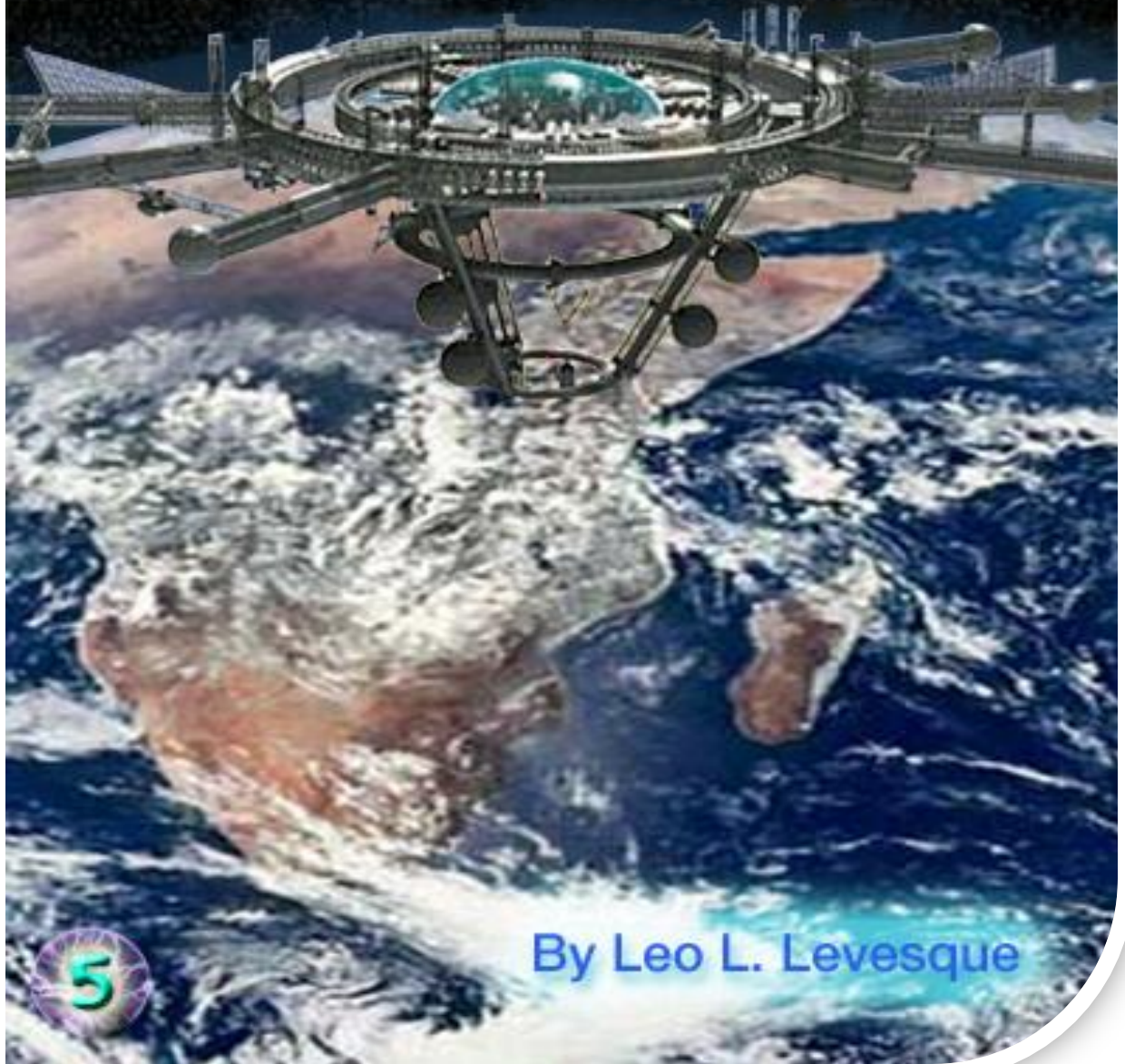


A SWIFT ENTERPRISES SAGA

# Thomasina Swift and the Space Repair Station



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By Leo L. Levesque

*A Swift Enterprise Saga*

**Thomasina Swift – Girl Inventor  
And The Space Repair Station  
(Repairs ‘R’ Us)**

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By Leo L. Levesque

Dedication:

Thanks to all.  
And to all a good Tom Swift.

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# Foreword

## Thomas Appleton Swift's World

Tom Swift was the hero of World War One. Single handedly he did more to end it than anyone else. Not by treaties or by peace but by sheer destructive madness. He was a man who believed in 'love thy neighbor' but—after seeing firsthand the slaughter in the stalemated trenches of France and the torn body of his best friend, Ned Newton, who had volunteered as an ambulance driver—he devoted himself to ending the war the only way he knew how.

The Bosh could not be reasoned with, so extermination was deemed necessary. Tanks, aero-gunships, land canons, submarines, and fantastic aeroplanes. One weapon followed another. His factories poured out destruction like candy. Within a year, peace was attained. The American and allied forces marched into Germany leaving a swath of destruction that would still be seen twenty years later. The loss of life in Germany and its allies were insidious.

Being a man of peace, he helped forge the League of Nations after the war. With his vast wealth he tried to rebuild Europe. He placed his empire of factories in the hands of another friend, Andrew Flagger. He had been a rival of Tom in the past, but with Ned's loss, Andy filled the void in Tom's life and worked tirelessly to prove himself a friend.

Tom's inventiveness never ceased and his factories, managed by Andy, never stopped. His wealth kept on growing. What he didn't realize was that weapons were his main product. Under Andy's administration they grew and multiplied and became deadlier and deadlier. Andy didn't care who he sold them to. Money and power were all he wanted, and he had Tom where he wanted him, away in Europe playing peacemaker to a bunch of two faced liars.

Men like Hitler of Germany and Mussolini of Italy, flocked to Tom's side to profess peace and unity. In the Twenties and early Thirties there never was so much peace and prosperity on Europe and elsewhere. They started programs to educate and strengthen the youths of their countries using Tom's money. They preached peace but built armies of molded young men and war machines in secret. Meanwhile, Andy sold them illegal weapons and parts to rebuild and maintain them.

So when war reared its ugly head in the mid Thirties, Europe again was in turmoil and in six months time everything Tom had worked for, was once more in ruin. When it became known that Swift money had rebuilt and rearmed the European despots, he was dragged into the world's court and charged with crimes

against humanity. He was at a total loss and when he turned to his friend and manager, he found him on the other side of the court. Testifying against him and handing over files and affidavits to prove Tom's complicity in the selling of arms.

It only took two days to convict and jail him and until the World Court could take time to review the matter, that was where he stayed. A few days later, Japan attacked American ships and islands in the Pacific and along the west coast of America. They dropped bombs on San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The general public screamed for blood, and Tom remained locked away in total isolation for his own good and safety.

Tom's young wife secretly took herself and her young son back to America to live with her mother. Her father had passed away some years ago. Mary Swift was a woman of deep convictions and knew her husband was innocent and prayed daily to God for justice for him.

But the evil of the world was not done with her. By the end of that year she returned home, young Tom Jr. was stricken with polio.

In the final stroke of evil genius, Andrew Flagger, now sole owner of Swift Construction Company, gave the U. S. Government the one weapon he promised never to reveal. The electric rifle.

No armies could hold out against that mighty weapon. World War II ended nine months after the U.S. declared war on Japan and Germany; because of this, no one ever developed atomic power. But wartime advances in transportation made travel easy and inexpensive, and the moving around of the world's population—especially in and out of China, Asia, and Russia because of the war—was to have a lingering and disastrous effect.

Tom Swift was deemed a man without a country after the war and was forced to live in a small rural mountain village in Switzerland. Mrs. Swift joined him there, but she had to leave her son back in the US.

Mr. Flagger, in a moment of guilt for what he had done in the past, promised Mrs. Swift to get the young boy the best medical care available, and Tom Jr. was made a ward to him.

## Prologue: Thomas, A Driven Man

The ‘*Click*’ of the padlock on the pull over security gate sounded so loud in the deserted, dimly lit corridor. Mr. Flagger nodded to himself and felt somewhat safer with that infernal machine locked up. Placing the only key into his vest pocket he turned around and heard the thump, thump steps of his ward, Thomas, coming toward him.

Sighing, he knew what it meant, and knew this was not going to be a pleasant meeting. Polio had ravaged Thomas’s body, but like all the past Swifts, he fought with a vengeance, eventually winning most of the use of his body back. The best doctors, medicines, and a half dozen operations helped to see to that.

“Father Andrew,” came the young man’s voice using the customary name for his legal guardian, “please reconsider, this is our only hope!”

Mr. Flagger would have done so if he thought that it would help his ward see the world as it was and not in a dream. He had done dreadful things in the past and he was ashamed of them and, at the same time, too much of a coward to face up to what he had done. That was the barrier between him and Thomas.

Thomas knew what Flagger had done to his parents and that he refused to correct it. Afraid of his own punishment and the power he would have to give up with the World Government, he preferred to suffer Thomas’s hatred than world condemnation.

Thomas was now out to prove to the world that the Swift’s name still stood for integrity and goodwill towards humanity.

“Thomas, listen,” Mr. Flagger placed his hands on Thomas’s shoulders, forcing the boy to let go of the talisman, a shield-shape medallion with the letters T S stamped in it, he had worn it since he was a child. “It’s no good. Those other worlds that are out there are not like ours. They have oil and natural resources that we’ll only be able to dream of. Those geological maps you got for us prove that. Yes, we did find some things here on our world and in our time, but it wasn’t enough. We don’t have the technology, people or materials to waste on such deep drilling and mining.”

“But, her generator’s—“

“Sure the flying generator wing does hold promise for us and we will beef it up in size and use it on the ground, but the composite shielding it’s made of, the nano-batteries and their type of electronics are far beyond us. For god sakes where they have those almost magical black chips, we still use vacuum tubes. It’s an everyday struggle for us to keep the technology we have, never mind adding totally strange and bewildering science.”

He saw the boy had stopped listening, but continued anyway.

“Thomas, you know our history—you know that since the end of World War II in ‘38’ we have gone from one disaster to another. Here we are, twenty years after the war and we have half the world’s population that we had before that war. The influenza that ran through China, Asia, and Russia right at the end of the war wiped out a third of their people and the famine that followed in its wake took out half again as many people by the end of the next year.”

Thomas was now openly glaring at Mr. Flagger.

“Here in the West, we were hit with the influenza too. Then the polio epidemic—you know personally about that. If it wasn’t for the old League of Nations, now the World Government, and its newly formed Medical Corps we’d be back in the stone age.”

“Father!” Thomas never called him that and that told Mr. Flagger Thomas’s real state of mind.

“No son. It’s locked away by decree of the World’s Consul and it will stay that way. We don’t care to be influenced by some unknown person, for some unknown reason. This world is ours and we have to live with what we have and not some possibility that doesn’t really exist.”

“No! You’re all wrong! Wait and see!” Thomas pushed Mr. Flagger into the security gate and ran off down the corridor the best he could with his braced leg thumping hard into the floor.

“You can’t stop me, Father Andrew!” Thomas thought as he made his way down the hallway. “I’ll be back later tonight. That cheap lock won’t keep me out and when I come back with Thomasina and her knowledge of science, they’ll change their minds. And to see that Thomasina behaves, I’ll take Sandra too!”

## Chapter One: Preparations

Aristotle's shuttlecraft was in orbit around the planet that existed in the same probability as Tom's restaurant. By the time he made it back from the other side of the sun there was nothing he could do. The *Exedra* was gone, the Swifts were missing, and the restaurant was mostly missing—the foundation was in ruins.

He had no way back home. Logic dictated that he should go into sleep mode and turn the ship passive, except for its defenses. The surveillance computer would wake him when needed. The last thing he did was unreel the static power collector lines that would accumulate power as they orbited through the Van Allan radiation belt.

“Negative Zone forming one AU out from present position,” the defense computer informed Aristotle as soon as he was powered up and running. The scanners informed him that it was the *Exedra*, which had no power, but it still had one life form aboard. Alive!

A few simple strokes of the keyboard and the maneuvering jets flared into life and headed him to his Master. He reached the starship and positioned his shuttlecraft so it could mate with the docking system's dimple that was located behind the raised pilot canopy of the *Exedra*. This way the outer skins of both ships made the airlock. A secondary universal docking port was located under the ship between the drive units and the storage compartment.

Connections formed automatically and sensors took power from the shuttlecraft to open the hatches. The floor bi-folded up against the back of the pilot's seat and the smiling face of Tom III poked up.

“Thanks for the rescue, pal.” As the lift reached the deck of the shuttlecraft its gravity took hold and Tom III slumped a little under its effect. “How much Helium 3 do you have left in the tanks and what is your electrical power situation?”

“The ship has half a tank of Helium 3 and the power accumulators are full, Master Tom.”

“Humm, dump the Helium 3 into our tanks so we can start up the fission reactor. We'll continue to use your electrical power until we have some extra to spare. I don't want to stay in this neighborhood for long, if we can help it. What is the situation downstairs?” He pointed to the planet that could just be seen from a porthole.

“Not good, Master Tom. There are no Swifts at the restaurant. As a matter of fact there is no restaurant. Most of it was destroyed.” Aristotle was incapable of showing emotions, so everything was said in a flat, emotionless voice.

“Well, I guess we are on our own. Let's get this old tub running enough to



get the Negative Zone going so we can go back home. Once we're back to one hundred percent running status we'll look up the other Toms. That's if we can find them!"

"But, Master Tom, I found them, or at least the escape capsule from the restaurant."

"What! Where?" Tom III barked out as he stretched over the robots shoulder to see the instrument panels.

"Out in the vicinity of Jupiter, sir."

"For the love of Mike! Do we have enough Helium 3 to make it that far?"

"In the shuttle... two point five times, but in the *Exedra*, just enough to get out to them and then have power left over to NZ back home and be marooned ourselves out in Jupiter's orbit in our own probability."

"Good enough—that works for me. Let's go!"

\* \* \*

"Portia, you understand what you are to do?" Sergey Levenkov asked Portia Flagger. He did not trust her, but he needed her, and his nephew Peter did seem to have her wrapped around his finger. Sergey needed her money and he played her hatred of the Swifts to his advantage.

Looking in the full-length mirror that was nailed to the bathroom door of the seedy motel room they were in, he could not detect that he had on a pressure suit under his work coveralls. Stepping in even closer, he examined his face. He liked it! With the latex head mask there was no way you could see the scar that ran across his forehead, through his eye socket and down his cheekbone. His lost eye was replaced by an artificial one that matched his real eye. It even moved slightly and gave it a somewhat natural look. Dark glasses and a goatee finished the disguise.

Portia was not a beautiful woman, being only five feet tall, chubby and with a squeaky voice that grated most people's ears. She was ripe for the attention that Peter gave her. She had meet Sergey nine months ago at an air show where he was pretending to be a pylon racer. He had scared her then, but fascinated her more, and now she was completely terrified of him. His real intent at that time was to get his Russian mafia people into Flagger Communication to undermine the construction of several satellites bound for the Russian-China Com-Sat replacement program.

Because of Sandra and Thomasina Swift, with the help of Bud Kenworth and Haz Samson, the espionage scam failed and Sergey had been on the run ever since. This was his third attempt on seeking revenge. Two previous tries had failed.

"Yes Sergey, I'm to drop you off at Astros Aerodynamics, then take Peter to

work at SEI as normal. I'm then to go to the back gate of the complex and park in the woods near it and camouflage the Rover. When Peter calls me, I'm to pick him up at the gate and go the Pinetop Motel and wait for you to contact us. If anything goes wrong I'm to go home and wait for one of you to call me." She bit her lower lip and looked pensively at him.

"Good, girl. Now, Peter, remember," he turned to his nephew who was impatiently pacing the room, "I'll call you when it's time for you to go after those plans. Do you have your data stick?"

"Uncle, please don't..." The slap practically rattled Peter's teeth.

"Don't ever back talk me, Peter!" his Russian accent was thick with anger. "We lost your father, and I don't want to lose you. Now, by the numbers. Do you have the data stick?"

"Yes, sir." He answered back while he stood at attention with flames in his eyes.

"Take your time. You'll have a couple of hours to get all their inventions and designs, so use the time wisely. Get what we need and then get out of there." Sergey picked up an oversize duffel bag and swung it over his shoulder. "Let's go!"

\* \* \*

It was the third week in December and not the time of year to be outside in upper New York State, but science marches on. Astros Aerodynamics was wide open and cold. Thomasina's parka, even with all its artificial fur, was not keeping her warm. "On the other hand," she thought, "Bud seems to be enjoying himself. Sure, maybe the heated flight suit makes the difference. Next time I'll make sure I'm the one testing the generator and he can stay on the ground and freeze his butt off."

A chilly wind blew across the tarmac carrying a hint of snow in it and making Tommy shiver. But, finally, a car approached them from the main building of this converted one runway airport.

