill two birds with one stone by moving things and bracketing the... hmmm. I guess we call it an ‘event’ at this point. So by moving the array around we might be able to determine the outer boundaries of it. If so, then we need to wait a week or so to see if it is growing, shrinking, staying the same, or whatever.”

“Whatever?” Hank asked.

“I meant that we might find it is staying the same size but growing or shrinking in intensity. If it is a magma bubble, it might be that it is getting cut off from it’s source and could just be rumbling like—”

“Like your insides after eating a bad taco,” Bud finished for him.

Rolling his eyes, Tom had to nod. “I suppose that isn’t that far off the mark. Once it’s digested, or cut off and begins to cool, it could stop being any bother.”

What he didn’t add was that like any volcanic activity, once the magma had come up high enough it would only be a matter of time before it happened again. Possibly with devastating results!

* * *

The orbit around the Moon and measurements from an altitude of ten miles above the colony had given Tom nothing he didn’t already know.

The surface on the dark side was, as usual, nearly two-hundred-fifty degrees below zero. There was no measurable variation to this except where some of the meager sunlight that reflected off of mountains entered the perpetual semi-darkness and hit the surface. Even there the difference was only about six to eight degrees warmer.

Tom set the *Challenger* down at the edge of the crater close to the control tower sticking up from the number one dome of the colony. Everyone climbed down from the airlock and headed for the downward-sloping ramp a hundred feet away. At the bottom they all entered a large airlock next to the base of the tower and ended up inside a

sizable staging room. Spacesuits were not required inside the colony so they all tugged and pulled theirs off, hanging them on some of the hundred or so special hangers to one side of the inner door.

Tom was just turning around when Harlan and a Filipino man came into the room.

“Skipper!” his former Security chief greeted him. He also personally greeted the other members of the team. “You remember Saclolo, the man who would be in charge today if this blasted shaking hadn’t started.”

Tom and the others shook Saclolo’s hand, but Tom noticed that the man looked a little less than happy. He also noticed his continuous glances at Harlan.

“Uh, Harlan?” Tom asked to get his attention. “Can you and I head to your office for a little chat? I’ll let everyone else grab a coffee or, well, it is lunch time, so how about you all head for the food while I talk to the Administrator, here?”

Saclolo, Bud and the two wives held back as the others headed out of the room. “Okay if Sandy and I go visit our friends?” Bashalli asked, quick on the uptake. “Bud can tag along with you three. I’m sure you will need him more than Sandy or I.” Before he could reply, the two girls headed down one of the side corridors and disappeared around a corner.

“Sure,” Tom answered in their direction, chuckling. “We’re on our own, guys.”

They walked in silence until they reached the offices. Once inside, Saclolo came right to the point.

“I had wanted to show you something, Señor Tom, that I and others believe is vital to the well being of this city.” He hesitated, looking at Harlan.

“Look. Stop worrying about my feelings if it’s about the Empress. As far as I’m concerned, she and Maggie were two separate people. So please do the same and stop walking on egg shells if you have to mention her or her evil actions.” Smiling, he added, “That’s an order!”

Saclolo nodded and continued. “Si. Yes. I found this. Or, rather one of the young secretaries found it on searching through a secret file of the former Empress. We finally decoded her security system and have been trying to catalog

what is left of her data.” He handed Tom a five-page report. The inventor read through it quickly, his eyes widening at two points and a low whistle escaping his lips once. He handed it to Bud.

“Do you believe she managed to do that?” he asked.

Harlan looked at Saclolo and Saclolo at Tom. “Yes.”

“Could that be responsible for what is happening, skipper?” Harlan inquired.

“Well, if this is correct, and she had access to a copy of my atomic earth blaster—and we’ve seen many examples of how she and her brother cut corners and did very poor work on many of the stolen technologies—then it is completely possible for her to have stashed that drill in the old mountain reservoir—or never took it back out when they abandoned the thing—and managed to sneak in some Helium₃ and Uranium 235 as it says in that document—she obviously could have sent that to drill right into the water supply cavern under this dome. I’d say to get the water shut off immediately and get down there to see if she poisoned the water supply.”

“What if she did, Tom?” Bud asked.

“Then every man, woman and child in this colony could be slowly dying from radiation poisoning, Bud!”

Harlan cleared his throat, “Uh, Tom? They really prefer to be called a city, not a colony.”

“Smack me the next time I forget that,” Tom said, grinning.

While Bud managed a team to investigate the water cavern, Tom, Harlan and Hank—whom the inventor asked to join them—donned their spacesuits and left the colony, but not before warning the ladies and technicians to not drink anything. They each took one of the small, two-man *Straddlers*—the scooter-like flying vehicles featured a front-mounted Attractatron for lifting objects. These rose straight up until they were a few yards above the crater top and then set off in the direction of the distant mountain.

They covered the ten-miles in just four minutes, rising up to the top of the tallest mountain and the gaping black hole in its top. The hole made this particular mountain appeared to be a recent volcano, but the truth was the top had been excavated and a flask-shaped cavern dug out of the inside.

Tom led the way into the wide hole and toward the distant bottom. The lights on the three *Straddlers* were barely enough to illuminate the floor when they were just two hundred feet above it. All three slowed to a crawl until they finally touched down.

Climbing off they turned on their more powerful hand lamps and swept the area. Most of it appeared to be just what it was; a man-made hole with unreasonably smooth walls and a flat floor with only minimal rocks and other lunar materials that had fallen from above.

But, as Tom and Hank moved their light back pointing toward the crater and city, the inventor let out a little gasp.

“Let’s get over there. I have to see what that is,” he declared.

Even before they arrived Tom already knew what they would discover.

“That,” he said pointing at the scorched nearly circular hole starting just a few feet off the floor, “is the entry point for an earth blaster. Not one of mine, for sure. We fully contain the side-blow of the atomic blaster, but that’s exactly what I bet this is.”

“What’s it mean, skipper?” Hank asked.

Tom filled him in on a little of what Saclolo’s secretary had found.

“Evidently, the Empress had a final act of sabotage or revenge all planned. If she couldn’t reclaim her position over the colony...” Tom paused, unable to understand how anyone could be like that.

“It’s okay,” Ames said quietly. “Go ahead. Hank needs to know this.”

“Okay. The Empress appears to have been willing to destroy everything if she couldn’t have it for herself. Doc Simpson says it goes with megalomania she and her brother were obviously suffering.”

“It’s mine or nobody’s? That sort of thing?”

“Yeah. Something like that. So it looks like she hitched a trailer to the back of the blaster, filled that with some pretty nasty stuff to poison the water supply of the city, and then went back to try to kill both me and Harlan. She failed there when Maggie’s personality overpowered her and... well, you

know the rest. Maggie scrambled her own brain so the Empress would effectively die.”

Tom was spared from going into any more detail when his radio beeped.

“Tom here.”

“It’s Bud. We’ve made a complete measurement of the underground cavern. It’s full of beautiful, icy cold water and absolutely nothing else! Not a tick.”

“Great, Bud. Now I need you to take the Damonscope and locate the closest point above the cavern and trace in a direct line to the mountain reservoir. See if it picks up any underground radioactivity as far as you can travel inside the colony domes.”

“And, after that?”

“Then I think you need to go outside and keep heading this way until we do find something.”

Tom thought a few seconds and added, “After that, I need to get back to Earth and rebuild the Geotron model.”

“Uh, but it has its own Damonscope and all of the other instrumentation, slipper. Why the rebuild?” Bud inquired.

“Because I have the feeling that this is one investigation that is going to require a human touch. And one that needs a human with some very special knowledge.”

“You?”

“No. Not me, but I do know someone who would be *perfect* for this!”

* * *

When they assembled in Harlan’s office three hours later Tom’s news was received with stunned looks.

“We traced our way toward the mountain,” Bud said, but never picked up anything inside the crater. Zero radioactivity signature for at least three miles. We stopped there.”

“Does that mean whatever she tried to send out never got here?” Hank asked.

Tom nodded. “It does. It also opens up a whole can of worms for us as in we need to get out there and find out what happened to that drill and it’s cargo.”

Saclolo cleared his throat. “Señors? Since that is a mystery that will require time to solve, may I show you a plan I have for the long-term success of this city?”

Tom glanced at Harlan who winked.

Everyone agreed, so he spread out his rough drawing and began to describe his vision of a resort and lunar theme park.

When he had finished—including showing them a greatly-miniaturized view of his restaurant—Tom looked behind him at Harlan with a look that said, “I’ve got issues. Do I say them?” Harlan nodded.

“Okay,” Tom began. “There are many things that might not be possible such as your intent to put a zip line on the L-Evator. Firstly, over the ten miles distance and even at the reduced gravity, the velocity achieved by attaching the zip line the half-way point would make deceleration physically dangerous. I’d suggest lowering the start point to no more than three miles up. But having a permanent cable sticking out means the tower cannot be used above that point. Nothing is insurmountable,” he added seeing the downcast look on Saclolo’s face, “but I think we need to bring you and your plans down to Enterprises where we can get things into the computers to see what will work and what won’t. We also need some experts in human physiology that we don’t have up here.”

Saclolo looked from Harlan to Tom and back again. “Does this mean you want me to go to Earth?”

Harlan laughed. “It’s your baby. Of course you need to go down.” It was arranged that the Filipino would take a supply rocket down one week later.

“In the meantime, I need to see if all your planned development would be for naught,” Tom told them all. “If we can’t stop or control this underground problem, your Moon resort will never get off the ground!”

Chapter Six: What's Up? Dock.

SACLOLO did not know what to expect when he stepped from the landing craft on Fearing Island. He figured he would have to make his way to Enterprise on one of the cargo jets and then see a Mr. Trent for the next open appointment date and time to see Mr. Swift and the Swift Construction Company boss, Mr. Jake Aturian.

Creation of the landing platform and cargo elevator would fall to his company. Most of the thrill rides that he'd envisioned would also fall under his construction jurisdiction, so Saclolo figured it was best to have him in from the start.

“Señor Reyes,” Sandy and Bashalli called out together even before he had time to look around for transportation. He turned to where the voices came from and spotted both young ladies waving at him. They were standing by a ST11-A passenger airplane. It was the smaller, twin propeller model of the Toad.

He waved back at them, made a “one moment” motion and headed to the other side of the spaceship to the storage bay. He found his two pieces of luggage still in the pod and called up to one of the handlers to see if he would throw them down to him.

“Saclolo!” the middle age handler call back. “If I knew you were on board I'd would have told them to put you in with the luggage,” he yelled back laughing.

“See if I'll find you another good job, López.” As he reach to read the tags, Saclolo called out once more, “No, not the red ones... the green ones next to those. Besides not being able to read I didn't know that you were also color blind.”

The man tossed them out of the pod as he murmured something in Spanish under his breath. The only words that Saclolo made out were '*Diablo tonto.*'

When he turned around to pick up his two bags they were already in the hands of Sandy and Bashalli. He tried to take them, but Sandy told him between giggles, “Finders keepers, losers weepers.”

“I wasn't expecting anyone to meet me,” Saclolo told

them as they ushered him to the aircraft. Bashalli took the pilot's seat and Sandy slid into the co-pilot's.

“No trouble at all, Señor Reyes,” Bashalli replied as she began the check list to start up the plane. “Sandy is giving me flight lessons on this aircraft anyway. So it is what she calls a ‘two-fer.’ ” She crinkled her nose before saying, “I think.”

Sandy could not help but snort. Even after all these years, Bashalli could never get used to American slang.

“So sit back, and take a load of your feet,” chuckled Sandy. “Once you start walking around at Enterprise you'll wish you had a *Straddler*.” The clamshell canopy closed around them and the muffled sound of twin props could barely be heard inside the compartment. Without a delay the plane took off and winged northwest toward Shopton.

Bashalli was all smiles when Sandy didn't have to remind her of a thing. Conversation between the three of them was carefree, but eventually Bashalli had to ask him about his presentation.”

“Ha! So you know about that, too!” He tried to sound like he was not upset, but failed miserably.

“Only that you want to talk to daddy and Uncle Jake about something important.” Sandy told him.

“I was hoping to do this on my own and not have Harlan give it a push start.” The girls could hear the sadness in his voice.

“Oh, no!” Bashalli exclaimed. “Harlan hadn't told us a thing. Your name was flagged as a VIP when you exchanged ships up at the Outpost and our ever efficient Trent saw it on the passenger list and told father Swift.”

“You know dad,” Sandy added. “He immediately picked up the phone and called Harlan. The only thing your boss did was arrange for your pick up, and for you to have nice place to stay for as long as you're here.” Sandy was watching his face and could tell he was no longer upset.

“Oh, you have a nine o'clock appointment tomorrow morning with both daddy and Uncle Jake.” Sandy added. Being the nosy one she asked, “Care to tell us a little bit about it? You know, we can be your sounding board.”

“Thanks, *Ang akingniga kaibigan...*” seeing the look on their face he switched back to English, “my friends, but for

now I would rather not.” He could see that the girls were disappointed. “I’ll tell you what, though. After the meeting we can have lunch together and I’ll tell both of you all about it.”

They readily agreed and Sandy promise to pick Saclolo up when he called her after the meeting. They would then pick up Bashalli from work and go enjoy the rest of the day eating and sightseeing; Saclolo had never been to Shopton or even to Swift Enterprise before.

When they landed, and by the time they taxied the plane next to its hanger, a mini-van came rushing up. Tom and Bud stepped out of the vehicle and followed the aircraft inside.

“This is not what I expected.” Saclolo told everyone as they exchanged handshakes and greetings.

“It’s the least we can do for the second most important person from Cordillera City,” Bud told him.

“And who is the first?” Saclolo asked back.

“Man... He’s here not even a day and he already forgot his wife!” Bud laughingly informed him.

Saclolo turned to Tom and asked in a low voice, but loud enough so everyone could hear, “And you still put up with him after all these years?”

“You know, mother always told me to be nice to the less fortunate...” Tom had to stop talking to ducked a punch that was coming his way from his own sister.

With luggage in the back, the four of them took Saclolo on a whirlwind tour of Enterprise, and as night approached they headed to the Shopton Yacht Club where the Swifts had part of the club’s beach closed off for a private party.

Many people at the company had dealt with Saclolo over the past year as Harlan’s right hand man, and at time as acting director, but none had ever met him in person. This was rectified that night. A face, a hand shake and a few words solidified a lot of casual acquaintance of the, “I only know him from work,” variety into real friendships.

The evening ended with a twenty-minute fireworks display over the lake. And a very happy, but tired, man from the Moon went uncomplaining to the senior Swift’s house and settled into their guest quarters.

Saclolo woke up in agony about five in the morning. It was a miracle that he had not woken earlier in the night with muscle cramps. Without realizing it he had put his body through too much exertion on his first day back on Earth. He immediately wished he had spent more time using the artificial gravity available to everyone on the Moon. But, he and Magadia had not turned it on in their quarters.

His foot and calf muscles, include the front and back of his thighs, his abdomen, and the muscles along the rib cage were in convulsions. The muscles were so tight that it felt like his bones would break. He was in so much pain that he could barely call out for help.

Luckily he was in the spare bedroom in the main house instead of the separate little apartment the Swifts had in the basement. Those rooms were so soundproof that no one would have heard him yell for help.

Mr. Swift, being a light sleeper, heard him first. The pain in Saclolo's voice frightened him. Rushing into the spare bedroom he instantly recognized what was happening to their guest. He grabbed the blanket and pulled it off him. Mrs. Swift rushed to the other side of the bed and together they got him into a sitting position.

Anne started to gently push his straining feet back, and Mr. Swift tried to massage the calf and thigh muscles. Sandy, who had spent the night in her old room while Bud was on an overnight delivery run, rushed in.

Her mother called out instructing her to fill the tub with hot water, find the epsom salts under the sink and pour half the box in. "Then go call Doctor Young to see if we need to do anything else." Sandy went back out into the hall and headed for the bathroom to do as she was told.

By now Saclolo was moving his arms about and stretching his back. After a few more seconds, Damon swung the young man's legs so they were out of the bed. Then taking his two arms Damon pulled him onto his feet. Saclolo yelped in pain as his body's weight forced his feet flat onto the floor.

Anne took hold of an arm on one side and Damon did the same on the other. Together they forced Saclolo to take a painful first step, then another. By the time they walked

him several times up and down the hall the constant cramps were fading.

Sandy told them that Doctor Young said they were doing all the right things, and that if it continued for longer than ten minutes to either call for an ambulance or take him to the hospital. He might need to be hydrated with an IV containing a solution of calcium, potassium, and magnesium.

With the cramps mostly gone, Mr. Swift helped Saclolo into the tub. A half hour later he came out wrapped in a robe that Mr. Swift left for him a much relieved man. He found Damon reading a science magazine in the corner armchair in the guess room.

“I’m so sorry...” Saclolo started to apologize, but Damon waved it off and asked if he was going to be all right, Saclolo said he was feeling better, so Damon bid him a goodnight and went back to bed.

It was past eight when Saclolo jumped out of bed, realizing that he was going to be late for his meeting. As the full weight of gravity hit him, he sat back down a moment but slowly got up and left his room to head for the bathroom.

Damon Swift called up to him, “Take your time, son. Anne is just starting to get breakfast going, so you have twenty minutes to get ready. Anyway, the meeting won’t start until we’re both there. I’ve called Jake and told him we were going to be a couple hours late.”

Two hours later the three men sat down on chairs in one of the smaller conference rooms.

“So, Mr. Reyes, what’s first up on your agenda for this little meeting?” Damon inquired.

“Well, I have two main areas of interest. But, the very first one is something Tom is already supposed to be working toward. Our new space landing dock and elevator transfer system.”

A fleeting image raced through Damon’s mind of Bud piping up with a smart aleck remark like, “What’s up, dock?” His lips twitched but he soon put the thought out of his mind.

“Yes, of course. Once my son returns from doing his survey and measurement work regarding your, uh,

unfortunate tremors, he plans to get Jake's folks started on producing a self-install kit for that."

"Wonderful," Saclolo responded. "Now, I would like to show you the longer term plans we have."

He handed Damon a cube that was quickly inserted into a telejector. Over the next hour Saclolo narrated his presentation accompanied by a series of still and motion images. At the end, Damon and Jake sat almost rigid in their seats.

The telejector had been turned off, and the proposed restaurant had gone back to nothingness. The computer-rendered map of the lunar city crater and close vicinity was spread out on the table with appropriate sized 3-D models place on it. Saclolo had done a marvelous job on rendering them before coming to Earth.

"Do you have any figures on how much this proposal would cost?" came the first question. Jake, if nothing else, was a cost aficionado. The bottom line numbers were what he looked at.

Saclolo reached into his briefcase and took out three, eight-by-ten booklets, and handed two of them out.

"This is a cost projection of four of the main sections of the project. Spaceships, the hotel, refitting a few current lunar sites into thrill rides, and constructing a Lunar Space Camp and launch point down here. The full amusement and water park will have to be a separate item a year or more after this stage is finished." He watched the two men leafing through their booklets.

"How did you project the costs for the lunar transport ship? It seems way under budget. We could never construct one at that price, never mind three," Jake inquired after he looked at the final cost on the last page.

Saclolo smiled at him, took a small binder out and handed it to him. "I first took the liberty of finding out the cost of the *Challenger* space craft form the Swift's annual reports, and I found some cost sheets the Master had for the *Genghis Khan*." He pointed them out to both men to look at.

"As you can see there is only a one point one million dollar difference between the two. So that is my basic cost

projection. It should be an over estimations since the ships don't have repelatron drive units. And if we construct at least three, the cost per ship should go down about eighteen percent.”

Jake quickly paged through the booklet again.

“Those ships need engines and that's two-thirds the cost. You just can't leave their cost out.”

“You can, if they don't need one.” Saclolo smiled.

“Well... I've never heard of such a thing.”

“Jake, Saclolo is pulling your leg.” Mr. Swift told his manager. He looked at the vice director on the Moon and asked. “How many space mules do you need?”

“Five robotic mules should do it. Two for launching and landing on Earth, and two to ferry the visitor transport back and forth.”

“And the fifth one?” Mr. Swift asked.

“They all will be on a rotating schedule, so one will always be in maintenance or standby.”

“Why didn't you include them in you costs?” Jake wanted to know.

“Well, I was hoping for the time being to rent that set of mules you have sitting in orbit right now. That will save us a big expense, and it will put cash in your pocket for mules that are on standby.”

Mr. Swift was nodding his head. “We definitely could work something out along those lines.”

Jake looked at Damon and still shook his head no. “There no way we can still spring for that amount of money, even doing it that way.”

“We're not asking you to,” Saclolo informed them. “All I really want is the availability of the space mules and for Swift Construction to built the ships for us,” he winked at Mr. Swift as he said that. “Take a look at the last couple of pages and you'll see the design I have in mind. Remember what they are going to be used for when you look at it.”

Both men turned to the last few pages and Mr. Swift burst out laughing. “Saclolo, you out did yourself with the design. And from the interior layout I see that it is very

practical. Don't you agree, Jake?" he asked his closest friend and manager.

"That's yet to be seen!" was his somewhat reluctant reply. "I only build the things that you guys tell me to build. If you say it will fly, Damon, then so be it." But his face told another story for now.

Saclolo was not surprised at his reaction, but was more than happy Mr. Swift recognize the possibility of his plans for ships looking more like flying saucers than anything.

"With the mules that you have already we can transport the materials we need to do the hotel and the rides. My people will do the work. Right now we have over a thousand construction workers who need things to do.

"When the Masters were eliminated, so was their master plan of being the only ones left in the solar system. No repopulation plan went into effect, so we are now overmanned. We need to get these people working on something big, and this is it."

"And how will you pay us?" Jake asked dropping the binder on the desk now knowing that he was going to be a very busy man in the near future.

"You won't believe this, but the Chinese want to send a pair of satellites to Pluto. One is to land on Pluto itself and the other is to study it's five companions. You know, Charon, Nix, Hydra, Kerberos and Stex."

"Yes, I know of that," Damon Swift spoke up. "They asked us to help them, but we had to refuse. They wanted to control not only the satellites, but the mission itself. To sort of borrow the *Challenger* and return it when they are done." Mr. Swift was almost laughing on telling that.

"Thank God it's too much red tape to work with them. On top of which, our government didn't like the idea either." He laughed slightly.

"I figured it was something like that. But Cordillera City does not have that kind of interference. And the *Genghis Khan* can do the trip. The Chinese are willing to pay us two billion dollars up front for the successful delivery of both satellites."

"Wait a minutes, Saclolo!" Jake cut in. "If I understand this right they're will give you the two billion dollars *before* the launch, so you can take the satellites to Pluto?"

Saclolo nodded yes.

“And they must deploy, right?”

Again, a nod yes.

“And if they don't?”

“Don't you see it? Their hidden plan?” Saclolo smiled.

“What...?” Jake asked, looking at Damon.

“They want Cordillera City as *collateral*.” Saclolo said it without blinking an eyelash.

“WHAT!” shouted Mr. Swift as he jumped up to his feet. “You've got to be crazy.”

“You do know that those satellites won't work, don't you?” the astounded, but clam, Jake. Aturian told him.

“I wouldn't think they would. You have to admit that it's a good ploy to getting their hands on Cordillera City. Give us two satellites that do work on take-off and then they go dead on deployment.”

“So if you know this, why do it?” a bewildered Mr. Swift asked, sitting back down.

“We'll have four weeks to start the delivery flight after they give us the satellites. Don't you worry, they will be in tip top shape before they leave the ship. I guarantee it.” He smiled at them.

“And what if they arrive in a sealed launch system and under a protective code?”

“We launch the two satellites ourselves, and as for the main computer and electronics, we'll be taking our own replacements with us and be ready to swop them around. At five billion kilometers out, they won't be able to stop us. Just the radio return time delay gives us an edge over them. I'll just make sure the contract language states we have repair abilities over the operations systems.”

“Would you mind if I run the agreement through our lawyers here at Enterprise to make sure all the I's are dotted and the T's are crossed.”

“By all means, Mr. Swift. That would be appreciated.”

Neither Damon Swift or Jake Aturian could fault the CAD's blueprints of the projects. Saclolo did have a group of engineers who knew how to design and build spaceships

and habitats better than most Earth people. Their very lives depended on it.

It was another two hours before Saclolo called Sandy to come to pick him up. He felt that he was back on the Moon he felt was so light headed with a sense of accomplishment.

After being away from Earth for a few years, one thing Saclolo longed for was authentic Southeast Asian cuisine. So, the girls took him to a small, out-of-the-way Vietnamese and Cambodian restaurant that had mild citrus and spicy sauces that they found very enjoyable.

They ordered several different plates so Saclolo could have his fill of the cuisine and while they waited for their meal they shared a virgin scorpion bowl drink as Saclolo told the girls how well the meeting had gone. While they ate he told them of the project and how the city hoped to fund most of it. He added that he wanted to have several restaurants like this one at or near the hotel. Not only for the patrons, but for the people of Cordillera City.

The only thing was he could not fund that extra expense at first, so it would have to wait.

Bashalli asked if she could see the restaurant proposal; she knew a few people her advertisement firm did business with in that industry who might be able to help

A group of people had approached her once to see if Tom would build an undersea restaurant. But when Tom showed them that the extravagant sea life they thought would be visible would avoid the vicinity, they invested instead in taking over older seaside aquariums and putting dining facilities in them. This went over quite well and they now had several throughout the country and two in Europe.

To celebrate this idea they had a second scorpion bowl and a creamy rice and fruit dessert. By the end of the meal, Saclolo had to use the men's room. Nobody noticed the man who was sitting, silently and hidden, in the booth behind them.

With a smirk of delight on his face, the man paid for his meal and, as he stepped out the front door, he casually watched as Sandy, Bashalli and Saclolo drove off to go sightseeing the rest of the day.

Chapter Seven: Bashalli Swift, Show-Woman

TOM and Bud returned to Enterprises the following day from a quick trip to the Moon. He wanted to personally move some of his recording devices around and bring back the data that had been collected. The inventor had enough of the early data to crunch in the company's huge computer bank, so he went straight from the jet to the Data Processing building. There, he fed more than two dozen data cubes into the input terminal before heading to the office he shared with his father.

He walked past Trent, greeting the secretary, before entering the office. Saclolo and his father were seated in the conference chairs. The Filipino stood up on seeing Tom.

"So, have you discovered the source of the quakes?" He looked eager for any good news.

Tom shook his head. "I'm afraid there is so much data to sort through that we won't have anything to report until about this time tomorrow. The one thing I can tell you is that I am going to have to mount a manned underground mission to trace the path of that atomic drill and its cargo of nastiness your Empress tried to send into the colony."

He told his father about the scorched hole and the notes that had been located.

"I don't like this at all," Damon stated rising to refill his coffee mug.

"Nobody does, Dad," Tom said, "but all Damonscope measurements show that the took a downward turn for some reason and disappeared about three hours later. I need to find out if all their problems can be traced back to the small reactor in that drill, and I can't do that without getting close to the location and find out if it is still going."

"How do you intend to track it?"

Tom smiled. "I've contacted a very special specialist who has agreed to take on a contract job for us."

Mr. Swift's eyebrows raised and then he scowled. "Who?"

"Stefanie Brooks!"

Stefanie had been instrumental in locating, identifying, and ultimately helping Tom find a way to heal a potentially deadly tectonic rift coming in from the mid-Atlantic and into Rhode Island.

During that time she had met a friend of Bud's, fell in love with him in spite of his being considerably taller than six-feet and she being a dwarf. They had a child who, Tom thought, must be nearing two by now.

"Stefanie told me she is going stir crazy being a full-time mother and would relish the chance to not only work in her field and with us again, but she was ecstatic when she found out it would be on the Moon."

Damon began to pace from the chairs to his desk and back again. After two laps he looked at his son. "How dangerous is this? If there is any chance she might get injured or—" He stopped, unable to articulate what the "worse" scenario might be. "Well, just how dangerous is this?"

Tom's head tilted to the left. "Well, short of spending millions to create a special version of the Geotron, I want to take the model back up. It worked like a little champion when we were locating their hidden reservoir cavern. The only thing is that it is just too small for me to find any room to pilot it myself. If I could go in it, I would."

That was sufficient for Damon. He knew his son. Tom would take chances, but never knowingly place himself in jeopardy.

Saclolo was looking confused, so Tom told him about Stefanie and the Tectonic Interrupter incident. By the end of the story he was smiling.

"I had a cousin when we were young affected by dwarfism. He was a true fireball of energy and eagerness. Ultimately, his size and general health took him from us, but having known him makes me eager to meet your Mrs. Brooks."

"Actually, now she's married it's Mrs. Bodack. Her hubby is Deke, a former military pilot, and before the subject comes up, the baby has no dwarfism traits. Anyway, Stefanie is perfectly proportioned except her shins are half normal length. She's over four feet tall and, like your cousin, a fireball!"

Saclolo looked at his watch and carefully stood up. “If you will excuse me, gentlemen? I am lunching with your wife and mother, Tom. Until later...”

They nodded and gave him identical smiles. He noted the absolute similarity between them and shook his head in wonder. He had never seen a father and son who shared so many physical characteristics. He could almost imagine them to be brothers, separated by about fifteen years.

Once the door closed, Damon looked at Tom.

“Well? What didn’t you say while our guest was in the room?”

Tom made a motion to the conference chairs and took one himself.

“That atomic drill the Emperor and Empress built was probably going to explode on them if it were used more than a few additional times. Their shielding leaked radiation like crazy and instead of titanium any sane person would use instead of our durastress, they used simple extruded aluminum. If it had gone straight—and the Empress’ aim was so bad that it would not have passed *under* the first dome and into the water cavern—it would have pierced that upper dome and spread destruction and death throughout.” He shook his head. “How can people be so clueless?”

Damon let out a rueful chuckle. “Son, there are billions of people out there and I’d venture to say that only a million of so have the training and intelligence to take the sort of precautions we do. Let’s just be happy that the drill and its deadly cargo disappeared.”

Tom nodded, but in the back of his mind a thought was hovering telling him to not get cocky about the drill. It could come back to haunt them all!

* * *

The following day as Tom was reviewing the initial round of data from the Moon, his father was making a few phone calls.

His first call was to an old friend—both in terms of acquaintance and the man’s age—who had once worked for the Disney Company designing theme parks and hotels.

“The Moon? As in ‘*Shine on Harvest?*’ Have you gone crazy, Damon?” Bob Hastings asked, but Damon could tell the man’s brain was racing with the possibilities and he was probably smiling.

“No, not crazy as such, Bob. But Saclolo Reyes, the man who will be taking over as their Administrator—sort of a Governor General—has made a pretty convincing presentation. Money is going to be a bit of an object, but he has a multi-stage plan to cover things as they go along. Can you come up to see what he’s got? I know Florida is comfy and warm, but—”

“Criminy geez, Damon. It’s muggy as a jungle swamp and the bugs that ought to know better and be gone at this time of year are still carrying off small children and an assortment of household pets! Of course I can come up. Your dime or mine?”

Chuckling, Damon assured him that an SE-11 jet would pick him up. “At your convenience in the next day or two, of course,” he added.

“I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon!”

The second call had been to a man who was currently responsible for operating more than thirty restaurants mostly in Seattle and New York.

“I’m really too busy to design another one,” he told Damon before hearing where it was planned to be constructed.

After hearing the location, he said, “I’ll drive up tonight, See you in the morning!” and had hung up. Before the connection broke, Damon could have sworn he heard the man giggle.

The next afternoon Saclolo and his new assistant, Bashalli Swift, addressed their visitors. The two of them had spent the previous evening and that morning reworking the Filipino’s presentation. Her natural sense of how to dramatically convince via visuals and words had forced Saclolo to turn the presentation of many still images—beginning with a flyover of the crater and ending in the mouth of the mountain reservoir—into a virtual thrill ride.

Borrowing special software Tom had created more than a year earlier, called “Tweener,” they let the computer build

additional images to fit between his original ones.

A few special effects such as tilts and some added motion served to make the “ride” feel real. The darkened room added to the imagery and at the end everyone was left ever so slightly motion sick.

It had been, in a word, *success!*

“I believe that team of five people representing the best of the five areas of what we must call entertainment groups should come up and see the actual sites and conditions,” she told them as the presentation wound down. “Swift Enterprises will provide transportation, but it should be a single event so you can all share thoughts and information face-to-face and live,” she suggested.

“Got a good question for you up front,” Hastings stated.

“Go ahead, please,” she invited him.

“Okay. Dealing with the Disney folks I’ve had to build in swamps on bedrock so shallow that it took nearly a quarter million pounds of explosives to excavate, and even in ground that seemed to be solid down to about thirty-eight feet, and then we hit a layer of brittle volcanic rock. It made things *difficult*. What the heck are we up against with this?”

Saclolo took over answering. “From the standpoint of excavation, the lunar soil, if you will, is relatively easy to grind away. What remains has withstood the rigors of billions of years of vacuum, and it mostly stable. We have found, especially in our now hollow mountain, that the lower we go, the more natural cracks we find. At first we thought the ground was cracking after we excavated, but that isn’t the case. It has been like that for who knows how long.”

“Fine...” Hastings said slowly, “but, what does it all mean in the long run?”

“We have performed some experiments. There is a naturally occurring adhesive ability in most of the soil taken from about fifteen feet down to one hundred feet. Mix it with water, compact it into sheets, and you have something that in ten-inch thicknesses has the same strength and durability as twice that of concrete. Coat it with one of the Swift’s amazing polymers and it is not only airtight, it is radiation proof, self-insulating, and impervious to anything

short of C-4 type explosives... in fairly high quantities.”

“And,” Bashalli spoke up, “we not only have sufficient initial water supplies, my husband has told me he can be depended on to provide regular deliveries of additional water-bearing space materials to the colony.”

“What about supplies for the hotel? For the restaurants? Snack bars?”

She explained that the same source of water would be sufficient to handle the facilities once built. “As for food, nearly everything will be grown within the city. We have decided to construct one additional dome devoted specifically to growing and raising food. Of course, I do have to tell you that large animals are out. We can support chickens, fish, and small game animals, such as rabbits, only. But, we want to make sure that people coming up realize they will be leaving some Earth comforts behind. They are coming to the Moon and should share in some of its rigors. Otherwise, why come? We have provided plenty of Earth type amenities, like the 'Top of the Mountain Restaurant'. That might include steaks and things of that nature brought up from Earth. Very limited, however.”

The meeting ended on a high note and the two men left to go have dinner with Damon and Anne Swift.

Saclolo, once they left the conference room, sighed, sat back down and laughed.

“I think that went fairly well,” he declared.

“I think that went wonderfully well!” Bashalli told him with a little giggle. “Let’s pick up Sandy and have a celebration. Feel like more Southeast Asian food?” Saclolo’s eyes lit up and a smile spread across his face.

They returned to the very same restaurant they visited before. The owner even came out and seated them himself. He took them to a nice secluded area, partially screen off by tall plants. Once he had them seated he called over his best waiter before he rushed off to make a phone call.

His only thought was of the extra two hundred dollars he was going to pocket for that one easy call.

This time they each ordered a house specialty dish and the non-alcoholic scorpion bowl drink to top everything off. They had a second scorpion bowl and the same creamy rice

and fruit dessert as before. It tasted just as good the second time around as it had the first. At the end of the meal, Saclolo excused himself to use the men's room.

None of them noticed the man who followed him in.

A minute later the men's room door flew open and Saclolo rushed out. He forgot about the step down and stumbled until he caught the back of an empty chair. When he tried to walk his right foot gave out and he almost fell, the chair saving him again.

A waiter and the girls rushed to his side and started to help him back to the table.

“Stop that man in the men's room.” Saclolo gasped. Sandy, used to reacting to this sort of thing, hurried past them and looked in... the door was still open. The room was empty.

Back at the table, the owner, Mr. Li, was making a fuss over Saclolo's hurt foot. Saclolo was insisting it was not his fault and that he should not have rushed out like he did. Mr. Li would not let the matter drop, muttered several times that it had been his fault, and finally the three of them left the establishment with the rest of their food in bags, not paying for their meals.

Li was feeling pangs of guilt over his earlier phone call and feared that its discovery could lead to a lawsuit.

Not knowing about this, Bashalli slipped forty dollars under her napkin before they left. With each girl at his side they awkwardly helped Saclolo to the car. He had to be held up because with the higher gravity. He had an almost impossible time walking with one foot.

They finally made it and headed back to the Swift's home.

“What happened back there?” Sandy asked as she drove out of the parking lot.

“I wish I knew.” Saclolo replied. “I stepped out of the stall and this man blocked my way. He started to ask question about why I was on Earth and carousing around in the middle of the day with the Swift's women.”

Saclolo looked at Sandy, “Is that what I'm doing? I thought carousing had a bar connotation and womanizing.”

“It is, Saclolo, and maybe we better report this to Phil Radnor just in case.” Sandy looked at Bashalli in the mirror, who nodded.

“How did he know who you are?” Bashalli asked from the back seat. “This sounds like the kind of trouble that Thomas always finds himself in.”

Sandy readily agreed with that statement, so she turned the car around and headed towards Enterprise.

“We might as well let Doctor Young take a look at your foot while we're at it. Why you're limping could be from more than a sprain.”

* * *

Anne Swift liked to keep herself busy. After her husband left for work each morning she did the breakfast dishes and a little bit of housekeeping. But, every day, Monday through Friday, she watched the 11:45 morning broadcast of *Shopton's Socialites, Your Neighbor's Fifteen Minutes of Fame*. It was usually just small fluff pieces about what was happening around town. Nothing mind boggling, and at the end of the week it had report on local fun things to do for the weekend.

The reporter, the young-ish wife of the former Governor of the state, came from a well-connected political family. She was an ex-childhood beauty queen who had reached the age where her beauty had turned into gentle attractiveness, it was getting harder to disguise her crowsfeet, and her over-eager style sometimes wore a bit thin.

Courtney Curtis grew up in the local social spotlight and knew everyone of importance in Shopton. This morning she was sharing the broadcast with a well dressed, just out of college, young man by the name of Donnell Basset.

Anne had not been paying attention to the light banter between the two at the start of the show, but she caught a glimpse of video featuring two women with a man held tightly in between them on the television screen. They staggered down a street until they reached a red, two door convertible, and very awkwardly set the man in, got in themselves and raced off.

Anne was held spellbound by the video. When side-by-side closeups of the two women appeared Anne just sank

onto the coach she was standing before.

“And this, ladies and gentlemen, are recent pictures of the two *ladies* involved in this public display of drunkenness.” The young reporter's voice was smooth and assured. It even held a little disdain as he gave the names of the two women.

“The blonde woman is none other than the former Sandra Swift, daughter of the world renown inventor and businessman, Mr. Damon Swift of Swift Enterprise. Sandra has *only* been married for less than a year to Budworth Barclay, test pilot and best friend to Tom Swift Jr.” The two pictures were replaced with the showing of the video once more, this time in slow motion.

“The other woman,” he continued to talk as the video ran, “is Tom Swift's wife of nearly three years, Bashalli Prandit Swift. She is of foreign extraction being born in someplace like Afghanistan or one of *those* countries.”

The video was now replaced with a close up of the man.

“And this man, Saclolo Reyes, is the vice-director of the newly independent Cordillera City slave colony on the dark side of the Moon. He is reportedly the inside man who helped Harlan Ames, Swift Enterprise Security Director, in the overthrowing and elimination of the so-called Masters. They were the twin brother and sister who actually conceived and built the lunar base out of their own fortune and inventiveness. Talk about your go-getters!”

The image on the television now switched to a long shot of the two reporters sitting at a desk facing each other.

“Mr. Basset,” Courtney tried to sound shock at what he was implying. “The way you are linking these outstanding citizens of our fair city together with the dealings on the Moon is outrageous. Do you even have any proof that the video you showed us today is of them intoxicated, and not caused by another reason?”

With a small smile on his lips he nodded to someone off the screen and they were replaced by another video taken from inside of a restaurant. The scene was of poor quality, shot with a cell phone probably, dark and somewhat shaky. But, Sandra, Bashalli and Saclolo could be seen drinking from a large bowl with long, thin straws. Anyone who ever been to a Chinese restaurant would recognize the

scorpion bowl drink and might be forgiven for not thinking this one might contain no alcohol.

Anne knew what really happened the previous afternoon. She could see that with the right wording the video could be misinterpreted, but why? The person who took it also knew the real reason and was willing to go along with the lie. Her daughter and daughter-in-law were helping poor Saclolo walk back to the car on a very bad ankle. This being only his third full day back on Earth really made his mobility worse.

Saclolo had even joked at supper that night that if he stayed on Earth too long that he'd be sent back up in a full body cast. It had been a slight break in the thigh bone and he would need to wear a cast and use a cane for several weeks while it healed.

She picked up the remote control and hit the record button, The hard drive in the digital recorder would have already captured what had been broadcast since the show began. She wanted the video to show her husband.

Anne reach for the phone not waiting for the show to end. She had heard enough to know where it was going. Just as she touch it, the phone it rang, startling her. She recognized the number on the caller display, and knew why her husband was calling.

“Damon, that horrible man, Donnell Basset is disgusting.” She didn't even say 'Hello' first she so was so angry. “You have to get Phil Radnor to find out who he is.”

“That is why I called. Someone at the TV station left a tip with one of our operators just before that live segment went on the air. We did not have time to try to have it pulled.” Mr. Swift told her. “Phil called the Shopton police to see if they could get someone there to hold that reporter after the show, but they can't really do anything about it. The Captain told us it's a civil matter and not a criminal one. It's Donnell Basset's interpretation of what is on the video against ours.”

“Then who is that pipsqueak son of a bugger?” That was the closest Damon ever heard his wife get to a swear.

“Well, Phil had that answer in seconds. You'll love this, Hon,” he chuckled. “That show hostess, Courtney Curtis, is his second cousin, and,” Damon emphasize what came next, “*he's Dan Perkins' nephew.* Guess the rotten apple doesn't

fall far from the tree.

“Ever since Dan lost management of the *Shopton Bulletin*, he's been telling everyone that we railroaded him out of the company. I guess this particular nephew believes his hogwash. Or, he thinks that we're a fast way to the top in the newspaper business.”

“What can you do about him?” Anne asked disgusted about the whole matter.

“Call him up. Try to reason with him. Invite him to see me personally, and see if I can set the record straight.”

Anne snorted, “That technique of yours, Damon, never worked on his uncle Dan. Threats, yes. Softly, softly, not so much. Why do you think it will work on him?” Anne was so tired of all the false press her family received throughout the years that she felt like screaming.

“He's young and he really doesn't have an ax to grind with us. I'm sure he's trying to use us as a quick start for his career. Maybe if I can give him something else to chew on he'll leave us along.”

“Oh, Damon, I hope so, but I doubt it.”

Nothing more was said or shown on television at the 4:45 p.m. repeat of the show. In fact it was replaced by a fifteen minute special on wind surfing on Lake Carlopa. The Swift's legal team was fast in quashing the false broadcast.

It turned out that Basset knew he was on shaky ground and had quickly left the station at the end of the broadcast, requesting to take his video tape with him. Nobody knew where he had gone or when he might return.

It was late in the afternoon when Tom walked into the office where Saclolo and his father were once again seated in the conference chairs. Tom immediately noticed the knee-to-foot cast the Filipino was wearing and asked about it.

“Saclolo ran afoul of someone while he and your wife and sister were having lunch yesterday. Doctor Young says it is a simple greenstick fracture of the lower fibula which he would normally just soft wrap, but with his reduced calcium levels from too long in lower gravity, Saclolo here needs to wear a cast for five weeks.”

Saclolo shrugged and smiled. “My clumsiness combined

with my time up there,” he pointed to the ceiling, “has conspired against me. I’ll be fine. Don’t worry. Doctor Young said that he will defer to Doctor Simpson once I go back. I could be out of this in four weeks with luck. So, what have you found about the quakes?” He looked eager to learn any news.

Tom was amazed on hearing what had occurred the day before. He had arrived home so late and tired that Bashalli didn’t have the heart to tell him what had happened. By the time he got up, she was already at work.

It made Tom wonder what really happened in the world around him when he was not paying attention to it.

Chapter Eight: ...and Then Came Stefanie

DURING the three weeks it took for the Construction Company to put together the first half of the pre-fabricated landing pad—less than the one or two months Saclolo had anticipated—his leg would continue to improve at a rapid rate. The calcium and vitamin D the doctor had advised him to take, helped his strong, athletic body to repair itself faster than the physician might have believed.

On calling Doc Simpson up at the lunar city, Young had been told that was to be expected. The lunar colonist's bodies had grown accustomed to rapid repair.

“But, I am going to have to introduce more calcium and D into the diets up here along with mandatory operation of Tom's gravity system in all public places,” Doc admitted. “We're going to have more people commuting up and down over the next years so I want everyone prepared. Besides,” he said, sadly, “the lack of true sunshine is starting to take a toll. We've had some rise in cancers of the breast in women.”

Young arranged to have the necessary supplies shipped up when Saclolo returned.

* * *

Saclolo didn't venture out for the next two days after breaking his leg except for small walks with Mrs. Swift around the neighborhood. His good leg ached constantly from the extra weight if was forced to support in Earth's gravity. He had to push himself if he was going to get anything done in his present condition.

He confirmed a week long business trip to Beijing, China—starting in another eight days—to the headquarters of the China National Space Administration (CNSA) to go over final contract language for the Pluto satellite deal.

The Chinese wanted the deal so bad that they were sending their new sub-orbital transport rocket-plane to Enterprises—it required their longest, three-point-five mile runway—in four days to pick him up with room for two assistants. The craft could only hold six passengers including the pilots. It was more a showoff piece of

engineering than anything else, and not practical at all cost-wise. But it could take you anywhere worldwide in the matter of a two hours instead of days.

Before the end of the first week of his convalescence Saclolo made it to Jake Aturian's office at Swift Construction to see how the new loading dock and elevator system was coming along. Jake was very happy to show him the progress on completing the system.

Certain parts of it were about to undergo testing. The trial run would last five days in which the separate units would be in continuous stressed to see what their limits were. Then the testing was done the units were going to be torn down to see what was no longer within specs. Those parts were then to be replaced with retooled items to stand up to the rigorous use. The idea was that if it worked in Earth's gravity, it was a cinch to hold up on the Moon.

Saclolo was more than happy to see the outstanding progress on the dock system, and could not thank Mr. Aturian enough.

"Are you kidding," he laughed in reply. "If you pull off that China satellite deal and begin your resort construction, you'll have us in the *green* for the next year. And, we'll be running this section of the company twenty-four / seven. The modular room design for your hotel is ingenious. Inflatable walls that can be attached anywhere you want them. Not only do they save on construction materials, they're lightweight and, if filled with that expanding adhesive and moon dust mixture your scientist came up with, you can make them permanent. From what I've seen you have plenty of regolith to go around up there." He teased Saclolo for he knew that was one of the biggest problem they had on the lunar surface. The regolith tended to cling onto everything and jam up exposed moving parts.

Harlan noticed the problem in his first month as Director on the Moon and had purchased several mini visions of the Spectrum Element Selector Vacuums, an offshoot product of Tom's Spectromarine Selector. He'd invented it to clean the mud and slime off the underwater gold city that he discovered near his helium wells in the mid Atlantic some time back.

That settled, Saclolo rushed off to see Mr. Swift on two

more vexing problems the satellite contracts were causing.

He got right to the heart of the matter when he finally was able to see Mr. Swift. Without a previous appointment, he had to wait his turn to see the always busy man.

“Mr. Swift, as seems to be usual these days, I need your help. On the Moon I would know what to do and just do it. Here, I’m at a loss and beg for your guidance.”

Damon Swift tried hard not to smile at Saclolo; he was glad to be able to help the younger man and did not want to shatter his confidence. “Go ahead.”

“I’m about to finalize the contract with the Chinese and I need a good contract lawyer with me *just in case*. One who understands Mandarin as well. One that will keep quiet and listen to what is going on around us, if you know what I mean.” Saclolo looked at him hopefully.

“Oh, indeed I do. What language is the contract going to be written in? Mandarin or English? That is the first hurdle you’ll need to overcome.” Mr. Swift could see that Saclolo never gave that a thought.

“My...” Saclolo mumbled more to himself, then he said to Mr. Swift, “I just assumed the actual paper would be in English, but you are right. They will probably write it up in Mandarin and I’ll have a heck of a time detecting legal traps. I was only thinking conversations between them might be the tricky part.”

“We’ll assume the worst scenario and the contracts are in Mandarin. Let me see what I can come up with.” Damon picked up the phone and talked for a few minutes with someone. When he hung up he had a wide smile on his face. The tension just flowed out of Saclolo body on seeing his face.

“I think we can cover that problem. We’ll know in a few minutes. Now, what else can I do?” Damon sat back in his chair and templed his hands together before his chin and waited.

“The Chinese are sending their sub-orbital rocket-plane here tomorrow to pick me up and two assistants, if I have any. So, I will need clearance for the landing and a large quantity of liquid hydrogen to refuel their ship. The Chinese government will pay for the refueling.”

Mr. Swift nodded.

“Then there is the return trip back in about a week. Can you get the two landings past U.S. Customs?” Saclolo was a little worried about that one because clearance had to happen in the matter of hours.

“Tell you what. Fearing Island is listed as an international landing area with the U.N. We will inform the Chinese they must land there. We’ll get you out there tonight so there is no need to worry about them coming here. They know that they can use Fearing’s field with no U.S. interference. As long as they don’t leave the island they don’t even need passports. Security is up to us to supply and if something happens, the U.N. and the U.S. Government will come down our throats like gangbusters and make our life miserable.” He laughed lightly. “The Chinese know that too, so I wonder what they hoped to accomplish by suggesting landing here at Enterprises?”

“It was my idea. I didn’t mean to cause you any trouble,” Saclolo sadly started to say, but Damon interrupted him.

“Not an issue. I’m just happy we caught it today.”

They conversed about what Saclolo believed would be happening in China for ten minutes. Saclolo started to turn the discussion back to the matter of the Enterprises vs. Fearing landing when a knock on the door interrupted him.

“Come in,” Mr. Swift called out and then added to his guest, “It’s no trouble. Letting them land their space plane is part of our space flight agreement with both the U.S.A. and the U.N. space fairing nations. We must all have a safe landing zone for other countries in case of emergencies. The Chinese will be pushing the boundaries of this International treaty, but I see no harm in it.”

By the time he had stopped talking a thirty-something lady of Chinese origin was standing quietly beside them. She was just over five feet tall, slim and had short black hair. Her face was round with almost no makeup and her eyes were mere slits so you could not even see what color they were. Her large, round, yellow-tinted glasses hid much of her face. Her nose and mouth were both petite. She was frumpy looking and her clothes were somewhat out of style. Her whole demeanor seemed meek, mild and submissive.

Mr. Swift gave her a close scrutiny and smiled at her.

“Well, if I hadn’t been expecting you I’d have completely failed to recognize you.”

“I take it you are pleased with my present looks, Mr. Swift?” The woman asked in a well assured voice not fitting her looks. “And I tell you this, I won't be caught dead outside this assignment in this hideous outfit no matter how much you pay me!” She sounded furious to Saclolo. He did not know what to make of the byplay between Mr. Swift and the woman.

“Saclolo Reyes, I want you to meet one of the rising stars here in our legal department. Lynn Johnson is the older sister of Artie Johnson who works in our Propulsion Engineering group.” They exchanged handshakes before all three sat down to talk.

With a grin on his face, Mr. Swift asked Lynn, “Your face says you don't want to go play meek, mild and especially dumb to the China National Space Administration? I thought that you or your brother would die for a chance to get payback for your parents.” The color of the woman's face turned white, then red with anger.

“I never thought you were that kind of man, Mr. Swift. I see now why you always win over your opposition,” she told him coldly.

“I'm not, but there are times that you must be more than you feel comfortable being. As a lawyer you know that. You also know that I met you father for the first time when I was still working with NASA on the Shuttle program when he came over with a group of visiting rocket scientist from China. That was before they ever launched their first satellite. Everything for them was in its infancy.

“We hit it off very well.” He turned to Saclolo. “When the first Chinese manned rocket exploded on the launch pad a few years later the government went looking for a handy scapegoat and her father's engineering group was held responsible. They were sent to prison for ten years. It was a terrible shock to me.” Mr. Swift stopped talking and handed the woman a tissue from his desk; she had started to softly sob. “I'm sorry, Lynn, I don't mean to upset you.” He gently touched her arm.

“No, Mr. Swift, it's not your fault. If it wasn't for you locating us in Cambodia after dad was released and we escaped from China, we would all be dead.”

Saclolo pulled up an extra chair and handed her a glass of water after she sat down in it.

“Whatever you want, Mr. Swift, I gladly do. If it wasn’t for you, we would never have made it to the United States. You were a life saver for all of us. My whole family own you a debt of gratitude we can never pay back.”

“That is something that I don't want you to feel obliged for. I helped a good man who deserved better than he got. It was just luck that I found out about all of you escaping into Cambodia.

“That he was willing to risk taking you at eleven, and Artie at four months, really tells me what a good man your father was. The rest of it, helping your family out, was the right thing to do. And how wonderfully you and Artie have turned out as adults is more than fair payback. Both of you have contributed more to this company than we have paid out to send you to college and law school and your brother to MIT. We do the same for all our worthwhile employees, and always with no strings attached.

“So if you don't want to do this once you hear the whole story, just say so... and I mean that!” Mr. Swift told her about the Chinese satellites for Pluto and the possibility that the contracts could be all in Mandarin. “Certainly, their side of the conversation will be. We need you to ensure their interpreter is doing his or her job.”

He gave her a ten-minute description of the trip and what was required.

“Bring it on!” Lynn told them emphatically. “My Mandarin is spot on and I’m getting fluent in Cantonese if they switch to that. If I can help stop the Chinese from trying to take over the Moon, I'm all for it.”

Because she had a commitment that evening, Mr. Swift arranged for Bud Barclay to fly them to Fearing the next morning. Before they left his office he made one more phone call and sent them to see Phil Radnor before letting Saclolo go home to pack for the trip.

When they arrived at Phil's office he gave each a small box. Lynn opened hers and found a new pair of glasses close to the ones she had on. She was mystified by them until Phil explained that the glass lens had microscopic Video-Oculens built in and could be turned on by pinching the top

and bottom of the lens frame; it would start recording sight and sound of everything she looked at. Each lens had enough storage capacity for twenty-four hours of continuous use. They could be turned off the same way they were turned on.

Saclolo's box had a pair of contact lens that did the same thing as Lynn's glasses, but without sound, and ran only four hours each. They were turned on and off by a special blink sequence. Leaving Phil's office in high spirits, they joked that they were now junior international spies.

* * *

Two weeks later, and the day before the landing structure was to be collapsed and loaded on board a special lifting body—based on Damon Swift's original *CosmoSoar*—Saclolo sat in Jake Aturian's office looking through the instruction manual. The package of spars, girders and platform panels was to be lifted into orbit where the waiting *Sutter* would load everything inside and transport it to the Moon, and the same lifting body would take it gently to the surface; it would take four trips up before the golden ship was ready to leave.

"This seems to be too easy. Am I missing an important detail?" he asked.

Jake shook his head. "Nope! We've made it as easy as we can. And, for two reasons. First, we are completely unsure how construction in low gravity might affect things like alignment and snugness of fittings. That will be up to your experts so we caution you to make it clear that this is not a speed project. The other reason is it makes it much easier to sort of fold it like a very complex origami umbrella for shipment than to bundle up a lot of beams and sheets and such."

Saclolo rose and shook Jake's hand. "I am humbled by your work and forethought, sir. Thank you from the thousands of us in Cordillera City."

Twenty minutes later Tom caught site of the Filipino as he walked from the little electric runabout he had been using during his stay and the Administration building.

"Hey. Glad I found you. I hear you've seen the collapse-o-pad. What do you think?"

Saclolo effused over his positive feeling so long that he only finished as they were taking seats in the shared office.

A minute later there was a knock on the door. Tom called out, "Come in," but nothing happened.

He stood up and was walking around the chairs when the door popped open, a cry of, "Incoming!" broke the silence, and he found himself with an armload of Stefanie Bodack!

Her arms encircled his neck and she was giving him such a tight squeeze that he could barely breath.

"Guess what I found?" Bud asked as he stepped into the room. "Oh, I see you've met."

Tom disentangled himself from the diminutive woman's embrace and set her down.

"Gee it's great to see you, Stefanie!" he said. Before he knew it, or could avoid it, she had jumped back up and had her arms around his neck.

"Give me a kiss and I'll let you go. And, before you stammer and stutter, Bashi gave me permission. I called your house earlier and she was still there. So, pucker up!"

She planted an amazingly soft and uncomfortably long kiss on his lips. Finally, and with a little sigh, she let go and slid to the floor.

"I got one of those as well," Bud said with a goofy look on his face. "She doesn't half kiss, does she?"

"You ought to see what I do for Deke!" she told them with a wicked smile before her face went a little sad.

Tom introduced her to Saclolo.

"Stefanie is the woman who will be riding my little Geotron model into that hole and coming back with the truth about what actually happened," he explained.

"It is a distinct pleasure to meet you, and forgive me if I tell you I hope that we never become good friends. I do not think my wife, Magadia, would ever be as understanding as Sandy or Bashalli are." Under his dark complexion, he was blushing furiously.

"Can't promise anything," she explained, "but we'll stick to handshakes for now." She reached out and shook his hand. "Tom told me a little about your shaking and rolling,

but how about if I get your version of the story?"

The four sat back down, and Tom picked up the phone.

"Chow? Can you rustle up some snacks for four?"

Five minutes later the door opened and Chow rolled in his lunch cart. Taking one look at Stefanie he shoved it to the side and walked over to her. She grabbed him around the waist and gave him a big hug.

Stepping back, she smiled. "Why, Chow Winkler, you've gone and lost even more weight. What? Fifteen pounds?"

Chow's face beamed. "More like nineteen, little missy. Mighty nice o' you ta notice." He was the only one she allowed to address her using terms like "little."

"Tom's sending me up to the Moon day after tomorrow. Could you be even more of a dear and pack me up about two dozen of your spicky pork tamales?"

"Why, shore. And, mebbe a little enchilada sauce ta put over 'em?"

She made a show of smacking her lips. "Sold! And, I'll bring you back a bundle of moonbeams if I can find them at the duty free shop."

They shared a laugh. The truth was that she had lost her father at a young age and sort of thought of the old ranch cook as a father figure. For his part, Chow had taken to the plucky little woman like a niece or possibly a daughter.

Tom and Bud arrived at Fearing Island late the next morning. From there they "flew" the heavy lifting platform ship back to Shopton and to the airfield behind the construction buildings at the Construction Company.

Three specialty cranes had been rolled out on the series of rails found all over the facility. Between them they held the large collapsed landing platform—or at least the first third of it—and slowly swiveled and moved in a ballet of motion, placing the bundle in the precise center of balance on the ship.

They made the first two round trips up to the *Sutter* in low orbit in less than two hours each. The components were pulled off the platform and floated over to be positioned in the massive front end cargo space. Under Bud's piloting, they landed again to take on the final load of materials that

would be the blast deflectors and the elevator.

One hour later, and with Sandy, Bashalli and Mr. Swift standing with Jake Aturian, the ship slowly lifted from the ground. The Filipino spent the first forty-minute trip gazing out one of the small observation ports. He was enraptured by the thought of where they were heading.

They reached the *Sutter*, in orbit at one-hundred miles, and maneuvered into parking position just under an hour after takeoff.

While the *Sutter's* crew loaded the last consignment of materials and swung the drive module around and back into place at the rear of the conical, golden ship, Tom, Bud and their guest took a rest break in the long recreation room on the top of the main hull. In moments the boys were sound asleep.

Saclolo spent the next half hour wandering around the large multi-purpose space.

“Skipper?” Someone was gently shaking Tom’s left shoulder. “Skipper?” the masculine voice repeated. Tom opened one eye.

“Oh, hey, Red,” he said seeing the older man hovering above his reclined chair. “Time?”

“Yeah. We got things loaded and the lifting platform tucked away, and we’re back in flight mode as of an hour ago, but I told everyone to give you a little longer. Hope that was okay?”

Tom sat up and stretched. He glanced over to the sleeping form of Bud and the now drowsing Saclolo. He stretched.

“I appreciate it, Red. I don’t think any of us got much sleep last night. Thanks!”

Red handed the inventor several sheets of paper. “Your dad thought you’d like to see these,” he said indicating the pages.

Tom looked through them and nodded. One was a report of a new lunarquake that had hit several hours earlier. It was gentler than most of the recent ones, giving him a small glimmer of hope. The other two sheets were a list of several additional changes that Stefanie was requesting for inside

the Geotron model. Two seemed to be for her basic comfort and one was for an additional sensor he hadn't thought of. She wanted a forward-searching thermo-sensor in addition to the Damonscope.

“Get word back down that I've okayed these, and tell Dad to push back her departure a day or so to make sure these first two are absolutely of her liking.”

Fifteen minutes later, the *Sutter* departed Earth orbit heading on it's trip to the Moon.

Eleven hours after leaving orbit the lifting ship touched down right at the edge of the crater holding most of the lunar colony. On its top sat the first of their loads. This spot was close to the ramp that had been dug out for the transport of ice when the space elevator had been in operation. Now, placed on a makeshift sled, the entire platform package barely fit between the walls as it was dragged down and over to the point of erection.

That process would take two days and would not begin until the following morning.

Tom left Bud to help Saclolo direct the positioning duties while he entered the colony, shucked out of his spacesuit, and headed across the room. He was met at the doorway by Harlan Ames.

“Hey, skipper! Great to see you,” he said as they shook hands warmly. “Saclolo sent me several messages over the past couple days, so I'm mostly up to date on things. But, if you have anything new...?”

Tom shook his head. “Not that comes to mind except for the latest on the data findings. We can go over those a little later. Oh, and the Geotron model and her pilot will be here in a couple days.”

He told the Administrator about the pilot being Stefanie.

“Wonderful! I haven't seen her since the wedding. Oh, but I'll be heading back once the *Challenger* brings her up,” he explained. “I thought while you are tracking down the Empress' atomic drill I might slip back to Earth and go on a little exploration. With Saclolo returned, he and Magadia can get back to running thing so I won't be missed.”

Knowing that “a little exploration” had once been the cause of Harlan being captured and taken to the Moon as a

potential slave, and the second time he had come back with a wife, Tom was unsure how to take the information.

“Umm, what *sort* of exploration, Harlan?”

“I want to go back to the Philippines, with a security detail of course, to see if I can find anything at the fortress the twins used for staging and launching things. I have the nagging impression that I saw something back there which might either explain a few things up here, or perhaps there are bits the explosions didn’t destroy that we can use.”

“Where are you going to get your security team?”

Harlan looked directly at Tom, who nodded. “Right. I’ll alert Phil to get Gary and his group ready. They did a bang-up job up here and I know they’ll keep you safe... in spite of yourself.”

“Not required. I have my own posse laid on. Best in the business!”

Tom grinned, but his stomach was churning. Harlan was an incredible head of Security and was so detail-oriented that a few secretly called him, Mr. Every-speck-of-dust Ames behind his back.

But, on things like his first visit to the Philippines when he plummeted in an evacuation ball from the Outpost, and his visit to Tibet where his insistence at bringing Maggie back in spite of who she really was had been the cause of most of the colony’s troubles, Harlan Ames seemed to have a blind spot.

And, as Tom considered it, that blind spot kept getting him and others into trouble.

I have to get him to quit this lunar thing and come back to Enterprises, Tom thought. Otherwise, he could get himself killed one of these times!

Chapter Nine: Return to Not-So-Magic Mountain

HARLAN was packing an overnight bag when Saclolo sought him out for dinner. True to his word, Harlan was going back to Earth to complete what he thought of as “unfinished business.”

What had been found on the papers from the Empress still bothered him. Some of those notes may have seemed like doodlings to most people, but Harlan knew that the Empress never did anything without a reason. And for her to leave those numbers and drawings mixed together... it had to mean something. It had definitely been important enough to be on her mind.

“Just thought that I’ll give you a quick rundown on the Chinese Pluto Probe deal before you leave. I know that you want Dia and me to handle things from here on, but you still need to know about this since you have told no one else that you are permanently leaving us.”

They were standing in Harlan's kitchenette, and he poured two cups of coffee made from his own private stash sent up to him from a friend back at Enterprise. Compared to the hybrid grown in the colony it was wonderful.

Harlan sipped his coffee first before answering. “Until you see me packing my babies’ things I won’t be leaving for good. You can count on that!” He smiled warmly. “This place is still my home and no matter where I finally may live I will always consider this my home. I know where my final resting place will be, and I hold you responsible to see that I get buried here. Near... well, you know where.”

“Hell, Harlan!” Saclolo exclaimed in surprised as he sloshed his coffee out of his cup. “It sounds like you don't think you will be coming back alive. And if that is what you think will happen I'm not letting you step out of here.”

Harlan had a towel already to receive the slow motion spilled coffee before it even hit the table top.

“Saclolo, I could drop dead right now. I don't *plan* on kicking the bucket, but I must be realistic that it could happen, and with this kind of exploration I'm going to do

back in the Philippines. I have to be prepared.”