Zack Zimmerman, the director and half owner of this fast growing portion of Swift Enterprise International, was at the wheel and an old tired looking man was seated beside him. "He must be the FAA certification man that was supposed to be here an hour ago. I don't like this!" thought Tommy. She stomped her feet and clapped her hands together and started to walk towards the group of people gathered in front of the large hanger. The car stopped there and the two men got out and were greeted by the small crowd.

Tommy could hear Mr. Zimmerman calling out names and pointing to people as the inspector looked on. Bud, as pilot was introduced and the man took one look at him, turned somewhat white, and quickly turned away. Tommy was

next and being the designer of the craft she expected some questions but he barely acknowledged her and turned to Mr. Zimmerman.

“Where is this so-called aircraft?” he harshly spoke to him. “All this paper work is wrong, and I don’t have time to coddle people that don’t know how to fill out simple forms. Look at this mess. Aircraft Make: Variable attitude hover platform. What kind of nonsense is that? Propulsion Type: Quantum Gravity Drive. Ridiculous. Aircraft type: Electrical Generator. It goes on and on. I told my superiors that this was a waste of time, but no, they insisted that I come here. So, here I am. You get five minutes and then I’m gone from here, and you’ll have your big, fat, red rejection notice stamped all over this mess.” And he waved his fist full of paperwork.

Everyone was shocked at his behavior. Bud tried to step up to the man with his fist balled and was ready to duke it out with him, old or not, but Tommy stepped in, cutting him off. Looking directly at the man she said, “Sir, you were sent here to do a job. Those forms are accurate to the letter. They have already been approved by your superiors and you are here to see the actual flight of this experimental device. I don’t care who you think you are, and I don’t care if you stay. But if you leave now you won’t have a job to go back to!” Tommy then proceeded to take her bracelet phone off her wrist and tapped in a series of numbers. “Mr. Anderson, please. Tell him this is Thomasina Swift and I have one of his inspectors here with me and he is not being very cooperative. Thank you.”

Tommy then handed the phone to the FAA man. He took the phone reluctantly. His listened for a time and they could hear him stutter out replies. “Yes, sir. No, sir. Right away, sir.” He then handed the phone back to Tommy and she talked again for a moment. “Thank you, Mr. Anderson, I’m sure we’ll have no more trouble from here on in—Yes, sir, and as soon as they’re available I’ll personally let you know. Good-bye, sir.” And she put her phone back on her wrist.

“Now, Mr. Walter, shall we start again?” He nodded a ‘Yes.’ “Good, this way please, and I’ll gladly answer any questions you may have. I’m sure there will be many of them.”

Tommy, Mr. Zimmerman and the inspector went into the hanger. The group of employees stayed back to give them room. A massive black machine dominated the floor space. The fifty-foot circular turbine faced them in its upright position, its sixteen blades twisting up from the center hub. The launch base and the platform of the generator added another twenty-five feet to its height. A movable stairway led to a hatch built into the top of the platform.

Tommy stopped at the base of the turbine before the stairway as the inspector gasped at its enormous size. The straight front edge stretched thirty feet on both sides of them and when he looked up he almost fell over trying to see the top.

He frantically searched through his papers and with slightly shaking hands

read out loud to no one in particular, Gross Weight: 22,000 pounds. He then looked both left and right, stepped back several feet and looked both ways again.

“Ahhh... Miss Swift, this still looks like a wind turbine? Why am I here?”  
The bewildered and lost look on his face almost had Tommy laughing out loud.

“Now, sir, we are getting somewhere. This turbine is for wind generation of electricity and has been approved by the Department of Energy, but it is also an aircraft. Not a conventional one, that’s for sure, but it does fly and because of that it also falls under the jurisdiction of the FAA. So you are here to see that we follow all aircraft procedures and safety rules. We do not fall into any standard category on your forms except for *Experimental*.

“We do not use any known aircraft engines or wing structures, no gas envelopes either for hot air or lighter-than-air gases. We will show you all the required lights, transponders, and radio equipment. And for this flight we shall also include a human pilot to oversee everything onboard and we have an emergency escape system for him as well. Normally the platform’s ‘Brain’ would follow its pre-set programming but this time it will be by overseen by us at ground control so we can test its systems.”

The FAA man stood there, saying nothing, but doing his best not to appear lost.

“Its air time will be measured in three to five years at the minimum. We hope to take care of most repairs while it remains in flight. We will show you all of this and more if you want. Also the generator power output is equivalent to two thousand houses or a small town or industrial site.”

The inspector, Mr. Walter, stood there and blinked his eyes and swallowed hard, several times, and murmured to himself, “Why me? What did I do to deserve this? Why didn’t I retire when I had the chance?” Sighing, he looked at Tommy. “Miss, sorry about before, no excuses for my behavior. Let’s do this and then we all can get on with our... sorry, I was about to say my Christmas vacation. You see my wife is waiting in the car and...”

“Mr. Walter,” interrupted Tommy, “if I had know this I would have postponed this flight until after the New Years.” Quickly she turned to Mr. Zimmerman. “Could you call someone and please have Mrs. Walter looked after? Have her escorted anywhere she would like to go for the day. Ask if she would like to go to a shopping mall or a spa and beauty shop to receive the works, all on us. And see to it that they have the best hotel to stay in tonight and include their dinner also.”

“Be right back, Tommy. I’ll see to this myself. You take Mr. Walter on the inspection and I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Mr. Zimmerman,” Tommy tried to reply, but he was already on his way.

“Mr. Walter, do you want to call your wife and warn her or is she quick on

the up take?” Tommy already had her phone open and holding it for him to take.

\* \* \*

“As you can see, Mr. Walter, The front of this craft is sixty feet long and the front entrance hatch is in the middle with the white nose light located above the door.” Tommy pointed it out and continued to walk to the right end of the craft with the inspector following. Tommy had asked the rest of the group to make themselves scarce for awhile when he talked to his wife on the phone and they were to catch up later.

“We have the appropriate lights at the ends since this is the equivalent of the wing tips. From here you can see that the rest of the craft is built in a horizontal ‘D’ shape and the blinking red light is in the center of the ‘D’. Let’s take this work elevator up to the flight deck. I’ll take you into the control center, power room, and work/environmental room. Those three areas run the entire length of the front of the ship and directly below the turbine shroud” As they rode the elevator up, Tommy pointed out the hydraulic rams that were used to lower the turbine flat above the deck. “When we get to the ground control room we’ll lower the turbine to make ready for the flight and you’ll get to see just how streamlined this ship is.”

When the lift stopped and they stepped out onto the two thousand square feet of deck space, Mr. Walter hesitated for a moment. To his left, towering over sixty feet high, was the back wall of the turbine, and on his right, one of the enormous hydraulic jacks that was two feet thick and reached twenty-eight feet and pinned into the turbine housing. The deck was totally empty except in the center where there was a large eight by eight square foot area outlined in red with a big red ‘X’ from corner to corner.

“Can we get to the control room soon, Miss Swift, I’m feeling a bit woozy right now.” The color had drained once more from his face.

“This way,” Tommy hooked her right arm through his left one and led her to a hatch in the middle of the wall. It was a double-door air pressure lock big enough for three people. Once inside his color improved and he felt better.

Tommy proceeded to the pilot seat that sat ten feet in from the airlock, and turned on the power to the flight console. The whole wall in front of her lit up and split into nine sections, each one concerned with a different operation of the ship. Touching the control pad in front of her, she zoomed in on the communication readouts and pulled it forward. A handsome, squared jawed, young man appeared.

“Hi, Miss Swift, ready for the test?”

“Not yet, Hank, but tell Bud to come over and sound the Test Alert. Once Bud’s aboard give us fifteen minutes and we’ll come to the flight center and let Bud babysit the ship.”

“Roger on that, and I’ll leave us hooked up.”

Tommy pushed the screen to the side and pulled up the front camera and rotated it toward the control center. They watched Bud make his way across to them. She got up and opened the floor hatch that was behind the seat and led down into the infrastructure of the platform.

“The front stairway where we started this tour leads into the internal working of the ship. Since it is mostly open latticework and pathways, it is not pressurize at any time. Only four sections are, and this is one of them.

“All that you see here is part of the redundancy control systems. We have three ways of controlling the ship. Once the flight perimeters are set at the ground control center, the main computer, Brains, here on the ship takes control and follows the programs in its memory banks.” Tommy pointed out a section of controls and monitors to the left of the flight seat. “The second way is from the ground control center. And the last is by a pilot here in this room.” They could now hear Bud making his way up the ladder.

“Gentlemen, you have met earlier so we’ll dispense with the niceties. That hatch next to the main computer station, Mr. Walter, opens to the environmental area and the work station, if something has to be repaired by hand and not just pulled, discarded and a new one plugged back in. The heat, oxygen and air pressure units are in that area for ease of repair and space. An access hatch to the interior of the shroud crawlway space for maintenance is also there. Do you want to see it?”

“No, maybe later if there’s time... uh, please continue.” He took a quick glance at Bud and turned from him. Tommy looked at Bud and raised her eyebrows a bit. Bud shrugged.

“The hatch opposite to this one holds the turbine power center that regulates the turbine and feeds the electrical power down to the ground. There are control units that siphon off whatever electrical power is needed to run the ship. The backup nano-batteries are storied there also and another hatch for the other side of the shroud crawlway. Care to look at *that* one?”

“No, I’ve seen enough, Miss Swift. If you’re ready to go to the control center, I am.” He had been acting cold and anxious ever since Bud came aboard. She looked at Bud again and he frowned back at her. He was looking at Mr. Walter, who was now fidgeting.

“Mr. Walter,” asked Bud at last, “is your first name, Marvin?”

Looking like a trapped animal, his eyes dotting back and forth from Tommy to Bud, he could barely be heard saying, “Miss Swift, I have to leave now before there’s trouble. I’m sorry, but the FAA will have to send someone else!” and he made a dash for the back door.

Bud reached out, grabbed his arm, and stopped him. Mr. Walter let out a sob

and turned around to face Bud. He was suddenly an emotional wreck. His eyes held tears and he was trembling.

“Please, Mr. Walter, you misunderstand! I want to thank you! You saved my father’s life that day and plenty of others too!” Bud was holding his arm and placed his other hand on his shoulder. “You could not have saved those other two men no matter how long you’d have waited to close that door. They were doomed no matter what. That jet slid over them way before they got anywhere near the cargo elevator. If you had waited any longer to close that door, you and those ten men inside would have died and that jet would have exploded inside the superstructure instead of against the elevator door. The loss of life would have been in the hundreds instead of four.”

“Mr. Kenworth, you don’t know how much I regretted closing that door. The look on those men faces as I closed it on them, sealing their doom, I’ll have to live with that every day.” Bud gave Mr. Walter a minute to compose himself before he told Tommy the rest of the story.

“Tommy, it was thirty years ago when my father was still in the Navy, stationed on an aircraft carrier. There were maneuvers that day with jets taking off and landing constantly. A landing went wrong. The landing hook missed all but the last cable and that one snapped. Somehow the plane nosed up, then smashed into the deck and skidded toward the ‘island’ as it is called. Two men were on the deck; they had no reason to being there, but they were. The accident happened and the jet headed right toward them and the open cargo elevator that was bringing up equipment to the side of the deck.”

“Mr. Walter was the supply officer at the time. My father was an equipment handler with nine other crew members. You heard the rest. The two men and the pilot and his radioman died that day. There was an investigation and he was cleared of all wrongdoing, but some people just won’t be reasonable and listen to the facts. There was a big hullabaloo and cries of injustice for more than a year. My father always told me that Mr. Walter was a hero that day and if I ever get a chance to thank the man that I must buy him a beer or as many as he wanted.”

Mr. Walter listened to the account with his head bent down. As Bud finished he looked at Bud and softly said. “I recognized the name, and you look so much like your father, that for a moment I thought you were him. I never knew for sure which men of that crew hated me because of that day. So many of them jumped to the conclusion that I panicked to save my own skin over that of those two men. I was the only one to see the whole thing and everyone else only saw a portion of it from where they were working. I had seconds in which to react and I choose the safety of the ship first.

“Mr. Walter, from what my father said about it and from the flight deck tapes he said he saw, you did the right thing, and if my father believes you’re innocent...

then you are!” The communications unit started to beep loudly and all three of them were forced back to the present aboard the platform.

“Bud, that’s for you. Tell them we got busy and forgot the time. We’re on our way now. Mr. Walter, down the hatch and as we go out you can take a look at the quantum gravity drive cone systems.”

“Down the hatch? Yes, please, Miss Swift, lead on.” And he stepped to one side for her to climb down first. As Mr. Walter started to descend Bud called out.

“Sir, that beer—later, after the test?”

“Sorry, Bud, but I don’t drink.”

“Great! Neither do I. Tommy and I know of this great Pakistani restaurant that has the best saffron lamb and stuffed pastries in the world. The brother and sister that run the place are fascinating people and the sister does some really out of this world oil paintings that she sells on the side. I’m sure you’ll like it!”

The older man smiled gratefully. “You’re on Bud, but it’s strictly as friends.”

“Come on you two,” called up Tommy from below, “Make supper dates later. We got a ship to launch and we’re two hours behind schedule!”



## Chapter Two: The Rise...

“Peter, make ready. I feel the turbine blades being lowered. All their attention should be on the test flight now.” His Russian accent was heavier when he talked to Peter. “Have you chosen which computer terminal you are going to use?” Sergey was on his Blue-Tooth in the crawlway of the shroud near the access door where there was the most room to stand up in. As the shroud was lowered, the angle of the crawlway changed from vertical to horizontal.

“Yes Sergey, I have. I’ll use the one at Barclay’s flight school. No one is there now and if I have to I can steal one of his planes. I just might anyways. I don’t like the idea of that girl being with us anymore. She has served her usefulness. I wish to be rid of her!”

“Excellent, Peter! Yes, do that. Ready the plane first, and then get the information we need. Fly out to our safe house in Maine, leave the plane there and make your way to Kazakhstan. You know were to meet me in Astana.” Sergey was pleased with his nephew. He was afraid that the woman would be a cause of trouble when it was time to leave her behind. “I shall not be talking to you again.”

“Победа: Victory!”

\* \* \*

Mr. Walter watched from the glass enclosed control room in amazement as the roof of the hanger slid open to the warning sound of klaxons, and a light show with the late morning sun reflecting off the carbon fiber material in a blaze of different colors. At the same time the giant turbine hinged down towards the deck and the colors shimmered down its side as well. Several monitors showed the procedure from various angles. When it was fully horizontal, locking clamps extend themselves out twelve feet above the deck and locked it down. That left an area where items could be stored or transported on the deck that were too big to transported inside. The roof was opened and turbine was down—it was ready to go.

Tommy was at the main controls. Mr. Zimmerman was back and his two interns, Arvy Hanson and Hank Sterling were manning the secondary control units providing weather surveillance and communications to the ship. They were also handling a conference call to the SEI boardroom where Mr. Swift and his daughter Sandy, Haz Samson, one of the company’s VP, Hank Avery, company general manager and Tommy’s assistant Hinkle were watching. The only person of importance not there was SEI security chief, Hardin Ames, who was busy overseeing his men.

“Bud, we’re all ready in here. We set the auto guidance system to search out

a zone of wind activity of fifty miles an hour at an altitude of fifteen thousand feet with a ceiling of twenty-two thousand feet. With that front coming in from Canada it shouldn't be hard to find. Our ground sensors show a low speed jet stream at seventeen thousand feet and we'll let the 'Brains' do the finding. The ship is locked into a five-mile radius of this GPS coordinate. We don't want you all over the state or beyond. Do you have all this information on your position/parameter screen?"

"Copy that, Tommy. I'm strapped in and ready for the joy ride. Up, up and away!" he joked.

Tommy turned on the PA system and announced: "On my mark, the first flight of the SEI's *Bud Air Master One* commences, 9:59:54, 55—Energize the Quantum Cones—57, 58, start cone rotation... Mark!" And without a sound or a roar of engines the *Bud Air Master One* lifted off from its ground platform unit and rose slowly above the roof of the hanger, it then rotated to the northwest and started to accelerate upwards and a few degrees off vertical.

"How does she feels, Bud?" inquired Tommy, even though she knew the answer from the monitor screens.

"As smooth as silk, acceleration steady at ninety feet per second. Be at 15,000 feet in two and a half minutes at this rate. My weather monitor shows a 50 MPH jet stream at 16,200 feet from the North West. Do you concur?"

"Bud, this is Hank on weather, and its affirmative. Looks a little gusty, but well within the limits for this test."

"Roger that, and we're slowing down... stopping at 16,222 feet, going into hover mode. The Brain is unlocking the turbine and activating the rams." In a few moments Bud could hear the upright position locks snap into the shroud base and a green light turned on in the generator sector of the large screen. As he watched the screen, atmospheric wind speed appeared and matched up within the prearranged setting for this test. The red 'Break' light blinked several times and then the 'Break Release' turned green.

Without the slightest moan or sputter the giant turbine blades started to rotate. Faster and faster they whirled, gaining speed with the blade pitch constantly adjusting to meet the ever-increasing speed. At fifty point one MPH the speed balanced out and all the readings stopped bobbing about. One point two megawatts of power were now ready to be transferred down to the ground.