“Then don't go. Let someone else do it. There are plenty of people that do that kind of thing for a living. Hire one of them,” he pleaded. “Have your Phil Radnor take on the responsibility. We'll pay for their time!”

“I can't. The problem is I really don't know what I *need* to find. Or, where! But if there is something still there, I'm sure I'll know it when I see it. I may be the only one who can. Now, tell me about the Chinese deal that you're so excited over.” Harlan refilled their cups with hot coffee. They sat down and he leaned back in his chair.

“The truth is there is not much to tell. The meeting was all anti-climatic. The rocket plane ride was the most exciting thing about the whole trip. Lynn—the lawyer from Enterprises—could have stood stark naked the whole time we were there and those old dimwitted bureaucrats would not have noticed. Faces buried in pages is all we saw of them.”

“You don't think that somewhat strange?” Harlan asked while shaking his head in disbelief.

“Way too strange, if you ask me. And the legal contracts were so plainly written in almost simplistic words that it was scary. A first year law student could have read it and understood everything.”

“So what you do?”

“What could I do? We need the money, so I signed it. Lynn gave me the okay signal. Now we only have to find what kind of trickery they're trying to pull on us.”

Harlan let a full breath escape through his nose. “Are you sure you did the right thing? Ten thousand lives depended on you making a sound decision.” Harlan voice was close to a whisper.

“I know that, Harlan. Lynn went over the legal stuff... twice. I went over the schematics and remotely viewed the probes. I could not see them first-hand because they are in the clean room and being mounted atop the launch rocket. In another few days they will be inside the protective shroud.”

That was when Harlan smiled. “So, you never *physically* saw the probes?”

“There was no way to do that. They're way out at the Xichang Satellite Launch Center in Sichuan, southwest China. The video feed was live and I could direct the camera to whatever I wanted to see. It all looked copacetic to me.”

“Well, what's done is done now and you have to live with it.” Harlan got up from the table and put the two dirty cups in the small washer.

Saclolo got up slowly, watching his friend carefully, and felt somewhat disturbed. He believed Harlan did not like that he had signed the deal. That it had been a mistake.

“Harlan...” he stated to say, but his friend walked back to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“It's tough being on top, Saclolo. Don't rethink your decisions just because a person you trust and like might have a difference of opinion. Stick to you guns and ride it to the very end.” Saclolo slowly nodded and smiled. The worried look relaxed off his face. He knew Harlan had been making a point.

“Just for the record, you did the right thing. I know Lynn so if she gave me the nod I'd have signed them myself. Now follow through with your plans and check everything twice, to the smallest bolt and even what kind of paint they might have used. Visually catalog every step of the way. You must be a good detective as well as a good engineer on this one. Use your best people and take all the time you have available.”

The Filipino nodded. “I will, Harlan.”

“Now go home to that beautiful wife of yours, and show her how much you missed her the last few weeks.”

Harlan slept through much of his two-day trip back to Earth. Cargo ships travel slow, but thanks to Tom's simulated gravity repelatron strips he was not as sick as he could have been. It was the constant floating and disorientation that got to him. He transferred to a supply landing craft, bypassing the Outpost altogether, heading directly to Loonau Island in the Pacific Ocean where the Swifts had their main spaceport for the Outpost.

He picked up a traveling companion while on the island. Kinova, the chief of Security at the island rocket base, could have been a Sumo wrestler for his size even though he was

half Samoan and half Cordilleran.

Harlan had met Kinova over a year ago when he first started to track down the Empress and her brother. Back then the evil empire-builder twins had their space launch base in the Cordillera mountains.

Kinova was quick of mind and agile on his feet. He was also well known to the mountain tribes where his uncle was a tribal ruler. Together they took the four hour flight to Luzon Island in the Philippines.

At the airport they flew off in a twin rotor, heavy lift helicopter that had been waiting for them. It was piloted by a husky young man who's appearance just screamed *military*, or at least mercenary. He was accompanied by two equally muscular, no-nonsense friends.

Kinova called each man out by name and introduced them to Harlan. The islander had known them for a while and trusted their abilities to obey orders without questions and how to work as a team in any situation. They were part of a semi-military organizations that sold their expertise to protect private ventures in hostile territories.

Their record of success was unparalleled within their "industry."

Harlan wanted nothing or nobody that could be traced back to the Swift's on this venture. Kinova was the only exception, but he could always fall back on his family ties claiming he had been with them only as the mediator to smooth the way through the mountains and various tribes.

The flight didn't last long and before Harlan realized it he was looking down at the partially destroyed fortress on the edge of the mountaintop. It looked so different from the last time he saw it. Some it was just a pile of stone rubble. The courtyard was a mess with a huge hole in the middle. Even the massive stone perimeter wall was breached in several places, something that happened during the raid.

The most telling sign of destruction was that gaping hole in the middle of the courtyard. The black cavity seemed to rise up to swallow him as the helicopter settled down on the ground just yards from it.

An icy uneasiness flooded over Harlan. He didn't like it at all!

It was decided that Tom and Bud would come back to Enterprises for a few days. Hank had radioed to say the conversion of the Geotron model was going to take at least two additional rotations of the planet, so rather than sit around, they had the *Challenger* come pick them up.

Tom and Bud were sitting in the inventor's underground office discussing the next possible steps in the hunt for the truth about the lunar quakes.

"If it were up to me, skipper," Bud was telling his friend and brother-in-law, "I'd be playing the game on the side of the overly cautious. I'd concentrate on finding a way to get everybody out of there first. Pronto, if it comes down to it. Then I'd try to solve the problem."

He noticed that Tom didn't appear to share his preference for haste or his priorities. In fact, the inventor was sitting there, his left hand fingers covering his mouth and with a twinkle in his eyes.

"What?" Bud asked, now sensing that Tom already must have had things in hand. "What have I missed? Did you and your dad already figure this one out and I forgot to read the notice?"

Tom shook his head. "No, Bud. It's just that the idea of what we need to do hit me yesterday. I've already checked and it is possible. But, only as a last-minute emergency measure."

"Ahh. Do I get the cheap and easy run down on it, or is there so much sciency gizmo this and cyber-electronic the other thing that it will all soar over my little head?"

Now, Tom grinned outwardly. "Well, let me say one word, and then we can discuss. *Sutter!*"

The flyer's eyes widened into saucers. "The *Sutter*? That big, golden thing we were recently in?" he asked.

"The very same. She can be totally sealed and hold atmosphere in the forward multipurpose area. And, as long as she stays in orbit and folks are weightless, it'll be tight but everyone from the colony will fit in there."

He told Bud about the issues of creating and maintaining a breathable atmosphere, and the logistics of getting

everybody into the ship.

“For air, the colony’s own facilities can separate water into hydrogen and oxygen. They do it all day, every day as it is. We park the *Sutter* at the top of the space elevator and pump oxygen up to her instead of water like we did a while back. We can also seed it with the right proportions of CO₂ and some of the other, non-nitrogen gases.”

“Don’t we need that nitrogen?”

“Not really. It is inert and we breathe it in and breathe it out. It’s only under pressure that it enters our bloodstreams and collects in muscle tissues. But, here’s the thing dad suggested. We pre-fill the *Sutter’s* hold with enough nitrogen to make up about fifty percent of the air rather than the nearly eighty percent. So, the end result is there is more O₂, but that’s okay because we aren’t going to be able to do the very best job scrubbing out excess CO₂.”

The citizens of the lunar city would be provided with large habitat bubbles into which they would pack themselves, be hauled out to the elevator and loaded onto the circular platform. It would rise to the top where the bubbles would be shoved through a special-built airlock system. People would get out and float around while the bubble was taken back down for another load.

“I figure that if we build nine of the bubbles, and run the elevator at its top speed, we can get everyone out and up to the ship in under ten hours!”

Bud whistled in appreciation of the plan.

“But,” Tom cautioned raising an index finger, “only as a last resort.”

His phone buzzed, and Tom reached over to pick it up.

“Tom here, Trent. What’s up?”

“Well, what is up is that you and Bud have competing phone calls from your spouses. Do you want me to ask Sandra to call back later?”

Tom, knowing his sister for all her life and understanding her temper, blanched. “No. Can you transfer Bash to my TeleVoc and I’ll let Bud take the phone?”

In a moment it was done and Tom wandered out into the underground hangar to give Bud some privacy.

“Yeah, Bash?” he subvocalized. “I’m glad you called, but can’t help wondering why.”

Her voice, as clear as if she were standing next to him, came into his head. “And, I love you as well, Tom.” She giggled. “The reason I called is that you and Bud have both received mystery envelopes from that nice man who owns Herd of Chickens and Flock of Burgers. It is marked ‘Important’ and ‘Personal’ on the outside so I thought you might wish to know about it.”

“Did you already open it?”

“Of course. What kind of wife do you believe you married. It is a nice, hand-written invitation to a celebration of a brand new food they will soon be selling, and the letter states that he really wishes that you both be there. Plus, your adoring wives, that is.”

Tom was a little confused. While it was true that the owner had honored him several years earlier by naming one of the most popular burgers at that restaurant after the inventor, and then just ten months ago had honored Tom’s mother, Anne, with a burger sandwich named for her, it was unlikely they wished to try to name something for his father—the older Swift had refused the honor shortly after Tom’s burger hit the menu. He was at a loss to figure out why they were being invited.

“He asks that you RSVP by tomorrow, Tom,” Bashall told him. “I believe Sandy will be calling Bud soon to tell him they are going.”

“She’s already explaining his options, Bash. So, it’s a foregone conclusion her curiosity will mean she’s dragging him there no matter what. I guess you and I have a date. Can you call and accept for us?” He paused, then added, “That is, unless you and Sandy already accepted the invites.”

Her giggle was all he needed as an answer.

When he tapped his TeleVoc pin to disconnect, Bud was standing in the office doorway shaking his head.

“Do we pick you up or you pick us up?”

Tom shrugged. “Do we even know what date?”

Bud looked astonished. “Didn’t Bash tell you? Today is

Thursday and the ceremony is at eleven on Saturday. No dressing up. T-shirt and tennis shoes optional!”

Bud left soon after the calls to attend to a quick delivery run out to Terra Haute while Tom sat back down to complete the list of things needing to be transferred to the island by Monday, the new date of departure.

On Saturday morning, Tom and Bashalli pulled up in front of the Barclay residence where the two were already sitting on their front steps, waiting.

“Sandy was hoping you’d get her sooner, like a half hour ago,” Bud said as he closed the rear door for her. When he climbed in on the other side it in time to receive a punch in the arm.

“I *said* I didn’t want you telling Tom that,” Sandy hissed in mock anger. To the pair in the front seats she said pleasantly, “It was only a few minutes, anyway. I just thought it would be nice to come outside and get some fresh air, that’s all.”

They arrived at the specialty restaurant where everything was built around, or at least contained, chicken eleven minutes later. Tom chuckled and shook his head when they were directed into a parking spot right by the front door that had been cordoned off with thick, yellow plastic ribbon.

“Guess we’re the guests of honor,” he said as they got out.

Inside, it was jam packed with customers, but there was a table—again surrounded by the yellow plastic—waiting for them.

The owner came out and with a huge smile greeted them warmly.

“You can’t believe how wonderful this is,” he told them. Then, he excused himself and headed back into the kitchen. He returned a minute later carrying a silver-covered serving dish that he took over to their table. After setting it down, he reached around the right side of the booth and picked up a microphone.

He tapped it several times, to the accompaniment of feedback which got everyone’s attention more than the tapping, and then he cleared his throat and spoke.

“Now, I think everyone here recognizes one or even all four of our guests up here. Right?” There was a round of enthusiastic applause. “Good, because today is a special day. Shortly after opening my Flock of Burgers joint, errr, restaurant—my wife says I gotta stop calling it a joint—anyway, Tom Swift came in with these other fine people, and ordered a specialty burger. He like it and I had an inspiration. Just like those big-name delis down in New York City, I decided to name the thing in his honor.”

More applause came and ebbed away. “So, Tom’s got a burger, and his mother’s got a burger, and nobody else in the family’s got a burger. And, while I’m still trying to find an angle for the ladies here, I have come up with a nifty idea to honor Tom’s brother-in-law!”

Bud looked around, confused.

“So, without further ado, and to honor his job as a pilot at Swift Enterprises, I want to present our newest creation here at Herd of Chickens, the Bud Barclay Wings collection! Spicy wings, barbecue wings, orange glazed wings and even teriyaki wings!”

As the crown clapped and cheered, Tom and Bud looked at each other grinning.

“I suppose it’s better than having something named Barclay’s Itty Bitty Chicky Bits,” the dark haired young man said so that only Tom could hear him.

The cover had been taken away and the platter of assorted wings paced in front of Bud. He made a great show of trying each type. To his amazement, each was almost exactly what he would want if he where ordering them in any restaurant. The spicy wings were not too spicy and the teriyaki and orange ones were not too sweet.

“Incredible!” he declared, making their host a very happy man. “I am proud to accept this honor. Thank you!”

Making the owner even happier, many people in the crown ordered the selection so they could also try them. For the next hour the foursome remained, there were nothing but smiles all around.

The platter had contained enough wings for the four of them and they left full and with slightly sticky fingers.

Sunday evening they all had dinner at Tom and

Bashalli's, a sort of good-bye meal for the men because it was anticipated they would be on the Moon for up to two weeks.

"I wish you could let me come with you, Tom," Bashalli said over dessert.

"I wish I could force old Bud here to take us both, Bashi," Sandy declared as she picked at the home-made cherry pie her sister-in-law had baked that afternoon.

"I wish that the two of you wouldn't worry about us. Bud and I will be fine. We'll have the *Challenger* with us and if necessary can take off at almost a moment's notice. Besides, if there is a problem, about the very last thing we both need is to have you ladies to worry about. It's going to be enough watching out for Stefanie. Please understand that this is just another of those trips where you might like to be with us, and we might like to have you there, but would not be good to have come along," Tom tried to explain.

Sandy nodded and dropped her fork onto the plate. "We know, Tom, it's just that Bashi and I have both put so much time and effort into you two that we can't even consider having to start all over again. You've become indispensable to us."

"Sandra means that we love you very much," Bashalli explained.

Bud grinned. "Isn't it nice to know that they care about us, skipper?"

Tom returned the grin. "Well, I noticed mine said she loved me and yours said she didn't want to feel that she's wasted time on you. What do you suppose that means?"

He ducked, but not quickly enough to have Sandy's napkin hit him in the side of the head, spreading out on his shoulder like a limp parrot on a pirate's shoulder.

"Sorry, San. I know you meant the same thing. Just different words. Right?"

The evening ended with the four of them dancing to several slow tunes on the Swift stereo before Bud and Sandy headed home.

He and Tom met at six the following morning and headed to the waiting *Sky Queen*. She had been raised

during the night and the recently re-outfitted model of the Geotron stowed in her aft hangar along with a full load of sensor and detection supplies for the colony.

They soared skyward from Fearing by noon and arrived at the edge of the crater a little more than two hours later. This being her first trip into space, Stefanie had spent the entire trip looking out the huge view windows in the control room.

A team had been alerted and swarmed up the lower ladders and began to unpack the hangar and even the outside deck where some supplies that could stand the vacuum of space had been stowed.

“You head inside, Mr. Swift,” one of the young men from the handling team suggested. “Co-Director Reyes would like to see you as soon as possible.”

After thanking the man, he, Stefanie and Bud left the ship, heading down the ramp to the lower airlock, undressed and hung their suits up, and then walked down the hallways to the Administration offices.

“Ah! Tom. Bud. How very nice to see you two,” Saclolo greeted them. “And you again, Mrs. Brooks-Bodack. Hello!” He shook her hand warmly. “I take it,” he said once they had all shaken hands, “that Harlan got off on his mission?”

Tom told him that such was the case.

Saclolo sighed, heavily. “I have a very bad feeling about that. The Emperor and Empress might have blown up their own fortress, but I can’t believe they would not have also left booby traps for anyone treasure hunting.”

“Or,” Bud suggested, “anyone snooping around in the ruins.”

“Yes. Or that. But, as he told me before he left here, he intends to be extra vigilant. I told him that if he got himself into any trouble that I would personally come down and drag is behind out of there by the scruff of his neck!”

Chapter Ten: The Depths of Hell Variations

WHEN HE arrived at the site of the former mountain reservoir with Stefanie and the Geotron model in tow, Tom fully explained his plan to the red-haired vulcanologist.

She listened carefully, nodded a few times, and finally asked, “While I love you like a brother, Tom, I have to ask why not just send in an autonomous probe? I don’t ask that because I don’t *want* to go. Heck, I’ll be the first woman to pilot a sub-lunar exploration vehicle. Ever. I will get in the record books and make my baby proud of me. As it is today, I tell him what mommy has accomplished and all he does is gurgle and throw up breakfast on my shirt.”

Giving a little chuckle, Tom explained. “Okay. I believe that while we could get some information, and a few views of what is going on, my belief is that this is like a lot of things. A real, live, thinking person—an expert in your case—can make more observations and extrapolate what they see better and even quicker than any robotic machine.”

“Good enough for me. Too bad we have these visors on, else I’d give you another big smooch. Has Bashi ever told you what a great kisser you are?”

Tom turned bright red in his helmet.

“Don’t answer that. I’m just trying to lighten the mood. So, when does the Geo-mini get here?”

He looked at the chronometer on his left sleeve. “About five minutes. Some of the men are bringing it over hanging in front of a pair of the large *Straddlers*.”

“Speaking of which,” she told him, “I want one of those. They’re great. I’d never have to sit on a stack of phone books in a strange car again!”

On schedule, the pair of 4-man *Straddlers* dropped down through the hole in the top of the cavern with the small Geotron held securely in front of them using their Attractatrons. Everything set down light as a feather.

“You know, I forgot to even ask if I need to work wearing this suit,” she asked as Tom entered the code to open the

back of the small vehicle. “But, I suppose there is no changing room in there. Can I at least shove the helmet back?”

He smiled. “Yes. Once we get you sealed up, you will find a green button to your right marked **ATMOSPHERE IN**. Press that and give things about a minute. You’ll hear the air hissing in. An LED will light up green when you have pressure. The one next to it, **ATMOSPHERE OUT** is red and has its own LED. You will have about twenty hours of breathable air in the cabin, but you should be back in under four. Your suit will give you another six but that shouldn’t be necessary.”

“Good. And since I don’t have Deke here to bash the hell out of his arm if the hatch gets jammed, promise you’ll get me out of this thing if I get stuck.”

Tom looked into the small woman’s eyes and thought he detected a hint of sadness.

“If I have to wade in to get you, I’ll be there, Steff. Promise. We will have the cable attached to the rear of the undercarriage in case we need to drag you backwards.”

She hugged him and entered the Geotron model. Sliding on her stomach she pushed and pulled herself into position. A minute later, after the self-tightening harness had snugged her down, she reached back with her right hand and gave him a thumbs up sign.”

“I’m ready, Tom. Close me up and no tickling my feet while you have me in this compromising position.”

A single button press sufficed to close and seal the back hatch. A minute later the little vehicle moved forward. Stefanie took it in a full circle, checking right and left steering, before heading for the blackened hole the atomic drill had made.

“I’m nosing in,” she reported. “This hole is about three sizes too small for the Geo-mini so it’s a good thing it does what it does with your repelatrons.”

“Keep giving me reports, or just talk,” Tom requested. “Bud will be out here in about a half hour so we can all talk about whatever you’re seeing, or whatever you want to talk about.”

There was a moment of hesitation. “Anything?” she

asked tentatively.

Tom took a breath and answered, "Absolutely anything, Stefanie. Except maybe about kissing me."

"Ahhh, Tom. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I've just always been a kissy kissy kind of gal. Anyway, my gauges say I'm now fifteen feet in so my back end is covered. Nothing new. Just the same black, smooth surface all the way around."

By the time Bud arrived she was nearly a half mile inside the hole.

"How's our friend doing?" Bud asked.

"She'd doing fine, Bud," Stefanie answered. "In fact she is doing so fine she has been letting her mind wander a little. Bring me back to reality, Barclay. Tell me a dirty joke!"

"Okay. I don't have a good joke, but how about this? I was on the radio back to Enterprises before I came out. Deke had just phoned and left a message for you. Want it?"

They both heard her take a deep breath. "Tom. This is going to fall into the category of we can talk about anything. So, no judgement, please."

Bud opened the pocket on his right leg and pulled out a slip of what passed for paper in the city. "Okay, I haven't seen this yet, so bear with me." He read:

Stefanie,

I miss the dickens out of you and want us to get back together. It doesn't matter about what you told me. It's in the past. Yours more than mine. So, I was an idiot to make a big thing out of it.

Please get me a message to say I can come home. I miss the baby, I miss you, and I miss sleeping with you. (Bud and Tom both blushed at the possible double meaning of that.)

I love ya, Oompa. Forgive me.

Love,

Sasquatch

Bud looked more closely at the end and then, with a shake of his head, refolded the page and placed in back in

his pocket.

Both men could hear the sobbing from inside the Geotron. It took her a minute, but she composed herself.

“And that,” she said in a husky voice, “is the anything, Tom. You might as well hang on for the ride, Bud. I guess you want to know what that is all about.”

“Not unless you want us to,” Tom said. “And, even if you tell us, we’re leaving it in this cavern once we depart. So, it’s your call.”

There was a pause.

“I’d like very much to talk about it but I’ve got something new in here.”

Tom’s heart began to race. If this was an emergency, they only had the winch and a cable to rely on to get her back.

“Sorry for the silence,” she reported. “I was taking measurements. It appears that there is a glow way ahead of me. Perhaps, if the laser location device is accurate, a mile and a half ahead.”

She explained that she was detecting both a very pale glow as well as a rise in heat in front of her of about 7°F.

As the Geotron moved forward she began to measure the temperature of the surrounding walls. Until this point they had been at a steady minus 186°F. This, in itself, was unusual as it ought to have been dozens of degrees colder.

During the next hour she made another mile of progress—well under the maximum the model was capable of—and watched as the temperature of the walls rose at a rate of about one degree per 593 feet of forward travel.

“The end of the tunnel is now registering a steady minus seven, Tom. This is definitely spooky-ooky in my book. What the heck is going on?”

Tom had been toying with a notion that suddenly came into sharp focus.

“Check your Damonscope readings. Has the outside radiation risen at about the same rate as the wall temp?”

“Not sure. But, and let me see if I can find that darned calculation program... there! Uhhh, as near as I can figure the rad reading is going up about as fast as the temperature

of that hole ahead of me.”

Tom looked at Bud who mouthed, “Is she in danger?”

Tom shook his head. “Not even close. Stefanie? What’s your cabin temp and are you seeing any measurable radiation inside?”

“Same as at start, Tom. Once I got air in here it’s been sticking at sixty-five degrees. Radiation is same as normal ambient. Almost none, in other words.”

Tom suggested that she slow her progress to about half of her current speed. “You’ll come close to that hole in about thirty minutes that way,” he told her. “Keep an eye on inside and outside radiation readings. I’m not too worried about heat because you can always dive into a side wall to cool down. Just keep talking to us.”

“Okay. Now’s the best time to come clean on that letter. So, here goes. You both ought to know that I’ve never claimed to be an angel. I lost that right on my fifteenth birthday. Little gift from the captain of the football team. Anyway, there’ve been a few boys and men in my life—” she paused for about ten seconds making Tom worry again. “Well, there’s also been one woman in my life if you know what I mean. That’s what Deke found out about one night after we’d celebrated something or other with straight shots of malt whisky. He kinda got angry about it.”

Tom counted to ten before saying anything. “I can only think he was shocked.”

“Oh,” she said in a merry voice, “shocked, dismayed, angry, frustrated, confused, hurt... and about a half dozen other things. I was nineteen, for crying out loud. Everyone was doing it. Besides, it was a one time thing. But, Deke couldn’t see that. So, after a particularly nasty exchange of words he left about a month ago.”

Bud cleared his throat. “Uh, Steff? Do you want me to have a talk with him? If it really is in the past then he needs to let it go. I know I did.”

Tom whipped around to stare at Bud. The flyer made a “never mind” sign.

“You’ve been in his shoes?” she asked. “Wait. It can’t be Sandy. Can it?”

Bud sighed. “No, not her. A girl I knew in California

before I hooked up with the skipper. We dated a month before she admitted I was her first boy experience. Told me it didn't matter that anything in the past was in the past. I had to believe her. Either that or lose her. I didn't lose her for another month and then to a guy from another high school."

There was light laughter coming over the radio. "Bud, you amaze me," she said. "But, I sense there is a question you want to ask. Go ahead."

"Sasquatch? Oompa?"

"Yes. Sasquatch because of Deke's size and hairy back and overall gangliness. And go find an old movie, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* for the other. Oh. Hey! Change of conversation. I just saw something pop up at the end of the tunnel. By god, it looked like lava. What the heck?"

"Stop!" Tom ordered. "In fact disconnect the cable, turn into the side wall, circle back around and get back here. Top speed. I don't want you out there if we've got anything molten in that shaft."

The turn-around maneuver took her twenty minutes but she found herself back in the tunnel now facing the point where Tom and Bud were waiting.

"Tom? If this thing blows, I need to know if I'm instant toast or if I am going to regret being here for very long. Also, why don't you two hop on those *Straddlers* and get upstairs just in case."

The boys looked at each other before Tom answered her.

"Stefanie, the hull will hold for at least twenty minutes. At your top speed you can be back here in that time. That's why I had you turn around. Hit the throttle and just get back here."

She and the Geotron made it back to the cavern in nineteen minutes. Stefanie drove the model over to stop in front of the *Straddlers* in case there was a need to pick it up and get out of there.

She slipped her helmet on and heard Tom asking her to depressurize. She pressed the red button and heard the pump sucking out the air. A minute later Tom hit the controls outside and the back hatch opened. Strong hands reached on, grabbed her legs, and pulled her out.

Standing upright, she discovered the Tom was leaning over to check a spot on the back hatch.

“Come here and look,” he suggested.

Bud and Stefanie walked around and immediately saw what he was pointing at.

A blob of cooling molten rock was stuck to the hatch. It had obviously shot up from the hole, somehow made the corner and hit the back of the vehicle that would have been at least one hundred feet down the passage.

They all turned and looked toward the drill hole.

A slight reddish glow could be seen.

Without a word, Tom closed the Geotron’s hatch, he and Stefanie climbed on their *Straddler* while Bud mounted his, and the two flying machines picked the Geotron up before heading upward and out of the mountain reservoir cavern.

“Let’s set this thing down a mile or so away, flyboy. Then, I want to come back and take a look at what’s happening down there.”

They landed and, while Bud and Stefanie waited, Tom flew back to the hole in the top of the mountain, hovering just inside it as he looked down. He had arrived just in time to watch as a small amount of molten Moon rock oozed out of the drill hole. The colder conditions outside the shaft made it cool almost instantly turning it into a solid plug in moments.

He took a few telephoto pictures of it before returning to his friends.

“I’ll explain everything when we get back to the colony. Come on.”

His explanation in Saclolo and Magadia’s office to the Co-Directors and Bud and Stefanie shocked them all.

“I think that the Empress’ idea to send that atomic drill into the colony is behind what is happening. I can’t be certain but my guess is that the drill headed this way, hit a pocket or former gas bubble, and tumbled down. It impossible to know how deep it went, but probably deep enough to hit hard, even in this low gravity, so that the atomic capsule broke open. It consumed the Helium3 and Uranium isotope and started a small nuclear conflagration

down there.”

“What does that mean, Tom?” Magadia asked, having no real understanding of science.

“I can answer that, Mrs. Reyes,” Stefanie volunteered. “You see, if all the wrong things happened, such as if what Tom described *actually* happened, there would be a temporary nuclear fire down there, but it would, well, it should burn itself out in a few days. A week, perhaps. But, Tom told me this happened months ago, For the fire to keep burning there would have to either be more nuclear isotopes, or... no. That’s really about it.”

Saclolo, Tom and Bud all exclaimed in unison, “Helium3!”

Saclolo explained. “One of the things we have managed to discover, mine—for lack of another term—process and sell on Earth has been the Helium3 inside the Moon. We have been running low on the ore from our chief mining operation and have been looking for another source. I guess the drill found it for us.”

“I take it this is a nasty situation,” Stefanie concluded. Seeing Tom and Saclolo nod, she shrugged. “Anything you can do, Mr. Genius Man?”

Tom snorted. “Unlikely. We have to hope the circumstances that put that drill into a pocket of Helium3 will prove to make it a relatively small pocket. Otherwise—” He didn’t finish his statement.

“What can you do, skipper?” Bud asked.

Tom rubbed his chin in thought. “Well, for one I’m going to have to relocate a lot of the stuff inside the Geotron model so I can squeeze in. I’m not risking Stefanie in a crazy scheme I’ve just come up with.”

He explained that he wanted to drill down from the lunar surface to a point at least one hundred feet farther on from where the molten rock came up, drop below that point by perhaps fifty feet and then slowly make his way back toward what was by now probably a solid plug.

“I’ll keep circling out and around coming back at, oh, fifty foot levels until I either get too close to whatever reaction is going on down there, or find some way to peer into it.”

Bud had been shaking his head. “Nope!” he finally declared. “Not going to happen. First, your dad would skin

me alive. Bash would skin me alive and pour lemon juice over me. Sandy would help Bash then never speak to me again, and your mom would take her favorite chef's knife to my remains."

Stefanie had been watching both of their faces as first Bud looked very serious and Tom looked ready to argue, then their looks switched before finally both setting into determined masks.

"Okay. Enough testosterone already. Stop before you start taking bits out. The truth of the matter is that neither of you would know what you are looking at, so any trip you might take would be a sightseeing adventure at best. There is only one qualified person up here and we all know who she is."

She looked at them defiantly as if daring anyone to contradict her. Nobody could, so nobody did.

"Great! It's settled, then. We create a detailed plan of action and tomorrow I go down." She looked at them to see if they had anything to say. "I'm hungry. Somebody feed me or I'll get cranky."

Tom and Bud led her to the closest dining hall where she had a half-helping of a tofu and bean sprout stir fried dish, declaring it to be "delicious."

The inventor left them to go outside to check on the work being completed on the landing platform. To his surprise, the team was nearly finished, and that made it more than a day ahead of schedule. The structure, more girders and cross beams than anything, was topped with a rather thin deck made of a durastress checkerboard coated in tomasite, leaving three-inch openings between each piece.

That would let chemical rocket exhaust to flow through down to the deflector system that would force it out to the sides and slightly up in elevation.

To facilitate landings by ships like Tom's *Challenger*, one corner was made of magnetitanium, something the ship's propulsion could push against.

Satisfied, he returned inside where he headed for the quarters he, Bud and Stefanie—all in separate bedrooms—hit their beds and fell asleep within minutes.

Stefanie was the first of the trio to get up and ready for the trip outside. After getting dressed they met in the living

room of their quarters and created the plan she would follow. As Tom had said, it was going to be more of a spiral staircase approach with the occasional leaning in to see what the central shaft had to offer.

The only thing that changed from the previous day's plan was that Tom was going to be the one inside the Geotron. To allow that he had the model recovered and refitted as they all slept. Now, by crossing his ankles and bending his knees the back hatch could be closed behind him.

Stefanie had put up an almighty fuss, but once Tom handed her the latest message from Deke—evidently a full apology and request that she come home soon and safe—she had relented.

The model was flown out to the appropriate site, Tom wiggled his way in, and Bud closed the hatch. Stepping back he radioed, "We're ready out here, skipper. Whenever you make your checks, head down. We'll back off like agreed, but you have to keep in constant contact."

"Roger, *mother*," Tom called back.

As the model prepared to head downward, Bud and Stefanie moved to the back and picked it up a little so the repelatrions in front could open a hole. Moments later it nosed into the ground and fifteen seconds after that, the back disappeared.

Tom made the first downward spiral coming to within five feet of the point where the vertical shaft and the drill's horizontal one intersected. He inched forward. The nose pierced the shaft into open space, and Tom had to throw his arm up in front of his face.

He found himself staring right into a searing light as bright as the sun.

He had to wait a second for the computer to blank out the viewport. Blinking several time, Tom knew he was in trouble. He couldn't see a thing.

He had no idea what to press to start backing up. The wrong button could put him *inside the nuclear firestorm in front of his vehicle!*

Chapter Eleven: Shake It, Don't Break It!

WHEN the blinding flash happened, Bud and Stefanie, up on the surface, saw it briefly on their monitor screen. They were watching the vehicle's forward-facing camera when the sudden searing light burned out its video element.

"Not good," Bud declared as he looked at his accomplice.

"Get him back!" Stefanie shouted as she raced over to the hole the Geotron had made as it entered the lunar surface.

Bud didn't need to be told that as he already had hit an emergency recall sequence on the monitor board that would override anything Tom might try to do.

"Skipper?" he called out. "Don't know if you can hear me and don't really care. We're bringing you back!"

There was a split second pause during which Bud's heart nearly ceased beating before Tom's voice crackled over their helmet speakers.

"Yes, please. I'm blind right now. Took a direct hit in the retina from what looks like a nuclear firestorm down here. Bring me back about thirty feet and then give me a few minutes to try to close up this hole."

The flyer wasn't entirely sure he liked the idea of not getting his best friend back as quickly as possible, and personally doubted that the little model vehicle had any ability to do anything close to sealing the tunnel it had made. But, Bud knew Tom nearly better than he knew himself, so he had to give the inventor a chance.

"Just let me know when you start to see things again," he requested.

"I'll do you one better, Bud," Tom replied through, what sounded to both of the people on the surface as coming through gritted teeth. "On your heads up display can you call up the control panel of this little digger? I'm going to need some outside eyes to tell me what to push and what to avoid."

"I can help there," Stefanie offered. "I mean, after all, I was in that thing for several hours and had nothing but time to memorize the control layout."

“Good woman!” Tom declared. “Okay, Bud. I think I’m back far enough. Let’s pause here. Stefanie? I can feel the ten-key pad under my right hand. How far up is the control to lock the Geotron in place?”

She had to think. “Do you mean the repelatron control to hold still in case the floor gives way?”

“That’s the one,” he answered.

“Hmmm? Put one finger on the top of the top row of numbered keys, the ‘eight’ key, and then go up about three-point-three inches. Round, red button. Oops! Sorry. You can’t see it.”

“No problem. Got it. Thanks”

Pressing the button activated the repelatrons on both sides with just enough force to shove out and hold the small vehicle in place. On Earth this was a safety measure Tom added when the second test of the small craft nearly ended in its loss as the floor gave way into an unknown air pocket.

Now, it held the Geotron and Tom steady while he and Stefanie worked in concert to get his hands and fingers into position to do what he wanted to try.

With the surface and much of the underground of the Moon made from a crumbly, almost dusty material, he started the small treads under the main body spinning as if trying to reverse. As they spun, they send a steady stream of dirt forward. Every few seconds he released the repelatron grip, allowing the vehicle to drop a few inches, where he repeated the process.

“Bud?” he called out five minutes later. “My eyes seem to be clearing a little. How’s the camera view?”

“Almost nonexistent, skipper, but I can see that you’ve kicked up nearly enough dirt down there to cover the hole. One more drop-and-scuff cycle ought to do it.”

“I think I’ll let you back me up manually about the length of the Geotron so I don’t get too far below the shaft level.”

Bud took over and had Tom pulled back fifteen feet in no time.

Tom did two more cycles and the hole was finally sealed. He allowed Bud to bring him back to the surface.

“I called for Doc Simpson on another channel,” Stefanie informed them both as Tom was painfully unfolded and

extracted from the Geotron.

As he worked to straighten up, she hugged him.

“What’s that for?” he and Bud asked in unison.

“Because you are the closest thing I have to a brother, and I was really afraid I was about to lose you,” she replied. Both young men could see that she had tears on her cheeks as she looked up at them.

Bud took Tom back on his *Straddler* while Stefanie piloted the other one with an expertise that surprised the flyer. When he asked her about it—as Tom was being checked out by the doctor—she told him:

“Remember, I’m married to a pilot! He’s got me checked out on about half a dozen different planes. This is just a lot slower and steadier with handlebars instead of a stick.”

Inside the examination cubicle Doc was applying a soothing drop to Tom’s left eye. “There. Give that a half hour with the lights in here on low, and I’m nearly certain the vision will come back. Your optic nerve just got a bit stunned.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Tom replied. “I don’t have to tell you how much I appreciate you being up here!”

The doctor, once head of Medical Services at Enterprises had taken an extended leave of absence—Damon Swift would not accept a letter of resignation from him—to come to the lunar colony. For years he had been the one man to repair Tom whenever the young man was hurt. It was like old times for both of them.

Tom asked how the space university was going and was told its success meant the school had found it necessary to limit the more than five-hundred original applicants to just two-hundred. Another hundred would be allowed to begin studies a year later and the others were wait listed.

Not a single physician or medical researcher had opted to take themselves off the list.

Their conversation was interrupted by another moderately violent shaking of the ground underneath them. It lasted about twelve seconds.

“Sorry, skipper. I’ve got to move you along to make room for the inevitable line of injured,” Doc told him. “Bud!” he called out. The curtain pulled to one side. “Take Tom back

to your quarters. He's to have five hours of rest in a darkened room before you let him back into polite society."

Bud grinned. "I'll have Steff sit on his chest. How many 8x10 color glossies so you want to order of that?"

"Get out!" the doctor ordered, but the smile on his face told Bud he wasn't angry.

"Well, I'm hungry again. Tiny girl, tiny stomach," Stefanie stated as they walked out of the exam rooms and over to their suite of visitor's rooms. "How about if you get Tom all comfy, Bud, while I play room service? Anyone object to the mushroom and mixed grains veggie patty sandwiches? No? Good. See you both in fifteen."

As the inventor was slipping his shoes off, Bud asked him, "How bad was it down there, Tom. I mean, the flash and all I understand, but what does it mean?"

Tom stopped moving. "I'm not sure, Bud. However, I have a guess if you want to hear it."

"Like a leafless corn stalk, Tom. I'm all ears!"

Tom groaned. Bud's puns had become more like old Vaudeville one-liner jokes recently. "Okay, but only if you stop with the 'ears' stuff."

"You can't see it but I'm crossing me heart right now, skipper."

"Ah, but Bud, I *can* see some stuff now and you are just standing there with your hands on your hips."

The flyer did a quick cross with his right index finger. "There."

"Well, that light is just too darned bright to be a simple magma-like problem. Think back about five years to when we went to Africa and those caves with the natural nuclear reaction fire. Remember?"

"You bet I do!"

"Well, I built our little sphere with a lot of dark tomasite for the windows. Not quite as dark as welder's glasses, but close, and you recall how bright it still was. Ditto, down there." He pointed to the floor.

"A nuclear reaction. So, your guess was right," Bud said, amazed. "I mean, I know you talked about the Helium₃ thing, but that's really an uncontrolled reaction down there."

And, you believe it was the atomic drill?"

Tom nodded. "Yes, I'm now certain it is. My theory that it plunged down the shaft and broke apart seems to be validated. The problem is it seems to have hit a fuel source."

Bud was nodding. "So, how long before the colony—sorry, the *city*—has to evacuate?"

Now, Tom shook his head. "That, I can't say. Like the nuclear fire caves on Earth, the actual reaction doesn't spread very quickly. It is miles from the colony and could take a century or longer to move that distance. The only good thing about all this is that the Moon is so darned cold that the reaction is naturally going to be somewhat controlled. In fact..." He trailed off as a thought struck him.

"What?" Bud understood he would not get an answer from his friend and brother-in-law for a while. Tom was off in a little world inside his own mind where he worked on his most difficult scientific thoughts.

Bud was about to close the door when Stefanie came back with a tray and three plates. He explained what was going on, so she took one plate in and set it next to Tom's bed before tip-toeing back out.

Bud filled her in on what he had started to explain.

The blades of the helicopter slowly came to a stand still. Kinova stepped out of the aircraft and took stock of their surroundings. Nothing moved in the entire courtyard. The very air itself was calm, something that did not happen often on this mountain top. He sniffed and detected the old scent of explosives. There had been a lot of it; too much and yet not enough to obliterate the fortress. It hung heavy in the humid air.

The wall around the yard was slowly being reduced to rubble, no longer showing the work of man other than his destructive side. Anything of usefulness was long ago stripped away by scavengers. The same thing held for the fortress that was built into the cliffside of the plateau.

Once it was known for certain that the Masters were not coming back to this mountain top hide-away—or to the valley on the other side—the area was made taboo by all the Cordillera mountain tribes. Too much pain and suffering had occurred here for it not to be haunted by the souls of

the departed. Especially for those killed by torture.

But, there were always those ready to break such taboos in search of monetary gain.

Harlan busied himself setting up several instruments including a 360° video camera system to record everything around them. Once things were in place he returned to the helicopter. He and the others knew they must wait. For what, they did not know.

After an hour, a young man barely out of his teens walked through the ruined gate and stopped. Kinova did not move from where he was now standing. The tribesman stopped and stood, looking at the chopper, waiting. He was dressed in dull, tan, baggy pants and a loosely fitted short sleeve shirt of the same color. His hair was black and unkempt. A rifle was slung of his shoulder.

“*Maliit na pinsan.*” Kinova shouted out in Tagalog to the man as he finally recognized him. “You have grown into a fine looking young man very quickly.” He added in English for all to understand as the two men came together and embraced.

Holding his young cousin at arms length, Kinova looked down at his five-foot-tall relative. Not that his cousin was much shorter than the rest of his family in the mountains. It was the Samoan blood that made Kinova the giant he was.

“Taz, I want you to meet some friends of mine who need to explore this place once more.”

“I don't think that you want to do that, *pinsan* Kinova, but I'll send a runner for one of the Elders. I hope they will turn you down for your sake. Are these men from the Swifts?” Taz changed the subject and was trying to see who the men were sitting in the two doorways of the helicopter.

Kinova let the young man do so, for he would question him in private later regarding his warning if the Elder did not explain things. “No, they're not, but you will recognized one of them.” He hooked a thumb over his shoulder.

“Come.” Kinova started to walk toward the machine. On seeing this the five men rose to their feet and waited.

When Taz stood before the small group of men he held out his hand looking at each one as he was introduced. When he reached the last man and looked into his face, Taz fell to his knees and started to mumble in Tagalog.

Kinova burst out laughing, reached down with one of his oversized hand and put him back on his feet by the back of his shirt.

“Harlan, I do believe this zealous cousin of mine does think you are more than a mortal man.” He was still chuckling as he talked.

“And what kind of stories have you been telling around the camp fires at night to foster *that*, Kinova?” Harlan asked for he could see him doing that, exaggerating what Harlan had done to free the Cordillera people on the Moon, making him a super hero.

“Just telling it straight, Harlan, just telling it straight.” Kinova was grinning from ear to ear.

Two hours later a small camp had been established near the chopper consisting of several tents and a large canopy by the cook fire. It would be necessary when the inevitable rains came that evening. Under the canopy was a large folding table and a half dozen canvas chairs around it.

Taz would not leave Harlan's side; not that he was underfoot, but only several feet away and always on guard as if something might jump out at him and needed stopping.

An elderly man, walking with the help of a six-foot-tall staff, showed up just before dusk, and he bowed deeply at Harlan saying, “*Aming tagapagligtas*, what we have is yours, and whatever you need you shall have.” His English was slow, but very well pronounced.

Harlan could not get over this kind of adoration, but being called 'Our Savior' was so untrue and foreign to his way of thinking that it made him nervous.

Kinova, seeing the look on Harlan's face, started to speak to the Elder in his own tribal version of Tagalog and explained that Harlan needed to investigate the fortress and probably the valley also. He stated that they did not want to break the Cordillera's taboo and enter the sacred grounds without permission.

The elder took both of Harlan's forearms into his hands and speaking in a whisper said, “May God protect your soul as you venture into that accursed place for the diablo still dwells in the mountain.”

Harlan could tell that the old man believed what he said.

“Kinova, had you heard of this?” Harlan asked his friend. “The devil has not moved on?”

“No, this is new to me. I have not been back here in over a half a year, and it seems something has changed considerably.”

“What make you think that the devil remains there?” Harlan asked the Elder somewhat skeptically.

“Because you ask, *Aming tagapagligtas*, I shall try to explain.” The Elder stood there for a time with his eyes closed, his hands on top of each other as they gripped the wooden staff, murmuring to himself. Harlan could tell it was a prayer.

The praying stopped and the Elder opened his eyes before speaking to him again.

“For the past four months strange noises and lights have come from the fortress. They last no longer than a moment or two, and come in the middle of the night. No one now dares enter this place after seeing the lights or hearing the sounds after what happened to the first two men who ventured in to see what it could be.”

Harlan did not believe in ghost stories, and this was starting to sound just like one. If the elder mentioned a hook on a car door handle, he would lose his composure!

“And what *did* happen?” Kinova asked. He was wondering why he had not been told of this development earlier.

“Two of the night guards went in the first time the sounds and lights were seen and heard. Only one of them came out. He was so frightened by what he saw that he ran all the way back to the village and he has not been the same since. Day in and day out he now sits staring into the sky. Every once in a while he lets out moans that cause the hair to stand on end.”

Harlan glanced at the other security men. They were looking around, unease showing on their faces.

“Later that day we found the skeleton of the other man deep inside the fortress. No one has ventured in since.”

All the men were astounded by this tale. Two of them even pulled out their sidearms from their holsters and peered into the gathering darkness.

“Elder, why had nothing been said to the authorities or to anyone else?” Harlan asked even though he knew that the tribes do not call for outside help and it was that very attitude that let the Masters make slaves out of them.

But Kinova was *family*, and he should have been told.

“The evil spirits of this place haunts us for we no longer appease it. We are mostly Christians and no longer worship the old beliefs. We must now deal with it in our own way. The old tribal ways.”

Harlan was not about to argue the sudden reversal of religious convictions.

“Then you will not mind if we stay and do what we came to do?” Harlan asked.

“I cannot guarantee that the evil will not hurt you. You may be outsiders, but you go into his dwelling place. Diablo may come after you. Even a great man like you, Harlan Ames, cannot stop it from harming you or your friends.”

The Elder looked out into the now dark landscape and shivered slightly.

“I can stay here no longer, but I will not forbid you from your task. Just do not hold the Cordillera people responsible if harm befalls any of you,” he said looking Harlan in the eyes. The old man then took several steps backwards, turned and walked away into the darkness.

“I hate it when my people fall back on their old, superstitious way.” Kinova then swore to himself before he took his cousin Taz by the arm and lead him away. He was now determine to get to the truth on all this nonsense.

“Harlan,” asked one of the mercenary with a laugh, “Did you by any chance pack a Ghost Killer Gun? I left my at home.”

“Okay, children, listen up,” Harlan retorted with a little snort. “Let's cook supper and get to bed. I think we'll start first thing in the morning. Ghosts I don't believe in, but people masquerading as ghosts is another thing. So two men stay awake and switch off every three hours.” He now wished he had thought to add a proximity sensor to his equipment list.

The sun had barely risen above the far distant horizon

that was well below the mountain top. The early morning shadows were long and dark. Harlan was shining a high intensity floodlight down into the enormous hole that was in the middle of the courtyard. This hole had been the air pressure outlet for the magnetic launch system the Masters used in conjunction with four repelatron antennas.

The wide and heavy grate that covered it had been blown off and was somewhere down the slope of the mountain.

Yesterday as they came in for a landing he'd felt that it might swallow him; today in the early morning light he could see that it was full of large boulders. He didn't even need the light to see the rocks. He knew that the Swifts had had it backfilled so no one could go into the prison area again.

Though he had never seen the tunnel until now, he wondered why he had thought that it was *not* blocked yesterday; he couldn't understand this as he looked at the stones—left over from building the fortress—that nearly reached the level of the courtyard.

The only other way down into the now empty slave quarters was by the gate tower elevator and stairwell, but they had been sealed off by the Masters on their final space launch, the one that took Harlan to their hidden Moon base.

With these two entrances sealed off, it seemed a lost cause; he needed to try to enter some other way. He had to find another entrance. Harlan turned and looked at the stone fortress that sat at the edge of the plateau.

Like a medieval castle, it stood tall and strong against both weather and time. The last time he had entered that building it had been as a captive. This time he had to walk into it on his own accord, and he did not want to. It held no joy for him, no sense of success.

Only the memory of pain was associated with it. Pain caused by nothing more than his now deceased wife.

Chapter Twelve: Skirting the Failure Option

TOM, along with Bud and Stefanie, sat in the makeshift office they had set up in the living room area of their shared quarters. The inventor's eyes had recovered sufficiently for him to maneuver around without assistance, but Doc had told him to take it easy for at least additional day.

"I'm not about to let you go back down there, skipper," Bud was insisting. "Not after what happened. We may not have any video of what went on, but the sensors that were not affected by light gave us a ton of data that you need to see. I've already had Saclolo's best people take a look."

Tom's face had a serious set to it. "But, there is nothing like good, old human insight when these unexpected things happen. I just need to rig some protective shielding for both the cameras and my eyes. That's easy enough to make happen if we head back to Enterprises for a day. Besides, with at least another twenty-four hours before Doc clears me, there's nothing to do here."

"I miss my friendly giant," Stefanie commented from Tom's right. His face swung around to see her grinning at him. "Call me sentimental, or just plain crazy, but I could use sixteen hours or so with the big lug. I vote for a little trip."

Bud, hoping to appease Sandy, added his vote.

"It's settled," Tom told them. He called Doc who agreed that as long as Tom wore some special dark glasses and let Bud pilot the ship there was no reason to not go home.

A short wait was required while a team of men on *Straddlers* went out to retrieve the Geotron and get it stowed in the *Challenger's* hangar.

Bud landed directly at Enterprises on the old heat-protective pad the *Sky Queen* had used during her days when she rose on nuclear lifter jets. Tom called Bashalli thirty minutes before they touched down.

As the inventor headed to the large office, Bud left for home dropping Stefanie off at the house up the hill from Enterprises where the company kept guest quarters.

Tom poured over some schematics and lost track of time. With his father away in Washington D.C. a few days he had the office to himself.

In what seemed like no time since he sat down, the door opened and his beautiful wife came in. She was carrying a wicker hamper which she set on the large conference table before coming over to give him a very long hug and kiss.

“I have brought you a picnic dinner,” she explained pointing to the table. “If you will give me about twenty minutes I will set things up. I also need to see if Charles will allow me to use his kitchen.”

Tom’s head was so full of things he needed to work on that he completely lost the thread of conversation when she mentioned somebody named *Charles*. Then, it hit him.

“Oh! Chow. Right. Sure. Uhh... twenty minutes? Okay.” And, with that he turned back to his work.

Bashalli shook her head in wonder. By now she was used to this sort of behavior and did not take it personally, unlike her sister-in-law who still could raise a pretty good pout if she believed she was being ignored.

She eased out of the office after taking a small casserole dish from the basket.

She was back in twelve minutes with the now piping hot dish. As she set out their plates and cutlery, Tom’s nose began to twitch at the aroma coming from the table.

“Is that your cheesy chicken noodle casserole?” he inquired sniffing deeply a few more times.

She smiled sweetly at him. “One of your favorites and very easy to put together in under the two hours I had after your radio message came through. I knew you would be here all night so I thought I would bring dinner to you as well as arranging for your breakfast.”

Tom made one quick note and rose from his chair.

As they ate he filled her in on what had happened deep under the lunar surface. He did, however, leave out mention of his blindness preferring to tell her the nuclear fire flash had made his eyes very sensitive, but that he was working on something to keep that from happening again.

After they ate, she took the dishes down the hall to

Chow's kitchen and washed them before coming back to repack the hamper.

Tom was waiting for her at the door when she stepped inside. He wrapped his arms around her lifting her off the floor and holding her tightly. "I sure do love you, Bash!" he said. "I can't imagine what life might be if you weren't in my life."

She tilted her face up to look into his eyes. "Ditto, kiddo!" she said, giggling. "Oops! I think Sandy is rubbing off on me."

They both laughed as he set her back on the floor.

"Tom? I do have a serious question," she told him.

"Shoot."

"Well, is there a possibility that you will not succeed and the people up there will perish?" Her lower lip trembled.

He took a deep breath before answering. "Bash, while failure is always a possibility, I see it as an avoidable option. I plan to skirt whole thing and just go for success!"

Bashalli rewarded him with a long kiss.

It was only four o'clock so after she departed he made several phone calls and soon had five people standing in front of his desk.

As he explained each of the changes he wanted to make, there were nods of agreement as well as on hand raised.

"Skipper?" Hank Sterling began. "We have a small issue with the Geotron model. Well, three. First, I have to replace the track on the left side. It got scorched by the heat. Those softer, plastic treads weren't meant for that sort of heat."

"How long?"

"I'm pumping the sections out as fast as I can, but day after tomorrow, noon, at the earliest. I have to do both tracks or it would be by three-thirty tomorrow morning."

"Okay. I can live with that. It gives everyone else a bit more time." The other four smiled in relief.

The big engineer outlined the two other items. The first was his desire to add a protective layer of Intertite, the special coating Tom invented using material taken from the Caves of Nuclear Fire, to the Geotron.

The second regarded Tom's request to reconfigure the interior to allow him a little more room.

"We can do that if I have an extra day to swap out some of the larger, older components with a couple of new, much smaller ones I've been sitting on for over a month."

Tom gave the go-ahead for everything, and the completion date was set for three days later.

But, barely another twenty-six hours passed before Tom received an emergency radio call from Saclolo Reyes at Cordillera City. The man's voice was quivering.

"Tom. I do not wish to alarm you but we have been experiencing the longest shakings and rumblings up here to date. So far, it has been going for nearly three hours. People are in a panic. What can I tell them?"

The man sounded near to panic himself and Tom sought for the words to say to him. His plan to possibly use the giant *Sutter* were still weeks away from possibility. He hadn't even mentioned it to the lunar city's leaders to get them started on creating the extra oxygen they would need.

"Listen, Saclolo," he said in a calm, even tone, one he wasn't especially feeling at the moment. "I need for you to transmit all of the data from the sensor placements to me as soon as possible. I need to see what is happening and whether it is moving. Can you do that? In the mean time I will get things finished down here and take off by tomorrow morning. Assure the citizens up there that nothing we've seen so far indicates that an eruption or anything else associated with what's going on underground is eminent."

Half an hour later, Saclolo was back on the radio telling the inventor that the ground shaking had subsided over the previous ten minutes, and all that was left was a light gurgling sound heard only on the deep-placed transducers.

"I am still sending the data you requested, except that a power failure has caused about half of it to be scrambled or lost. We are accessing what we still have," he explained.

When the data came in, it was nothing Tom had not expected. The shaking was, however, quite a bit longer than he thought possible. He called Stefanie at the guest house to see what she thought.

"Ohhh, not good," she said. "I'll be down the hill in ten

minutes. I need to see that info,” she told him.

Once she had reviewed the data while sitting next to Tom she turned to him with a quizzical look. “Okay, mister genius. What looks like a duck and quacks like a duck but is not a duck?”

He was perplexed by her question. As he tried to formulate an answer, she assisted him. “Okay. Not a duck, obviously, but from a distance there are a few other water fowls that look and sound sort of like one. That’s what I think we have here. Something that sounds and looks a bit like an underground magma pit, or bubble if you will, but really isn’t. And, it is moving!”

Alarmed now, Tom started to open his mouth.

“No. Not yet,” she cautioned him. “I’m not finished. The good news is that from the soundings, whatever our duck really is, it is heading *away* from the crater.”

Her eyebrows rose and she smiled at him.

“That’s great news. Isn’t it?” he questioned.

“Well, yes and no. It means that the city isn’t in immediate danger. But, it doesn’t preclude that this all sort of turns around and comes back in with a vengeance. Or, it could creep in on little duck feet decades or more. I can’t say anything other than it is moving away right now.”

Tom looked into her eyes. They were sparkling with some inner glee she was feeling at this discovery and yet he detected a hint of sadness around the edges.

“Tell me the bad part,” he requested.

Stefanie took a deep breath. “The bad part is that from the data they managed to save before their power cut, I would have to say that the magma is heading on a direct course for that hollow mountain. The one your darling wife tells me is supposed to become the next great rich people’s paradise.”

They looked at each other for a moment.

“It is going to catastrophically overcome or under cut by what’s going on inside the Moon, Tom. Not real soon. Not in the next few months by the looks of things, but probably within two years. Oh!” she suddenly sat upright and smacked the palm of her hand on the desk.

“What?”

“I just thought of something. You know that tunnel the atomic drill that started all this made? The one heading part way to the city? Well, we need to go up and plug that or else it will likely become a pressure outlet, melt through, and fill up the inside of that mountain. Or,” she added with a sad shake of her red hair, “it could blow the thing apart!”

Tom picked up his phone and made two calls. There were new items to add to the growing list of things the *Challenger* was going to need to take back.

“Gotta get back up the hill to the beast,” she told him once he finished his calls. “If we’re going to take off tomorrow I need to solidify the, ummm, understanding we came to about my past life. If you need me, at least give me a couple hours and then call.”

With that, she hopped off the chair and walked out the door.

Tom sat at his deck wondering what all that had meant. But, he had larger things to attend to so he put Stefanie out of his mind for the time being.

By the next day nearly everything had been made ready. The inside of the Geotron had definitely been reconfigured and updated. With no more need for autonomous operation, most of that computer and control system had been pulled out. A new, more detailed flat-panel glass control board was installed in place of the variety of switches, slider controls and other items. The joystick was a newer one than Tom had previously used and featured at least three additional control buttons.

Those, Hank explained to him, were override controls allowing the pilot to manage all power, traction, directional control and speed with a single hand.

With the removal of the autonomous systems, the false floor once covering it had been lowered and that meant the operator actually had enough room to pilot the craft in a slightly reclined, sitting position rather than on his or her stomach. The manual pedals that had been near the back of the craft—the ones they had to build special extenders for when Stefanie operated the craft—were moved forward.

“What’s that?” Tom asked pointing at something that

looked like a padded origami piece mounted on the floor behind the operator's seat.

"Watch and marvel," Hank said with a smile. He reached into the interior past Tom, pushed a small recessed button next to the strange feature and pulled his arm back.

From the floor came the sound of an electric motor spinning and gears meshing. The origami piece unfolded slowly and in a moment turned into a second pilot's seat complete with five-point harness.

"Wow!" the inventor marveled. "I'm assuming that you've included that because you second guessed me, or that dad called in and suggested it?"

"Nope," Hank admitted. "Stefanie contacted me to insist on it. Said that she absolutely needed to be down there with you to properly identify what is going on. Since the room wasn't going to be used for anything else..."

Tom laughed. "If she and flyboy have their way, it won't be me in there with *them*." He agreed that it was a good addition. "Now I'll ask you about the other thing you are working on."

Hank nodded. Tom had asked that a special earth blaster be hastily constructed. This one would be set into the lunar surface at some point to drill down a large, pressure-relieving hole into the magma. It would, of course, perish in the process—and Tom hoped that its own nuclear power supply would not add to the problems—but if it could help avoid a catastrophic buildup of pressure, then it would be worth it.

"Since you said you would not need it this trip, I've got another team working on it, Tom. Is that still okay?"

"Sure. But, we might need it in the next few weeks. It all depends on what the Geotron can find out. Just so we're on the same page, it is going to have to drill a fairly wide hole. Did you figure out how to do that?"

"I did. It will need to dig slower than previous blasters because it will be powering a trio of heads. It'll ship up with them folded down along the body, and the three mobility treads will be narrower and stick out farther to fit into the larger hole, but the three will have a fair amount of overlap and the resulting hole at least eighty percent larger."

Tom looked at the growing smirk on Hank's face. Finally he asked what it was about.

"Well, it was going to be a surprise, but I know you're really worried about adding another nuclear source into that mess, so I did something. Now, if you don't like it, there's time to go back to the self-contained way."

"And, that means you are not going to have this self-contained?" Tom inquired. He could see where this was going and, if he were right, he wholeheartedly agreed with the engineer's decision.

"As you probably have guessed, I'm adding a power tether with the actual nuclear power source remaining on the surface. I can provide up to half a mile of power cable before we have troubles with tugging along that extra weight."

"Even on the Moon?"

"Oh, especially on the Moon. Down here I'd say you might get four-hundred feet or so before we would need to beef up the treads and the system."

It wasn't until past midnight of the following day that the repelatron-driven ship lifted off from Enterprises and headed back to the Moon.

Tom brought Zimby Cox along to pilot them so he could spend the trip introducing Bud and Stefanie to the Geotron changes, and so that they might discuss strategies.

By the time the call came for landing positions, both of them had been completely checked out on the new controls.

Tom called up to Zimby and asked that he first set down as close to the base of the hollow mountain as possible so the Geotron could be off-loaded. Once that was accomplished, they headed for the crater and the city.

As they hovered near the crater wall, Tom pointed over to the now-complete landing pad structure. The radio crackled to life.

"*Challenger*, you are cleared to be our very first visitor to the landing pad. Be advised that the repelatron-approved section is marked in green lights at this time. Call when down, then wait for instructions."

"Interesting," Zimby muttered. Tom agreed as he sat

watching the older man side-slip the large ship over to the new structure. A minute later and they touched down as light as a feather.

“Cordillera City, this is *Challenger*. We are down. Awaiting instructions.”

The instructions only meant they needed to wait for *Straddlers* to come pick them up as the elevator and giant airlock system going straight down were still under construction. Zimby opted to stay on the ship.

Saclolo and Magadia met them at the older airlock below the control tower.

After a very brief meeting where they presented Tom with more recovered data from the previous, lengthy shaking, the three were allowed to go to their shared quarters where they fell asleep within minutes.

At eight, barely four hours later, they arose, ate a quick breakfast, and headed out to the mountain on a trio of the largest, four-man *Straddlers*.

Along with the Geotron, Tom had set down a large, silver tank and a crated pump. These were left in place as the three on their *Straddlers* lifted up and into the hollowed mountain to land on the mostly-flat floor.

To Tom’s amazement, there was not only no sign of the former hole in the side of the cavern—the tunnel heading toward the colony—but the floor was now nearly thirty feet higher on the side closest to the former hole than when they had left it.

“This is not good,” she exclaimed.

“Why?”

“It means the fire has traveled much faster than I thought it would. It must have hit a rich vein of fuel.”

The magma had evidently bubbled up and through the shaft, spewing into the cavern with enough force to spread the thick layer out and build it up before it finally cooled and solidified.

“I’d estimate the actual hole to be about twenty feet below us,” Stefanie told the boys as they measured the ground temperature. “All of your dragging that tank of sealy stuff was a waste of time.”

Tom shook his head. “No, I don’t agree. The point of

bringing it was that we need to also plug places like that hole I dug with the Geotron before I got the blinding flash. Remember, all that's blocking things now is the twenty feet of so of dirt I jammed up against it."

"So, how exactly will we fill that?" Bud asked.

"It's pretty easy, flyboy. Let's get up and out of here and down to the Geotron. I'll show you there."

Once they landed and approached the vehicle, Tom stooped and pointed out a new bracket attached to the undercarriage.

"Hank installed that to hold the nozzle for our tank of, what Stefanie is calling, 'sealy stuff' that I'll pump up against the blockade and keep building up as I back out."

Bud shook his head. "No, not you." He sighed. "It's my turn in the hole. You and Steff have had all the fun. I go in on this one. And, don't you try to argue or I'll get Doc out here to classify you four-F!"

With a rueful grin, Tom nodded his acceptance. It would be a relatively safe operation so he had little worry that his friend couldn't handle things.

They made two trips to get things to the new location, and then after about an hour of set-up time, Bud gave them a thumbs up sign and climbed into the Geotron. Three minutes later, having completed the check list, he radioed, "Okay. I'm heading in. How close do I get before I have you turn on the pump?"

"Twenty feet, Bud," Tom called back. "Then, back out at a rate of about fifteen feet a minute. We'll shove in a seventy-five foot plug. If that doesn't hold, nothing will!"

"Roger."

The Geotron disappeared into the previous hole. As Bud neared the point where Tom had dug down in order to toss out enough material, he felt a shudder go through the cabin.

A moment later, he was nearly shaken from his seat with only the five-point harness keeping him in it.

"Bud! Get back here! It's a major quake, and—" With that, the radio went dead. Bud was cut off from the surface, and as he looked out the front viewscreen he could see the tunnel *collapsing around him*.

Chapter Thirteen: Fortress of Sadness

AS HARLAN turned to go back to the nearby campsite, he kicked a stone into the hole.

“Any size stone is a help to fill it,” he thought to himself as he walked away, and totally forgot about it.

The four other men were just starting breakfast when He joined them. They talked lightly among themselves about the night watch and the lack of anything happening.

“That, gentleman, is what I wanted to hear,” Harlan told them with a smile, “and let's hope it stays that way.” He continued to talk on a more serious note. “Art, as pilot, you stay with the ship for now until we're sure we are alone.”

Art nodded, resignedly, knowing he was in for a long, quiet day.

“Paulus, do you see the remains of that corner tower?”

“Sure do, Boss. I expect I'll mosey up there and keep an eye open. Never tell what I might see. Ought to take my rifle in case there are rats up there.”

Harlan nodded his agreement, but added, “Keep an eye on each other also. Stay in radio contact. The rest of us will search the fortress from top to bottom looking for anything that's seems suspicious.”