The 'Brains' adjusted the flow of electricity through the Power points—siphoning off just the correct amount of power to operate the flying generator—and now reversed the power flow. Instead of power going up to fly the platform the generated power was fed down to the ground. Either way the platform stayed afloat. The ground base converted the direct current to alternate current used in the power grids. Before any of it would be allowed out to the public power lines it was first fed into Astros Aerodynamics private power grid for their use. The rest, if any,

was made available to be use by the community.

“Tommy,” Bud asked as he looked at the power readout going down to the ground unit, “do we have a problem with the power output? I expected a lot more than what we’re showing”

“It’s okay, fly boy, we’re not at our primary wind speed. When we go for the higher wind speed of one hundred miles or more we’ll get eight times the power output at just twice the wind speed. That will be around nine megawatts and if we dare go for the two hundred mile an hour mark we’ll be production over seventy-two megawatts, and that’s over ten thousand houses powered by a single fifty foot machine. What do you think now?”

“I don’t,” he replied with a laugh, “that’s your department and you’re welcome to it. How long are we staying at this altitude and wind speed? Don’t we have other flight tests to attend too?”

“Don’t rush. You haven’t been up there for ten minutes yet! Sit tight. At eleven we’ll go looking for that one hundred mile per hour breeze for you to play in. Meanwhile, just twiddle your thumbs and let me play with all these cute switches and dials.”

“Tommy, have you notice the environmental readouts?” asked Hank Sterling. “It’s registering oxygen consumption equal to about two people. We know that Bud’s a big man, but not that big!”

“When did it start to show up, Hank?”

“It’s been there from the start. That’s why I’m looking at it as a sensor malfunction. The air pressure is not changing, so it’s not a leak. But I thought it best to mention it to you.”

“Thanks. Keep an eye on it and tell Bud about it. See if his sensors have the same reading. If they do we may have a problem somewhere.”

\* \* \*

Peter Levenkov waited thirty minutes before he made his move. He called his section boss over and complained of stomach pains and of wanting to go see the plant nurse. This time of year no one wanted to work with a sick man, so he was relieved of duty. Whistling a quiet tune to himself, he made his way by a roundabout route to Bud’s Aerodrome. It was the biggest hanger in the complex, maybe in the state. It was originally built to house the giant dirigible Sandy’s Grandpa Swift had made back in the thirties.

The back door lock of the hanger was child’s play for him. Uncle Sergey had him picking locks when he was six. Once inside he stood by the closed door and let his eyes adjust to the low light level in the huge open space. He expected to find two or three small planes that Bud used in his flight school, but not the weird

geodesic dome that stood before him.

He had been employed for a month now at SEI and he never heard of this project. It was only half a dome and part of it flared out to a rectangular shape that was sixty feet long by twenty feet high. That made it more like a 'D' laying flat on the ground. Peter could not make out any more detail than that, and he could not see a way in, even if he had the time to waste. Why the Swifts should want to build this bizarre shape dome in a hanger was beyond him, and he did not care. He had bigger fish to fry.

He made his way to the front of the hanger and located the airplanes he had expected to find. There were three planes to choose from. Two of them were useless to him. The first plane was the pylon racer that Bud used to race with, but its motor sat in a cradle and lots of its small parts were strewn over a workbench. The other one was a bi-plane that was three-quarter built. The skeletal frame was complete and the wire rigging was done, but everything else was missing. That left the Cessna Turbo Skylane. It had to be Bud's instruction plane for the school.

Peter climbed into the pilot seat and turned on the power. The instrument panel lit up and all the indicators were green. It had a half a tank of fuel, good for four to five hundred miles. More than what he needed to fly to Maine. He turned the power off and looked around and found the remote to open the hanger door. He put it in his pocket. Satisfied, he left the plane and went into the office that was attached to the side of the hanger and settled in for a couple hours of computer hacking that he loved to do. Within a few keystrokes he was up and running.

\* \* \*

"Hey, Bud, wake up! Come on, sleepy head," Tommy called out as the clock read ten past eleven.

Bud eyes flew open and in seconds he had gone over all the readouts on both the ship and generator. "I wasn't asleep! Just resting. I'm exhausted from all the work I'm not doing." He yawned and stretched his arms.

"Well, we've been busy, and it's time for you to go out to the deck and play elevator man." Tommy had a twinkle in her eye and was about to burst out laughing.

"Elevator man?" Bud pretended to scan the nine sections on his monitor and whined, "Tom-m-m-m-my! I know that I'm the redundant hunk of equipment here, and a cute stewardess would have been welcome company, but all this isn't making me look very so good to Mr. Walter. Or did you put him to sleep as well?" Bud hated it when he let thing slip out of his control. But he was very bored.

"No, Mr. Walter is very much awake and stunned that a man in your position on a never before flown aircraft carrying a turbine that generates nine megawatts of

electricity thousands of feet in the air could be so relaxed that he could fall asleep.”

“Mr. Walter,” Bud called out, “it’s the company I’m keeping, or the lack thereof. I see that the GPS is showing that we’re above your test area, Tommy. And at the twenty thousand feet you wanted for your little experiment. It’s a balmy minus fifty-six degrees out there. Time to plug in and put on a helmet if I’m going for a walk. When I’m ready I’ll let you know. Out for now!”

Bud already had his pressure suit on and all he needed was to put on his helmet and gloves, then strap on a small emergency oxygen tank. He didn’t even have to turn it on for the two minutes it took him to get outside. The helmet had enough air inside it. When the airlock opened he stood there for a moment and adjusted his senses to the fact that he was stepping out onto a deck that was sixty feet in diameter, and at the edge of the deck it was a seven and three-quarter miles drop to the ground. The sky was one flat color of blue and there was no indication that a fierce wind was blowing at over a one-hundred miles an hour around the ship.

Set into the wall by the airlock was a recessed box with a sliding Plexiglas cover that held a lever that needed to be rotated ninety degrees clockwise—above it was stenciled ‘CANOPY DEPLOYMENT SWICH.’ Bud reached in and turned it. He then pulled out the oxygen and electrical connections below it. He slid them into a special holster that was built into his suit and plugged both lines in.

Bud’s visor lit up with a number of visual aids just like the heads up display in airplanes. If he did nothing in several seconds they would all disappeared from view except for one. He could call them back up by voice command if he needed them. If anything did need his attention it would reappear automatically. This was all part of Tommy’s new smart suit she was developing for use on future turbine maintenance and other things. The remaining status marker was communications and it was on at all times.

“Tommy, I started the deployment of the canopy. It’s going smoothly. Do you see it on one of your monitors?”

“A clear and sharp image, Bud.” From twenty feet above the deck, a long slot opened up on the wall behind him and a metallic-looking canvas came out and covered the whole deck forming a roof. While in motion, it was snapping and rolling in the fierce wind, but when it finished rolling out, a small electric current was applied and the fabric stiffened up. It was made out of one of Tommy’s and Betty White’s nano-crystal fabrics.

“We’re ready down here whenever you want to start.”

“Give me a minute more to get in position. Oh, and next time add sides to the canopy. I’m a pilot and we’re kinda used to enclosed spaces. Being out here in the open like this is definitely distracting.”

Bud moved over to the other side of the airlock, away from the air and

power connections and slid another Plexiglas door open and turned that lever. The box was marked, 'Elevator.' The red outlined square on the deck started to rise up. It was a cage within a two-sided box. The cage formed the elevator itself and inside each box wall ran two half-inch thick Crystal Carbon Nanotubes cables that Tommy had engineered when she invented her flying generator wing.

Under the deck were four large drums that held the cables. The spools were ten feet in diameter and ten feet high and held close to ten miles of cable each. The cables ran from the spools up the wall of the box and back down to connect to a two-ton platform equipped with high pressure air jets designed to help stabilize it as it was lowered to the ground. Bolts would shoot into the ground to anchor the base so it wouldn't move when the cables were tensioned up so the elevator cage could travel on them.

When the elevator/box reached its height of nine feet, it locked into position and a green strobe light began to flash from inside the cage. Bud walked over to the lift which featured a duplicate control system, one on each wall, to lower the weighted platform.

"Tommy, about those GPS coordinates that I have, do you verify them and should I start lowering the weight?" With the roof above him and the wall of the cage nearby he now felt very comfortable.

"Go ahead, Bud. Your position is good. Start lowering and get back inside. It's going to take twenty minutes for it to reach the ground, you might as well get comfortable, and sorry... no coffee, tea or stewardess."

"Why should my luck change now?" Bud replied as he went back inside and cycled through the air lock.

"Yes indeed," a heavy accented voice greeted him as he stepped into the control room. "It has changed to none at all, as of this moment. Your life now depends on what your dear friend Thomasina is willing to do to save your life." Bud stared at the stranger that had stepped out of the generator room just as he walked in and at the .44 Magnum he held in his hand. It didn't waiver as it pointed at his stomach.

Tommy was in shock, but not for long. With Bud's radio still on, she had heard everything. She instantly hit the emergency button on her watch bracelet and even though she was close to a hundred miles away from SEI, the alarm sounded in Hardin Ames' security control center and on his phone bracelet.

Only Sandy and Hinkle were left at the SEI conference room and could see what was happening. Like Tommy, they had heard everything. All the others had gone back to work after the initial flight and start up that had happened so smoothly.

As they both sat there too afraid to speak, the door suddenly opened and slammed back against the wall as Ames came running in knowing that the

conference call was going on here in this room.

“Tommy, report if you can, this is Ames.” He spoke clearly so she would know he was there to help her if he could.

In the couple of minutes it took for Ames to come to the boardroom things continued happening up on the ship. The stranger had made Bud get on his knees facing away from him and zip tied his feet together and his hands behind his back and he told him to stay there or else.

Tommy just watched knowing that any move on her part only endangered Bud more. The man finally put the gun back in its holster and added one more big zip tie between the ones on Bud’s legs and wrists yanking it tight and pulling Bud over in a hunch. He then pushed Bud over onto his side and spun him to face the front of the room. The man then leaned against the generator door where he could see both the monitors and watch Bud with ease.

“Thomasina, my dear, Thomasina, we meet again,” he laughed and that accent of his laugh was one that Tommy had heard before.

“What! You don’t recognize me? Oh, yes, the face.” He proceeded to take it off. He grabbed the back of his neck with both hands and pulled the back of his head up and over and then down his face. It pulled off cleanly.

“Sergey Levenkov!” Tommy choked out in rage.

“I hope you didn’t think I would forget our unfinished business, did you? I know I couldn’t. For every day I had to look at the reminder of what you did to me. And those formulas from that half-witted professor; I don’t know how you did it, but they’re completely useless. Peter and his associates wasted more time and money than what they were worth. I’m glad that fool is dead. Now I come to take what I want and to pay you back for what you did to me!” The scar on his face had been received when he tried to machine gun down both Bud and Tommy while they were testing wing designs by the lake. The airplane he was piloting hit one of Tommy’s test planes and crashed in Lake Copland.

“Revenge is sweet, and probably not as sweet as you, Thomasina, but sweetness is a passing thing just like life is. And if you want your friend, Mr. Kenworth to keep his life you do exactly what I say.”

“Sergey, you are in control, so tell me what you want and I’ll do it.” Tommy was reading off a ‘Q’ card that Ames was holding up for her to see on her monitor. On the bottom of the card he wrote, “Do what he wants, and delay him as long as you can. We need time!”

“Yes, now you are obedient and you’d better stay that way or else.” He motioned his hand across his throat. “I want to exchange you for Bud, and don’t tell me you can’t, for your new elevator system is about to touch down. When it does, I’ll send the cage down and you can be its first passenger.”

Tommy moaned and started to act panicky. “I can’t! I tell you, I can’t! I’ll

die before I make it that high. There's no air to breathe and the temperature would kill me!"

"Thomasina, I warned you! And, I am very disappointed. I know what you're trying to do, so stop it or I'll throw Buddy boy out the airlock... and don't think I won't! I have nothing to lose and you have everything to lose. Bud, this ship, your reputation, and whatever else that may happen when this thing hits the ground from seven miles up. Ahh! There is the touchdown, and yes, successful lock down. Do you want the honor of figuring out how to get up here or do I have to tell you? Better be Swift about it, too!" His harsh laugh held a hint of insanity in it.

"No, Sergey, you win, but I need at least an hour to get the atmosphere equipment and to install it in the elevator cage floor once it gets down here."

"I'm a reasonable man, one hour from now and you'd better be on your way up. You better start to let the cage down for your time has started already!"

Tommy hit the descend key for the cage and mentally cringed. She had hoped for an hour and a half—a half hour for the cage to get down and an hour to install the equipment, but he had seen through it. Darn!



## Chapter Three: And The Fall

“Sergey, I’m leaving now. You’ve giving me no choice. Two men are staying here to monitor the ship and stay in communication with you. I’ll be back when I’m finished setting up the elevator cage.” Tommy started to get up when Sergey called out.

“There’s no need to come back to where you are. I see that there is a video-cam in the cage and it had better not stop working at any time. Just step in when you’re ready and come on up. The clock is ticking! Tic-Tic.”

Tommy got up from the control station and walked out the door. Once she was out of range of the audio and video pickup she signaled Mr. Walter and Mr. Zimmerman to come out to her.

“Thank you, Mr. Walter for your silences in there. I know as an FAA inspector you have the right and duty to call in Homeland Security and the FBI, but I really don’t need all that government interference right now. This is a personal matter between Sergey and me and not a national security issue.”

“Tommy, say no more. I’m walking out of here, and by my watch that was ten minutes ago! I’m doing this for Bud and to pay back Bud’s father for all his faith in my judgment on that ship. God speed, young lady, and bring Bud back to his family Tell Bud we’ll do that diner in a week or so.” Nodding his head to them he walked out of the hanger. Tommy couldn’t think of anything to say to thank him enough for what he had just done.

“Thomasina,” spoke Mr. Zimmerman softly, “that is a man worthy of being called a friend.” Looking around he spotted one of his workers and called out to him, “Joey, catch up to the inspector there,” he said and pointed out the door. “Take him to wherever he wants to go. Remind him that his car is still in the parking lot and ask, Anna, my secretary where his wife is. Thanks!”

“No problem, Boss,” and he went to catch up with Mr. Walter.

Tommy was on her bracelet phone talking to Ames. “Yes, that’s right. Lock down SEI. Use the same precautions as if it’s an ‘Intruder alert’ but don’t launch the generator aircraft. I don’t like this! Sergey is up to no good and it can’t be just to get at Bud and me. Where is his nephew? I’m sure he wants to hurt us just as bad after what happened to his father.”

“What about the Simple-bots? You don’t want them to go online, do you?” Ames asked. They were a vital part of the defense program for SEI in the past.

“Yes, I do. Get them to Bud’s hanger, ASAP, and get Hinkle there also. Stay with him personally, Mr. Ames. Right now Bud’s life may be in his hands as well as mine. Give him your phone and tell him to go with you and have him listen to

me as you go. We've only got thirty minutes!"

\* \* \*

In Bud's office the computer shut down in mid word and the office door slammed shut and locked.

"крыс—Rats!" called our Peter, "times up. I wonder if they know I'm here?" He didn't waste any time, he simply got up, took the memory stick out of its slot and pocketed it. Looking at the half glass door he chuckled to himself and picked up the desk chair and threw it. The chair sailed right through, shattering the glass out of the door. Stepping gingerly over the shards, he reached up, grabbed the top of the outside door jam and, heaving himself up, swung his body forward. He cleared the window frame and landed on his feet on the other side.

He easily made his way to the oversize hanger door to check out the locking mechanism on the door track. "Childs play," he thought, "an electronic dead-bolt and a key release." He took out his lock pick set, once more, and picked the lock. He did the same thing on the other side of the door. Fingering the door remote, he touched the up button and heard the satisfying sound of the electric motors engaging the door.

He quickly stopped it and trotted over to the *Cessna Turbo*. As he pulled himself into the plane he began to hum a little childhood ditty, *I'm King of the Mountain*.

\* \* \*

Hinkle was hanging onto the dashboard and the door frame of the jeep for dear life. Ames was not driving recklessly but fast—too fast for Hinkle. He could see the hanger off in the distance and the aircraft door appeared to be going up. The jeep accelerated even faster and Ames' face took on a look of ferocity.

A small plane started to roll out and turned in their direction to take off. The unknown pilot spotted them coming, did a one-eighty and accelerated the short distance to the second runway that crossed the north end of the main one, and turned right to get away from the jeep.

Ames, seeing this, turned off the tarmac and cut across the back of the hanger, kicking up stones and dirt as he sped the jeep around the building. The wild maneuver cut a large portion off the distance between them. He forced the jeep back onto the runway and pulled up alongside of the plane.

The front wheels of the plane started to leave the ground when Ames jerked the wheel hard to the left and slammed on the brakes. The jeep went into a spin.