“And, what would you call suspicious, Harlan?” Kinova asked.

“Wish I could tell you, guys. Use your training—look for anything that's not right. No matter how stupid it may seem. Everything ought to look long-abandoned. If something is going on around here I want us to find it pronto, and not let it find us.”

“Highly paid mercenary team turned ghost hunters... that's the para-military way of life.” Scotty joked.

“Still better than sloshing your way through a bug infested swamp, isn't it?” Paulus reminded him with a wink about a less-than-pleasant aspect of their last assignment.

“Scotty, grab a communication repeater from the gear box so we can leave it in the fortress entrance. Those thick stone walls are going to be a nuisance blocking our radio

signals. There's a lot of iron ore in these rocks." The redheaded mercenary walked off to get the extra piece of equipment. Paulus went with him to grab his sniper rifle, ammunition and a combo night vision and high powered binoculars.

Within minutes the two men were at their assigned places. Harlan with Kinova and Scotty walked up the wide steps of the entrance and disappeared around the smashed open door and into the foyer of the fortress leaving the radio signal repeated set up at the doorway.

Once past the foyer the three men entered the great hall where the two Golden thrones once sat for the Masters. The platform that they had been on was empty, the gilded chairs long gone along with every other piece of adornment. The chamber was stark naked.

Harlan led the two men to the left side wall and followed it around to the back of the room and to a descending stairwell. He hesitated for a moment as another old pain took hold of his mind. He shook it off and took his first step down. Sweat was forming on his forehead.

Kinova took Harlan by the arm and stopped his descent.

"Are you feeling all right, Boss. You don't look so good!" The giant of a man was worried about his friend and boss.

"Yeah, I'm good. It's just that there is a dump truck full of bad memories down there, that's all. It keeps driving over my brain and my heart." He swallowed hard after saying this. It had been more than he cared to admit to anyone.

"Sure, Boss. Do you want me to go first and you stay up here?" Kinova could not believe he had just said that to Harlan of all people.

Harlan smiled up at his friend, patted the larger man on the shoulder, and started down the stairs. "Stay here." At the bottom there would be two doorways. Originally he had been taken left into what was a small medical examination room. Maggie... No!... the *Empress* had come from the other doorway at the bottom of the steps.

This time Harlan found no right-side doorway. He quickly turned left and recognized that side room even though it was empty. He turned back and placed his hand on the right side wall and rubbed it. It was cold, smooth and

solid to his touch.

Harlan shook his head and tried to see where he had gone wrong. He could not.

Kinova had ventured a couple steps down and could see that something was not right. He signaled Scotty at the top of the stairs.

“Go to the other wall and see if there is another stairwell that goes down over there. Don't go down, just get back to me and tell me what is there, understood?”

Scotty moved off without a word. Kinova watched him for a moment, then turned to look down at what Harlan was doing.

He wasn't there!

Kinova hurried down the stairs and turned into the left side room with his handgun drawn. There was Harlan tapping away on the walls trying to see if they were solid.

“Harlan?” he asked out of concern.

“I'm sure this is the room. I was placed on a cot right there,” Harlan pointed to the spot, “and stripped down. The Empress came in from that doorway, and I could see that it was from another room on the other side of the steps.”

Kinova turned to look, but saw nothing. He shrugged at Harlan.

“Look, stand here, and you can see that I'm not mistaken.” Harlan reached out to pull Kinova to the spot he indicated.

Kinova stood in the spot and could see the far wall of the stairwell. But it meant nothing to him. There was no doorway to another room there, only a seemingly solid stone wall.

“Boss, this might not be the right room and stairwell. It was a long time ago and things could be a little fuzzy. I'm sure we'll find the right one. I have Scotty looking for another way down right now.”

Harlan face went white and his eyes went wide. “No... No!” He ran up the stairs.

“WHERE DID YOU SEND HIM!” Harlan yelled down at Kinova almost in a panic.

“To the other side of the hall to see if there was an other way down,” the giant of a man yelled up as he took the stairs two at a time. They both raced to the other side of the hall and slid to a stop before a set of stairs that went up.

Harlan started up the stairs without coming to a full stop. Kinova was right behind him. They reached the top in seconds, but it was too late. Scotty was on the floor—or at least, what was left of him. A bleached white skeleton lay there. No clothes, no gun, nothing else remained.

“Crap!” was all Harlan said as he reached for the mic pinned to bulletproof vest.

“Art... Paulus... come in. Art... Paulus, respond immediately!” Only dead air came back. Both men turned and raced back down the stairs and out of the fortress.

It was close to midnight and they still could not find the other two men. Harlan and Kinova were at their wits' end. Three of the finest mercenaries had either died or disappeared in the matter of minutes of each other. This was beyond all belief.

There was no way that Art and Paulus were not covering each other. Whatever happened to them happened at the same time and before either of them could reach for their radios. With no shots fired, neither had reached their weapons either.

Paulus had been up in the remains of the corner tower that once held one of the launch repelatron units. No one could get to him without using the stone steps to the top. The stairs were visible all the way up. No one could have made it up without being seen by him.

Art was left in the middle of the courtyard with hundreds of feet of unobscured level ground. Paulus would have been looking down on him at all times and Art could see the lower portion of the stairs as well as Paulus. They both covered each other. And they were too good at their jobs to have both relaxed their guard or fallen asleep at the same time.

It had been less than a half hour in which the three men disappeared.

Harlan and Kinova men had a cold, silent meal and sat

back to back the rest of the night. Both were too wound up to sleep. Tomorrow they would have to call for help from the Philippine government and have the skeleton identified as Scotty. That left them missing two more skeletons.

There was still a small chance that the one set of bones was not him, but an unfortunate tribal man that had come into the fortress and met his demise. Men don't get turned into bones in the matter of minutes; it was not possible.

When Harlan woke in the morning he was alone.

Kinova was not at his back. He had disappeared some time in the early morning hours. The last time he recalled looking at his watch had been about four-twenty. Harlan was now by himself! He was on his back looking up at the blue sky where white tendrils of clouds drifted by.

Scrambling to his feet, he looked all around and found... Nothing!

All the gear and all the weapons that had been set out in plain sight were gone. Harlan checked for his sidearm; it was gone. Reaching down he casually ran his hand over his lower leg and felt his ten-inch knife still in its sheath. He went to check out the helicopter. Climbing into the pilot seat he turned on the power switch; nothing moved, not a needle twitched nor a display lit up. He turned on the radio that contained its own power source... nothing!

He climb out and went to the hatch behind the passenger compartment that enclosed part of the tail gear assembly and was also the battery compartment. There were no batteries to check. The connecting wires had been cut and the two heavy-duty batteries removed. The chopper was going nowhere and Harlan had no way to communicate with the outside world.

He checked the equipment box only to find all the extra gear and hand-held radios were gone. He snorted to himself and looked down at his feet. He still had his shoes so he could walk out if he wanted to. If he dared. If he could abandon his friend and co-workers, which he could not. Whoever took his companions must be counting on that.

Whatever game they were playing, Harlan had to see it to the end. He was now more than convinced that he was dealing with people and not ghost or the devil; they would not have to steal guns, batteries or radios to keep him there.

Harlan went back under the canopy and sat down, but not until he had arranged a few things to his liking. He could now see almost ninety percent of the courtyard without moving. He had also palmed the small calibre handgun they had taped under the table as a safety precaution.

The helicopter was to his back and in a blind spot, but he was far enough away from it that he had time to react to anything coming from behind it. He had food and drink in a few packs under the table in front of him and the small gun at his side. He was ready for any eventuality and determined that they had to come to him.

He was not afraid of being killed. If they'd wanted that he would have never woken up.

It was past noon and Harlan just finished a bottle of water. Out of boredom he threw the plastic container toward the huge hole in the courtyard a dozen yards away. It did not quite make it and came to a stop just short of the hole. The light breeze rolled it the rest of the way in.

Disgusted with himself for littering, and needing to stretch legs, he got up and went to get the bottle. Looking into the hole he could not find it. The boulders were just inches from the surface and Harlan could not see any crevices it could have falling into.

He stared at the hole wondering, and the wind blew a little dust around his feet and some of it into the hole where it disappeared from sight!

Harlan watched it, but it made no impression on his conscious mind. He turned and was looking back to his chair when it hit him. He hesitated for a moment, his breath catching in his throat, and almost turned around to go back and look for a second time—but he thought better of it.

He realized that if he was being watched that it might be a giveaway. He returned to his chair and settled in for a long afternoon vigil and think. They were playing with him right now, and tonight was when they would come to take him.

He had two choices to make. Let them come and see what they wanted, or he could take the attack to them. *They know the area far better than I do*, he thought, *and they surly out numbered me.*

Then it occurred to him there was a third option. He could turn the tables on them. A small smile spread across his lips as he reasoned the whole thing out.

Dusk was falling, and the Moon had still not risen in the sky. The canopy was in deep shadows. Shadows long enough to reach the helicopter. Harlan moved cautiously in the darkness. He had almost no clothes on as he had sacrifice them, along with the food packs, to make a dummy to sit in his chair.

He only took the hand gun with him and his ten-inch hunting knife. He reached into the helicopter's opened passenger compartment searching behind the bench seat for the spare mechanics jumpsuit that was usually there. No good pilot went flying without some kind of change of clothes in case of mechanical failure. It was somewhat grimy, but he put it on. It was of a dark color and was just what he needed. He also found a plastic bottle of grease and oil remover. With his knife he cut the top off the container and placed it on the helicopter's floor currently about hip high to him.

Just behind the co-pilot seat, strapped to the wall, was the emergency flare gun box. Harlan took the gun out and one flares. He loaded the gun and placed it next to the degreaser bottle.

The wind had picked up a little, and it was blowing in the direction that he needed it to. He looked once more at the hole in the courtyard. He could see nothing around it.

Do it now, or wait some more? That was the question utmost in Harlan's mind.

"Screw it!" he muttered to himself as he reached for and threw the container high into the air where it splashed its thick fluid all over the top of the triangular canopy. Then with a quick flick of his knife he cut the rope that was tied one of the inspection hatch handles on the top of the helicopter.

Harlan grabbed the flare gun off the floor and without even taking aim at the canopy that was now being pushed away from him by the wind, he fired at it. The gun made a small popping sound and the flare left a trail of white sparks. It hit the flapping canopy and disappeared as it got tangled in the material.

Vroom!

The highly flammable liquid exploded as it was hit by the exploding flare. The canopy came apart in large chunks. Most of the still-flaming pieces fell right into the mouth of the shaft.

What happened next put a smile on Harlan's face as he ran towards the castle. He dared not stop and look at his handy work. He still did not know if there were people waiting in the building. He ran with the gun in one hand and his knife in the other. He was determined that if he was go down, it would be while causing maximum damage.

Behind Harlan the sound of screaming men had subsided. The flames only lasted for a few seconds. The men yelled out more in surprise than by actually getting burnt by the flaming canvas. None of them dared to go over the edge of the tunnel to see if Harlan was waiting for them to come out and attack. Instead they were climbing down their makeshift ladder as fast as they could. Most of them had dropped their weapons so their retreat would not be hindered by them.

Many had their fingers stepped on by the person above them. One man fell to his death when he was pushed off the ladder as he tried to position himself to swing around into the tunnel that led to the slave's prison. The whole area was in the dark since the men were not expected to come back that way and any light would have been seen from above.

Harlan tucked and rolled as soon as he reached the top of the steps. He angled himself so that he stopped by the outside edge of the entrance. He stayed on the ground, listening for any sound from within. Everything was quite, both inside the castle and by the courtyard tunnel.

He was beginning to think that he had out-manuevered his enemy. At least for the next few minutes. He didn't hesitate for a moment as he slowly went down the left side stairwell in total darkness. He didn't have a flashlight, and even if he had, he dared not use it. He knew all too well how to get to the room were his implanted tracker was forcibly removed from under his skin behind his right ear when he was captured and brought before the Masters.

Reaching at the bottom of the stairs he kept walking and hit a wall. That stunned him. He knew that he had to go

farther. That there was a second set of doors.

His mistake early that day was he'd used his eyes and not the memory of what had happened to him. In the present darkness he found that his old memory had taken over. There were two sets of doors and the one he wanted was a dozen feet down a corridor.

The room on his left was the right shape and size, but there was no room on the right. He had to go deeper down a corridor... he was certain of it.

So what does that mean? Harlan thought to himself. *If this is not the right place where is it?* He touched the hard, cold wall on his right. He then touched the wall in front of him.

Different? Yes... Too warm?... Too smooth?... Yes, too both.

Harlan turned the gun around in his hand and gripped the barrel. He swung the butt of the gun into the stone wall in front of him. It crashed partway through the wall. Feeling the hole he had made with the gun he could tell that it consisted of a single piece of sheetrock.

He put the gun in his jumpsuit pocket and started to tear apart the wall in front of him. He made a hole big enough to squeeze through, which he did.

He'd just started to feel were the walls on each side of him were when an intense white light blinded him.

"Master Ames, finally glad to meet you," a soft feminine voice told him from beyond the light. "It is just too bad that you had to go through all this foolishness. I was going to take you here anyway. So, please remove the gun from your pocket and hand it over to me."

Harlan did as he was told and the light was aimed away from his face.

"Please come with me and we can talk. I am sure you have plenty of questions to ask." The woman was still mostly in shadows as she kept the light on Harlan's chest as they walked.

Harlan did as he was told since it was the easiest and safest thing to do. It wasn't only his life he had to think about; there were four others hanging in the balance as

well. At least, he hoped there were four *lives*.

They walked only a few yards and she directed him to the left side door. Once inside she turned on a larger set of lights and, to Harlan's relief, he saw all four of his men bound hand to foot with thick ropes lined up against the far wall. They had gags in their mouths and their eyes were wide open. Given the circumstances they looked to be in good shape. At least Scotty was alive. Harlan was given no time to wonder where the skeleton came from.

"Enough," the woman called out to Harlan. "Just wanted you to see that they are alive and it's up to you to keep them that way. Across the hall we go." She laughed lightly. "You've been dying to get in there ever since you arrived. Just remember what they say about curiosity and the cat!"

Harlan just looked at her. He was amazed at her looks. She was only five feet tall and must have weighed less than a hundred pounds but each pound was located in the most provocative locations. He could not tell how old she was because she had blackened her face. She was dressed in thin black leather that made her look very slim and offered no hiding places for imperfections. Her hair was black and cut so short that it was nearly a crew cut.

She was definitely dressed for night work.

The room they entered was not much larger than the one they'd left. It was not what Harlan had expected—then again, what did he expect? He had to laugh to himself as he thought, *When will she stop surprising me. I guess I'll never really did know my Maggie, never mind the mind of the Empress.*

Chapter Fourteen: Mr. Swift Goes to Washington

TOM AND Stefanie were thrown from their feet, hitting the lunar surface hard as it bucked up to meet them on the way down.

Stefanie's cry took Tom's thoughts from Bud for a second.

"I broke my arm!" she yelled out, sounding more angry than in pain. "Damn, damn, damn, DAMN!" She paused a second. "But, enough about me. We have to get Bud!" she stated ignoring her own injury.

Tom got to his feet and assisted her in regaining her own. He performed a quick check of her suit... finding, to his horror, a pinhole leak at the elbow of the broken arm.

"Stand still, Steff," he ordered reaching down into a zippered pocket on his suit's right leg. He extracted a black, rubbery sheet about three inches square. "Hate to do this to you, but I have to get that arm straight," he told her, explaining that he had to get the patch on quickly. "Let me know if I'm being too rough."

He could hear her snicker over the radio.

Seconds later she stifled a scream as he unbent her arm.

Tom slapped the patch between his hands to activate it, peeled off the protective bottom sheet, and pressed it firmly onto the elbow of her suit. It bubbled slightly in the area of the tiny hole—but it held. Five seconds after that it had set and he removed the backing piece exposing the now-flexible red patch.

"Is there any way you can drive your *Straddler* back to the colony?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm seeing little stars and teddy bears swimming around in front of my face. And, I think I'm going to foul the inside of this helmet if I do anything more than sit down right now. Sorry."

Tom assisted her in sitting down on a clear patch of the ground. Checking to see that she was going to be okay for a moment, he turned around to look at the exit of the tunnel

the Geotron had gone into. It had mostly collapsed, but he bounced over and tried to get into it.

Starting about five feet in was a nearly solid wall of lunar debris. Since the surface above this was fairly level, he walked carefully around the area for about fifty feet, scuffing his boot into the regolith to mark the area where it might be possible to cause a cave-in if anyone walked there.

“Bud? Can you hear me?” he called out over the radio. With the pump hose now torn apart and no trailing tether on the Geotron, the radio was the only way to try to contact his friend. He repeated the call ten times before walking over to check on Stefanie.

“You okay?” he asked, squatting down to look into her helmet..

She looked up at him, wincing as she did, and nodded.

“Yeah. I’m not going to need a bone replacement like you did for Deke when he hammered his forearm into jelly, but getting to Doc Simpson would sure be a blessing right now. However,” she said giving him a rueful grin, “Bud comes first. So, what do we do?”

Tom shook his head. “Not us. Me. And first I have to get you to Doc and bring some men back here to dig down to find Bud. So,” he reached down and grabbed the shoulder straps of her suit, heaving her up to her feet and then picking her up in his arms, “you and I are going for a quick ride.”

He carried her to his *Straddler*, placed her on the back and climbed on.

On the way back he radioed the lunar city, asked that Doc be ready to take a new patient and to have a team of ten men and equipment ready to come back with him.

They arrived at the airlock five minutes later. Doc met them with a wheelchair as they exited the airlock.

“I’ll get her fixed up and come out to see if I can help,” he offered.

Tom shook his head. “No. Unless you have a portable operating room there’s nearly nothing you might do for Bud until we get him back here. Although,” and he smiled at the doctor knowing he felt a great friendship for the flyer, “I’ll

let him know you offered!”

Tom led the men on a variety of the other *Straddlers* available back to the site. There was still no sign of Bud and repeated calls, even as Tom flew over the approximate path of the tunnel, could raise anything.

He stopped and called everybody to join him. He had checked the amount of hose that had unspooled, paced off about the same length and was pointing down.

“We start digging here,” he commanded. Within a minute eight shovels and a portable conveyor were moving incredible amounts of the lunar soil. Five minutes later they had dug down nearly ten feet.

Tom called a rest break as he dropped into the eight by eight foot hole and called out to Bud again.

Nothing.

Inside the Geotron, Bud was taking stock of his situation. A look at the viewscreen told him the way ahead was blocked, and the rear camera showed nothing, meaning that it was covered with collapsed soil.

He tried for several minutes to get a radio call out receiving no indication that it had been received.

Next, he tried the controls. The small craft could move forward and backward, so he wasn't very concerned about getting out. He was more concerned for his friends above and how they must be taking the situation.

He sat there for ten minutes deciding on a strategy. If, he pondered, he moved too far forward he was in danger of moving into and through the lunar soil Tom had packed up to contain the blinding nuclear fire.

No, that was not the way to go.

He also knew that unlike its full size version, this Geotron had minimal earth-parting capabilities for going backwards through things. It had, after all, been built before Tom realized the importance of adding that capability to the full-scale version.

“Okay,” he said out loud, “the thing to do is try to go back as much as I can, then rock her forward and into a turn and

then repeat as necessary until I can get pointed away from that conflagration!”

Before starting, he made another attempt at radio contact with the same negative results.

He had a drink from a water bottle found in a storage compartment before settling down to see what he could do.

The Geotron was able to move back only about five feet. But, as soon as he knew it would go back very little more, the flyer realized that he was missing an opportunity. He pulled forward again and then reversed, this time giving the craft a little steering to the right. As he hoped, the back end swung around a few degrees as he neared the back of his available maneuvering room.

He pushed the joystick to the opposite side before starting forward again. This time, he dug in an extra five feet—a distance he felt would be safe.

More than thirty minutes had gone by since the digging crew began, and they were now at the point where it became almost impossible to get the dirt up and out of the hole.

Tom called another halt and stood at the bottom contemplating their next move. As he thought what to do next, he began feeling small vibrations under his feet.

“Everyone out!” he yelled. “Quake starting!”

With no ladder, they had been using the smallest *Straddler* to raise and lower men two at a time. It dropped into the hole and two of the four men climbed on, soon deposited on the surface. Tom was with the final man incoming out.

“Tom to Cordillera control. Do you have any quake readings?”

There was a pause, then, “Negative, Mr. Swift. Nothing.”

Tom thanked the young man and cut the connection.

The group of diggers were standing about twenty feet back from the hole when something astounding happened. As Tom was looking out across the landscape toward the space elevator, lunar material spewed into the vacuum, nearly thirty feet up, and the nose of the Geotron not just

pierced the surface, the entire body of the Geotron practically leapt out of the ground.

A cheer went up from everyone, nearly drowning out Bud's call.

"Hey. I see there's a reception committee for me. Thanks, guys!"

Tom motioned for the diggers to be quiet. "Uh, Bud? I hate to tell you but it looks as if you've torn the bracket and the hose off my Geotron. What have you got to say for yourself? Those things cost money, mister!" He grinned.

"Well," the flyer began, "you see it's like this. There was this big ogre down in the tunnel and he took exception of me being there. Before I could stop him—bravely you understand—he reached out and grabbed my hose, tearing it from the Geotron. Quick as a wink, he bit the nozzle off and then turned toward me. But, I guess the thing gave him indigestion because he belched and blew me right up through the ground and back to here."

Tom had, by this time, reached the front end of the small Geotron and was looking in at Bud. He shook his head. "Moon ogre? Really, Bud?"

The flyer's head bobbed up and down as he reached back for his helmet. Swinging it up and over his head Bud clicked it into place and then touched something on the control panel.

"Air's going out," he radioed. "Meet me at the back hatch in a minute."

Within the next hour everyone and everything had been taken back to the colony, and Bud joined Stefanie in receiving a check-up from Doc Simpson.

"Well shoot, Bud. You didn't even get a little bump. Nothing at all for me to do. If you were Tom you would have had the decency to come back with at least a livid bruise or maybe even a laceration. Geez!" and with that, Doc turned away to check the hardening cast he had placed on Stefanie's arm.

"Will I ever be able to fast pitch a softball, Doc?" she asked.

Sensing the joke, he asked, "Did you ever do that?"

She pouted, making her face look more child-like. “No! Darn it, but I was hoping you’d say this would somehow strengthen my arm. Oh, well.” She sighed at the physician.

“You okay, Steff?” Bud inquired as he came around the curtains into her cubicle. He was genuinely worried about her and she sensed that.

“Sure, Bud. Tom saved me by patching my suit when I was stupid enough to get knocked down, and the arm is going to take weeks to get back to normal, but yeah. I’m basically fine. And, happy to see that you are as well. We were,” she said, smiling at him, “worried like crazy about you.”

Tom cleared his throat. “And, I’m fine as well,” he said. Their reaction was what he expected—blank stares. “So, with our plugging pipe and nozzle gone I’m not certain but that we are now useless up here. Either of you have any suggestions?”

Bud raised a hand. “Me, professor. Call on me!”

“Special student Barclay?”

“Does that goo need the nozzle to work? I mean, could we just go out to the hole I popped up through and pour the stuff in?”

Tom shook his head. “Not really, but I suppose Saclolo’s people could build another nozzle for us. All it needs to do is mix the liquid in one half of that tank with the hydrogen in the other side. It can be shot in and probably make it all the way down before it totally hardens. Better than nothing, I’d say. Good idea.”

The next day, with a makeshift mixing nozzle and a twenty-foot pipe attached to the pumping device, Tom and Bud—along with Saclolo and two of his construction team—pumped a plug down into the hole. It wasn’t perfect, but as Tom has said, it was better than leaving the open hole there.

The three, along with Zimby, headed back to Enterprises the following day.

While Stefanie went back up the hill to the guest house and some time with her husband and toddler, Tom and Bud went to the shared office to have a word with Mr. Swift.

“I heard about our vulcanologist taking a tumble,” he

told them as they sat down in the conference area. “Is she going to be all right?”

Tom assured him that Stefanie would be back in action within a few days once the residual pain subsided.

“She’s a tough one, Dad,” he explained with a grin. “As is flyboy here. You’ve also heard about his little dig out?” Mr. Swift nodded.

“It wasn’t anything Tom or even Steff wouldn’t have done, and probably a little faster than I managed it,” Bud said with a small blush.

“Nonsense!” Damon insisted. “You did a great job and ought to accept congratulations. Anyway, I’m glad you came back today. I’ve been called to Washington for a special conference with our U.N. Ambassador and the President.”

Tom and Bud were surprised. It wasn’t often that both men asked for Damon’s presence at one time.

“What for?” Tom inquired.

Mr. Swift rubbed his chin in thought a moment. “Well, I’m not certain if I am even the right person to go, much less the right Swift, but I gather they both want to talk about the possibility of a forced evacuation of the Moon.” He raised an eyebrow in his son’s direction.

“But, they can’t order that,” the younger man insisted. “Cordillera City—the entire colony and the area to their horizon—is a free state. They’ve declared independence!”

“Yeah,” Bud added. “Besides, I’d think the U.N. would tiptoe carefully given what happened the last time they interfered up there!”

He referred to the small contingent of United Nations Security Forces that, under the direction of a Major General with either a personal objective of taking command or a secret U.N. directive to do so—it had never been proved either way—had to be routed out and removed by Swift Enterprises’ personnel. Unfortunately about half of the small U.N. force had died including the Major General who had been captured by some of the more violent Filipino natives and beheaded.

“I agree, Bud, but I have no clear idea whether this is just a fact-finding meeting on the part of our Government, or if

this is to, well, notify us that the U.N. might be ready to insist on it.”

Tom shook his head. “It’s one thing for the colonists to request us to get them out of there if things begin to look dire,” he said, “and if that happens I still believe as many as thirty percent of the colonist will refuse to abandon their city. But it is entirely another thing for a pseudo-governmental body like the U.N. to just decide on their fate without representation by the colonists!”

“Come with me?” Mr. Swift suggested.

“I’m too close to this, Dad. I’d probably step over the boundaries of behavior and embarrass us all. No. It’s best if you go this time. You are ten times the politician I’d try to be at this moment.”

The following morning Damon borrowed the SE-11 Commuter jet that Tom frequently used and flew himself down to the mid-city airport on the banks of the Potomac River.

A private limo whisked him across the river and around to the rear of the White House. There, at an entrance he had used on several previous visits, he received his access/tracking badge—using an older Swift technology—and was ushered into a private elevator taking him to the main office floor.

A young female Marine in full ceremonial uniform took him down the hall, holding the door to the outer office open for him before snapping to attention as he passed through.

“Good morning, Mr. Swift. I don’t know if you remember me, but I am Mrs. Sutton, the President’s secretary. He will be ready to see you and the Ambassador in about three minutes.” She inclined her head to indicate another man waiting in a chair to the left of her desk.

“Of course I remember you, Mrs. Sutton. Nice to see you again. And,” he turned to the waiting man, “Mr. Ambassador.” He nodded to the man who returned the silent greeting with a guilty look.

There had been several occasions when the Ambassador had failed to speak on behalf of Enterprises in the U.N. that had caused ill feelings on the part of Damon and Tom.

The phone on the secretary’s desk buzzed and she

cleared her throat. “The President will see you now, *Mr. Swift*,” she said pointedly as the Ambassador rose. He sank back into his seat looking miserable.

Damon walked to the door and, as protocol required, knocked twice. He opened the door and stepped inside knowing there would be no call out to enter.

“Good morning, Mr. President,” he said walking over to the man standing between facing couches in the middle of the room.

“Hello, Damon,” the President returned shaking hands warmly. “I hope the Ambassador is feeling badly out there. I intend to make his part of this visit as difficult as possible!”

He motioned to one sofa while he sat in the middle of the other. Damon took a seat.

“Well, you will be wondering about this command appearance, I assume.” When Damon nodded, he continued. “You and your companies have been instrumental in the success of that former slave colony on the back side of the Moon. In fact, from what I’ve heard if it weren’t for you and your son those people would have all perished at the hands of those megalomania Masters, or whatever they called themselves.”

“Yes, Sir. The Masters is what they wanted to be known as. And, I suppose you are correct. Whether by direct action or by not being there to keep things running, the colonists—oh, and they *never* wish to be thought of or referred to as slaves, former or current status, sir—would most likely have died. But, and correct me if I am wrong or out of place, surely the inaction by both our own Government and the U.N. means that neither of those bodies can order the colonists around.”

The President made a two-handed motion, both palms pointed at Damon. “Whoa. I’m not saying anything about ordering them around. The U.N. says they have proof that the Moon is about to blow up and they want to save as many lives as possible. Uhh, I guess I ought to ask if that is good intel on their part at this time.”

Damon shook his head. “While it is true, Sir, that there is some unexpected underground activity going on, nobody has ever said anything about the Moon blowing itself apart. I’m a little taken aback to hear that this supposed rumor is

being spread around as knowledge.” He detailed what Tom had already reported watching as the leader nodded his understanding.

The President stood up motioning Damon to remain seated, and crossed to the door. He opened it and practically bellowed, “You! Get in here!” before returning to his seat.

The Ambassador entered and came around the furniture to take a seat as far from Damon as possible. “Yes, sir?”

In a falsely soft and pleasant voice, the President began, “You will, of course, forgive this sixty-two-year-old career politician when I ask you, a former half-term Lieutenant Governor from a very small state who is only in your position because of your college buddy, our former President. But what the hell is going on? Who at that bloated, ineffective organization to which you serve this nation is trying to get the Swifts here to evacuate the Moon on some made up pretense?”

The Ambassador had paled on hearing the anger rise in the President’s voice. Damon was a little shocked himself.

After a stammering start, the man rallied and stood up facing the President.

“Mister President. There has been some terrible misunderstanding. The U.N. did, more than a week ago, have the idea that the Swifts in conjunction with the free world, *rescue* the slaves up there.” He pointed upward while Damon opened his mouth to correct him.

The President beat him to it. “Stop referring to those brave colonists, those free citizens of the Moon, as *slaves!*”

The Ambassador sat back down with a heavy sigh. “Sir, I meant no disrespect. But, you seem to be under the wrong impression. And, I have to admit that the U.N. was also under an incorrect impression of the situation up there. It was discovered that the basic information, and indeed to demand that the citizens up there be forcibly evacuated, came secretly from the Chinese government.”

“Ahhh,” Damon said in hopes that he could add what he knew. When the President looked at him, he said, “You see, the government of China has already involved themselves in a scheme to take over the lunar city.” He told them about

the Pluto satellites. “I think they know their plan will probably fail and so they’ve spread rumors in order to get us to clear people out. Nobody there to keep control and they waltz right in and claim it as salvage!”

The Ambassador then said, “Sir, and Mr. Swift. The reason for my asking for this meeting—and I now regret not notifying you both of the full details—is because the U.N. has received a complaint from a foreign government regarding one of Mr. Swift’s employees.” He turned to face Damon. “Harlan Ames, your Chief of Security, has been stirring up the native tribes in the mountains of the main, northern Philippine island, and President Morays wants him to be removed.”

Damon set the record straight regarding Harlan’s previous, but not current employment status with Swift Enterprises. “So, he is not an employee these days. The reason he is in the Philippines is to discover anything he can about the former Masters and how they managed to steal incredible amounts of technology, build both their fortress over there, and get so many thousands of people kidnapped and launched to the Moon without anyone knowing anything about it. He also hopes to salvage anything that can be used at the colony.”

The President looked from man to man before standing.

“You know, the more I think about those Masters it seems to me that the only way they might have been able to do all of that is if they had help. Big help. Like top governmental assistance. Or, at least a blind eye in a high position. Not from here. From there. On Luzon.”

“But, that would mean—”

The President looked right at Damon. “I’d say that the President of the Philippines could actually be one of the bad guys in all this!”

Chapter Fifteen: The Cheese is Melting; Life Goes On

HARLAN stood looking at the dangerous and diminutive woman.

"You want me for what?" he asked his captor. "What in the world do you believe I'm here for?"

"To find the same thing that I'm after. Riches beyond anything you have ever seen." She smiled back at him. "Tell me I am not correct!"

Harlan snorted. "Then we're *not* after the same thing at all. I looking for clues to my Maggie's past. For something she had left behind. I want to find it and learn more about her history." He spoke quietly and honestly.

"Then we *are* after the same thing. Only *you* don't realize it."

"If we're after the same thing—and I gather you have no idea where it is—then you need me, and only me. Let my men go and I'll cooperate with you the best I can. We both might find what we seek that way. You can keep anything of monetary value; I want answers." It was worth the try to free his men.

"How stupid do you think I am?" She shook her head. "But I'll promise one thing, I won't kill any of you. That's the best offer I'll give you."

Harlan had no choice other than to except it, even though her promise had more holes in it than a sieve.

"By the way, they call me, Peu Nuit."

Little Night, Harlan translated in his mind. *That doesn't tell me much. Yet...* He let it go for the moment.

"Can I look around? Standing here won't do either of us any good," he told her as he watched her. Never once did she let her guard down. She was not what she seems, that was for certain. She was more like a bottle of nitroglycerin than a stick of TNT.

The first thing Harlan noticed as he walked slowly around the room was an abstract mosaic set in the far wall. He had seen it many, many times before, up on the Moon.

An oversize version of it filled the back wall of the former throne room—now a meeting hall and used by the amateur theater group for plays. That one held the trigger for a secret entrance to the hidden quarters of the Emperor and Empress.

Harlan didn't go near it, instead he took his time examining everything while talking to Peu Nuit.

"What's your connection with the Masters anyway?" he asked as he felt the stone walls with his fingers.

"I see no harm in answering that," she replied as she leaned against the outer door frame of the room. "I met one of them in Paris, France some ten years ago. I was just starting to make a name for myself and the Master liked what he saw. Back then I thought there was the one of them as everyone else did. It was more than two years later I found out that the Master was really twins." Peu Nuit laughed. "That knowledge almost cost me my life. That was the point I exclusively went to work for them."

"And what kind of work did you do?" Harlan was now standing before the mosaic art piece on the wall.

"I thought you knew that by now. And I heard that you were one of the best, too." She *tisk-tisk*ed him. "I'm what you call an *enforcer*."

Harlan quickly turned and glared at her. Then it hit him. There was never a picture of her and the descriptions of her never agreed, but she was one of the top persons of interest that Interpol was always looking for.

"The woman that never kills twice in the same way," was her MO, that is if you could call never killing the same way a *Modus Operandi*. That is what made it hard to pin anything to her. That the authorities knew that the killer was a female was their only clue to finding her.

Harlan was running his finger over the mosaic pieces looking for the right patten in the layout.

"What of the *goons* I set on fire? Where are they?" Harlan hadn't seen or heard them since he entered the castle.

"They're probably half way back to the Manila slums I recruited them from. That fire trick sure took us off guard. Where did we go wrong? If you don't mind telling me, that is," she asked as she started to come closer to him. She

could see that he had found something.

"Not so much what went wrong, but what went right for me. When we landed I thought for a moment that there was a hole in the launch tunnel. That it was not blocked. But the next day I went and looked and it was covered over. I accidentally kicked a rock in and paid no attention to it. Later, after my men had disappeared, I was looking at the tunnel again and noticed that some dust the wind blew into it disappeared. That was when I remembered that the stone I kicked made no sound. It hadn't hit the stones I thought I was seeing. I put the two facts together and came up with Telejector. Another stolen technology by the Masters."

"You *are* as smart as they say. And you found something too. Fantastic!" Peu Nuit was almost at his side. A few more inches and Harlan had her where he wanted her.

"See these five rows of tiles?" he asked her while running a finger in a circle near the left edge of the abstract image. "If you look closely you see that the shapes resemble a keyboard."

Harlan even stepped sideways so she could come a little closer to look. Instead he was slammed with a fist in between his shoulder blades and knocked into the wall.

"Next time you try to trick me I'll break your back, and don't you think I can't!" she warned him in a hiss that made him think of a snake.

"No... Look, you can see the keyboard design. All you have to do is type in the code. By the size of the mosaic I say it a wall safe of some kind."

"Then open it you cocky bas..."

Harlan was typing away even before she finished her crude remark. With a *CLICK* the safe open on its own accord.

Peu Nuit pushed Harlan across the room and before he could yell out she had both her hands in the safe and grabbing at the large box that just fitted inside.

With a *swish* sound a steel blade flashed down and separated both her hands at the wrist.

Peu Nuit stepped back from the wall as fountains of blood poured from her two severed wrists and covered the wall. She turned toward Harlan who now stood flat against

the wall he had been thrown into. Her face drained of color, her eyes looked like they were going to pop out of her head. Her lips parted but only a frightened whimper came out.

The woman known as *Little Night*—feared by so many—had finally caused her own demise, and she realized it. Little did she know that if she only had waited a few more seconds before reaching in, the blade release would have reset. The Masters had been astute on the ways of crooks and knew that they would almost certainly reach in immediately instead of waiting. Now the *bird in hand* (or lack of them) was their death warrant.

Peu Nuit toppled to the floor into her own blood where she closed her eyes and let out her last breath of air.

Harlan was too shocked to move at first. The smell of copper filled the air as the blood pooled on the floor. Gingerly making his way around the body and her blood he moved back to the safe. He had no feeling about her death other than it simplified things for him.

The box had slid partway out of the safe and was in easy reach. Taking it by the side handle he pulled it out and ducked at the same time for good measure. Nothing happened.

He hurried back into the room where his men were bound and cut them loose. He told them to follow him out and not to look in the other room if they did not want nightmares for the rest of their lives. If they did look he never found it out. No one ever told him that they had.

Outside the night was quiet. The place was totally shrouded in darkness. They found no one lurking about. Early the next day they found their weapons, radios and the helicopter batteries along with the portable Telejector and other equipment the late Peu Nuit had brought, all sitting on the underground platform.

Someone had been very busy recently and had managed to remove enough rocks to unblock the tunnel from the lower loading platform level to the surface. It was that, or the blockage was not that stable and the plug fell on its own the two thousand feet to the bottom of the tunnel where it leveled out and came out of the mountain and the magnetic acceleration track ran down the valley for another two miles.

The Philippine government was called in to take command of the fortress, and two days later the rented helicopter rose from the ground and started its journey back home to the airport. There Harlan paid, thanked and bid farewell to the three hired men.

Kinova and Harlan went to their plane and paid for its storage then flew back to the Loonauai rocket base where Harlan obtained a reservation on the next ship to the outpost and back to Cordillera City.

Not once did Harlan tell anyone what he found in the box, and no one asked.

He had been hoping to catch Peu Nuit off guard and disarm her—only not quite as literally as had happened—possibly turning her over to the authorities.

That had not happened.

When Tom, Bud and Stefanie returned to the Moon in the *Challenger* a few days later it was in convoy with the first of the rockets Enterprises was selling to the lunar colonists. Actually one of the more recent additions to the cargo rockets fleet used to supply the Outpost in Space, it was to be offered to the colony as a loaner until a brand new model was ready. This ship was one that had been converted to repelatron power rather than burning fossil fuel.

The first new ship in their order would follow in less than a month.

Inside, Zimby Cox and Red Jones piloted a cargo of special parts that Saclolo and Magadia had ordered.

“So,” Tom asked pointedly on entering the lunar Administration office, “all this stuff we’ve brought to you. What is it for?”

Saclolo smiled while his wife looked at the desk as if trying to find something on it, or to avoid Tom’s stare.

“Tom, what you have brought us are the necessary parts to begin to repurpose the rail launcher into what I have been calling our lunar slingshot ride. You know... the one where our guests can climb into a special pod, are fired toward the Earth side of our Moon, and circle it to be captured by the, also repurposed, Attractatron unit we

have.”

“But, with the instability out there, and Tom not finding what to do about it,” Bud protested, “how can you start a project like that? Heck, we might even need to evacuate you if things get really bad! All that green cheese under our feet is melting!”

Tom placed a hand on his friend’s forearm. “Saclolo and Magadia know that, Bud. I’m riding the fence on this one. On the one hand I see that everyone just sitting around is causing a lot of tension among the citizens. They need something to do. Isn’t that it?” he looked at their hosts.

Both nodded, but it was Magadia who spoke.

“Life must go on. You will not know this, but I attended university in Manilla in my youth where I studied psychology for about two years. I gave it up but have retained enough knowledge of it to, as the saying goes, make myself a nuisance at gatherings. As it is, I have been keeping a close eye on the people of Cordillera City, and you are correct. There is enough tension to feel it radiating as you walk past a group of people.”

Stefanie stepped forward to speak. “Speaking as someone who has been on the receiving end of a lot of psychoanalysis—long story but it got me through my teen years—I have to say even I recognized that the last couple of times we’ve been here.”

After an hour of discussion Tom had to agree with them. It could be all for nothing, but it was better than sitting around. The clincher argument had been that those people involved in the construction project for the landing platform and the ongoing work on the elevator system and airlock were actually quite happy and spent very little time pondering what the lunar quakes might mean.

It wasn’t until dinner time that the five people from Earth had the chance to get back together with the two leaders of the city. Far too many calls had come in interrupting their meeting earlier, so they had wandered down to the hospital to see Doc.

He had been unavailable as he was currently teaching one of the first classes at the new Lunar University of Space Medicine to an eager—if somewhat nervous about the quake situation—class of twenty.

They walked into the back of the small lecture room and took seats; he acknowledged their presence with a slight nod, never breaking stride in his description of the rigors of working on an injured man in zero gravity.

With a small snort of recognition, Tom realized that Doc was speaking about working on him when he took a tiny meteorite to the backpack of his spacesuit, tearing it open, and nearly died outside of the Outpost a few years earlier.

After class was dismissed, Doc came over to them. “You remember that incident?” he inquired with a grin.

“Does he?” Bud exclaimed. “Heck. I don't know, Doc. He never talks about it.” They looked at the inventor to see his answer.

Tom smiled politely but said nothing more on the subject. He did turn the conversation to the matter of putting the residents to work outside.

“I wholeheartedly concur with Magadia. Phrases like ‘stir-crazy’ and ‘pacing like a caged tiger’ come to mind,” Doc commented. “Unless you believe the ground is going to open up and swallow them, I’m all for prescribing good old-fashioned physical labor.”

The following morning Zimby and Red took the *Challenger* back to Earth to bring up a selection of repair and replacement parts for the Attractatron and to take down a set of designs for the first of the “glider pods” for the round-the-Moon ride that Hank would start work on. When they came back twenty-two hours later Tom and Bud were out flying over the lunar landscape of a pair of *Straddlers* hauling around two very sophisticated measuring devices.

Basically large-scale infrared detectors, they could work in a vacuum to register temperature variations down to a half degree Fahrenheit. Their mission was to determine and map the exact area of warmed ground below. That, because of the near absolute zero of the lunar dark side, would be a very good indication of the spread of the nuclear turmoil going on inside. Tom also hoped that subtle variations might also show where the fires were closest to the surface.

Stefanie had the job of pouring over all the data as it came in via digital transmission and was sitting, headset on her head, directing them to go back over various points of interest to her.

“Looks like that rock formation you passed over twenty seconds ago, Bud, was acting as a good insulator. Go down and give me the precise height of it above mean lunar level, please,” she directed him.

A minute later, he replied, “Pretty sharp rise. Looks more like a half-buried chunk of meteor. It’s about one hundred feet across and goes from lunar level to, hmmm, twenty-two feet, in the first three feet of travel, and then it slopes gently to the center top point which is thirty-one feet, and... nine inches, Steff. How’s that?”

“You’ve both earned cookies. Come on back, guys. I’ve got a few interesting ideas about our little local Hell.”

The news of Harlan’s anticipated arrival that evening swept through the colony. Children, hearing of his return, had been spotted skipping along chanting “*Papa Harlan está viniendo, Papa Harlan está viniendo.*”

Papa Harlan is coming!

It made everyone smile, even Stefanie who had first briefly met him when he interviewed her for her credentials to work inside of Enterprises. She had taken an immediate like to him seeing through his gruff exterior and deep into the highly intelligent eyes to see how much he cared about his bosses and company.

That meeting had given her an incredible level of respect for the man that continued.

Harlan was coming back to the Moon with answers, but they were mostly personal ones. Some time in the future he would have to act on what he had learned, but that concerned only him. He was still trying to untangle the ramifications on what he had found. What should he tell his children about their mother and what not to tell? Did they even needed to know about her criminal past?

Part of the information he immediately sent to various law enforcement agencies. One of the trickiest concerned the Philippine government and its involvement with the Master's crime organization. Heads would roll on that one.

In the next week or so many supposedly honest, but influential politicians and business people were going to be facing hard questions and criminal charges in many countries, not just the Philippines. Lives were going to be

ruined, even the U.S. Government was in for a shock.

Twenty years of activities of the Twins were meticulously recorded in their ledgers and diaries. Where their money came from, who it went to, what it bought and who it influenced. It was like reading the master list of all the evil that made the world crazy. To think that two people held so much power was mind-boggling. To know they had done so with very little notice was shocking. No wonder they thought they could make their own empire on the Moon and destroy what they didn't want on Earth.

The worst was that it began even before they purposely destroyed the little village where they grew up in Tibet. That the very monks who taught and helped raised them had fostered their world-dominating ideas. That an ancient oracle had foretold over a thousand years earlier that twin, white-bodied, red-eyed, brother and sister would come into their lives, and that they were destined to rule the world from a kingdom in the heavens.

He had to put all this from his mind for now. The Moon was approaching.

Harlan was arriving in style. During his sojourn at the former fortress the people at the Construction Company had increased their production capacity and managed to complete an all new rocket to leave behind until delivery of the first transport vehicle being ordered by the colony. This one had finished the day before and was on its maiden space flight when the pilots ran into Harlan at the Outpost. Along with Zimby Cox and Red Jones as pilots, he was going to make the delivery.

They radioed the controller well ahead of arrival mentioning nothing about the ship. And so, it was only once they were near to settling down on the raised landing platform that the man in the tower part way across the crater let out a string of Tagalog words, ending in, "I'll be damned!"

Looking like a slightly larger version of the standard Outpost supply rockets outside, inside the ship looked like something out of a 1950's science fiction movie. At the nose were a trio of seats—where the current crew sat—and the entire control board. The main area behind them was divided from nose to tail into an upper and lower floor with

the lower one used for cargo and the upper that could be stripped of the twenty-two acceleration seats currently there and also used for cargo when the need arose.

From the “flight deck” you could see into both levels.

The seats were arranged in pairs with two pairs in the front row and three pairs in each of the other three rows. Behind that, of course, were the mechanicals for the ship including the nuclear power pod and repelatrions.

“Uh,” came the uncertain voice of the controller, “is that you, Señor Harlan? Nice wheels!”

He activated his headset. “Yes, it’s me. Is that Francisco or Martin?” he asked. The two men were the primary controllers and were brothers. They sounded exactly alike.

“It is Francisco, Administrator. Welcome back. Shall I spread the word?”

“Not quite yet. I’m just coming back in a loaner ship. We get to keep this one until Swift Enterprises delivers our first flying saucer. From what I’ve seen, it is even more impressive than this. Please let Saclolo and Magadia know that I will meet them in the offices in ten minutes.”

“No can do, Administrator, They are both in orbit on the *Khan* preparing it for the Pluto launch. It will take thirty minutes to come back to the surface. Should I recall them?”

He thought a moment and made a decision. “Yes. But tell them only if they can get away without jeopardizing that mission. Tell them I’ll be in the office in case they need to call. Thank you, and it is good to be back!”

Red turned around in his seat while Zimby was finishing the shut down procedures. “So, Harlan, are you staying up here, or is the rumor I’ve heard bandying about true and you’re coming back to Enterprises?”

Harlan clasped the man’s left shoulder. “That’s a touchy subject right now, Red. I’d appreciate it if that entire concept doesn’t leave this ship for the time being. Okay?”

Both men said they fully understood.

A rumbling could be felt through the ship and Harlan’s eyes went wide. “If that’s another tremor get the ship back on line and prepare to lift off!”

Zimby's hands flew forward and began an intricate dance over the controls, but the radio crackled to life.

"The elevator is extending up to your hatch level. It will take it a minute to mate but you can come out without suits if you wish."

Harlan whispered, "Stand down, Zim. That must have just been the equipment moving up. Sorry for the panic."

"Not panic, Harlan," Zimby told him. "Good, clean and appreciated caution. I was only about a half second behind you, anyway."

Saclolo and Magadia walked into the offices two hours later with apologies flying. Harlan chuckled and motioned for them to slow down. "Listen, I'm here a day earlier than planned and you were busy. I just hope you didn't break off to come back down before you were finished with whatever you were up to."

Saclolo, usually the speaker for the married couple, answered. "We took delivery of the two Chinese satellites three days ago and were only up checking on them. I have a team of our top electronics experts going over them with such a fine toothed comb I doubt if a stray microbe will be able to avoid detection. So far they haven't even found a stray hair."

He told Harlan about how the Chinese team removing them from a large transport jet on Fearing Island and loading them into one of the on-loan cargo rockets had never spoken a single word. They had done the job, nodded and hurried back into their jet, taking off without receiving permission from the island control tower.

"Very suspicious, I'd say. Well, let me know when you find whatever it is they've done to sabotage their own success."

"Oh, I do have a question, Harlan. How soon do we need to return that rocket?"

Ames laughed. "According to Damon Swift, you have exactly one year to give it back. In other words, keep using it as long as you need to. Oh, and by the way, the Construction Company will have a second new rocket finished in about six weeks."

"Second?" Magadia asked in surprise.

“Sure. Didn’t you see what we parked on your landing platform?”

Both of the Reyes shook their heads. “We were too busy getting into the colony to come see you, Harlan!”

“Well then,” he said giving them a big smile, “have I got something to show you!”

Chapter Sixteen: Deep Space

THE next morning, the Reyes, dressed in their spacesuits, were waiting for Commander Tull Whiteman to come back to the main control deck of the *Genghis Khan* from his personal check on the two Chinese satellites. This was it—all the hopes and the future of everyone of Cordillera City depended on this one deep space flight.

The Helium3 reactor engines were now running fifty percent better than they had when first built by the Masters. Tom Swift had upgraded the original design overcoming several design flaws and shortfalls in what had been constructed. After spending nearly a week on the project, almost constantly shaking his head in amazement at the lack of care and even some outright stupidity, his neck hurt, he was satisfied with the end result.

A constant thrust of 1.25-G was now possible. The outbound trip to where Pluto was would now take close to six weeks. If the older version of the engines would have held together—a grave doubt in the inventor's mind—barely .676-G of sustained thrust might have been obtained. And, as Bud remarked, "Only when they were running the ship downhill with a good tail wind!"

The lunar ship was nowhere as versatile or as fast as the *Challenger*. Her fuel capacity was limited. The *Genghis Khan* still needed to swap out its spent high-density ion grid core and replenish its Helium3 fuel supply once they reached their destination, but it was the only other crew-carrying spaceship available that could cruise the solar system under constant power.

Some discussion had gone on regarding the ship's name. Some thought the old one was degrading given the harshness of the Masters, while others thought it was a good way to thumb their noses at the past. Bud had wanted to come up with a name but Tom cautioned him against getting involved, even in jest.

Time was running out. Saclolo and Magadia Reyes had decided that if they waited to launch for Pluto until after the lunar quakes had been stopped, they would lose out on their contract. Besides, if they were forced to abandon the city the citizens could use the money to reestablish themselves

back on Earth. One way or another the satellite delivery would not change anything that was happening on the Moon.

The six-foot, huskily built, Liberian came rushing into the control center. Smiling, he showed a full set of white teeth. His eyes were of such a deep brown it was nearly impossible to discern the iris, and his wavy hair was just showing signs of whitening at the temples. As he reminded people, he wasn't all that old at forty-three, it was that he had lived a life of action and stress, pushing himself first and then his crew to be perfect. It was something made extremely difficult a year earlier under the Masters' rule.

Tull Whitman had risen from the ship's third pilot to Commander after Emperor Shangri-La had slipped a knife into the previous commanding officer's chest for not carrying out direct orders. That order would have meant the death of almost forty asteroid miners. To Tull it never felt right that he had not been able to stop it from happening anyway.

Not that *he* had abandoned the miners; the Emperor had done that personally. It was the fact that he had not stood up to the maniac, but only slipped into the pilot's seat and meekly turned the ship away and ran back to the Moon after the Emperor had left in the mining ship *Rock Hound* to confront Tom Swift.

Everyone on board the *Genghis Khan*—at that time—wanted to go back to be with their families knowing they would die if the Emperor had won that day. Surely there would be no reprieve for them because they had fled and not fought along side the madman.

Harlan and the Reyes could not hold Commander Whiteman's actions—or the wishes of the *Genghis Khan* crew—against them. In fact they were praised for the aid they gave Harlan in getting him back into the *Rock Hound* in time to help stop the Emperor.

Because of this, Commander Whiteman had a fierce loyalty to the three directors of Cordillera City and would gladly give up his life to help them.

"I still can't believe that those probes are worth the amount that the Chinese are willing to pay," Tull said to Saclolo with a shake of his head. He looked at the hangar deck monitor. The single camera was no longer sweeping

the whole deck area, having been halted to now only focus on the twin satellites that had been removed from their launch shroud.

"Still believe that they are ticking time bombs, Saclolo?" he inquired, tapping a finger against the monitor's glass face.

"Yes I do, Tull. Even the more since our engineers have torn them apart, put them back together and found nothing. It would have been much better if the Chinese had left something for us to find. Some sign of their own sabotage or even a small, snapped wire to might divert our attention away from a larger issue."

"What can be done?"

"Who is to say? I'm certain that we missed something. So keep your men at it. Recheck everything. It could be something as small as a micro computer chip with a hidden command program that will download into the mainframe and cause a total breakdown."

Magadia touched her husband arm. "Don't add the improbable to Tull's already impossible job. If he can save the probes he will. We are only responsible for their first twenty-four hours of operation. After that we're home free."

Tull laughed a little, "That is going to be the longest twenty-four hours in my life."

He picked up the two space helmets from the command chair and handed them to the Reyes.

"Time's a wasting," he told them with a smile. "You just leave it to me. Those probes will work even if I have to spit on the tubes and hit the cabinet. Twice on the top and once on the side!"

"Tubes? Cabinet? What's he talking about this hitting?" asked Magadia over their radio as they cycled through the airlock to the small shuttle craft they were using to visit the *Genghis Khan* in high lunar orbit.

"It's an old colloquial term that radio repairmen used before everything turned to microchips. In the age of tubes you often could get a radio or television back running by jiggling one or more of the tubes to make better contact. The same for wetting their contacts. Sometimes you just had to give the outside a good whack!" With a small laugh he added, "It means he won't take failure for an answer,

Dia."

The *Genghis Khan* lit up its Ion drive and began to slowly pick up speed five minutes later. It would make a half orbit of the Moon, gaining enough speed to head away from the Moon.

At the same time the shuttle was dropping close to the colony, the giant spaceship slowly moved over the lunar horizon and headed toward Earth. The plan, much like early launching of space probes, was to use a large planetary body to pick up much needed speed. The ship would sling-shot partway around the Earth and headed out to deep space to the rendezvous point with the distant planet Pluto.

The half-million mile, three day detour would end up cutting out a full two weeks of travel time.

As the *Kahn* accelerated, ions poured out of the magnetic-enshrouded thrusters at close to the speed of light. Finally the much heavier nuclei of a hardened uranium isotope were ejected out along with the electrons. The nuclear reaction of the Helium3 in conjunction with the uranium grid was producing tons of thrust. By the time the ship reached the vicinity of where Pluto was it would be stripped of most of the usable mass from its fuel source and would have just enough for braking to the point Pluto's gravity could swing them back inbound.

Commander Whiteman and half his crew would then start the painstaking job of removing the remains of the radioactive core and replacing it with one delivered by an unmanned ship they would catch up to a few days before reaching their final destination. The spent core would then be placed in the drone delivery ship and flown into the Sun and destroyed.

The crew of highly trained technicians and engineers spent the long weeks of the journey going over the two probes for the nth time. All they could find was that both probes could use better insulation to hold in what heat was needed to keep everything running.

"Scrape it off and replace it with the best we have. No use on letting the little darlings freeze to death," Commander Whiteman ordered just a day out from their encounter with the refueling drone ship. *That might even be their plan!* he thought.

It was in the middle of the switch out of drive units that Commander Whiteman received an emergency radio call from Jose Mansfield, his chief engineer, who was still putting new insulation on the probes.

"CT," he said using Commander Whiteman radio designation. "You got to come and see this. I found what the Chinese had done to booby-trap the probes."

Even though he was inside the thruster tube and in his very bulky protective suit helping to aligning the new core he immediately left the crew to handle the rest of the work on their own. He didn't bother to take off his spacesuit before going to see Jose in the cargo hold where the re-insulation work was being done.

"Jose?" was all he said as he approached the middle-aged man. Mansfield handed Tull a small tray with two uneven piles of small flecks. One small pile was primarily gold in color and the other was uniformly a dull gray.

Before Tull could even ask what it was, Jose simply said, "Paint. Of a sort, that is. The small pile is the gold paint they sprayed over what you would think was a protective and reflective primer. But, it is not."

Tull reach out to touch them, but hesitated. "Is it safe to touch?" he asked instead.

"Sure, in here. I just would not take it out into space."

"Why?" was all he could think to ask, still eyeing the two piles.

"The gray power will react with the cosmic rays that are out in space, even this far from the Sun. The high energy impact of the rays start a chemical break down of the substances in the primer. And that is where the fun begins. It turns into an acid-like sticky substance that will eat away at the outer metal walls and turn the already thin metal into swiss cheese... in under two hours. The gold paint is specially formulated to keep the acids in place until they do their worst."

Jose did not have to explain anything else. Tull was more than amazed. He had to admirer the ingenuity of the Chinese scientists.

"How long to scrape that stuff off and apply a new finish." Tull was looking at both probes, he had not realized how much gold paint was on them. "And, is that primer

under anything else?"

"Not long at all, Commander. Well within our schedule. I'll just use the mini Spectrum Element Selector Vacuum we have on board." Like the units Harlan used at the lunar city, it could identify and safely strip away specific molecules and substances leaving everything else in place.

"I'll feed it samples of both the gold paint and the primer so it will know what to vacuum up. That little machine will have the probes clean in no time at all. We really don't have to repaint the probes—no one will see them way out here. The paint was only decorative and has no other real function." Jose was looking very happy and pleased with himself.

Tull picked up the tray and looked at the samples once more.

"And how did you make this discovery?"

"The truth of the matter is that I scuffed up the gold paint while I was applying the insulation. So I was trying to sand the scratches out when I notice how peculiar it looked. So out of curiosity I ran a spectrum analyzation of the stuff, and the rest you know."

"Jose, whatever you want as a reward when we get back to Cordillera City is yours." Tull slapped him on the shoulder. "Just name it." Tull knew that Harlan and Saclolo would back him to the hilt on this.

"Gee, I always wanted to live on the Moon! Maybe eat some of that green cheese they got. Can you arrange that?"

"Possibly!" They both laughed.

While the ship was in transit to Pluto, life picked up at Cordillera City. As is the case with most areas hit by seismic events, the population began to grow blasé about the almost daily occurrences.

To keep people busy, the space elevator tower had been undergoing a little refit to allow the substantial zip line cable to be strung from the two-mile elevation that would attach to a tower near the base of the mountain where the old reservoir was, and the new hotel would be. The work entailed rebuilding the circular platform that ran up and down on the central shaft so it could accommodate the

cable slipping up or down through a slit on one side.

It would mean the platform could still be used the entire height of the elevator whenever needed. Also, the new zip line cable could be remotely detached in an emergency.

Saclolo could tell that Harlan's mind was elsewhere as they inspected the new attachment point. More and more the Administrator's thoughts were on his twins and agonizing over whether their lives should be Earthbound, as citizens of Cordillera City living on the Moon, or as a combination of the two.

Either way, both men knew his days as a full-time resident of the colony were numbered even if they would not discuss it openly.

As they headed back down to the surface, Saclolo took a deep breath and asked THE question.

Harlan had to chuckle, although it was without mirth. "You know, Saclolo, that very point has been playing on my mind rather heavily for some weeks now. When I was at the old fortress and facing death from Peu Nuit, it all became so very clear to me. My children come first and foremost. They have to."

"I agree, Harlan."

"The problem is, as much of a parent and guardian and guide through life as I must be for them, I feel that same obligation to everyone up here."

"Then," Saclolo told him, "perhaps I can shed some light to help you make your decision. We are not children! Not yours, not anybody's. With now so few exceptions that they do not matter, everyone here loves and respects you, but not as their parent. Not their guardian. Not even their life guide. As their Administrator and the man who freed them from a life of slavery. You are their Abraham Lincoln. There might have been no Emancipation Proclamation for you to sign, but the effect of your ridding us from the tyranny under which we suffered had the same effect."

Harlan reached over and stopped the elevator in its decent. He turned to face Saclolo. Never in his life had he felt so much impact from a statement as he had from the comparison with Lincoln. *Lincoln!* But, as he pondered it all, looking into the face of his friend, he had to laugh.

"I guess I'd better not take in a play any time soon, then,"

he said causing them both to laugh until they had to sit down for a moment.

Getting back to his feet and helping Saclolo regain his, Harlan started the elevator back down to the surface.

“The day after Tom Swift solves our quakes, I leave,” he stated simply.

Less than four days later a convoy of the few surface-capable trucks the city had, overloaded with materials, accompanied by all the *Straddlers* carrying men and women of the construction crew headed to the forthcoming site of the “receiving” tower for the resort’s zip line.

The lunar regolith’s amazing property where a small amount of moisture along with about a ten-percent mixture of a binding agent would make a product stronger than concrete and more durable in the icy vacuum of the Moon’s surface, was about to be put to use.

A large, rectangular pit was excavated and a pad of the mixture some fifty feet across and eighty feet from front to back was poured to a depth of about six feet. Heavy anchor bolts at all four corners were added before the mix set to be used as the lower guy wire connection points. An upper set would be anchored out another hundred feet from the pad.

At the same moment Commander Tull was halting the forward motion of the *Genghis Khan* near Pluto, the first of thirty, ten-foot sections of the new tower was being bolted to the pad. The others would follow at a rate of about two per work shift, and Saclolo wanted as many people involved as possible so there were three 6-hour shifts going on.

Magadia was happy that another two hundred residents could be kept busy making the various pieces for the tower followed by work on the actual zip line pods from components produced at the Swift Construction Company.

In all, five 3-person pods were to be made. Each would run the line only twice before being taken down and checked for safety. By the time the other two had been up and down their pair of runs, the first would be ready to go again.

Tom was able to make good on a promise to bring Bashalli back to the colony. Her services were requested to help position things and to get the overall mountain site surveyed and ready for the next phases of construction.

“Oh, Tom! she gushed after visiting the receiving tower

site. "It is so exciting! I mean, to see it actually happening, and also to see the looks of joy on the faces of the people. They truly feel as if what they are doing is important."

Sandy, standing next to Bud a few feet away, added, "I've been going around with Magadia to speak to the people making the components for things. They are all champing at the bit for a chance to go out to see what's been happening. Is there some way to get them out there, Tom?"

"Well, we don't have any tour buses up here and I'm not certain how to go about it fairly, but I guess we could load about fifty people at a time into the *Challenger* and fly over there. They could all spend some time looking out the view windows before we bring them back and take the next load out."

"Good!" Sandy stated placing her hands on her hips. "Then Bashi and I can come up with a really good speech to give them telling them how each of their contributions have been vital and letting them know how everything will work."

Bud had to smile inwardly. Sandy could be obstinate and she could be a bit lax in offering herself as a laborer, but she had a streak of would-be actress in her that was crying to get out. He could see that this was right up her alley.

Tom was happy his sister was volunteering for that sort of duty as Bashalli was great in front of small groups but was still a nervous speaker when pressed to address more than five or six people at a time.

"Well, then," he said, "it's settled. Bash knows more about what is going on and *will* happen out there than just about anyone, and Sandy is good at getting people's attention and talking. This is going to be really great."

Three days later with their twenty minute talk finished and rehearsed, Tom followed through on his part of the bargain and set the *Challenger* down onto the landing platform. The first group of people took the elevator up and into the ship where they were briefed on what to expect.

"Just hold on to the person next to you as we rise and set down," he suggested. "Once we get there we will be on the ground and then you will be treated to an interesting little talk about what you are seeing. Let's go!"

He lifted off carefully, and other than one woman who was standing close to the windows and nearly fainted when

she saw the platform disappearing under them, everyone was fine with the short trip.

Sandy introduced Bashalli, whom everyone already knew of anyway but now could see her in person. Then, Sandy launched into her speech. She covered the building of the space elevator and how important that had been to both their colony and to the state of California. She impressed on them how their involvement in that project to bring water to the arid state had cemented relations with the people of the U.S.A.

As she moved their attention to the new tower, Tom slightly raised the ship and rotated it around for a better view. It was now half way built and beginning to look like what it was, a tower that would have both the connecting point for this end of the zip line, but also the elevator to bring people down to the surface.

Everything went well and by the time the first group arrived back at Cordillera City, they were positively buzzing about what they had seen and heard.

The fly in the ointment came ten minutes later as Tom, Bud, Bashalli and Sandy were leaving the ship for a snack. Another quite severe lunarquake hit. It was short but violent and had forced the floor under their feet a foot or more to one side before snapping back.