"Duck, Hinkle!" warned Ames as the jeep hit the plane and managed to rip off the back stabilizer wing and half of the rudder. The jeep careened off in one

direction and the plane went skidding in another.

The jeep kept spinning and because the damaged tail section had jammed under the driver's wheel, it heaved up and down like a bucking horse, throwing Ames out and onto the tarmac. The jeep came to an abrupt stop and Hinkle scrambled out of it as fast as he could, vowing never to ride with Ames again! He stumbled his way to Ames' side who was slowly trying to get up.

The plane spun and tipped over onto the passenger side, ripping the right wing to shreds. It finally came to a stop on its side. Smoke was billowing out of the engine compartment making it harder for Peter, who was dazed but not hurt, to get out. He managed to open the pilot's door and pulled himself up. He was coughing and choking on the fumes, and his eyes felt as if they were on fire.

Hinkle hauled Ames up onto his feet and they both almost fell back down when Ames's left leg gave out from underneath him.

"Broken, damn it!" cursed Ames as Hinkle half carried him back to the jeep and sat him down. They could hear distant wails of sirens but couldn't see them. Looking over to the crashed plane they could see Peter dropping to the ground and making his way out of the smoke. He looked toward the jeep and could see that Ames was hurt by the way Hinkle was holding him up. Ames and Hinkle looked back at him through the thirty feet that separated them.

"Well, kid," Ames murmured, "it's up to you. Payback can be a bitch, but it does have its rewards."

Hinkle shaking his head in disbelief at what he was about to do, let go of Ames. With a mighty roar, he charged like a mad bull toward Peter. Peter for his part took one look at the chubby man screaming his way toward him and started to laugh. He struck a classic pose with one foot in front of the other and held up his hands with his thumbs tucked in and sides of his hands ready to deliver two quick karate chops.

'Whack, whack,' and that should have been it, and Peter would walk away the winner. Instead he was slammed into by a hundred and ninety-five pound juggernaut that plowed right into him without stopping, knocking the wind out of him as he flew through the air and hit the ground landing on his back. Hinkle did an about face and with the grace of a walrus threw himself on top of him, forcing out what little air Peter had manage to gasp in, pinning him to the ground. Peter wasn't going anywhere fast. He was unconscious with a few broken ribs as an added, and painful, bonus.

\* \* \*

"Okay, Mr. Zimmerman, while I change into this pressure suit have the boys lash down the oxygen tanks into the cage and don't forget to add an extra long air

hose just in case. Were you able to find a break-away electrical connection for between the suit heater and batteries?"

"All set and ready to go," he answered back. "We even rigged up a Taser into your left glove finger tips, just press your thumb to the tip of your baby finger and it will be ready to fire in five seconds. And, Thomasina, don't argue with me! It's Bud's life you have to think of, and a little zap into Sergey might do him some good."

"Somehow I doubt it, but thanks anyways. Could you call Ames and find out where Hinkle is? I expected to hear from him by now." She left Mr. Zimmerman to change as he made his call. When she came back out of the washroom she found a very sober looking man.

"There's been a delay. Ames is on the way to the hospital, but Hinkle is all right. You just have to revise your plan, that's all."

"That's all!" shouted Tommy. What happened?" She asked as she looked at her watch, twenty minutes to go.

"It seems they had a little run in with Peter Levenkov. He was stealing Bud's Cessna and Ames was forced to hit the plane with the jeep..."

"What!" Tommy bellowed in disbelief.

"It gets better. Ames was thrown from the jeep after it hit the plane and broke his leg. Peter was about to get away when Hinkle tackled him and knocked him out, apparently breaking some of Peter's ribs while he was at it."

"Oh, my God!" Tommy didn't know if she wanted to laugh or cry.

"Hinkle told me he'll get the ship there before you reach the generator platform and that he talked to John, the Simple-bot technician, and he said he can do it. All you have to do is make sure that they're all outside on the deck. And seeing that Sergey won't let you on board till he has a chance to check you out, he'll have to be out there and he won't leave Bud inside to cause mischief, so he'll be outside too. So it should work as you planed but without you taking the risk!"

"So, I'm to believe that this is all a coincidence and not some master plan arranged by you guys to keep me out of trouble?"

"Thomasina, we don't have the time for this type of shenanigans and your life is still on the line going up there into Sergey's grip. We're doing what is best under the circumstances and that's all."

"Sorry, Mr. Zimmerman, I'm tired and frustrated about this whole thing, forgive me?"

"Of course. Now, let's get this over and done with." And he took her arm and they went out to the waiting truck to drive to the elevator test area just beyond the end of the runway.

\* \* \*

“Now, John, you’re sure of this? We don’t have to strap her down?”

Hinkle was looking at the Tommy-bot sitting in the middle of the *Star Spear* with her fingers laced into the steel mesh. She had on a flight suit just like Tommy’s and a clear face mask so you could see who she was.

“Are you kidding?” The Simple-bot technician answered back. He was in full Simple-bot garb, now totally wireless. A touch pad on his sleeve was all he needed. Tommy interfaced her radio-video Power Transfer device from the suit to the control computers in the truck, and back to the Simple-bot, making it totally portable. “You’ll have to break her arms off to get her free if I don’t relax her grip.” Hinkle nodded his understanding.

“Let’s go,” John urged. “You’ll be doing the flying of the *Star Spear* by remote control from here in the hanger and this time I’m really going to help Tommy out. With this new wireless sensory awareness suit and the Power Transfer device, the Simple-bot and I become one. Once we are joined together all my inputs come from the Simple-bot. I might physically be here in the hanger pretending to do all that is needed to make the Tommy-bot work, but to me I’m the robot! You won’t believe how it feels to be super-human, and it’s all because of Tommy. You’re not the only one who worships the ground she walks on. There’s not a Tech in this place who doesn’t!”

Hinkle looked at John in astonishment. Being a lone wolf-type, he could not conceive of that notion. John put his arm over Hinkle shoulder and laughed. “Half of us are married too, Hinkle, and this does not take away from our wives. Let’s say she’s the Queen of Technodom and we’re her willing soldiers going off to war and this time it’s more than we geeks ever dreamed of. We’re the shakers and doers today, so let’s do it! ”

\* \* \*

Tommy stood several feet away from the cage that was part of the elevator system to the generator platform some seven miles above her. The cage was ordinary in itself. Slightly over six feet square with two sides of heavy nanowire and a solid roof. The other two sides had sliding wire doors to help keep things inside. It was fully open to the weather and was meant to carry objects only and not for the use of transporting people.

The four corner guide cables disappeared very quickly into the sky and the platform itself was a dot to the eye, more a glint of the sun off its surface than anything else. Spare air tanks and nano-batteries were lashed down inside the cage making a ‘U’ shape space. Air tanks flanked two sides and batteries were set on the backside, so that Tommy was somewhat protected from the harsh winds she would

encountered along the way. Once she was inside the flimsy walls, a protective panel was to be added over the top to help seal her in for the ride up.

“Tommy, five minutes,” and Mr. Zimmerman handed her the airtight, clear face, helmet. “The *Star Spear* is on route and will hold off unloading till you give the signal. Just don’t mix up the radio channels!” and he laughed a little trying to relieve some of the tension. Tommy took the helmet and gave him a quick squeeze of a hug.

“Zachariah Zimmerman, you’re the best!” With a sigh she calmly walked into the cage and looked up to the ceiling to the video camera. “I’m here, Sergey, and I know you can hear and see me. I’m putting on my helmet now and connecting the air and power lines. The radio will be on at all times and we can talk if you want too. The only thing I want is to be able to see that Bud is all right when I get up there or I won’t open the cage and step out. The techs have rewired it and only I can open it. This is not to be your way only, understood?” Her voice had a hard and determined sound to it.

“Of course, Tommy, this was somewhat expected and when you leave the cage and step way over to the side, out of the way, I shall let your precious Buddy boy go to the elevator and descend. Then and only then will we talk and settle our differences, yes?” Tommy could hear laughter behind his voice and the superiority he felt over the situation.

Tommy pressed the up button and the eight electric motors started to spin and apply force to the cable wheels. Each motor helped to lift the cage and spread out the grabbing force that each needed to exert on the cable as it passed through the gearing. The cage pulled its way up the lines slowly but steadily at a speed of ten miles per hour. Looking up, she could see a tiny spot of light in the sky.

Tommy could feel her pressure suit adjust to the ever lowering air pressure and colder temperature of the thinning atmosphere. She had time to think of all the things that could go wrong and the lives that it could affect and she hated it. None of this was what she thought her life was going to be like in the States.

The makeshift shield held most of the roaring turbulent wind at bay. Remarkably the ride was solid and smooth. The harmonics that she was afraid of did not set in between the cables, but then she still had a long way to go before reaching her destination.

The mere glint of sunlight resolved itself into a larger and larger spot in the sky. Sergey was content to watch her on the monitor and say nothing to her, knowing it made the ride up even more nerve-racking. He watched Bud and could see him getting more and more angry over his helplessness and being the cause of this situation.

When the cage was well on its way up Sergey got up and cut the leg to hands restraint strap. He then pulled Bud to his feet and slammed him hard against the

side wall just to let him know who was still in control. He took Bud's helmet and pushed it forcefully down over his head and clamped it closed. He opened the door he had stepped out of earlier and pulled a large bag into the room. Reaching in, he took out a similar-looking helmet and a pair of gloves and put them on.

Glancing once more at the monitor to see if anything had changed in the rising cage—nothing had—he open the airlock door, manhandled Bud into it and stepped in himself. It only took a moment and they were outside in the cold and nearly airless deck. He plugged air lines into Bud's and his suits and a power led into his, but none into Bud's. He then pulled Bud over to one of the massive hydraulic rams and zip-tied him to it and left him there to slowly freeze.

"Tommy, don't come up here!" Bud yelled into his helmet as the communication system had turned on and the 'no power' icon was blinking in his helmet.

"Hush now, Buddy boy, if you behave I'll plug you in so you won't freeze. You hear that Tommy? Your friend here is without power right now for his heating coils, so you know what that means. No fooling around, or it's bye-bye Buddy boy."

"Sergey, you promised not to hurt him!"

"Thomasina, I'm not hurting him. I can't help it if you put him in such a harsh environment. Well, did you not ask to be able to see him? Do as you're supposed to do and he can hook himself up to your power in the cage as he goes down and be toasty warm."

"I HATE YOU, SERGEY!!" Tommy shouted back in anger as the cage was about to reach the platform. She quickly changed radio channels and spoke one word, "Now!" and switched back.

Hinkle was sweating bullets, not that he was hot or holding the *Star Spear* on station just outside the front hatch of the generator platform was hard to do, he just didn't like being in the dark over what was happening. He had to sit there and wait for a word and watch as John took over control of the Tommy-bot and carry out the rest of the mission without him. He wanted so much to be the one to help Tommy. "There has to be a way!" he contemplated to himself.

John felt the same way... tense and nervous about messing up.

"Now!" came Tommy's one-word call. John heard it and he was sitting on the floor of the hanger, just like the Tommy-bot was on the small flying ship. He was in direct action mode; what he did the Simple-bot did, so when he tried to stand up and couldn't, panic flashed through him. Relief followed when he saw, through his visor monitor, what the Simple-bot saw. He unhooked his fingers from the mesh he was imaginarily clutching and the Tommy-bot followed suit and was able to stand up. He reached out and opened the hatch stepped onto the hatchway of the platform. Turing slightly he held his thump up to the *Star Spear's* camera

and closed the hatch, so the warning light blinked out on the control deck panel.

He made his way down the interior walkway and into the airlock that held the ladder leading up into the control room. Sealing it, he climbed up and into the control room. He sealed that hatch behind him and looked at the split image monitor screen.

One of them showed the outside deck and the elevator cage was just arriving. He turned to the airlock and cycled the air out. Looking through the small window on the outside hatch, he waited for the right moment to act.

Tommy was out of her cocoon and standing up by now, searching for Bud even before the cage reached the deck. Spotting him, she was horrified. He was slumped down, hanging from the zip-ties. Sergey was all the way on the other side by the other hydraulic ram. He started to laugh at Tommy as she started to throw open the gate to get to Bud's side.

"Stop right there, Miss Swift, if you want him to..." He couldn't finish as the deck hatch opened and Tommy stepped out and faced Sergey. He looked from one to the other and they both looked back at him with the same face.

He slowly drew out his gun and started to point it first at one and then at the other. His face grew red with rage and his scar stood out white and throbbing through the face mask. In rage he screamed out. "I'll kill him first and then take care of both of you!" He stepped a few feet from the hydraulic ram and took deliberate aim at Bud.

Both Tommy's rushed Sergey at once, and he fired a shot off. It went wild. He was hit in the back by an unbelievable force that snapped him in two like a rag doll. The *Star Spear* flashed past at enormous speed. Sergey's body tumbled from the platform only to be snagged on to the speeding craft's twin camera periscopes and carried away.

Moments later, it slipped from the *Star Spear* and raced toward the ground.

Both Tommy's rushed to Bud's side and one of them grabbed the zip-ties and with a quick tug ripped them apart. Bud slumped into the other Tommy's arms and she staggered under his weight. Tommy-bot took him into her arms and rushed to the airlock that was still open and stepped in. The other Tommy disconnected their air lines and her power line, closed the hatch and cycled it through.

The Tommy-bot laid Bud's unmoving form onto the deck floor and stepped back out of the way. Tommy released his helmet and unzipped the front of the suit. He was blue from the cold but still breathing. The warm air that was being feed into his helmet helped him to survive longer outside than normal.

"Hank! Arvy! Emergency decent of command capsule now!" Tommy shouted out, "And have a medical team ready to handle a person suffering from hyperthermia."

The whole control center gave a violent shudder and Tommy found herself



and Bud skidding backwards. She stopped sliding. The Tommy-bot was holding them both in her arms as she stretched her legs across the walkway. They were jammed into the walls at a crazy angle.

The command center was built to act as an escape capsule if anything went wrong with the test generator platform and Bud needed a quick getaway. The vehicle was controlled by a pilot or by remote control and powered by Tommy's quantum drive cones.

"Tommy! Hank Sterling here, no need for a med team—you'll touch down at the emergency room entrance of the hospital in less than two minutes. Be ready for a jolt on your part, you're coming in hot! Mr. Zimmerman is on his way there now, and so are the rest of the Swifts."

"Oh, Miss Swift," Arvy added, "thanks for the big splash all over the runway just as the Feds showed up. How the heck am I going to explain that mess?"

"Well... tell the cops that we have a strict polices of 'no ticket, no ride!'"

## Chapter Four: Finding The Enemy

The false dawn was gone and the sun was about to emerge above the horizon. Birds were starting to sing and a lone deer was nibbling on the grass growing in the rubble of an old foundation. A high pitch sound descended toward the parking lot that was filled with overgrown weeds in front of the rubble that once been a restaurant.

The birds flew away and the deer loped into the nearby forest just as a strange, three-foot tall, mono-wheel came busting out of the shrubs that grew along the edge of the woods. The uni-wheeled robotic probe had its twin sensor discs extended and looked more like an oversized motorcycle wheel with moving metal ears than anything else. It was beeping, hooting and its radar dishes were swinging back and forth as it made its way to the spaceship that just landed. It was acting like a lost chick that just found its mother hen.

The hundred foot long ship filled the parking lot with ease and settled down with an audible whine of engines shutting down. The main hatch opened with a hissing noise and a ramp extended itself to the ground. A man form stepped out and it glinted in the first rays of sunlight and its glass eyes shone red in the morning light.

It was a robot, and it bent down to greet its brethren as it zoomed up the ramp. The big robot looked like it was petting the mono-wheel but in reality it was picking up its stored memory for the last two months by electromagnetic induction.

The robot, Aristotle by name, lead the smaller machine into the ship and a few minutes later a human being stepped out, stretched his arms out over his head and repeatedly blinked his eyes at the rising sun. He was unkempt and ill dressed, looking like he hadn't changed his clothes in days. The air was brisk and it felt good on his skin and in his nose. The climate controled ship offered no variations of environment and at times it could exude staleness.

He had been at his task for weeks, and was glad that he had successfully completed it. Now he only had to wait for the others to show up. He made the calls and arranged the time for all of them to meet, but three other very complicated lives had to come to a halt in order to come here after so much time had passed.

His memory slipped into the past, just a couple of months, and the fear of death took hold of him again as he now realized that fear of mortality alone was what drove him to finish his mission. He loathed death, especially his!

\* \* \*

“Tom Jr., it can't be helped!” Tom III answered back with a little more

feeling then he wanted to show. “I’ll not take the *Exedra* back out until it gets completely overhauled from stem to stern and that’s final!”

Tom Jr., TSL, young Tom V, and Tom III were sitting at an outdoor patio at a small coffee shop named ‘Sky Cat.’ But this was not solid ground. They were inside of a giant orbiting station. The *Exedra* was still being towed in from deep space after Tom III had rescued the other three Toms out by Jupiter and stranded his ship there with no fuel. The Toms had come on ahead on a space patrol ship that answered his distress call to arrange for the starship to be dry docked and check over.

Two of the Toms were still amazed at the size of the cylindrical space station that was three-mile-long and a mile in diameter, spinning on its long axis. Tom III called it his home away from home, his ship being his first love and actual home. But TSL just took it in stride for he had been out of the solar system into real ‘star space’ before and visited another world with an alien civilization... or what was left of it.

Looking around at the crowds of people rushing past and the tiers upon tiers of shops, offices and park-like areas throughout the station, you could believe you were just in one of those exclusive mega-malls on Earth that you could go from crib to grave and never have the need to leave.

“Why don’t you three guys go back to your realities and when the ship is ready I’ll call you and we can then go hunting for Thomas together?” He pushed his cup of coffee aside and looked intently at his three companions.

Tom Jr. slowly contemplated his own cup as he absently turned it around and around in its saucer. He hated to be stagnated after what just happened to them yet he understood the need for the starship as well. He craved action and a resolution to their present crises but not at the cost of their lives. They had come too close to losing those already.

“What if we make a small visit to Tom IV’s probability,” Tom Jr. spoke without looking up, “to make sure that he’s still alive and not in cahoots with this Thomas? At least that will answer one of our questions.” He looked up to Tom III, then at TSL and Tom V.

Young Tom was bobbing his head ‘yes’ and TSL just shrugged his shoulders and said, “Why not?”

Reluctantly Tom III gave in.

“Okay, Tom Jr., we’ll go and do this foolhardy thing, but we’ll have to go to your world first and use your NZ device, since mine is out of commission. I’ll want to take Aristotle with us too! Your ‘no weapons’ policy is fine normally, but this situation is far from being normal.”

TSL reached out and took Tom V by the arm to get his attention. “Tom V, I know you consider yourself a man, and in many ways you are, but you’re only

sixteen and you slipped out to go with us without telling your parents. We squared that away with them and promised to keep you out of future trouble. But as long as you are with us I can't guarantee that's not going to happen. Gentlemen, I think its best that we send young Tom back home and leave him to his own devices and to his own future from now on. He does..."

"Heck no!" shouted out Tom V as he jumped to his feet, spilling his drink at the same time. "We agreed that we're all in similar danger and should stick together. You can't dump me, now!" He was shaking from anger as he stood there looking at all the other Toms.

"Sorry, Tom V," TSL was standing up too, "I just want to keep you safe and with your family. This Thomas has only attacked us at the restaurant and that's destroyed now. I was hoping that if we/you stayed in our own worlds he'll leave us alone. I'm beginning to think that he just doesn't want us together for some reason and I'm willing to oblige him." He gestured to Tom V to sit down as he sat down.

"That's well and good, TSL," Tom III answered back. "But if he would just stepped out into the open to tell us what he wanted, we could act accordingly and not try to double guess him all the time! Maybe he doesn't even know what he wants and is just crazy."

"I think," Tom Jr. added, "that we've had this conversation before and we still don't know any more other than that he wants to be the only Tom Swift in the multi-universe, according to that raging message he left in the last file. So I don't think any of us are safe no matter where we are. The restaurant was a convenient place to attack us collectively at one time, that's all."

"Back to square one, no, square two... he does want us dead!" murmured Tom V.

"Look guys, the *Exedra* won't make it to port for another two days and then I'll be too busy to go anywhere so lets do this little 'Check on Tom IV' right now. I'll call Aristotle and he can bring the emergency recall fob that I have connected to your negative zone device, Tom Jr. He can meet us at the park across the plaza in five minutes."

"You want us to open an NZ right here in public?" Tom Jr. asked. He was flabbergasted at such an idea.

"Sure, why not. For us up here at the station, there is nothing new under the sun. I'll be willing to bet no one even notices or cares."

The following morning after a hearty breakfast prepared by Chow Winkler, Tom Jr.'s personal chef, the four Toms and Aristotle stood in Tom Jr.'s sealed laboratory at Swift Enterprise research center just outside of Shopton, New York. They arrived in the middle of the night from the space station in Tom III's probability, so Tom Jr. bedded them down at the guest quarters for the rest of the night.

Tom Jr. was setting the gateway to Tom IV's world. Tom Jr. hadn't been back there to visit Tom IV for a long time. As a matter of fact not since the restaurant had come into being. Which brought up the old question again, who invited who to the restaurant for the first time and who built it in the first place?

The notion danced in their heads for a moment and disappeared in a blink of the eye, never to be asked. Just like the NZ devices, they all knew it came from Tom IV, but why? He was the one not wanting to start up that particular technology again and yet... that thought also evaporated into nothing. The machine was accepted by them all. After all it was stamped with Tom IV's trade mark of the letters TS inside of a shield. The portal opened and they all stepped into its darkness.

Tom IV was lazily resting in a lounge chair in the afternoon sun. A cool pitcher of ice tea was on a small table beside him and a full glass of the refreshing beverage in his hand. Sunglasses covered his eyes and a pair of wireless ear buds tuned to the micro player on the table filled his ears with jazz. Cool drink, cool jazz.

His first hint that something was wrong was when shadows crossed his vision and a mechanical *clomp, clomp* reached his ears just as one tune ended and before another started. Sitting up and whipping off his sunglasses he looked at the five outline shapes in the sun that were standing before him. One of the shadows had weird red colored eyes that glowed. Cocking his head to one side and shading his eyes with his empty hand, he squinted and laughed.

"Well I'll be darn! If it isn't the old gang." He scrambled up from the lounge chair and offered his hand. No one took it. Tom IV looked down at his hand—it wasn't dirty—and then noticed the expression on their faces. "Somehow, I take it, this is not a social visit and I'm not in your good graces, am I?"

"Sorry, Tom IV, but we have to know. Are you trying to kill us?" It didn't matter who said it, they all had the same question in mind. Tom IV was so shocked he dropped his glass and it spilled all over his sandal covered feet, making him jump back and falling head over heels over his lounge chair and onto his back.

Looking up at all of them from the ground he murmured, "You've got to be kidding?" He rose from the ground and offered the others chairs.

With Aristotle standing nearby, The Toms got down to the business they had come to settle.

The sun was setting and the extra ordered cool pitchers of ice tea were gone two hours later.

"Sorry fellows, I can't help you." Tom IV was amazed at the happenings to the other Tom's. "I didn't send you the probabilities devices nor have I ever been to Tom's restaurant. I've been living a very sedate life right here in good old Shopton, USA. And I would like to keep it that way. So, as the saying goes, 'thanks but no

thanks,' I'll stay right here and bathe in the sun. I had enough of probability travel for a life time. I'm off the grid and like it that way. That must be the reason that your 'elusive enemy' picked me for his fall guy."

They kicked other notions around for awhile, but no satisfactory answers were found. At last they bid Tom IV a farewell and hoped he has a good and fulfilling life.

They all knew that they would not see him again.

\* \* \*

"Sir, I hate to interrupt," Aristotle was at the hatch of the overhauled spaceship, "but Tom Jr. just radioed in and they will be on their way here within the hour. I thought you might want to freshen up a bit before they arrived."

"Thanks, Aristotle. I couldn't survive without you. Please set up a small gathering of chairs and a table in the shade under that large oak tree, and a few refreshments too. Nothing fancy, but I think this will be the last time we shall all be meeting here and we might as well do it right with a last meal."

Suddenly thinking of the 'Last Supper' metaphor, he shuddered.

\* \* \*

"Aristotle," Tom Jr. called out to the robot that was gathering up the remnants of their meal, "You could definitely give Chow Winkler, my head chef at Enterprises, a run for his money. That was outstanding!"

"Thank you, sir. I aim to please." he said, imitating a smile the best he could, and the rest of the Swifts added their compliments.

"We take it, that you have been successful in your search for our two lost Swifts?" Tom Jr. asked as the four of them formed a close knit circle with their chairs under the tree. By agreement no business was to be discussed until the meal was done.

"Well, I finally found Thomasina's probability and I must tell you we were all wrong as to where to find her. We assume that her world is an offshoot of one of the Earth-base Toms and less likely to be from mine because of my future/space world probability. But we were wrong." He had their full attention.

"We all thought it was that Swift who went to Korea, a brother that shouldn't have existed. There was no such Swift with any of our realities, no such family member. We figured that was where the variation occurred but it did not.

"All the Swifts had only one son each until Tom Jr. and TSL and they both had only one sister. We did not give that enough thought, and that's where the answer was. She's not located near one of our probabilities but out on the fringes,

actually on a dead end probability of Tom Swifts. We forgot to take into account that Tom Jr. in her world had died when he was sixteen and that ended his probability line.

“That set up Thomasina and Sandra to have the next generation of Swifts in their world and the next generation after that started to get caught up to my time line. And that’s why New Mexico is our home and not Shopton. The family split apart for some reason and part of it moved to New Mexico and my world line came into being from there. The Thomasina and Sandra lines were somehow forced back into the Tom Swift main probability again but later in a parallel time. Mine, to be exact.

“My thinking now is that us moving around together like we do is distorting the multi-universe and it keeps folding back onto itself instead of flowing onward. Parts tend to stick together like taffy being stretched and folded. It keeps wanting to reinvent, or possible heal itself. You could say that I’m a product of my own bootstrap.” Two Toms nodded their understanding and Tom Jr. just looked blank. “Check out Robert Heinlein’s work if you don’t understand my meaning.”

Tom III sat back in his chair and let what he had just said sink in.

“Now that’s one long tale. And the Greeks thought that the Gordian’s Knot was impossible to untangle.” Tom V was studying Greek history in school.

“The reason why it keeps happening at this point is not important,” TSL said to the group, “but getting to Thomasina’s world is, as long as it leads to Thomas, the Swift hater.”

“It’s yet to be determine that we’ll find Thomas from there, but he does visit it a lot so are chances are good. I stayed around long enough to make sure I had the right Tommy, on the right world, and double-timed it back here. She’s involved with big going ons right now and is poised to leap off into space travel.”

He looked to see if any of them had anything to say. They didn’t, so he continued.

“Those blue folders seem to be accurate in their storytelling and she’s onto something that none of us ever thought off. Then again, none of us ever knew a Professor Albert either!”

## Chapter Five: Repairs ‘R’ Us

“Are you sure, Bud?” pleaded Tommy as she watched him walking toward her taking slow soft steps in his flight suit. “It’s only been three weeks and that new skin on your feet and legs could use more healing time.” He took her face into his hands and kissed her lips softly and then whispered into her ear.

“If you think that Hinkle or someone else is going to be the one standing beside you in the history books, you are dead wrong! Either we both go or we both stay, there are others that can take those two satellites up and place them in orbit for Haz and you know it!”

Bud stepped back and winked at her and continued to speak.

“The press is waiting and so is the rest of the world. Our own government must be sweating bullets that they don’t have your space drive under wraps. Even with Mr. Walter’s report most of them feel cheated in some way. But it’s too late once the cat is out of the bag and Sergey Levenkov sure did let it out in his own Earth shattering way.” He spread his arms out wide and whistled as he dropped his face and eyes toward the ground. “Splat!”

“Bud! Be more respectful to the dead.” She was trying hard to hold back a chuckle. “He’d paid the ultimate price for his selfishness. Now, Peter Levenkov and Portia Flagger are another story all together. So many foreign governments want a piece of him that he not big enough to carve up... and China wants the lion’s share. Can’t blame them! And poor Portia, she locked up in a high security psychopathic ward that your government has somewhere and even Mr. Flagger can’t get to her. And boy, he has tried. The one senator that did try to help Flagger suddenly got very ‘sick’ and had to resign his seat. How Haz gets his information is beyond me, but I’m sure it’s accurate.”

Bud gave out a little chuckle. “I’m in the hospital for three weeks and the whole world moves on without me!”

“Anyways we own Sergey something. In a way he did help us out.” Bud raised his eyebrows in response. “We now don’t have to go sneaking around on tip toes with our space drive pretending it’s only useable in the atmosphere,” she explained.

“Oh, yeah! Some favor. I nearly froze to death and to save my life, you come crashing down into a hospital emergency room parking lot in a ship that comes right out of *Star Wars* and the Feds... the Feds were already at Astros when a body drops right out of the sky onto the tarmac right in front of them and Hinkle drops the *Star Spear* right on top of it, to boot.”

“I still don’t know if he was trying to hide the body or making sure that if the fall of eight miles didn’t kill him, he was not going anywhere, so he pinned him



down under a half ton of machinery. And I hear tell that was his second take down in as many hours. Pro wrestling needs to sign him up. By God!”

“Bud, I think you are jealous! A big strapping man like you being bested by an engineering geek. My, my, what is the world coming to!” And laughing, she ran out of the hanger and into the crowd of reporters and well-wishers.

Cameras were everywhere for this was not like any spaceship launch the world had ever witnessed before. Tommy had released the *Star Spear* video soon after Bud’s hospitalization in the need to explain the *Bud Air Master One* and Sergey Levenkov’s involvement in the matter for the last six months.

The science communities the world over had been in a uproar every since, saying that the space drive and her Power Point Transfer device were a sham being perpetuated on the public for sensationalism. That Tommy had used up all of Tom Jr’s ideas and she was now using the Swifts. But at the same time they could not explain how she was faking it, while their own people were either there watching or even onboard the platform in slow, low demonstration flights.

Bud made his way to her in the crowd of reporters. Hardin Ames, much as he hated it, let them get near enough to ask questions. Moments later, he finally had enough of the three ring circus and called his men in and proceeded to get some form of sanity into the situation. He did that by leading Tommy and Bud to the space craft entry hatch that was only accessible by its own built-in ladder and by forming a strictly enforced blockade.

The space ship closely resembled the *Bud Air Master* generator platform, differing where it was missing the huge turbine and the base was totally sealed. But the biggest change was the vast quarter dome added over the back deck that was now the cargo hold. The first deck that had mostly been taken up by the experimental elevator system was gone and crew quarters and science labs now occupied that area.

With no rocket engines and fuel tanks the ship had no wasted space. And the quantum cone drive system was now sandwiched between the two decks in two opposite facing rings that held the drive cones. It was a complex mixture of cones but now the ship was able to fly anywhere and in any position. The drive no longer had a blind side and it could be rotated upside down so the crew would not have to stand on the ceiling if it were to land on the side of the Moon facing the Earth.

The two space explorers gave the world one last wave and closed the hatch on the crowds as Ames started the arduous task of moving them away to a safe distance of a hundred feet or so. The inner hatches were already open as were all the hatches while the ship was on Earth.

Bud grinned at Tommy. “You’d think with all the fuss some of those people have made about this being all a big publicity scheme that they wouldn’t be moving away so fast. Look at the trio from United Astrol Labs. They’re practically

running to get away!”

Tommy looked and laughed. Then, turning serious she twisted her head around.

“Uncle Hank,” she called in a loud voice, even though she could have used the intercom, “we need to know where our payload specialist is?” And she continued to call out to him all the way to the flight deck on the second floor. That layout was totally changed.

The whole sixty foot front edge was still divided into three sections but now of equal twenty foot square areas. The command sector had the flight cockpit in the front half of the room, with a two position control board with reclinable seats.

Three monitor screens wrapped around the top of the control panel, and the panel itself was one large inlayed touch control surface. The monitors looked like they were windows looking outside, which they effectively were at their present setting. The space that was left in front of the control station was utilized by the actual flight computers and the other electronic needs like communications and radar took up most of both side walls up to the side doors just beyond the control station.

The hatchway from downstairs was still behind the control seats. And the hatches on the side walls still lead into the work shop on one side with the environmental center on the other with all the air scrubbers, water recycling systems and so forth. Oxygen and water were stored in separate tanks above the ceiling and out of the way.

The back airlock was now missing and was moved to the workshop area and made three times its previous size for convenience. In its place there were four additional flight chairs for crewmen and storage lockers on each side. These were more or less VIP seats, for the crew could use any available seats throughout the whole ship to strap into if needed as well as all the beds in the crew quarters.

Uncle Hank was walking in from the workshop section as Tommy and Bud made their way up the ladder into the control room.

“So you finished schmoozing the crowd, Tommy?” he asked as he took the first VIP seat and made himself comfortable as he buckled up his restraints.

“Schmoozing, Uncle Hank?” Turning to him with a perplexed look, “I don’t know that word. But if it means that I was giving them a good public relations send off like Sandy asked us to do, then I guess I schmoozed the crowd.”

They strapped themselves in and Tommy started to power up their flight systems. Bud turned on the radio communications and spoke. “SEI Control this is *Swift Freedom*, ready for our instrument checks and to start power relay from our *Bud Master* Power Station. We are asking for priority power relay at this time until further notice. Do you comply?” The SEI Control center was located in the old

block house near the jet testing pit. The *Swift Freedom* was resting over the pit and above the ground unit now mounted inside the pit. The open space made it convenient to work on the ground unit while providing a bit of privacy, and that made Ames a happier man.