“Well,” Sandy exclaimed as she stood back up rubbing her bottom, “I’m gonna have a nasty black and blue mark back there!” She looked at Bud, slyly before asking, “Any volunteers to rub anti-bruise cream on me?”

Bud grinned and nodded his head.

Bashalli blushed deeply, making her already light mahogany complexion glow.

As they headed onward to the dining hall one of the men Tom recognized as being from the control tower was racing along the passageway.

“Senñor Tom. Oh, it is most terrible. We are ruined! The tower has fallen over. Everything is in ruins!”

Chapter Seventeen: A Trying Time Going Very Wrong

NOTHING Tom could say would be of any help until he knew what was actually going on, so he turned to the girls.

“You two get your lunch. Bud and I have to go out to see what is really happening. With any luck we’ll be back in half an hour. Now, no arguments. Go!”

Bashalli took a protesting Sandy Swift-Barclay by the hand and led her away.

The two young men reversed their path and entered the elevator again, taking their space suits off the hangers and getting into them as they rose. It was only a precaution in case the seals had suffered damage, but neither had to remind the other about their importance.

Entering the ship they headed straight to the control deck where Bud got on the radio to get takeoff clearance while Tom got the ship powered back up and did the brief systems check.

They lifted less than three minutes later and soared over the colony and the crater wall heading to the mountain.

With some relief Tom could see that the space elevator tower was still upright and seemingly straight. It featured a set of lights about one mile up that were slowly flashing green meaning it was still plumb and straight.

Bud was keeping an eye on the longer range camera and let out a little cry when he focussed on the point where the zip line tower had stood.

Tom glanced and nodded, his face looking grave. Setting the big ship down just a few dozen feet to the side of the pad they headed below and left the ship.

“It could be worse, skipper,” Bud commented as they walked along the fallen shaft. “Nothing looks broken except for the four hold-down bolts in the middle of the slab. Wonder why they gave up so quickly?”

Tom pointed over to several spools of cabling. “That’s why. They hadn’t installed the lower set of guy wires yet. I think we can assume that the tower was jerked one

direction and then whipped back the other under its own tension and maybe even repeated that a few times until the bolts just gave up.”

“Do you think the wires would have kept that from happening?”

Tom had to nod. “Not positively but almost certainly, flyboy. The good news is I’m certain the tower sections themselves withstood everything and can be raised back once the bolts get replaced.”

He was correct. He also decided that deep anchors would be needed to ensure the slab never rocked, even under full load, and ordered them from Earth.

The lower guy wires were installed immediately upon getting a crew back out. Tom used the *Challenger* to put the tower upright, setting it carefully into position. Pairs of workers on their *Straddlers* did the job with one piloting while the other did the cable work.

It required only five hours to finish and to tighten the cables to the proper tension.

On the way back to the colony, Bud asked, “So, if there will be an elevator taking workers up and bringing paying customers back down that short tower, how is it going to move past the four lower connection points for those guy wires?”

Tom smiled. “A little thing called magnetism, Bud. Inside the tower tubes will be the traction motor climbing along notches in the wall. Like what is on the outside of the space elevator only inside this one. You did notice that the upper end of those wires connect to arms sticking out from a ring. They give a stand-off of nearly eight feet allowing plenty of room for the cars to travel between them. Using ultra-strong neodymium magnets in the cars on each side, the elevator cars can carry up to a thousand pounds of Earth weight with no problems.”

“Because it will only with one-sixth of that up here. Right?”

“Science is not lost on you, Bud. Correct. And, just so you know, if there is a power outage, braking arms will swing out from each car to wrap tightly around the tower itself allowing cars to drop no more than about two feet before coming to a halt.”

They walked with the girls to the Administration offices and all went inside to speak with Harlan and the Reyes.

After Tom reported that the work was successfully complete Harlan suggested that the workers take a well-deserved day off to celebrate overcoming the potential disaster.

Magadia shook her head. “No, I do not believe that is prudent. The workers come from peoples and tribes that do not take holidays, vacations or celebratory days off. It might feel to them as if they are being somehow punished. I will ask a few of them how they feel, but please do not make that announcement until I can confirm the yes or no of it all.”

The answer surprised her. Evidently the people had become more westernized than she believed and now were telling her how nice it would be to take a day off before completing the tower and beginning new work.

With all the commotion going on around Harlan with this extra day off for the workers the one thing he wanted most was to have his children with him. He decided that now was as good of time as any to announce the names of his children. Tom, Bashalli, Bud and Sandy were there so it was more than convenient to hold the naming ceremony.

He'd arranged a time for all the interested parties to arrive at the large meeting hall. He had not told anyone why; he wanted it to be a surprise.

But, at the appointed time, Lola and the twins were nowhere to be found. He asked Magadia about them, and she informed him that they would be coming shortly. The twins had napped a little longer than usual and Lola was in the process of dressing them up.

A half hour later, Harlan put a trace on Lola's whereabouts using her phone location. Everyone was standing around wondering what this was all about. Somehow word of the upcoming ceremony had leaked out and the room was so crowded that sardines had more room in their cans than the people had now. Everyone wanted to be present for this, whatever it might be. Harlan had not expected such a turn out. He turned off his phone when it showed Lola was now in the main kitchen in the Cordillera dome. *Probably getting the children's food, just in case they get fussy*, he

thought. *She'll be here shortly.*

Harlan was so anxious that he asked Magadia to go and speed things up. Looking at the Swifts and Barclays quietly talking together he now felt he had to explain the reason for their attendance. He walked over and, somewhat red faced, started to explain.

The next thing he knew he and everyone else were bounced from their feet and flying through the air as the worst and most devastating lunarquake to date hit the colony. Emergency klaxons sounded in all the domes. Every airlock, internal and external, started their mandatory count down before slamming shut.

"Emergency personal, report to your stations!" a young, female voice called out over the loudspeaker throughout all domes and passageways. "Medical personal prepare for casualties." And in a more horrifying voice came, "The Cordillera dome has lost power... Air containment dropping. Corridor One is closed off. Do not, I repeat, do not override airlock doors without precautions... Oh, God!" was then heard and a scream and sound of breaking glass that quickly faded away.

Elsewhere in the vast complex of domes a woman cried out having just heard the last words and scream from her only daughter.

The young girl was one of the new trainees in the Control Tower. She and two others were on duty as the rest of the seven man watch team had just stepped out a few minutes before to get a late lunch.

On the meeting room stage Harlan was back on his feet and looking over the crowded room. He could not tell if a room full of people had made it worse or not. Already, people who knew first aid were helping the injured.

Saclolo was making his way toward Harlan and Tom and his group. Seeing Saclolo, Harlan yelled at him to get to the Administration command center and to get it into operation. He knew the Control Tower was gone.

Saclolo, white faced, turned and ran off the best he could through the chaos in the room.

"Tom, Bud," Harlan called to them, "Lola and the twins were still in the Cordillera Dome!" He said no more as he turned and started to make his way out to a corridor that

was in back of the stage. Tom and Bud looked at their wives for a second before they turned and ran after Harlan. Sandy and Bashalli moved off to help the best they could.

The back corridor was not crowded and Harlan raced along without much interference toward one of the stairways connecting the different levels. Reaching the sealed doors he checked the air pressure gauge for the other side before punching in his override code and opening the door. Tom and Bud rushed in behind him before the door had time to close and reseal.

They ran down two flights of stairs, checking and unlocking airtight doors on each level. On the fourth and final level he came out to a newly constructed double-wide tunnel. It was one of the new passageways from the supply and unloading docks and was connected to the landing pad elevator.

Bud looked one way then the other, orienting himself. He turned left, but Harlan yelled, "No, to the elevator hub, and then down the next tunnel." These corridors were completely deserted; everyone was trying to help in the main areas.

As they passed through the cargo hub, they each picked up a lightweight E-Vac suit, and Tom and Bud grabbed two life support bags from emergency lockers located on each level in this area because of the higher risk of vacuum implosions.

Harlan manhandled a bulky lock entry kit along with his own suit. Even on the Moon that was all the equipment they each could carry. They knew if it had been a total blow-out in the dome, no one could have survived. But, if it was only a small breach, there remained some hope.

The Cordillera was the oldest dome in the complex. It consisted of only four levels with a solid sixty feet of lunar rock between each one. Calling the area a dome was a misnomer; it was more like three levels that spanned two hundred yards wide by six hundred long. Each level was rotated by one-hundred-twenty degrees so that only one-quarter of each level overlapped the one below. That area was reinforced with steel columns along the walls. The agricultural dome was built along the same lines, only three times larger, being the second dome area built.

Before the new tunnel was dug on the fourth level, the

only entrance had been on the second level that once served as the main floor. The first level held all the life support equipment; the third and forth were living quarters.

Harlan was the first to hear the excited voices of people coming down the long corridor toward them. These people had to be from the fourth level, and that was a good sign.

"How many others are coming?" Harlan asked the lead person, a teenager. The boy just kept on going. Harlan could tell he was in shock, but he had to time to help the others to relative safety. The rest of the group was a mix of teenage boys and girls. As Harlan rushed past them he realized that they appeared to have hastily dressed.

He wanted to smile at the thought they were probably doing what teens do when they get a chance to hide and play without adults around. The day off party had left the lowest rooms empty and this group of kids had been trying to take advantage of it.

The emergency door had not slipped into place sealing off that floor. That was how they got out. Harlan's small party rushed up to the next level; that one *was* sealed. Again, Harlan checked the air pressure before overriding the lock.

Up another flight of stairs they raced, only this time they found a vacuum on the other side of the door. There was no need for talk—they dropped their loads of equipment and started to gear up in their pressure suits. When they were totally sealed, they zipped open the air lock kit. It was basically a plastic box with spring loaded tension rods that held the oblong box open all around.

Two opposite walls of the plastic box had air tight zippers in them and with a quick application of a sealant spray on one of the zipper walls the men pushed the sprayed wall over the door opening and held it in place. Bud stepped in and started to rub a plastic flap against the wall leaving the door itself untouched. In a few moments the plastic against the wall turned green indicating the two walls had fused. Tom stepped in with Harlan squeezing in next, closing the zipper behind them.

"Go!" he yelled louder then he needed to. Bud pulled the zipper up in front of him and reached out the opening to the control panel on the door frame.

"Code!" he called out and Harlan rattled off a ten digit number. The door clicked and started to slide open as the air in the plastic box roared out into the vacuum on the other side of the door. The three men were pulled slightly forward, but quickly recovered. Only blackness greeted them.

The second level was where the kitchen and eating area was and where the play area for the children should be. It was the level where the Cordillera people met and interacted with each other. This was the heart of their dome and now it seemed it had suffered a total blow-out!

With their helmet lights on, the three men moved into the darkness and down a wide corridor.

As they walked, Harlan explained, "This is the storage and workshop part of the dome, and it is located behind the kitchen. There is a set of airtight, solid doors separating the two. I'm hoping that only this corridor is in vacuum and we will find things all right on the other side." Harlan knew this was unlikely but could not bring himself to say it.

"Harlan, why did the door opened electrically yet there are no lights in here?" Tom asked over the suit's radio.

"Hey. Skipper's right. Why aren't there some emergency lights?" Bud asked next.

"I don't know," was all Harlan could tell them. Their lights did not illuminate the expected pair of closed emergency door when they reached the end of the corridor. Instead, the open area was almost chock full of stones. Apparently, the ceiling had collapsed.

No one could speak—this destruction was beyond words. Harlan stood there, transfixed by the collapsed stones. His blood had turned cold and his mind went numb at the thought of the loss of his children. This is where his trace showed them when the quake hit.

Tom and Bud slowly made their way along the left side wall where passage was not totally blocked.

Following the wall a small distance Tom and Bud came across one of the long dinning room tables. It had been pushed into the wall by the falling debris as it swelled outwards. They climbed over it. A few feet later a wide open area was revealed.

Stoves, ovens and work tables stood in place, ready to be

used. In fact several pans were still on the stoves and one oven had its door shoved open by a pan loaded with meat that now littered the floor. The vacuum would have caused the air inside the oven and the moisture in the meats to explode, slamming the door open and sending the pan flying.

Farther down the wall two oversized steel doors of the refrigerator units gleamed in the rescue team's lights. As they passed the first door a burst of static filled their helmet speakers.

"Tom?" Bud questioned. "You hear that?"

Tom stopped and stepped back a few feet and listened to the noise. "Bud, see if you pick up any static in front of the other door. Harlan," Tom added, "come to us as fast as you can. Can you still receive us through the cave in?"

"Barely," he radioed back. "I'm coming as fast as I can. Did you find survivors?" Harlan was hoping for a miracle.

"No static by this door, skipper. Do you want me to come back to you?"

"No, find an area where there is radio reception and get some people down here, pronto. They'll need to bring a portable airlock big enough to seal this door. It's a ten-footer. Get extra suits and a med team coming. Got that?"

"On my way." Tom watched as Bud's light moved off down the wall. It passed Harlan's as he came rushing to Tom.

"What have you got?" he asked anxiously.

"Can you by any chance turn on your phone?" Tom asked him.

Harlan touched his wrist and could lightly feel it through the pressure suit. He tapped its surface several times before he faintly heard it turn on.

"It's on, Tom. Now what?"

"See if you can get it to take a voice command. Try talking down your left shoulder joint. You need to get it to open the emergency channel. My radio is picking up static, and I think it's feedback from someone's phone. With everything else dead down here that is the only possible explanation, and it's coming from inside that refrigerator."

Harlan tried several times to no avail. He finally pushed up on the underarm to lift the shoulder, allowing more

space for sound to penetrate down his sleeve.

The phone doubled beeped, "Emergency channel opened," the automated voice intoned.

"Help! Can anyone hear me?" A strongly accented voice come from the phone. "We need help."

"Lola!" Harlan cried out in amazement not believing his ears. "Don't open that door! Do you understand me?"

"*Salamat sa diyos!*" the much relieved woman replied.

"Thank God is right." Harlan repeated it to himself. "The children?" He was all most to afraid to ask.

"They are safe, my son. We are cold and the air is hard to breathe. Can you help us?"

Harlan turned to Tom for that answer. The inventor had heard all that Harlan did. He shook his head.

"Sorry, Harlan, no can do right now. We can't possibly open that door. If we had a drill and an oxygen tank we might, but if it wasn't properly sealed it would cause a blow out. They just have to hang on. Let me look around in those rooms in the corridor. There might be something there that can help us. Keep talking and keep them calm. I'll be back." Tom slowly moved off searching for anything that might help.

For the people in the refrigerator the waiting felt like hours. For Harlan it felt like days. But less the fifteen minutes later, Harlan was picking up voices over his radio. A high-powered searchlights was seen a minute later coming toward him from down the hall.

Eight minutes after that the rescue team's doctor stepped into the cold refrigerator and shined his light on eight weeping women, three young children, and one set of twins.

Harlan Ames nearly fainted with relief.

Nine hours passed. Harlan, the Reyes (Magadia never made it to the dome), Doc Simpson, Tom and Bud were in the now quiet Emergency Center discussing the worst tragedy the people of Cordillera City had every lived through. The loss was great, but the people overwhelmingly still wanted to stay and rebuild at any cost.

Three people died when the control tower twisted so

violently the triple pane glass windows shattered.

Eighty-five other people died when the ceiling fell in the common area in the Cordillera dome. Most of the power and air handling equipment was ruined either by the collapsing of the floor or falling of large slabs of stone from the dome-shaped roof of the first level. For now that dome was a total write off. Three more workers in the industrial dome were killed by falling equipment.

In all slightly over two-thousand people were injured.

It might have been much worse. Harlan's hastily-called announcement meeting had drawn more than a thousand others who would have otherwise been in the stricken dome.

But, everyone was determined to get through this. To move on, to repair.

The one thing that almost closed down the city and sent everyone packing had occurred down in the water reservoir. It lost nearly to two-thirds of its water when it leaked out through cracks that developed in the bottom and lower walls.

There was nothing that anyone could do to stop the seepage; it was more like a deluge. It rushed out for nearly an hour before it was noticed that the flowing was slowing down. Four hours later it had completely stopped.

It took Tom another two hours to figure out the whys and wherefores.

In the end it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. The water had saturated the porous and subzero ground for a quarter mile around the city and just under a thousand feet deep. For the first time in the lunar city's existence, the rocks had been fed water. And like the regolith on the surface, the ground soaked up the water and turned into a cement-like substance.

The whole city now was set in one giant block of stone and stabilized from the lunarquakes. At least for the foreseeable future.

Chapter Eighteen: Will Reason ÷ Action = Success?

“HOW DO WE, or rather you, plan to attack that blob of molten hell down there?” Stefanie asked as she, Tom and Bud sat in the control room of the *Challenger*. With the possible lull with the lunarquakes because of the water saturation from the reservoir, the young men had gone back to Earth for some specialty supplies and picked her up. Now, nearly back at Cordillera City, they were trying to decide on the next move.

“I’m hoping that is where the little trio of rovers we’re bringing back up will help us in planning our next moves.”

He had explained shortly after takeoff that the hanger now held three quadruple-treaded rover, each about seven feet wide when extended and nine feet long. In storage, they were half that size.

Tom’s latest long-life Solar Batteries powered the vehicles that were capable of sustained travel for more than thirty days, even back on the dark side of the Moon. He had their solar panel tops removed to save weight and space as they were destined to remaining working in the dark.

Their purpose was to even more finitely map both the extent of the nuclear hell going on below along with determining its rate of travel, but more importantly by triangulating their findings and communicating with each other as they traveled, the trio could develop a 3D model of what was going on inside the Moon.

“Once we have that information, and I’m going to have to lay this one on your shoulders, Stefanie—” he started to say.

“Even though they be low and girlie?”

Tom smiled at her. He was used to her self-deprecating manner. “Even with all that. And, I’m sure you haven’t slathered on enough body lotion to make those low shoulders of yours too slippery to handle the task. What you will need to do is interpret what the rovers spit out. It might be a sort of 3D-dimensional look inside, but only an expert such as yourself can tell us what it means.”

“So, when does this roadshow hit the dusty trail?” Bud asked.

“Good question. I was going to stop off at the colony and ask Harlan to join us, but I’m thinking now of just setting down above the crater, getting the little rovers out and then sending a courtesy message telling them what’s going on.”

Stefanie lightly cleared her throat. “Uhh, Tom? I’d nix that in favor of letting them know what we are about to do. It’ll only take a minute and if your time is already too spread out, I can take that on. Okay?”

He nodded. “You’re right. Of course we have to tell them first. I’m just anxious to get to the root of the problem. In fact, I’ll radio now so we don’t have to lose time on the surface.”

Once contact was made and Harlan’s voice came on, Tom explained. Of course the Administrator had been briefed before the team from Enterprises headed back to Earth, but he appreciated the courtesy.

“Don’t bother asking if I can come out to play, skipper,” he warned Tom. “Saclolo and Magadia have grounded me until I come to my final decision on a subject left better unsaid. Savvy?”

“Savvy, Harlan. Tom, out!”

Upon touchdown, about three hundred feet away from the crater edge, Tom and Bud got busy in the hangar performing the final checks and self-tests of the three vehicles. Stefanie remained in the control room getting the winch extended from its mount above the “porch” that surrounded the cube at the lower level and rolling it along its own track into position.

“I’m now ready when you boys are,” she called down to them.

“Five minutes and we’ll be decompressing, Steff,” Bud returned over the intercom. “I’ll let you know. According to the skipper we’ll need you to spool out about fifteen feet of cable so we can hook up and use the winch power to drag each unit to the porch before you lower it.”

On schedule, he called up again, this time over his suit radio.

“Steff? Tom and I are about to roll up the outer door. Stand by...”

She didn't respond because she knew it wasn't necessary. A long minute later the flyer's voice came back.

“Right. Can you swing the winch thingie about two feet to the ship's left?... Great. Stop right there. Tom's got the cable and is connecting it to the top of unit one. Stand by... now slowly reel in about half of what you let out... keep going... and, stop. She's clear of the hangar. Use your skills to pick it up and swing it away from the ship.”

“Roger. Hey, you know something? This is actually fun. I never in my dreams would have guessed I'd be doing anything like this with my life. How's it looking for distance to the ground. I'm having a little depth perception problem.

“Three feet to go... two feet... and, wheels on the surface. I'm going down to disconnect this one. Hold for a minute and then its all going to be like shampoo.”

Stefanie paused and then laughed. “I get it! Rise, lower and repeat!”

Bud had to smile inside his suit. Sometimes his puns had to be explained. Having an audience who got them was nice.

On the surface he popped the quick disconnect and took the cable off the rover.

“Up now, Steff. Skipper, I'm going to move this one away about twenty feet.”

“Great, Bud. I'll be down after Stefanie gets the third one down.”

“Me, too!” she radioed to them.”

“And, Stefanie, too,” Tom agreed.

In less than twenty minutes from touchdown, the three rovers were positioned and their programs synched. Tom handed Stefanie a small silver box.

“Press the glowing green button when you want them to head out,” he instructed her.

“Travel well, you little beauties and bring mama back some really good news!” She held the box in front of her and pressed the button with her gloved right thumb. The four tracks on each vehicle began to slowly turn.

At top speed they would manage about four miles per day. One unit would remain on a direct course while the other two would “spread out” to a starting distance of about two hundred yards each. Then, depending on what heat signatures and RADAR soundings showed, they would maneuver closer or farther apart.

This would continue until they reached a point where the molten Moon material ended—actually at the base of the mountains where Tom and his companions would need to pick them up and transport them to the opposite side of the range. They already knew it had at least under to mountain hole.

The overall layout of the magma field would have a two-thirds mile gap where they could not travel, but the inventor was sure the problem area did not stop under the mountain.

By the following evening when they checked some of the data that was sent in each hour, Stefanie had some good news for them.

“As we suspected, that nuclear ball of trouble is definitely not headed toward the colony.” Bud wiped imaginary sweat from his brow while Tom let out a relieved sigh. “To go one further, I’m seeing a distinct line of travel as this thing moves away at about a fifteen degree angle from straight out. It must be following something like an underground passage that lets it travel.”

Now the inventor shook his head.

“I don’t concur. What it is traveling through is fuel. And, the only fuel it has now, unless it is breaking down other elements, is most likely a vein of Helium3.”

Bud whistled. “Nasty. I mean, you’ve already suggested that, but this seems to bear that out. So, do we just let it go until it finds no more fuel and sort of fizzles out?”

Tom had some very bad news to tell them, but at that moment Harlan Ames came into the office where they had set up.

“Hope I’m not interrupting anything, but I’ve just given official notice that I am definitely heading back to Earth. Just as soon as this lunarquake and nuclear fire thing is sorted. Have you got any news?”

Tom nodded. He might as well tell them all.

“Okay. First I want to say that this is not a definite thing and may take years or decades to occur, but one of our flyover scans for rock density a few weeks ago showed me where the vein of Helium3 is and where it is going.”

Harlan’s shoulders sagged. “Oh-ohhhhh! I hear bad news coming. Give it to us straight, please.”

“I will. Now, the reason why you haven’t been burned out up to this point is that you have mined that very same vein out to a couple miles. That was when you hit a wall with nothing and gave up. After you backfilled your shaft you were pretty safe from that inferno traveling much closer.”

“Good, so far...”

“Yeah, so far. Here’s the thing. That vein seems to run nearly under the reservoir in the mountain and out under the other side of the range. My belief is it will never rise to within two hundred feet of the surface as it travels along.”

Bud raised a hand. “But, if it is going away, that’s great news, or have I missed something? Again.”

“Only what is to still be said. That same vein runs another four or so miles out before it curves back around. Then, and about two miles to the relative west of the outward track, it passes back under the mountains and heads this way. I’m afraid that as quickly as it consumes that fuel it is running along, it will come back here and probably destroy everything you have built.”

He looked around a three shocked and blank faces. It was one thing to believe in a possibility but another thing to know it was going to happen. There were good sides and bad ones to that, but this was definitely on the bad side.

“How fast is it burning?” That came from Harlan.

The inventor shrugged. “Hard to say until we have the complete rover survey and Stefanie gets a chance to review everything. But, as I said you might have about a decade.”

Bud perked up. “Can’t they just start mining this end of that loop and take away any fuel in case it does make it back around?”

Tom smiled. “Took the words out of my mouth, Bud. It will be a good thing to get going on and will give people

something else to do rather than think about this. Of course nothing can guarantee that our reasoning is going to match what the Moon has in store. Nor does anything we might do guarantee success. Ultimately the fire will build and start breaking down other materials and consuming them. By the time it arrives at the side door of the crater, it could be burning the very rock the Cordillera people shove back into the shaft they mine out."

"What else?"

"Well, Stefanie will bear this out but as long as the fire burns you will have the quakes. I'm afraid one goes with the other. We have to stop that fire!"

As they sat contemplating the situation, the one thing he still had to tell them was one thing we wanted to keep in reserve until the rovers had made their final report.

Harlan watched Tom's face for a few minutes. When he tried to take a deep, cleansing breath, his throat threatened to close on him; his breathing was ragged from his nerves.

The more he concentrated—unwillingly—on all the negative aspects, the more it seemed that this could be the end of everything. That all their future plans were for nothing. His mind replayed what Tom had told them. They had time, *but how to use it?*

"Tom, you said we may have ten years or so before the ring of fire might get back around to us. Does that include it burning through the solidification of the ground around the city? Won't that count for something?" Harlan had crossed his fingers, hoping against hope.

Tom looked at his friend, and shook his head no.

"I wish I could tell you yes, but the solidification from your lost water is only going to buffer the city from most of the shock waves and not the fire; the high-intensity waves will still get through, although probably greatly dampened. Eventually those vibrations will slowly cause cracks in the hardened ground that will just get bigger in time." The young inventor sighed.

"When that nuclear fire makes it back around, the water still encased in the outer shell will vaporize and add thousands of pounds of pressure and help the nuclear fire explode upward and out. At that moment, this colony and

anybody left in it will cease to exist. Sorry to have to put it bluntly, but hiding things will do absolutely no good for anyone. What I'm trying to get around to saying is this: The threat must be stopped way before then. There isn't even an 'or else' in all this. We both know it isn't just the city up here at stake!"

Tom stood up, walked over to Harlan and put his hands on his shoulders. "We'll have this licked way before that nuclear fire heads back this direction, my friend. I intend to do it; you can trust me on that!"

While Harlan was talking to Tom, Saclolo and Magadia were acting on the city's water problem. The four-hours and forty-minute wait for sending a radio signal to the *Genghis Khan* in the vicinity of Pluto—and the same for a return call—was tedious to say the least. They had bundled all the necessary information into one radio burst and were now waiting for the reply.

"Understood," was the single-word message. Saclolo and Magadia looked at each other and burst out laughing. Talk about the economy of words. Tull had never been a big one for conversation, but...

Then the white noise of the on-going radio transmission was broken by:

"Sorry for all the troubles back home. Will proceed to your indicated coordinates and will pick up the asteroid mentioned as soon as our present job is done. It will take us three extra months to get back, and we will have to coast most of the way. Good thing it's sunward and not outbound. Fuel will be very tight. Food supplies will have to be cut drastically. Some fresh oxygen may be needed. If a resupply drone could be sent it would be greatly appreciated. Commander Whiteman, out."

Saclolo took Magadia's hand and pulled her up from her chair. "I guess I owe you dinner tonight, Dia. Tull did keep it down to a single transmission. I should have known better than to bet against you. And you were also right that he had no more information on the mission itself so he did not include it. They still have a week before they release the probes."

Magadia ran her fingers through her husband's thinning

black hair. "Don't worry, Saclolo. Tull and his men will pull us all through. That's another bet I'm willing to make!"

Before they turned in for the evening, Tom went back to the *Challenger* and made a radio call. He asked to be first connected to Hank Sterling.

"Hank," he started, "I need a status update on the special blaster you are building. How soon and any issues?"

"Well, as for the timing, two days. That is without running a test, but this is proven technology so we can assume that if the internal checks show green lights, we have a fully-working unit. As for your other question, I have one issue that I am working on. Hope you don't mind a little secrecy, but I'd like to keep that one to myself for the time being."

Tom wondered if this was a point of worry, so he inquired, "Is it a show stopper?"

"Naw. Just a refinement I want to make that may or may not pan out. Don't worry. It'll be ready in fifty hours at most."

Next he asked to be transferred to his father's office. When the older inventor came on Tom got straight to the point.

"You know about the loss of their control tower up here, Dad, but you may not know they are running out of some of the basic materials to construct a new one and to do all the repairs to the partially-collapsed floors of the one dome."

"You're right, Son. I didn't know about the materials issue. What can we do to help?"

Tom outlined his idea to get a load of various polymers together and to ship them up in the *Sutter*.

"She'll only need to be half full, Dad, but the folks up here can use the help. They won't ask for it, of course."

"Of course. But, they'll get it."

Tom asked for permission to do one more thing his father readily agreed to.

Before heading to the guest rooms, Tom stopped and knocked on Harlan's apartment door. When it opened it

was with Harlan attempting to juggle both his children in his arms as well as getting the entry open.

“Come on in, Tom,” he greeted the inventor.

“Can’t stay but a minute and I see you’ve got your arms full,” he nodded at the babies with a grin,” but I just got off the radio with dad. Here’s the thing...” and he told Harlan about the atomic drill and his plans to use it in three days. He also said that the *Sutter* would arrive in two weeks with a load of materials the colony desperately needed to rebuild with.

“Uh, before I leave I wanted to let you know that Dad and I give permission for Saclolo and Magadia to send the loaner rocket out to meet the *Khan* when it gets back to the asteroid belt. It ought to be large enough to carry everything they’ll need to bring back here.”

When he departed five minutes later, Harlan was holding his children tight and sobbing with the joy of relief he now felt.

Chapter Nineteen: The Deeper You Go...

“YOU WANTED to see me?” Tom inquired as he and Bud entered Phil Radnor’s office. They, along with Bashali, Sandy and Stefanie, had come back from the Moon the previous evening. With them were Lola and Harlan’s twins. The babies because after the near fatal scare Harlan wanted them to be safe, and Lola came along because she—as she put it—was, “never going to let the babies out of my sight again!”

“I did. Do. Whatever. The upshot is that I want to see you, Tom, and even you, Bud, to let you know of a decision that is being made even as we speak.” He nodded at the inventor. “You are about to be officially asked by the outgoing Administrator of Cordillera City Lunar Colony to take a specific action that will either mean a fast evacuation of the Moon, or the salvation of the city.”

“Gee,” Bud said under his breath. Then, aloud he stated, “That’s got to be the—hey! Wait. Did you just say the *outgoing* Administrator?”

The Security man smiled. “That I did. It appears that Harlan finished turning over all his duties to Saclolo and Magadia Reyes today and will be coming back to Earth, and this job—which I will not be entirely sorry to give up—in a couple days.”

Bud’s head whipped around to look at Tom. “You don’t seem surprised. You know about this?”

“In a way, Bud, I’ve known about it for more than a year. As soon as the Empress—Maggie effectively killed them both I could see Harlan’s days up there were numbered. He has only been holding on to get things in a good place. These quakes and the pressure buildup have really been tearing him apart. Then, the blowout and almost losing the kids settled it.”

“So, are you going to be able to keep the folks up there safe?”

The inventor’s eyes went vacant for a moment and then he blinked three times and answered the question. “If the latest findings from those little rovers is correct, I’m going to have to.”

“Why?” The question came from Phil.

“Her findings from the data show the rate of travel for the burning ground has slowed.”

“That’s great! Isn’t it?”

“No, Bud. Actually it is worrying. Especially if you add that the ground all around the head of the burn is swelling.”

Phil was now looking quickly between the two young men. His head was moving like he was watching a tennis match. “I don’t understand.”

Tom explained that the nuclear fire underground had been traveling at a fairly constant rate until about two days before the huge quake that caused the partial collapse of one of the domes. That, he told them, was most likely caused by pressure build up that had found a point to fracture, releasing some explosive pressure that had shaken the entire Moon.

“In fact, the seismograph left up there by the Apollo 16 mission registered the quake, and that’s just about the complete opposite side of the Moon!”

“Now are we going to have to put the *Sutter* to work evacuating them?”

Giving a slow shake of his head, Tom replied, “The next one is going to be much worse. Catastrophic, even. I’m hoping I have an ace up my sleeve, Phil. If I don’t, then yes, the colonists need to get off that rock. But,” and he held up a cautionary finger, “if it gets that bad, and the pocket under there explodes, we might all be in for a nasty shock. The Moon could break apart or at least lose a big chunk. And, if that comes around and heads to Earth—” He didn’t have to say the rest.

Finally, Bud asked, “What about the mules? Can’t they grab onto whatever breaks off and just sort of shove it back into place?”