Arvy Hanson was on Bud's smaller side video screen, "Yes, we understand. Telemetry is coming in from your control systems and Hank Sterling is with Tommy right now on her side screen confirming the numbers. All the power you need is being relayed to *Freedom's* power accumulators. And last on the list, Haz is standing by at Satellite Prime Headquarters in New Guinea and just verified all is green at his end."

The main screen in front of them still showed the outside area but in four quadrants, so they could see all around the ship. The crowd of people had grown beyond what was expected. Workers from all the different shifts were showing up with their families and friends. People from nearby Shopton and the vicinity crammed their cars onto the access roads that surrounded the SEI complex and boats filled the icy waters of nearby Lake Copland in the hopes of witnessing the take-off flight of *Swift Freedom* in what was fast becoming a worldwide event. Four inches of snow from the day before wasn't keeping anyone home.

Sandy had set up the three large monitors they used with the *Star Spear* flight, and she was busy trying to give the news people the best video coverage possible using each screen with different views of the lift off area or the flight center activity. Mr. Swift was helping by being with the news anchors and answering their question at what they were seeing on the monitors.

The take off lists were tedious, but for this first manned flight into orbit nothing could be overlooked. The ship had been flown several times already in tests, but never above the magic mark of sixty-two point five miles (the 100KM/Kármán line) that was considered the official altitude needed to become an astronaut or for sub-orbital flight.

"*Swift Freedom*," advised Hank, "Com-Stat One is approaching apogee over Kazakhstan on the Sino-Russian border. Schedule take off time in five and a half minutes and counting. Projected trajectory is locked in and automatic launch sequences begins in fifteen seconds."

"Roger that, SEI Control," Tommy briskly replied, as the launch clock started to count down on the bottom of the main monitor. "Uncle Hank, how are you doing back there? Need company?"

"No thanks." He half-heartily answered back. "I'd rather have you at the controls right now, even if the computers are launching the ship!"

"I wasn't leaving. I was going to send Bud over. He just might fall asleep again up here. I know this must be boring to him after what happened to him the last time," Tommy teased.

“Thanks, Tommy. I’ll take this over freezing my—over freezing any time.” He quipped back as his eyes danced over the instrument panel.

“Launch in sixty seconds,” intoned Arvy. “All systems are green and ready to go. Tommy, Bud, and Hank, all of us here at SEI wish you God speed and the best flight ever! Thirty seconds and counting. Power is now being transfer to quantum drive system. And all interfaces are active. You’ll have total lift capability once the quantum cones start rotating.”

“T-minus 10... 5... 2, cone rotation commencing, zero, lift-off!”

And accompanied by the roar and cheering applause of the crowd the silent *Swift Freedom* lifted off from the SEI complex and headed off into space at a steady one-quarter G acceleration.

“SEI Control, we confirm launch at 9:55:30 EST and will insert into Molniya orbit in thirty minutes as planned. Final flight speed will be approximately 22,000 miles per hour and then we’re coasting the rest of the way. Outside ground view is fantastic, by the way. Trajectory is shifting on schedule and the ship is angling itself accordingly. Feels no different than being in a high speed elevator.”

“Glad you’re enjoying your trip, Tommy. The view is spectacular on our monitors too. I can’t wait to see the satellite rendezvous!”

“Neither can Uncle Hank by the look on his face! I guess this is a lost dream coming true for him. We’ll have to arrange for the rest of the old boys from Hank’s satellite group to take a ride up.”

“Senior citizens in space,” Bud commented, “going to heaven before your time. What a reality show that will make.”

“Bud,” Tommy smiled at him, “that was so bad you’d better excuse yourself and take Uncle Hank with you to check out the ship and see that everything is okay. Captain’s orders.”

The Earth passed under them and clouds reflected the sun’s rays back at them in a rainbow of colors and for a time all was right with the world.

“Bud, Uncle Hank how are you doing out there? Are the SpacePacks working all right?” Tommy had the ship in a matching Molniya orbit following behind the Com-Stat One satellites by a few minutes of flight time. They were getting ready to exchange the non-operative satellite with one of two they were carrying in the cargo bay. They were hoping to make the needed repairs in orbit and then reposition it into one of the two remaining spots in the four satellite constellation that Haz Samson’s Satellite Prime Communications needed to replace.

“I’m doing fine, Tommy” Uncle Hank answered back, “The old NASA training hasn’t gone out of date. Slow and easy on the altitude jets is the motto for a space walk. Bud thinks it’s a space game and is doing things too fast. He’s over

reacting and over compensating but he's learning. You can only hit a wall so many ways!"

"Oh well, Uncle Hank, wait till he sees the inevitable bloopers broadcast on TV. Time to get to work and earn your pay, guys. Keep your safety lines limited to no longer than fifty feet. There's no taxi out there and the walk home is a killer!"

Tommy watched both men slowly make their way to the half glass safety partition that stood out from the inside wall. It held the controls for the space grappling arms that were used to move cargo in space, or as in this time, move the satellite out of the cargo bay. There were two arms and each had a satellite cradled in it.

The air that was in the bay was being drawn into collapsible nano-fabric bags that inflated along the sides of the craft. There was no way that much air could be replaced each time the bay doors were open, and this way only about two percent of the air was lost. This process was going on while both men were getting use to working with no gravity.

Hank was the payload specialist and he took full control of the launch procedure for the satellite. Bud was a spare set of hands, if needed, and readily available in case of an emergency. The air pumps had stopped working and the little air that was left was lost to space as the big dome doors retracted into each other starting in the center. Half the dome slid back uncovering half of the deck to space.

The mechanical arms were built in two thirty feet sections that could be extended another twenty feet each. Each one was capable of moving along a track that was set into the floor that reached to the outer edge of the deck taking whatever they held from the front of the deck to the back. Majestically, the arm carrying the first payload unfolded upward and then down in a slow semicircle and extended to its full hundred foot length. Once in position Hank released the clamps and set the satellite free. The arm retracted back into the ship leaving its payload trailing behind the ship.

"Satellite Prime Headquarters" Hank spoke for the first time into his radio, "your number one bird has been set free. She's all yours."

"Roger that, Hank," returned Haz's voice from far off New Guinea. "The video looks great. My people are commencing the startup procedure at this time and it's looking good. Our compliments on a smooth deployment."

The four solar panels could be seen unfolding from the topside of the satellite like gossamer wings reflecting the sunlight off its dark blue surfaces that absorbed the energy from the sun in five different wave lengths, given the solar panels extremely high efficiency. Three different types of antennas bloomed out of the sides and oriented toward the Earth. A complex digital camera came out of the fourth side.

“*Swift Freedom*, we have fully intergraded the Com-Stat to our ground communication stations and we wish to thank you. Please proceed with retrieving our sick bird and making her better. Thanks, folks!”

“You’re welcome, Haz.” Hank spoke proudly. “Tommy? Let’s catch us a turkey and turn it into an eagle.”

Following the prearranged plans that were devised weeks ago, Tommy maneuvered the *Swift Freedom* towards the useless Com-Stat, rotating the spacecraft around so the cargo bay was facing the direction of flight. When the ship was within several hundred feet of the satellite Tommy switched controls over to Hank again.

Using two video cameras to give a 3-D perception visual on the monitor and radar he zeroed in onto his target and brought the ship into arm range.

“You know, Tommy,” Hank informed her, “that I think I could really guide this ship so the Com-Stat could just drift into the bay and then Bud could man handle it into its cradle instead of using the arm.”

“Uncle Hank!” Tommy exclaimed in surprise, worry soon creeping into her voice. “That satellite has a mass of over eight tons! There’s no way you’re going to let that satellite into the bay without it being secured to the arm first. As for Bud maneuvering it around by hand, you’ve got to be kidding?”

Hank said nothing for a moment and then pushed himself away from the control board. “Bud,” he spoke softly, “Take over, please. My judgment can’t be trusted. I know better than that, and I just made the one mistake that can’t be forgiven in space. I’m going back inside the ship.”

Bud reached out and stopped Hank. Looking at his face, even partly hidden because of the helmet, he could see that he was trembling. “Hank, if you go in now you’ll never come back out. Your judgment is fine, you didn’t do it. You just voiced an opinion that’s all. Now get back to work, old man, before us young ones send you to the retirement home.”

“Bud...” Tommy started to say.

“No, Tommy, this is the only way, believe me. Hank, continue to grapple that satellite. Just remember that I’m here by your side and Tommy is too.”

Hank could feel the sweat beading on his forehead. With no gravity pulling on it, it had nowhere to go. He took a deep breath, steadied his nerves and hands, and returned to the control board. The readouts showed that the satellite was within the hundred foot reach of the arm and the *Swift Freedom* had perfectly matched its speed and trajectory.

Slowly at first, and then with resumed confidence he clamped onto the satellite and brought it into the bay, locking it down in the forward half of the cargo deck. “Satellite secured, Tommy. You may proceed to the next one. I’m closing the bay doors for maneuvering.” Hank’s voice was back to normal.

The *Swift Freedom* with its Quantum Cones as its drive did not have to follow the laws of orbital mechanics to catch up with the other Com-Stat and take hours to fall back and then speed up again. Instead Tommy just flew the ship across the distance between the downward orbit they were now in to the rising orbit of the other satellite.

Tommy took her time doing it and the slight G-force helped Hank and Bud in their repair efforts on the Com-Stat. When the first access panel came off they found the trouble. Someone had soldered in a cell phone with a bypass relay connected to the power feed.

When the phone had been called up the first time—probably right after takeoff—the relay opened and the main power line was severed. A second call should have closed the relay and the satellite would resume working. But somehow the person that was responsible for the soldering hooked up the relay before the phone and not after it. When the relay opened it cut the power to the phone too. The phone batteries went dead before the signal was sent to close the relay.

When they reported it to Tommy, she replied, “It looks like the hijackers might have planned to get control after all and not just to cripple the satellites. They goofed!”

“I guess, Tommy,” radioed in Hank, “you get what you pay for. When you use cheap hoodlums, you get shabby workmanship. If I remember right all those workers that Sergey planted in Flagger’s Communications were second rate criminals.”

“Second rate or not, Uncle Hank, that little phone and relay cost us and Haz’s Satellite Prime millions of dollars. Let drop this fixed eagle off and repair the other Com-Stat and then deliver the two satellites we have left into their proper orbits so Haz can have his full constellation of four Com-Stats over Asia. And then we can go home!”

## Chapter Six: Lunar Crash

“Well guys,” Tom III said as he turned off the communication scanner, “was I not right? That Tommy sure has ‘that’ Earth in her grasp.” They were watching her whole space flight being transmitted around the world. Never before had a space venture done by a privately owned company so enthralled all the people of every nation.

The name Swift had skyrocketed to the forefront of world news. And the world speculated on the future of space travel now that Tommy had proven her Quantum Drive. The next fantastic invention that might come from her fertile imagination was beyond anyone’s guess. But that didn’t stop them from trying. Networks spent hours quizzing ‘experts’ only to have them shrug and admit their ignorance.

The *Exedra* had landed on the edge of the lunar surface facing the Earth just an hour before Tommy and her crew had taken off. With so much radar, telescopes and satellites scanning space watching Tommy’s venture, it was impossible to get any closer to Earth for the time being.

The four Toms were gathered in the small lounge/kitchen/exercise room. Even in a starship of Tom III’s size most space was taken up by engines and life support. Supper was long gone and they now were finishing up a late night snack.

Tommy’s twelve-hour space adventure came to a close with a night landing at the SEI complex and an impromptu celebration party had been thrown together by employees and friends. No one got any sleep that night!

“Aristotle,” Tom III called out to his mechanical friend and servant who was standing watch at the control room. “You can put the ship on its night cycle and power down yourself. We should be safe enough here.”

“Tom Jr., TSL, and Tom V, I bid you all a good night and I hope you’ll find your cabins comfortable. After breakfast we can try to get hold of Thomasina and introduce ourselves and try to explain our dilemma and its connection to her.”

\* \* \*

Alarms were ringing and red strobe lights were going off in every room. The four Swifts collided with each other in the corridor leading to the lounge.

“Out of the way!” Tom III yelled as he scrambled to move forward past the mass of bodies.

“Master Tom,” Aristotle’s voice boomed throughout the ship. “Taking evasive action, we are being fired upon. A salvo of five missiles has been launched by an unknown ship.” The *Exedra* lurched up and forward at the same time trying



to take off from the lunar surface. They were thrown to the wall and then to the floor. But the launch was too late. The ship rocked violently—once forward then back and then it felt like it somersaulted over. It slammed back onto the lunar surface and all the lights went out in the ship, and the same results happened in their individual consciousness.

An annoying ‘*tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap*’ kept repeating itself. The air was smoky and rancid. Only a few red lights in the lounge area were blinking separately, all else was dark. A moan and then a groan was heard. The tapping was unceasing. It slowly penetrated their brains. More tapping, more groans and more moans. ‘*tap, tap, tap*’

“Damn, DAMN, DAMN!” Tom III half moaned and swore at the same time. “I just had her...DAMN!”

“Tom, someone, please help me! I can’t get up. I’m pinned down by something.” The voice sounded like Tom V’s. In the off again, on again lighting Tom III struggled to get to where Tom V’s voice was coming—from down the unlit corridor. ‘*tap, tap, tap*’

He stumbled over something as he tried to pick himself up off the ceiling. “Ceiling?” He thought to himself, realizing for the first time that the ship was upside down and the obstacle was a person. Which Tom? He could not tell in the darkness. Touching, he felt for life signs and found a strong beating heart and a slight stirring of oncoming consciousness under his hand. Satisfied that whoever it was would live he continued on. ‘*tap, tap, tap*’

Groping his way toward the voice he called out, “Tom V, talk to me. I can’t see you!”

“Here, I’m in front of you, help!” His voice was on the verge of panic.

“Easy, Tom, easy. I’m here, relax,” he soothed. Reaching down he felt something wet and sticky. “Tom V, are you hurt? Bleeding somewhere?” he questioned. ‘*tap, tap, tap*’

“No, I don’t think so. Just pinned down by something hard and long across my back.”

“Okay, I know what it is. It must be the floor grid for the heat and air exchangers. But you should have been able to shift that, so don’t move. Something else must also be on you.” Ignoring the wet substance, he knew it was blood, he continued to probe with his fingers. First an arm, a shoulder, and then a head covered with blood. Lots of blood. ‘*tap, tap, tap*’

“One of the other Toms is on top of you and he’s badly hurt. I have to get us some lights. So hang on for a couple of more minutes.”

Now knowing where he was in the corridor, he went to the emergency supply closet, which was right in front of him, and groped for the handle in this upside down world. Quickly he managed to open it. As soon as it was opened a

light flooded the closet and part of the hallway. Grabbing a hand full of emergency light balls from a sealed bin he put them in his pocket. *'tap, tap, tap'*

Tom III then took one of the balls from the bin and smashed it on the door frame to activate it. Throwing it up to the floor where it stuck and filled the corridor with light. With the med kit in his hand he rushed back to Tom V and the injured TSL. *'tap, tap, tap'*

Tom Jr. was on his feet and slowly stumbled his way to them. "Let's leave TSL on the grate and lift both off Tom V at the same time," Tom Jr. suggested as he reached for one end of the grate. Thanks to the low gravity of the Moon they were able to move TSL even in their impaired condition and health. *'tap, tap, tap'*

Stopping once, Tom III activated two more light balls and threw them ahead into the lounge. Making their way around the suspended furniture to a clear area they put TSL down. Tom V was able to follow them with the med kit. *'tap, tap, tap'*

Tom III placed the kit on the floor and opened the box and immediately it extended two visual probes on flexible stems. They scanned the surrounding and intone. "Please step away from the patient. We must sterilize the area. And a mist issued from one of the probes. The other probe swiped down over TSL's face. The spray also helped slow the blood flow from the laceration that ran from the ear to the chin. "Facial wound is non-life threatening if treated properly. It must be cleaned and closed."

"Treat and stabilize wounded man." Tom III told the med kit. *'tap, tap, tap'*

"Proceeding to treat patient. Please be aware that a distress signal is being heard approximately ten feet to the left of this point," the Med Kit said as it began to clean away the blood.

The three Tom's looked at each other. "Aristotle!" Tom III called out. He rose from the floor and went to the point of the tapping. It was the closed and sealed door that led to the control room area.

The door was solidly locked against the vacuum that now existed in that part of the ship. A large multicolored 'vacuum on other side' sign was running snake like down the door from left top to right bottom and started again. It was a built in characteristic of all the doors in spaceships of Tom's III probability.

Tom III hit the top of the door frame and a panel the width of the door opened. He pulled out a bar that was attached to a clear plastic like sheet and stretched it to the bottom of the door that was now at the ceiling. Rubbing the plastic with his hands against the door frame it changed color to green where it adhered to the frame.

Once done he reach into the slot once more he pulled out a lever and began pumping it several times to release the door. The plastic bowed outward towards the door as a vacuum was achieved between the two surfaces. At the last pump the

outer door slid open and the plastic held the air at bay. The plastic Vac-Seal was an extreme emergency precaution but it had saved hundreds of lives throughout the years.

Aristotle, or what was left of him, lay on the ceiling. The left leg was totally gone, the other leg was missing from the knee down. The left arm was crushed and useless. A terrible dent was visible on the left side of his head with the eye lens and socket gone, leaving a gaping hole. How he was still operating was a miracle.

Aristotle started to do sign language the best he could, spelling out the words one letter at a time with his good hand. ‘Imperative that I talk to you,’ He spelled out. ‘Cannot make it alone to cargo bay hatch now located on top of ship. Power low.’ He stopped, his hand sank to the ceiling, his eye dimmed but did not go out, and he didn’t move again.

Suddenly the lights flickered and came back on and the air treatment plant turned on with the fans whirling to life. The rancid air improved immediately. What was left of the ship’s self diagnostic and repair systems were trying to do their jobs, repairing what systems they could to maintain human life onboard the ship, which was its top priority.

“How do we get to him, Tom III?” Inquired Tom V.

“Through the cargo hold which is below... above us, but the access hatch is out there,” he answered pointing to the plastic covered door, “or by the engine room at the end of that corridor.” He was now pointing back to where they just had such a hard time getting out of.

“Is it air tight? If not, do we have space suits available in this section of the ship?” Tom V was rising to the occasion.

“There are two emergency suits in the closet, but not designed for outside use. They are thin-skinned suits without any heating or cooling capability for being out there for more than a few minutes. As for the engine room being air tight, we’ll have to check. I didn’t notice a warning sign before. It was totally dark and the sign is bright, so I think it’s safe.”

Looking at TSL, who was now fully medicated, cleaned and glued together by the Robo-Doc, with hardly a visible gash that had no stitches or bandages, Tom III got up and went down the corridor. In a moment he called out, “Whoever feels capable of taking a spacewalk I could use your help. The other stays with TSL.”

Tom V joined him at the engine room door. “Tom Jr. is still a bit dizzy and I’m having the Robo-Doc check him over, just in case. So, you’re stuck with the kid.”

Putting his arm over Tom V shoulder, Tom III told him, “I couldn’t think of anyone else that I would rather have. Let’s get Aristotle.” It was not to be as easy as it sounded.

In the topsy-turvy engine room getting to the spare space suits was a horror show in itself. The ship was designed for gravity or for Zero-G, not to be walked upon upside down. Once in the space suits they made their way to the external airlock rather than go through the cargo hold. They could not extend the ramp so they had to knot up a length of cable and secure it once they had the airlock open to the outside.

On the lunar surface they made a cursory examination of the ship's exterior. Besides being upside down and the shuttle crushed underneath it, the engines appeared to have taken a hit in the magnetic field containment chamber and the left side of the control room canopy was blasted away. That explained why Aristotle was so damaged on that side.

The damages in the control room were severe enough so that it could not be repaired while they remained on the Moon. Both Tom's climbed back into the ship through the shattered canopy and through the jumble of control wiring and dangling pieces. Once past the pilot area it was relatively easy to get to the robot.

Between the two of them they managed to carry, and at times, drag him back to where the knotted cable was. Tying him to the end of it, they climbed up first and then hauled him up into the airlock. With the lunar gravity it was easy work.

\* \* \*

"Master Tom," Aristotle was sitting against the bulkhead in the lounge with an external power cord plugged into an electrical socket recharging his batteries. "The Negative Zone materialized just above the lunar horizon and a starship just like the *Exedra* came out of it and fired a salvo of five missiles at us and then entered another zone and disappeared. I tried evasive action, but the missiles were too close. Being grounded hindered my option to just one, taking off and trying to outrun them. I also hit the attack alarm and called out to you, Master Tom. And finely, I fired an NZ probe after the departing starship. We were hit in the magnetic containment field coupling to the engines, then in the left side of the control room canopy throwing the ship noise downwards. We hooked the top edge of a mountain ridge and flipped onto our back."

Aristotle seemed to need a moment to collect his thoughts before continuing.

"Just before the power ceased I did receive a set of coordinates from the probe and it's still in the probe receiver chip. I left it in the receiver in case I was not able to contact you, Master Tom."

"You did the best you could, Aristotle, under the circumstances I couldn't asked for more. Now it's up to us. We are alive and we have the ship to scavenge to help us get out of this mess."

The other three Toms were listening and agreed with the assessment. They were all eating a cold breakfast of energy bars and protein drinks. Tom III was juggling a list of working machinery, one detailing what was not working, and a list of what they needed to get to Thomasina's Earth.

The shuttle was totally destroyed. It was as flat as a pancake. The main engines were out. Without the magnetic coupling there was no way to control the Helium 3 in the fission reactor. So they were on emergency power only. Tom III had curtailed power usage to a minimum.

The living quarters were already getting colder. They were in the shadow of the mountain ridge. The sun would not reach them for a few more days and that would start a whole new set of problems in itself.

Radio communication with Earth was out. They were now further around on the back side of the Moon and had no way of bouncing a signal to Earth. Even their limited defensive weapons were out of commission. All fire control capabilities had been lost in the wreckage of the control room.

The Tom's were sitting in the gloomy lounge in chairs unbolted from the ceiling, with a list of options that was getting shorter and shorter. The back side of the Moon proved to be more un-inhabitable and unfriendly than the Earth side.

"Can we send up one of the defensive rockets rigged with a radio repeater and aim it at Earth on one of their satellite frequencies?" Tom V had been throwing out wild ideas for the past half hour, to no avail.

Sighing Tom III shook his head. "Yeah, we could. One of us can rig up the radio beacon. Someone can modify the rocket to carry it. Someone else can reprogram the target computer to seek out Earth and we can put in a timer to start an SOS call and a message that will make the people of Earth believe the SOS is real and not a joke and come to the back side of the Moon to rescue us. Four Tom Swifts from four different probabilities here seeking a fifth Tom Swift that is out to kill us and their Thomasina Swift too! Right, totally believable and a lot of we can do's." Tom III finished sarcastically, as he slumped into his chair looking at the floor.

"Well! I'm not giving up. Aristotle, could you convince Earth or even better, Thomasina Swift, that we're real and need her help?"

"Sure, Master Tom V. Just seeing me should be proof enough to convince her."

"Then if I replace your legs with, ahh... let's say four defensive rockets that you could control, could you navigate to Earth and using one of those new satellites Miss Swift has just launched, contact her, and get her to come rescue us in her wonderful *Swift Freedom*? Then she can help us repair our ship so we can go home. We only need to get the NZ to work and at her SEI complex we should be able to do that!" Tom V glared at the other three Toms daring them to find holes in

this plan. It was simple and had only one moving part. A totally autonomous and intelligent robot.

One Tom looked at the other two. Slowly smiles appeared on all three faces.

Aristotle understood he was about to do what no robot had ever done before, contact intelligent life on another planet. And, four lives depended on how well he did it.

\* \* \*

Four men and a jury-rigged, smashed up robot were standing beside an equally wrecked starship. They were in the darkness caused by the mountain's shadow but most of the lunar surface in front of them was bathed in sunlight and stood out in pristine clarity. Unseen by man until now, craters and the lunar landscapes of flat plains and sharp jagged mountains beckoned to them.

They all felt the sense of urgency. They had been able to recharge the two heated suits they used before, and the injured TSL and the young Tom V wore those. The other two jogged in place as best they could trying to stay warm in the emergency suits.

Aristotle's legs were now replaced with defensive rocket motors. Two sets of rockets for each leg to power him to Earth in the fastest flight trajectory possible. The first one third of the fuel from the rockets were to be used in taking off and plunging him at high G acceleration toward Earth. The other two thirds was needed to slow him down enough to grab onto a passing satellite. His left arm had been replaced with a spare rocket motor for emergency maneuvering. His right arm had not been changed. He already had a built in radio for normal communications and for computer link ups and his own radar system.

Aristotle knew four lives depended on him and in his own way he depended on them as well. He served no purpose without them. Rechecking his internal diagnostics systems he knew something was wrong. He could feel the un-rightness of it but could not pin it down to what circuit was causing it. Too many new connections without proper feedbacks and subroutines. He was only a machine and could do only what a machine could do. That was to function, to carry out its program. To serve man.

The men stepped back several feet to be out of the backwash of the rockets as he took off and he gave them a three word good-bye, "I'll be back!"

And he even had the accent right.

\* \* \*

The robot did not have to check on any instrument readouts or gauges, he was the machine. In the small universe of his robotic body he was like a God. All knowing, he just had to think and it happened. “But what was that nagging thing?” He thought. “A subroutine error? Must follow top priority; Constant acceleration for the next four hundred cycles of time.” Triangulating his course by the stars around him, he wondered, “Am I right on course?” Was he? “Error in flight location? Numbers not matching. Maybe not to the final zero, but good enough.” Was it? “Recalculate and adjusting. Burning too much fuel in engine number two causing me to drift off course.”

He checked his position; it wasn't correct.

“Rockets off, still accelerating because of Earth's gravity. Reversing engine directions, using limited built in air jets. Need to locate the satellites put into high Molniya orbits by Thomasina Swift. Recalculating speed reduction needs because of changing fuel mass and constant acceleration. Need to restart engines, now! Numbers not within parameters. Recalculating... error... Error! ERROR!”

One millionth of a second later, he knew what had to be done.

“Total shutdown and rebooting of all math processing systems. Self diagnostic of rocket motors CPU and their connections to my hard/soft ware systems. Feed back indicates rocket motor number two out of line. CPU corrupted, transmitting erroneous numbers. Need to shut down that rocket, switching to arm rocket and changing flight path to compensate for engine misalignment. Thrusting still at maximum. Fuel consumption to three remaining leg rockets too high, out of fuel, flair out! Jettison rocket motors to lose unneeded mass. Adjusting arm rocket for maximum thrust and compensating for my off center body mass.”

Aristotle ran the gauntlet of miscalculation and faulty circuitry without a second thought. He faced one problem at a time and did what was needed to continue the mission.

“Radar showing I'm approaching too fast. Will bypass satellite by several hundred feet, need to slow down more. Arm rocket flaming out, jettison in five unites of time for maximum effect to help in slowing down. Jettison, now! Firing air jets. Almost there!”

The Com-Stat was slowly drifting past him by a few feet. He only had to reach out a few feet more! Reaching into his empty left thigh socket he yanked out his leg motion sensor and its bundle of integral wiring and unerringly threw it at the solar panel nearest to him. It smashed right through the thin ceramic surface and snapping back it tangled itself around the metal frame of the panel.

Pulling himself in by the wire connection, he anchored himself to the satellite with his hand. He could now concentrate on the job of communicating with Thomasina Swift.

He knew that someone would be interested down there. After all, if they hadn't notice his approach, they certainly will have registered the damage to the solar panel.



## Chapter Seven: Rescue

The proximity alert flashed onto the monitor screen at Satellite Prime Headquarters in New Guinea. Com-Stat Two had an object hurling toward it.

Ureic, the technician on duty, turned the satellite's camera from its storm tracking to trying to obtain a visual of the oncoming object. It could not be of solar system origins, like a meteor, its speed was decreasing as it approached the Com-Stat.

Ureic, on seeing the object, next called the headquarters president, Mr. Hercules Samson, since he was still there. Within minutes the monitor rooms was in a state of bedlam as additional personnel came rushing in. And as soon as Haz saw the mismatched-looking object/robot on the monitor he immediately called Thomasina Swift at SEI and patched the video over to her.

By the time this was all done, Aristotle had performed his impromptu method of stopping and was making his presence known by radio. He was cutting into the frequencies that SEI used for their communication between their Eurasian branches.

"This is an SOS call to Thomasina Swift of Earth. I repeat this is an SOS call to Thomasina Swift of Earth. There are four other Tom Swift's marooned on your Moon in immediate need of rescue. Could you please help them? Their lives are in danger!" The robot kept repeated this message.

"Haz," Tommy asked, "did you back track the flight of that machine?"

"Yes, we did. We could only assume it came straight in by what little we did track on radar and that does lead back to the Moon. I guess we'd best answer it back because our communication network is useless until it stops."

"I agree with you, Haz. And I do believe it's for real in that it's from a Tom Swift. I've seen one. But four? You talk to it and tell it that I'm going to get it and repair the damage it has done to the satellite. Afterward I will bring it down here to SEI. See what it says. If it's a trick it will probably let me do it my way. But if people are really in danger he should insist that I rescue them first. What do you think?"

"That's your call Tommy. I'm not a robot person like you are."

"Haz, if I didn't know better I would think that you see me as a doppelganger. Just remember that I do have one and she will do as I say. So do be a good boy! I'll call you once I'm airborne and on my way."

\* \* \*

“Satellite Prime, this is *Swift Freedom* calling, Haz are you with me?” Tommy’s ship was in a flight trajectory that was going to get her to Com-Stat Two when it was over Central America in that part of its orbit. Bud was the pilot and Hank Avery and Hinkle were with her to act as robot retrievers.

The communication screen switched from the SEI logo to Haz’s face and shoulders, “Tommy, it’s good to see you and that it didn’t take you too long to get topside. That robot, Aristotle is apparently its name, just won’t shut up. I know why they sent him out on this mission. It was for peace and quiet!” and Tommy could still hear it talking in the background.

“He insists that you go to the Moon first and that he’s all right where he is and won’t interfere with any future communication. He says he will power down and wait. But his Master Tom must be saved first.”

“He also said that it was Thomas Swift’s fault for the Moon crash of their starship and that the four Tom Swifts were on their way to seek you out and see if you wanted to join with them on their search for Thomas Swift. They know all about your troubles with Thomas until about just before you blew him up in your lab. That time period seems to coincide with a bunch of trouble they had from him too.” Haz could tell by the look on her face that Tommy was at a loss. Way too much information to digest and he laughed at her.

Ignoring his laughter she asked, “Haz, what are the chances that I can get a word with him? Is he really intelligent or just a very sophisticated robot with good AI circuitry?” Tommy was shaking her head in wonderment.

“I say intelligent and not just with AI circuitry. He has to be more than that because of the way he managed to stop himself at the satellite. Could a non-thinking machine come up with a solution like that? I doubt it. We have your ship on the Com-Stat Two’s radar system and so does he. He’s telling us to leave him, to go help his Master Tom. Tommy, it’s like he’s pleading with us!” He was shocked at the way the robot was talking.

“Haz, I’m switching to our regular satellite radio frequencies so I’ll take over from here on in but cut in whenever you like.” Tommy pushed the quantum radio/visual screen to the side monitor with a wave of her hand and called up the Com-Stat’s radio link.

“Please Mr. Samson, send them to the Moon first, don’t...” and Aristotle was cut off as Tommy called to him.

“Aristotle, listen to me, this is Thomasina Swift. Do as I ask and we’ll be on our way in five minutes. Will you comply?” She decided on a direct approach.

“As you wish, Miss Swift. How can I help?” Tommy smiled over to Bud and with a chuckle he shrugged his shoulders in reply.

“We’re coming beside you in a few minutes and we’ll have a robotic arm out ready to bring you in. Please push yourself away from the satellite so we can get

you. Once onboard we will proceed to the Moon at a constant one G flight plan and a mid-point turnover. That is the best we can do. We are not trained astronauts and have never been under higher constant G force. But we should be there in under two hours. Once we are in lunar orbit you'll have to show us where they crashed. You do have that information?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Swift, longitude minus twenty-two degrees and latitude nine-five degrees in an area called 'Curie Mare' on the far side of the Moon. I can precisely pin point it once we get there."

"Thank you, Aristotle. Please push off now. The arm is equipped with a large hand-shaped multiplier. It is touch sensitive and will not damage you. You will be released on lunar arrival. Once in orbit we can float you onto the flight deck and you can help pinpoint your friend's location. Please be quiet unless it is really necessary until we get there. Is that okay with you?"

"Very good, Miss Swift, more than satisfactory. Pushing off now." He perfectly judged the distance between the ship's robotic arm and where he was. In less than a minute he was being carried into the docking area. Hank closed the bay doors and locked the arm down as near as he could to the back of the bay.

"Missy, he's clamped down and going nowhere. If he is a threat, it's the best we can do unless we leave him hanging outside." Hank was talking to Tommy through a hard wire connection so the robot could not listen in to their conversation. Hinkle, in the meanwhile had energized the nano-cables that ran throughout the robotic hand locking it tight and immovable as well as unbreakable. Experience with Thomas Swift had taught them one thing: be cautious, really cautious.

\* \* \*

All four "Swiftnauts" were in the control section gazing at the lunar surface just twenty miles below them. The two smaller side monitors were hooked up to the main screen giving them a panoramic view of the surface. It was also being beamed down to SEI by way of the Power Transfer Points. They were slowly approaching the coordinates that Aristotle had given them.

The far side was so different from the Earth side of the Moon. There were only very small lunar seas or mare, as they were called, and the Curie Mare was just over on the far side and surrounded by hundreds of craters and mountain ridges.