“Possibly. Maybe. I don’t know. It depends on how many pieces are blown out. We have a finite number of mules and most of them are so far out they couldn’t make it back to Earth orbit in time.”

All three sat in silence for a few minutes until Phil cleared his throat. “Well, that’s not going to happen. Is it? I

mean, those folks, all of us, have Tom Swift looking out for us!” He shrugged. “Well, it seemed like the sort of thing a really bad sci-fi television program would have someone say.”

When Tom got home that late afternoon he walked in on four women and two babies.

The babies were giggling and fussing, and the women were universally cooing and saying things like, “Wassa itsy bitsy li’l cutiepie doing? You like your binkie? You like your binkie?”

“Hey, Mom. Hey ladies. So I can understand Lola fussing over the kids and even Sandy and Bash, but you, Mom? I thought you were long past the ‘itty bitty baby’ stage.”

Anne Swift looked at her son and shook her head. “Oh, how little you know about women, my one and only son.” She turned to the others. “You know, it might just be worth it to have another at my age just so I can correct all the mistakes I made raising this one!”

Lola and the babies were staying with Tom and Bashalli until Harlan came back down in a week. That was fine with Tom, as it let Harlan concentrate on closing out his duties. But, he could see a dangerous look in his sister’s eyes. He knew she wanted a baby pretty badly. Bashalli, on the other hand, appreciated them, and liked being around them, but she had been very up front about not wanting to have one of her own for at least the first ten years of their marriage.

He gave them all the news about Harlan. Only Lola was not surprised; she’d been told about his final decision weeks earlier, even before the refrigerator event. That only served to accelerate his timeline.

“Do any of you mind if I turn on the TV?” he asked. “It’s just that I want to catch up on world news. Everything I know about is lunar.” When nobody objected, he sat down and picked up the remote.

The newscaster was just completing a story about an unexpected tornado in northern Idaho when she touched her earpiece and appeared to be listening to someone. Her eyes went back to the camera and the teleprompt screen in front of the lens.

“We have just received important news and video from

the network. I... uhhh... we take you now to Washington D.C.” She looked like a rabbit caught in headlights as the view failed to change for about ten seconds.

It finally did.

“This is Brad Summers in Washington where we’ve just been told that Interpol has swooped down in five countries arresting more than thirty individuals who, we have been reliably informed, were key in the kidnapping and transporting of thousands of people to what is now considered a free colony on the Moon run by people calling themselves the Masters. Chief among them is President Morays of the Philippines and Felipe Gasteau, the Finance Minister for France. Both are said to have accepted millions of dollars in bribes for their participation in the machinations of the former brother and sister responsible for these atrocities. We’ll have a final list of those arrested within the hour, and—”

Tom turned the television off.

They sat in silence until Lola made a spitting noise and muttered something that sounded like, “*ka habag habag titi pasusu hin!*”

“What does that mean,” Bashalli asked. She recognized the first few syllables and was afraid the rest was very nasty.

Lola shook her head. “It is very rude and I should not have spoken it, but that man, Morays, is exactly what I said! I hope that he is hanged. Very slowly and painfully!”

Over the following two days as Tom and the team at Enterprises prepared for what the inventor hoped would be the final step in the process to defuse the nuclear fire inside the Moon, several important events took place around the world.

First, the French Minister was found dead in his cell in Auxerre, France. There was no outright sign of foul play, but indications were that it had not been by his own hands.

At least five of the others arrested were attempting to get plea deals in return for providing many more names to the authorities.

But by far the biggest story was the apparent escape by former President Morays. While being transported from Manilla to Paris, his jet had been hijacked and had landed

at the Phnom Penh International Airport in Cambodia. There, he and seven others left the jet and disappeared. It was obvious to all that they had one or more accomplices both at the airport and inside the city.

But, these events didn't impact what Tom, Bud, Hank and others were doing. And, there were many things they had to accomplish in the next full day.

According to Stefanie, she had detected a near pattern and schedule in the lunarquakes. They had been slowly ramping up for weeks overall, but there had been measurable dips in frequency and violence. But, one thing that stood out was that after a violent quake, there was a period of about nine days before another, stronger, quake hit.

According to her findings, the Moon should have another major quake in about fifty hours!

Harlan waited until just after the evening meal before he went "on the air." He broadcasted throughout the city the news of what Tom Swift had told him. He could not, in good conscious, keep any of the situation or their plight from them.

Harlan ended his broadcast by announcing the names of his children. The boy was named 'Kambal' meaning *twin*. The girl was named 'Kaloob' translated as *gift*.

For Harlan that was what they were.

He also told the people that he had sent the twins back to Earth and that he felt no shame on doing so. He hoped that would help people to decide if they wanted to leave or not. But, he promised them one thing—he would not leave the city until all of them were safe. He would stay and meet the same fate as the people he had help to free. That their lives was as important to him as *his* was to him, and he would be the last man to leave the Moon if it ever came to that.

To his astonishment, by the end of the following day only a few dozen people asked to go back to Earth. The overwhelming majority of people wanted to wait until all hope was lost, and trusted that Tom Swift would come up with something to save them.

Perhaps two hundred of the people asked if the Swift's Mars colony had room for them or whether it could be outfitted to take them. They reasoned that the money coming from the Chinese would pay for the costs of having Swift Enterprises built additional habitat structures.

When he inquired why Mars, the simple answer was this: Earth no longer had an appeal to them. The worry over money, politics, housing and where their next meal would come from frightened them more than the lunarquakes or even the prospect of starting all over again.

Tom, Bud and Stefanie made one last trip up before the big one. They needed some final measurements and a big conference with the colony's senior leaders.

It might mean little to most of the people at the colony, but he was coming in a surprise. The very first of their saucer-shaped spacecraft had been completed the day before. Since it needed a shake-down flight he decided to kill two birds with one stone. In actuality, it had already been flown several times by Bud starting the day before.

He stepped up through the lower hatch and up the short ladder into the circular room. Near the front—if any one position could be called that since the circular ship could fly equally well in any direction—sat two seats in front of a curved all-glass control panel.

Just as with the control panels Tom had been designing for many of his newer vehicles, the one was a marvel of hardware and software engineering. There were more than twenty gauges and readouts available to either the pilot or co-pilot—or both—that could be rearranged to fit the desires of either flyer.

A simple press and hold on a small dot in the corner of each one and the user could move it to any new position. Release the button and it would remain at that position on the display.

And, each pilot could store his or her desired layout to be recalled automatically once they registered themselves with the computer.

Tom felt this was very important as the colony would have perhaps three dozen pilots for the small fleet they

would eventually own.

If, that is, there remained a colony to deliver them to in the future.

Bud's in-atmosphere flights had proven the stability of flight and the lightning-fast response to steering orders. Unlike any rocket with a nose and tail that could only travel the direction the pointy end was heading, the saucer could spin within its own diameter and even hover. The repelatron used for flight and maneuvering were located on the underside of the four landing struts plus one extra on the very top of the hundred-thirty-foot-wide by twenty-one-foot-tall craft.

And, like the loaner rocket, the inside could be outfitted in quick fashion for multiple missions. The outer twelve feet of the ring held all the electronics, power and mechanical systems leaving a central cabin of about ten feet in height and one-hundred six feet wide. If fully set up for human transportation, it could carry in excess of two-hundred and twenty-five passengers in seats and another fifty sitting on the deck in various empty areas.

For cargo hauling, the entire rear of the saucer was hinged and could be lifted hydraulically so anything that might be needed—that would actually fit—could be loaded and flown. Hold-down points could rise up from the floor. These same points held down the sets of seats.

Straight from his final test flight, Bud practically burst into the shared office where Tom and his father were having a small conference.

He stopped short and attempted to back up and out of the office on tip-toe when he saw they were busy, but the young inventor motioned him to come over and join them.

“Dad and I were just talking about putting the new saucers into three-shift production. Overall, it might be easier and quicker than trying to do the whole haul small groups up to the *Sutter* and then try to get them back here to Earth.”

“Less expensive in the long run as well,” Damon added. “We might have a military contract for twenty of them to do fast-deployment of Marines in remote spots around the world.”

Tom nodded. “We would need to have more than forty of them to do a one-shot evacuation of the Moon, or we just build twenty in addition to the few we are supposed to be making for the colony and each one takes two trips.”

The two inventors looked at Bud. He wasn’t certain if there had been an implied question, or if they just wanted his feedback. He tried to look as if he were contemplating the entire matter.

“As I see it, these are going to make excellent space craft no matter what the initial use. I’ve found absolutely nothing I’d change about them except to put in a bathroom or two.” He did some counting on his fingers, adding, “Or four or five. I think that’s about how many they have on commercial airliners with that many seats.”

Tom smiled at his friend. “Bud? I hate to tell you but there are already four restrooms in that ship.”

Bud’s eyes registered surprise and then disbelief. “Where?”

“In the flip-up back end. Next time you’re in the ship, take a look for the thin vertical gaps back there. And, the small indented buttons that slide the doors up and into the ceiling.”

“Now you tell me. Geez. I had to shorten a run first thing this morning when I, uh, got caught short, if you get me.”

Tom and Damon laughed. “We get you, Bud,” Mr. Swift told him. “But, you came in here in quite a hurry. What did you need?”

The flyer slapped himself on the forehead. “Damn! I wanted to let you know they’ve had another quake on the Moon. Not as bad and most others, but Steff is beside herself. She says this ruins her entire pattern discovery.”

Tom got up. “Let’s go talk to her. Sorry, Dad, but I’ll fill you in tonight. You and mom are coming to dinner so she can play with Harlan’s twins.”

Damon rolled his eyes. He loved both his children, but had had enough with babies to last a lifetime. If neither Tom nor Sandy had children, he would not be sad.

They found Stefanie sitting in the cafeteria where Bud left her twenty minutes earlier. She was absently stirring an

empty mug of coffee with a spoon, making little *clink*-ing noises.

They plopped down on either side of her. She looked at Tom and then at Bud before bursting into tears.

Now alarmed at what else she might have to tell them, Tom placed a comforting arm over her shoulders. She turned into him and buried her face in his underarm. He let her sob for a minute before pushing her gently away.

“What’s the matter?” Are we in more trouble than we thought?” he asked gently.

Stefanie sniffled and wiped her tears away with the back of her hand.

“No. It’s just that everything is going wrong!”

Before she could start crying again Bud had a handkerchief out and was pressing it into her hand.

“Is this clean, Barclay?” she asked, trying to smile.

“Nope. Full of Bud snot and something I wiped off my shoe last week. Go ahead and use it anyway!”

In spite of her sadness, Stefanie laughed. With an exaggerated shrug she blew her nose and shoved the cloth into Bud’s shirt pocket. She gave it a solid smack for good measure.

Then, looking back at Tom she shrugged again. “All in all the situation up there isn’t terribly dire. The tiny quake they had would be about a two-point-five down here. Like having a truck rumble along the street in front of your house. Sorry if I gave you the impression all this—” she pointed to herself, “—was about them. The problem is that I can’t see this to the end with you. Deke got sneaky and frisky one night way back when we made up and the upshot is I’m going to have another baby.”

She had to endure a pair of long and powerful hugs from the two surrounding her.

“Back it off, boys!” she ordered. “Ya wanta smother the kid?” But, she was smiling.

“Congratulations and why does this mean you can’t join us for the fast up and back trip to talk to Harlan and do those final evaluations?”

She had to think what the appropriate answer might be, but soon ran out of ideas. She reached into her purse and pulled out her cell phone. A moment later she was speaking with her husband.

“Hey, slim. It’s short-stuff. Got a poser for you. I’m sandwiched between two handsome and young men and feeling pretty good about life. So, even with the you-know-what in the oven, can I go play with my friends for about twenty-four hours? Can I, can I, can I?” She listened a moment. “It’s Tom and Bud, you jealous dunderhead! Holy Samolie. And, you already knew that, didn’t you? So?” Again, she listened. A smile crossed her face.

“Yeah. I’m pretty certain that can be arranged. I’ll be back up in about twenty minutes.... huh?”

Now she listened for more than a minute, her smile turning into a near celebration of glee.

“I love you!” and she hung up. “The big geek went and got himself a job! That bone lady specialist in Boston gave him an unconditional okay for flying, so he has been interviewing by phone for the past week. He’s got a job as test pilot at some Podunk, upstate New York company. Something like Fast Corporation.”

With a squeal of delight she jumped into Tom’s arms and gave him a wet kiss on the lips.

Bud, thoroughly confused sat waiting for an explanation. When Stefanie got off Tom’s lap, the inventor had a goofy grin on his face.

“Dad said we needed an additional test pilot, Bud, so we agreed to hire Deke. You okay with that?”

“Okay? You bet!”

When the three took off for their final Moon study, Stefanie made it clear she needed to remain very close to the ship. She had promised her husband she would not get caught without a fast exit capability. Tom had no troubles. He even showed her how to get the large ship off the ground in an emergency.

On arrival she began downloading all the most recent data while the boys headed to the Administration offices.

Before they had done more than say their hellos, she was

on the radio.

“Okay. Here’s the news. Pressure is building up down there and the fire seems to be moving deeper and not so much away from us. I’m not sure what that means in low gravity, but on Mother Earth that means trouble. As in, eruption! If things blow, the deeper that fire is the more violently it will blow.”

Harlan asked, “Can anything be done to relieve the pressure?”

“I’ll take that one, Stefanie,” the inventor told her.

She said goodbye and told them she was going to take a nap.

“Okay, Harlan. Here’s the potentially good news. All that pressure Stefanie was talking about? Well, everything I’ve studied about magma on Earth tells me we do have to relieve it. On Earth that generally happens on its own and we call that an eruption. Up here, I’m not certain we have the luxury of waiting to see if it works itself up and out. We have to give it more than a little push.”

Now the Administrator looked horrified. “We’re not going to do something drastic like setting off a nuclear warhead, are we?”

“Bud laughed. “Don’t worry, Harlan. Tom’s got a little beauty that’s going to take care of everything.”

Tom told Harlan about the one-shot atomic moon blaster that would arrive the following morning.

Hank cornered Tom just before takeoff.

“Skipper? You recall I mentioned I was trying something with the drill?”

“Sure. Did it work?”

Hank shook his head. “No, sorry to say. First, I was trying to see if we could do away with the small atomic power pile inside and came up with the tether idea, and then it hit me that we’d still be leaving a nuclear source right next to the hole, and what if it melted and started up the same problem?”

Tom nodded and rubbed his chin. “At one point I

thought of asking you to rig a speed winch that would automatically trigger and yank the power source away from the hole as soon as we had breakthrough. I never did ask, though.”

Hank laughed. “Well, that while ‘great minds’ thing pops up again. That is what I was attempting to give you. But, I just couldn’t make things work with a cutting blade to chop the tether so the power box could be removed. So, I have the thing encased in three layers of tomasite. It won’t melt through and ought to hold everything internally until the cut-off timer I did get installed shuts the thing down.”

“And,” the inventor added, “it will all just remain buried forever if what I believe is going to take place, happens!”

Chapter Twenty: Breakthrough

THE *Challenger* was streaking back to the Moon with its single piece of cargo—the new nuclear “suicide” drill. It was still a secret from the city’s citizens because Tom wasn’t entirely certain it would make any difference. According to Stefanie, *if* it could drill down at an angle away from the colony and *if* it could get to a reasonable depth before breaking into the magma pressure chamber, it could cause either an instant relief to the pressure such that all the burning materials would be expelled. Or, it could cause another major and potentially deadly quake.

As the ship set down on the landing pad, Tom radioed to the cargo master.

“Just to let you know, we do not require offloading of anything, Sid. We’ll come down and inside to meet with the folks and then take off in about an hour.”

“You sure you don’t need my guys, Mr Swift?” the voice of the dock manager Tom knew would be on duty came over the radio. With the tower a twisted wreck still, the auxiliary control room at one corner of the platform was the only place anyone could see outside.

“We’ve had nothing to do for a couple days and we’re getting a little antsy. We could, you know, come up and hand carry you people down here. We can use the exercise,” he concluded hopefully.

Tom laughed. “Nope. Appreciate it and we’ll take you up on your offer some date in the future. Thanks!” In his head he added, *I hope!*

One thing he had trouble getting used to was being called “Mr. Swift.” He had been “Tom” or “skipper” for so long and to so many people that he kept looking around to see if his father had walked into the room and was standing behind him when addressed so formally.

Turning to Bud, he said, “I’ll go down and pick up Stefanie while you get the ladies settled in the guest quarters.” Deke had relented the previous day and allowed his wife to remain on the Moon while the boys came back for the new drill.

Glancing over his shoulder at Bashalli and Sandy sitting in their acceleration couches Tom smiled. "I hope you understand how dangerous this could be and the need to keep the crew as small as possible."

Sandy crossed her arms over her chest and made a "harrumph!" sound. Bashalli smiled back at him, reached out to squeeze his shoulder, and said she understood.

"Of course, we will both be going crazy," she admitted. "I mean, with the men we love in possible danger and just sitting around with nothing to do but worry—?" Her lower lip quivered. She fought to bring a smile out. "Of course, even Stefanie managed to talk her husband into allowing her to remain up here. And, she has more to lose than we do. We shall sit quietly and behave."

"Ah, but you two won't be just sitting," Tom told them as Bud shut the ship down. "In fact, I have a very specific job that you two can do that will help me out a lot."

He explained that he would be setting up a series of video cameras all around the perimeter of the proposed drill site.

"They will be hoisted on extendible masts all pointing to the spot the action should happen. I promised dad that we'd get real-time video back to him so he can watch. You'll be able to watch as well and I expect the two of you to work to send down the best shots. That means that Sandy works the control board because she has the most experience with the electronics side, and Bash, you'll watch the bank of eight monitors telling her which view to switch to. You've been involved in a multi-camera commercial shoot before so this is nothing new. Do this like a real pro television production."

What Tom didn't say was that the world would be watching along. The networks had paid good money for live broadcast rights and he wanted that money to help pay the evacuation costs if what he was about to do failed.

"Okay, gang," Bud said as he unstrapped and stood up. "Out we go. Well, first on with suits then..." he made a sweeping motion as if to invite them to get a move on.

The time had arrived. The moment of truth for Tom—for

everyone in Cordillera City, and for Earth's largest moon. In spite of all his work to determine the extent of the lunar magma, Tom had no real idea.

What he *did* have was a stomach almost clenched with enough nerves to double him over. It didn't help that the odds were in favor of success; there were thousands of lives hanging in the balance of his decision and the single push of a tiny area on a small touchscreen that would send the giant drill on its death plunge into the side of the upper chamber a thousand feet below.

He looked around. On his orders nobody else was there. All the Enterprises team members were in the *Challenger* back two miles closer to the crater. They could respond in under two minutes if he was in dire danger, but he did have a *Straddler* sitting five feet to his right. If all else failed, or even if it succeeded and the molten rocks came spewing out and headed for him, he would have fewer seconds to climb on and ride out than it would actually take him.

He thought of his wife, Bashalli. She had been crying when he left her to come out for this final showdown. There had been many times when Tom's life was on the line, but she had generally been far away from it. He hadn't wanted to put her in harm's way before, but now having her able to watch his success or... He looked around at the tall masts spaced about a quarter mile apart. Each one had a flashing red light on top so he could see them in the darkness of the back side of the Moon. He counted them. Eight in total.

Over the radio, on a special frequency to Bashalli, he said, "I've got visual confirmation of all cameras. Are you receiving the signals?"

"Yes, Tom. We are getting all eight of them. I have things set for infrared until it gets too bright and then the computer will switch to visible light. Just like you asked for. And, I can see you standing there. Please promise me to be careful?"

"I promise, Bash. You just keep an eye on things and get all the video sent along to dad. Eight individual feeds and the master one Sandy is combining."

He hoped his gamble of allowing her and Sandy to remain inside the colony wasn't going to backfire.

Her involvement with the Cordillera City people and

their hopes and dreams of having their LunaCity Resort had seen her working close to her husband for weeks on end. Now, when he needed to concentrate on the job at hand, he had her to worry about.

Tom said a silent prayer of hope that she would forgive him if things turned sour.

But, he had to put all those thoughts aside.

The time had come. He had checked the atomic drill three separate times with the same results. Perfect. It sat upright on its makeshift stand, the extra drill panels spread out waiting to dig deep into the lunar ground. His finger flicked one spot on the control box screen to activate the system. With one more press the five-second countdown would begin.

He looked back at the *Straddler*. *I'm an idiot!* he said to himself as he walked over and sat astride the repelatron scooter, turning its systems on and allowing it to rise a few feet.

In his worry over everything else he had forgotten that he could be off the surface and ready to hit the accelerator and zoom out of harm's way in a split second.

He set the control panel in its special mount. His finger hovered over one spot on it.

"Here goes," he radioed. "Ten... nine..." The countdown went until he reached zero. He dropped the finger and pressed down on the touch screen between the handlebars.

The low gravity of the Moon meant that dust and dirt went flying and was soon obscuring every view.

Tom?" Bashalli radioed. "We can't see anything. Is that the way it is supposed to be?"

"Yes. I forgot about the stuff being tossed up for the first couple minutes. It'll settle down pretty soon. And, Sandy? Keep switching views so people get an all around peek."

"Roger." It was, as far as Tom could recall, the shortest message his sister had ever sent. It made him smile.

Within two minutes everything began clearing and he could see that the drill was completely under the surface. His control panel showed the head at a depth of thirty-eight feet.

Five minutes later it had reached one hundred feet

down.

“Bash. Record everything I say from this point, and sent it down with the master feed of Sandy’s, please.” He paused to give her time to start, then began giving an ongoing description of what would be occurring below him.

“As you can all see there is a constant stream up through the new shaft expelling the gaseous remains of the rocks and dirt the drill is digging through. Because the hole is going down at an angle of about five degrees, all the ejecta will arc up and settle about ninety feet away from the hole. In fact, if our camera controller can give you what is being recorded by camera five you will see the materials arcing up and landing back on the surface. In all there will be nearly a ten foot high pile of the things that have not been totally vaporized once this is over.”

He kept up the descriptive oration for the next half hour. The drill had just passed the nine-hundred foot mark. It would be nearing a holding point in another ten minutes.

According to his instruments the drill arrived at that location two minutes early.

“I’m not sure whether we miscalculated the depth slightly—it is within our plus/minus allowance—or if the bubble of pressurized magma has grown a little. In either case we will sit here for five minutes while the drill’s sensors gather some data. Then, I’ll give you another countdown before sending the drill the final few yards. After that, I can give you no possible idea what to expect. This is a first for us all!”

As the final time mark approached, Tom checked the *Straddler’s* instrument panel. It showed the two green lights telling him the vehicle was poised to race away at his command.

“Okay. On my mark the drill will make its final plunge.” He paused to take a deep breath. “This will only take thirty seconds, so, five... four... three... two... one... and GO!”

The panel for the drill showed it moving forward again.

Everybody from Tom on the *Straddler* to Bud and the crew of the *Challenger*, the ladies in the control room back at the colony, Damon Swift at Enterprises and about two billion other people around the world held their collective breaths.

They did not have very long to wait.

Deep under the surface the small planned explosion shattered the final five feet of rock between the large shaft and the magma. On the surface the cameras shook until the auto-stabilization could kick in.

Tom sent the *Straddler* racing away only circling around to face back when he had managed to put a half mile between him and the exit hole.

Knowing that he could back away almost as fast as moving forward, he hovered, watching and waiting. It only took about twenty seconds.

With a thunderous rumble felt seventeen miles away in the colony, the lunar surface erupted and the first lava shot out, bathing the landscape into a glowing red glare.

Tom's helmet visor automatically cut in and blocked most of the bright, orange, yellow and finally nearly white light as first a candle flame-shaped cone shot three-hundred feet into the sky lighting up the lunar landscape like it had never been before, followed by a fountain of molten Moon, sparks and glowing rocks.

He backed farther away—even in his suit the radiated heat was warming him alarmingly—never taking his eyes off the phenomena.

Up the white-hot magma came, splashing back down on itself and all around the hole, in what seemed to be a never ceasing display.

“We saw it go off, skipper,” came Bud's excited call over the radio. “Don't look now, but I sort of broke the rules. We're hovering here a thousand feet behind you. Getting pretty great video of this to boot!”

Tom spun his head around and saw his *Challenger* right where Bud said it was. He didn't mind. Now that the deed was done he really only wanted to watch it to the end and then go home. Having his ship and his very best friend behind him felt right.

He looked back at the bright display. The hole was still spewing out its white, red and orange deadly cargo, but now from more than eighty feet higher up.

With a grin Tom realized that, like any good volcano, it was building its cone as it erupted. *How high would it end*

up, he wondered.

He thought back to the day when he sent his first Atomic Earth Blaster down into the snow and ice of the South Pole, and the tower of molten metals that came back out. In that case they all splashed into a man-made lake dug out for that purpose. And, the metals had ceased flowing after only a few minutes, plugging the hole as they cooled.

He wondered how long it might take for this volcano to stop. More important, he wondered if the simulations had been correct. Would, once the pressure was gone and the icy vacuum of space solidified things, the fire below stop.

Five minutes later he could see the flow was slowing.

“I’m coming back inside,” he radioed. “Have the airlock next to the hangar cycled and open for me.”

“Done, Tom. I knew that’s what you’d want. Come on in, number one. Your time is up!”

By the time Tom got inside, removed his spacesuit and reached the control room, the volcano’s flow was down to only sending things a few dozen yards into the sky. The cone had reached almost three hundred feet and was glowing nearly all the way from the top down to the lunar surface.

Ten minutes after that he piloted the ship up to about a thousand feet and moved over the top of the cone.

The ship’s SuperSight video system focused as far into the cone as it could, and everyone crowding around the monitor could see that a plug was forming five hundred feet down. Then, it was over. The plug was solidifying. There was no more fiery hot magma or lava flowing up.

The volcano was, perhaps temporarily, dormant. Stefanie had said there would be signs, shortly, if the release was going to be a permanent fix.

The primary one was that the ground would subside as a vacuum sucked down on it from inside if, but *only if*, the nuclear fire had burned out or been expelled.

Half an hour later everyone in the *Challenger* noticed that the ground a half mile from the volcano, directly over the core of the nuclear fire, suddenly caved downward. It was as if a giant hand yanked the ground down by more than four hundred feet.

So, along with a cooling volcanic cone, the Moon had a brand new crater caused, not by an impact, but by an implosion.

One final scan showed that the soil was already cooling. That was Stefanie's next to final sign. Only once a full day had passed and the temperature gone down nearly to normal would she be satisfied the nuclear fire had been extinguished.

When the ship touched down on the landing platform, and Tom and his crew reached the bottom of the elevator shaft, more people than could possibly fit in the space outside the doors had crowded in, each man and woman yelling their thanks, and the children perched on their shoulders smiling and throwing kisses.

Tom leaned over to Zimby Cox and said something that made the other man smile. He nodded and turned to go back into the elevator.

"What was that thing with Zim about?" Bud asked an hour later once they were finally allowed to move out of the elevator and cargo distribution area and into one of the larger meeting spaces where Tom was to receive an award.

He told Bud causing the flyer to smile and nod.

Next Tom asked Saclolo if the celebration could be put off for another six hours.

"I'm absolutely bushed," he explained, "and need to eat and rest before we continue to party."

Saclolo began to pass the word around and soon it became obvious that the citizen of Cordillera City believed it was the very best idea they ever heard.

They met Bashalli, Sandy and Stefanie in the guest quarters as soon as they could. There were hugs, kisses and words of love shared between the five of them. The other four also stood behind Stefanie as she placed a video call to Enterprises where the newest test pilot—her husband, Deke, along with their first child—sat with a very pensive look on his face.

"We are all doing great!" she announced watching the effect it had on him. But the most profound effect came to Stefanie when her baby looked right at the camera and spoke her first coherent sentence. "I lub you lots an lots, Mama!" the child said pointing a finger at the camera.

Deke leaned into the camera range and said, "Ditto a million times!"

It broke the diminutive woman down and left her crying happy tears.

Tom motioned the others to come with him, leaving her to her family and privacy.

When the celebration started back up, Tom was standing on the raised stage with Bud on his left, Bashalli on his right and Sandy standing on the other side of Bud.

Harlan, Saclolo and Magadia stood to the right side of the stage.

Bashalli had tears of joy in her eyes. With tears in his own eyes Tom told her, "Bash. I hope and pray that you can forgive me for wanting to keep you away from this. I never wanted to hurt you, but I couldn't guarantee my plan wouldn't split the Moon in two. I didn't want you here if that was a possibility, but I'm glad you made me see the light. I am so glad you were involved it all this. I'm proud of you!"

They had stood hugging for three minutes. It was, she assured him, in the past.

Now, facing the throng of happy people, most chanting his name, Tom smiled. It wasn't over. Not yet. It would take a month of weekly measurements and even a small test drilling with another expendable earth blaster to make certain the fire was out, but for now the pressure had been relieved and there were no more noises coming from underneath the volcano.

The problem of water was, he had been told, in hand and would be solved within a couple months. The only thing Tom needed to do was find a way to patch the cracks in the tomasite-coated walls of the reservoir cavern.

He was fairly certain he knew what to do about that.

Then, the Cordillerans could begin building their resort in earnest!

Saclolo waived the audience into silence.

"I know we all wish to thank Tom Swift and everyone from Earth who have saved us, but I also want to ask him an important question." He turned to face Tom and motioned the inventor to join him.

“As everyone knows, we have to say goodbye to our Administrator, Harlan Ames. His desire for a slightly less *interesting* life for his children, one back on Earth, must be honored. But, my question for Tom Swift is this. If it were up to you, would you also honor Señor Harlan by naming the Moon’s newest volcano for him?” He smiled a toothy smile at Tom. Next to him, Magadia was nodding, looking hopeful.

Tom looked to Harlan who had a look of shock and deep appreciation on his face. He gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Taking the microphone, the inventor acknowledged the cheer that went up. Once things became moderately quiet, he answered the question.

“Saclolo, Magadia, and the free people of Cordillera City. I can think of nothing nicer for you to do. Señor Harlan must be most honored! Harlan?”

He handed the microphone to Harlan who spent twenty minutes explaining that he was leaving but not abandoning the city or the citizens. “You will see me about once a month,” he told the crowd, “and I expect to be the first paying customer for the Lunar Resort when it is ready to receive guests!”

That news made the crowd roar with delight.

Later that evening as they lay in bed, Bashalli asked, “Now that you have solved all of the Moon’s woes, and things back on the Earth seem to be fairly quiet, what ever will you do to occupy your time?” She smiled and wiggled her eyebrows.

Tom smiled back, and he reached over to turn the lights out.

“I’ll think of something,” he whispered to her.

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Epilogue

The hollow-eyed man sat in darkness stroking a piece of paper that would help him solve everything. Each of his personal demons would disappear once he cashed in the ticket so he could travel to the forthcoming Cordillera Lunar Resort. He had so carefully plotted and planned, finally arranging to get one of the first twenty tickets through the spreading of liberal amounts of money... all that he had.

Once on that ship everything would be fine. Everything that haunted him about the one man he hated more than anything else in the entire world—or, off of it—would be solved.

He let out a racking cough, something he could not control for more than a minute; the illness he had contracted had settled in his lungs. It didn't matter. It just didn't!

The means of exacting his revenge had been set in his mind months ago, once he had read about the forthcoming resort on the Moon.

He would kill the man who had been responsible for mercilessly hounding his beloved uncle until the man had lost his job, filed for bankruptcy, and finally died from a painful, and very public, heart attack. And, he would kill those who supported him!

For the death of his uncle, Dan Perkins, Donnell Basset would *kill Tom Swift!*

Coming Soon... although don't hold your breath...

Four For Taxes

It can only be hoped that book sales surge to such levels that both of us find ourselves catapulted into higher tax brackets.

Then, we will need to write a fourth book so that it, too, sells many, many copies and we will have more money to pay your Uncle, and ours, Sam.

We've had asteroid as weapon, comet as savior, a gassy Moon as a danger to itself, and...? What comes next?

Abandon the Moon only to find that the thousands of colonists bring a terrible disease back to Earth?

The Moon gets struck by a meteor and begins to spin, sending it closer and closer to the Earth, causing horrible tidal waves and destruction? Solve the final riddle from this book?

Yeah, we don't know either. Except there is that unfinished business of Donnell Bassett and his determination to kill Tom!



Tom Hudson's Bookstore

[www.lulu.com/spotlight/
tedwardfoxatyahoodotcom](http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/tedwardfoxatyahoodotcom)



Leo Levesque's Bookstore

www.lulu.com/spotlight/savagelion51

If you've read the previous book from beginning to end,
you know better than to look here for anything more.
The book is over!

What the heck is wrong with you?