"Picking up anything, Tommy, on the sensors?" Bud couldn't take his eyes off the monitor screens. He couldn't wait to add his name to the roster of people that had walked on the Moon. He was hoping to be the fourteenth person listed, letting Tommy being the thirteenth and the first person since the end of the Apollo

Moon missions in December of Seventy-two. Plus, she'd be the first and only female. The four stranded Swifts could not be counted as they were not from Thomasina's probability.

"I'm picking up an emergency location transponder that's not using our assigned frequencies, so I guess it's them. Bud, bring us down next to them but off to the side by a couple hundred feet. I'm going to talk to our wayward passenger on the radio and tell him that we're landing and will release him on the deck once we are down. He can tell his friends we're here and that they are welcome to come aboard. Strap down everyone. Bud, take us in."

\* \* \*

Aristotle had been released and was sitting at the edge of the deck. With no legs he could go nowhere on his own. The Swiftnauts were gazing at the wrecked, *Exedra*, not believing that anyone had all lived through the crash. The four Toms were making their way toward them, kicking up small puffs of the dusty regolith under their feet.

"Shall we meet them on the surface?" Hank inquired. "Does this count as a meeting of extraterrestrial life forms?" he joked.

"Sir, we are not extraterrestrial by any means," answered back Aristotle rather indignantly. "We are all from Earth."

"Yes, Aristotle, he was only kidding... making a joke." Tommy was ready to burst with laughter. "Hinkle, if you'll do the honors, lower us away, please."

On the edge of the deck where they were standing was an outline of twenty by fifteen feet and Hinkle was near the back edge standing near two yellow circles that were just inside the marked area. One was marked up and the other down. He tapped the down one with his foot and the outlined section started to descend to the surface. This was the loading platform for the ship. It could be used even if the dome was closed and the deck had an atmosphere. The platform passed through an airlock that was below the deck when needed.

"Missy," Hank said after the elevator stopped on the surface, "We all agree that you should be the first person to set foot on the Moon after a forty-one year absence." Bud and Hinkle standing next to her both bowed and gestured to her to proceed.

"Thanks guys, but no thanks. We all line up, link arms and step off together like the four Musketeers of old." The three men looked at each other and lined up and linked up.

"We four," intoned Tommy for the people back on Earth, "take this combine step for all humanity. May we go forth and discover the universe and all its wonder." Thomasina Swift, Bud Kenworth, Hank Avery, and Abernathy Hinkle

stepped off in perfect unison and reclaimed the lunar surface for mankind once more.

\* \* \*

“And that, Tommy, is the whole story as we know it.” All the Toms were taking turns telling what had befallen them in the last nine months. From the blue folders containing Tommy stories, the threats on their lives, the destruction of the restaurant, to the most panicky rides of their lives in the Negative Zone tunnels and finally to finding their way to her probability and the recent lunar attack.

Tommy filled the Swifts in on the kidnapping attempt and the possible death of Thomas Swift when she released the counter magnetic field in her laboratory and the hijacking of the *Bud Air Master* Generator Platform by Levenkov.

“If Thomas is dead,” TSL asked as he sipped his tea and nibbled on cold sandwiches in the crew room in the *Swift Freedom*, “who attacked us on the Moon?” No one had an answer to that question.

“Gentlemen,” Tommy said after a yawn, “let’s all get a good night’s sleep and in the morning we’ll see what we can do to get your ship in running order. My crew and I will take turns on watch tonight, just in case. You Swifts don’t know how to fly this ship so there is no use in arguing with me. Breakfast at seven and who’s cooking?”

“Why, Miss Swift,” answered Aristotle as he walked in from the electronics lab on his new legs, followed by Tom III and Hinkle. “I’m the best cook on this side of the Moon.”

Tommy and her crew had made available one of the two Simple-Bots that the ship carried for dangerous work and with its legs, an arm, and motor systems Tom III and Hinkle had been able to put him back together again.

\* \* \*

Tommy took the first watch and after an hour of looking at the *Exedra* she came to a decision. “Aristotle, please come to the control room.” She radioed directly to him. He was in the crew lounge where he was in power down mode.

“How may I help you, Miss Swift?” He asked as he came up and stood by her side at the control console.

“First, I need to know if you can transmit what you see to this monitor screen?” She pointed to the main one that was showing the wrecked ship. The screen dimmed for a second and Tommy’s face replaced the image from Aristotle’s point of view.

“Good. Second, are you capable of going to the ship and doing some close up examination of it for me?”

“Yes I can,” he simply stated.

“Will you, not can you.” She repeated to him.

“As long as you don’t ask me to do any further damage to the ship, Miss Swift.”

“I see. We’re both leery and I can understand that after the surprise attack on your ship. But your Toms are fine with me. Why not you?”

“To err is human, and I am not.”

“Aristotle, you’re more human than you think!” She laughed.

Eight people and a robot watched as a second earth ship descended onto the Curie Mare on the far side of the Moon. It was the *Bud Air Master One*. The wind power turbine had been hastily removed during the night by Mr. Zimmerman and his workers at Astros Aerodynamics. Tommy switched on her radio to the frequency used by the Air Master. “Welcome to the far side of the Moon, Hank and Arvy. Please change your radio channel to match ours and I’ll introduce you to our guests when we come aboard your ship. We’ll use the front door. See you in five.”

Switching back she caught the end of what Tom Jr. was saying. “...appear to have a space fleet already, Tommy.” This second ship was a surprise to them.

“Not exactly a fleet. That is my test model for my high altitude wind turbine and it uses the same Quantum Gravity Drive and as you can see I used its basic design for my space ship too.”

“But,” TSL asked, “how do two ships help us?”

“Your forgetting, TSL,” replied Tom V, before anyone else could, “that it’s equipped with an elevator system and I think Tommy is going to hoist the *Exedra* back into space and take it to Earth. Am I right Tommy?” You could almost see him busting with glee that he had the answer.

“Yes, young man, you’ve got it partially right.” Tommy responded. “Once we have it in lunar orbit we’re going to lash it onto the deck of the *Air Master*, turning it right side up first and take all the way back to SEI so we can fix her up properly.”

“Trying to take it through the atmosphere dangling from cables no matter how strong will only lead to tearing the ship apart. Securing it to a sixty foot wide deck should make it child’s play,” Bud added.

“When do we get to see your other ship?”

“How about now. Let’s go. We have work to do and I hope not much digging to get the cables under the ship. That’s going to be the hardest part, I think.” With a murmur of agreement they went to work.

Even with the eleven of them working—in heated suits that Tommy supplied—and Tom III showing them where they could blowtorch holes into the

sides of the ship to run the cables through, instead of digging under the ship—in safe places that would not destroy what integrity remained and strengthen areas that had none left—it took them ten long hard hours.

By the time they were finished the *Exedra* looked like a toy repaired by a kid with string holding it together. Luckily no one had to be onboard the ship as it was transported off the Moon and back to Earth.

It took them another three hours once in orbit over the Moon to reposition the ship and secure it to the deck. They found it best to leave it tied up and just use new cables to hold it in place.

Bud, Hinkle and Tom III flew the *Air Master* back and the rest of them followed behind in the *Swift Freedom*. With only a stop to replace the solar panel on the Com-Stat Two satellite they were back home by midnight. The *Swift Freedom* was back at the pit, the *Bud Air Master* back at Astros Aerodynamics having its turbine put back on, and the *Exedra* was in the old dirigible hanger hiding from prying eyes.

## Chapter Eight: Prisoner

Tom III was the last person to leave the ship as it was locked up for the day. He carried two cases with him and on finding Tommy outside the hanger he asked, “Do you have a medical section I can temporarily use? Both Tom Jr. and TSL were injured on the Moon and I would like to check them over after this work out we just had.”

“Do you want our doctors to check them over instead? Tom III, you must be just as exhausted as they are.” She reached over and took one of the cases he was carrying.

“Thanks, but no thanks. The Auto-Doc here,” pointing to the case he held, “already has the treatment record it initially did on them and I’ll hook it up with the mind scan in the other case there just to make sure that everything is okay with those old synapses in their hard heads. If not then we may need to see your doctors, but let’s not make it more complicated than it has to be.”

“I’ll get us a vehicle and we’ll be off. The guest quarters are in the same building so it should make it easier for you.”

\* \* \*

TSL was sitting in a chair trying to relax with what looked like a sweatband with solid eye shields on his head. Interwoven wires caped his skull and connected into the band. The Auto-Doc was on a table next to him and its two probes were doing a continuous scan of his body and his head injury. The lid of the mind scan, with its built in monitor, was open and showing a combine CAT-Scan and EEG readings. Half of the screen showed a 3-D picture of the part of the brain being scanned and the firing of active nerve cells and the EEG readings were on the other half. All were in acceptable limits.

“This is amazing, Tom III,” Tommy so much wanted to open the cases and scrutinize the electronics inside. “Do you know how large our CAT-scan machines are and that we’re just starting to do 3-D imaging?”

“Tommy, this is nothing; it has two more usages. One is as a language translator. It scans the visual cortex of two people and synchronizes the images to the verbal and written language of each person involved. And our psychologist uses it to step into a person’s mind and hitchhike through their memory. It’s sort of like a controllable dream but strong personality’s can cause overriding identity conflicts.”

“All very useful in a starship I’m sure,” was all Tommy could reply to the sophistication of the device.



\* \* \*

After a brief morning rest most of the entire Moon personnel went back to the *Exedra* to help Tom III ascertain the damage to his ship and the best way to repair it. Bud had to jet off to China to handle some transportation problems they were having with the government's policy which dictated that they alone gave out the freight contracts and controlled the rates of shipping.

It was several hours later, and an early catered supper had been enjoyed by all the Toms and most of the top echelon of SEI in the spacious board room. Now it was time to put all the facts together and to see if Tommy's world could put the *Exedra* back together. Or was the technology just too advanced and the best they could hope for was a probability jump back to Tom III's world.

Their first problem was that the computers on board neither worked in the same or even similar languages, nor did it function by the standards on Tommy's Earth. It quickly went downhill from there. The reactor needed Helium 3 to run on and an unnoticed fractured seal left most of it on the Moon. Helium 3 wasn't an available substance around here—it was exceptionally rare. The ship's outer covering, while it seemed and acted like metal, was actually a self-repairing silicon and polymer matrix with a Titanium alloy bonded to it. Too much was missing with no hope of making more. The list of problems continued and most seemed insurmountable.

While Aristotle was able to make the correct connection to the Simple-Bot leg and arm motors, the complexity of a starship was too overwhelming for them all to handle. Tom III finally had to settle on trying to making the Negative Zone Device work. And the only way the device could take the ship back to Tom III's world was to have the NZ vortex engulf the spaceship and it could not do that from within the ship. They had to dismantle the whole device and rebuild it in a separate area.

Luckily, Tom Jr. also knew how to build one, and he only had to concentrate on how the electronics worked. Toms III and Jr. working together had to take it apart section by section, check its individual components' reliability, and put the whole device together again in a space that was just big enough to hold the device—Bud's office. Each time they located damaged parts, they sent it off with someone else to find a comparable working part inside the ship itself.

Aristotle with his vast knowledge of the ship directed the search and at times helped them in taking two or three broken parts and reassembling them into one working unit. The worst of it was that the device itself was not one piece of apparatus but several devices scatted around the ship and most had other functions to save space in the ship.

By the third day they were far enough along that they could now start thinking of how to power the device. The device used gigawatts of power and the ship's super-conductive rings were missing chunks of material that had been vaporized when the magnetic containment field coupling was destroyed on the Moon by the rocket attack.

Tommy just smiled on hearing about this last obstacle, "Power," she said to them, "we have. Just tell me when and how much and you'll have it. The *Bud Air Masters* are coming off the assembly line daily and it will take no time at all to get the power amount you'll need."

Tom III's eyes lit up with glee for the first time in days. "Then by tomorrow we should be done."

And the Universe answered back with the alarms going off all over the SEI complex.

Tommy's wrist phone rang about a second before the complex alarms. Hardin Ames was the caller. "Tommy, I'm canceling the alarm. It was activated too late. A portal materialized, dropped off a person, closed up and left him behind standing in the middle of the runway in front of the administration building. He's standing there with his hands up in the air over his head and for the life of me if he doesn't look like old man Flagger, himself." Tommy could hear the disbelief in his voice.

"Keep him there, Mr. Ames, Don't let anyone go near him in case he's not who he looks like. Man, do I need to invent a hand-held body scan for times like these!"

"Ahhh... Tommy, he's dressed in a three piece business suit and its twenty degrees out there!"

"Throw him a blanket! I've got to go. Bud's frantically calling from China." And Tommy switched calls. "No, Bud, just a false alarm, just one of those days. Are you coming home soon?" she asked, trying to change the subject.

"We're at a dead lock." He replied. "They want the quantum space drive and won't give in on the transportation hauling contracts until they get it. Sheer blackmail, if you ask me!"

"Tell them they can have the quantum drive for the power turbines and to launch satellites with. Also that if they're willing to wait six months I'll have a true self-contained gravity drive space engine that will probably open a way to the stars. Make sure they understand that the list of who gets the drive is long and names do get lost or misdirected."

"They won't like that, Tommy!"

"Well explain to them that friends help friends. We didn't hold back on the arc jet, nano-batteries or the turbines and we would hate to start going down that road now. You can make up the rest of it. Right?"

“Sure, Tommy, hard ball it is!”

“Great! The NZ device will be ready to test in a day or two. Finish up and come home. Hate to leave without you. See you soon, bye.”

She closed her phone and put it back on her wrist. By now everyone was standing around her at the hanger’s office.

“What a day!” she murmured to herself. “Now back to the other fire!” Looking around at everyone staring at her she quibbled, “What else could I say? He would have rushed back, probably for nothing, and China would really be impossible to handle after that!”

“Tommy,” spoke out Tom Jr. “Gravity drive space engine? What the heck?”

“Oh, that. Sorry, later my friends. We have a man freezing his butt off right now and he may have the answers that we need. So let’s attend to that first. All interested parties into the mini-bus and we’ll be off.” And with that statement, Tommy walked off and got into the bus.

“Aristotle, can you tell yet if he’s real or not?” Tommy asked as Hinkle parked the mini-bus in the assembly building parking lot that was a couple hundred feet from the lone man. They could see Mr. Ames watching them and the stranger from the administration building doors.

“He is human, Miss Swift. Cold and ill if I read his vital signs right. I think he’s dying.”

“My, God!” exclaimed Tommy. “Tom III, can you help him if we take him to the med-lab?”

“I don’t know, Tommy. We’ve got to get him inside first and then I’ll get the Auto-Doc.”

“I’ll get that for you, Tom III.” spoke up Tom V. “Where will you take him?”

“The boardroom on the second floor will hold all of us, thanks, Tom V.” She opened the bus door and they all piled out into the cold. Mr. Ames came out and started to head their way. Tommy briskly walked toward the man that had a space blanket over his shoulders and called out at the same time.

“Mr. Flagger, sorry for the delay. You caught us at a busy time and we are ill prepared for surprise guests.” She tried to hold a smile on her face as she got near him. Reaching out her hand she took hold of his arm and started to lead him to the administrating building. His face was white and his blue lips trembled, but he was willing enough to be lead away.

With a hot cup of coffee in his hands and after taking a few sips, he slowly stopped shivering. Tom V showed up with the Auto-Doc and Tom III asked permission to use it on him. He reluctantly gave his approval and told him at the same time. “I’m dying, so don’t do anything foolish like trying to keep me alive longer. Save it for my son. He’s young and deserves to live. I’m old and past my usefulness. Save him and I’ll willingly go to my grave and to my just desserts.”

He took another sip of coffee and looked at Tommy, “You’re Thomasina Swift,” and looking at Sandy he nodded his head and said. “No wonder he’s half crazy about the two of you. I’m just sorry that he chose the wrong way to approach you two.” Now pointing at the three Tom Swift standing near the Auto-Doc, “I owe you three more than I can ever repay. I did not know that he lied and deceived his way into your group. He told me that you all willingly accepted him and wished to help our world, but that you as a group of probabilities could not do so without jeopardizing your own existence. I truly believed him when he told me this. He also told me that Thomasina’s probability was the only one not affected because she was not a direct descendent of a Tom Swift. That her Tom Swift had died and that freed her from the repercussion of her helping them out with her inventions and knowledge. I guess I was too naive to know better and I should have. But I so much wanted Thomas to be right and regain his position in our world that in my greed I took from him and his family.”

Now turning his attention to Mr. Swift. “You must be Damon Swift. I implore your forgiveness, sir. I have put the rest of your family, friends, and your livelihood in peril. A thing a man should never do! But I’m afraid I came by this knowledge a little too late.”

Looking at the rest of the people in the room he simply said. “I’m a fool that let this happen and if Thomas hurt any of you, I’m sorry.” He took the last sip of coffee and put his cup down and slowly stood up.

“I know I have no right to ask this of anyone of you, but I beg you, please help my son and I’ll pay any price that you see fit. If it’s mine to give, I’ll gladly do so.”

Mr. Swift spoke up, “I’m confused, sir. What is wrong with Thomas and you refer to him as your son, but you also said you took his position in your world. What does that mean?”

“Forgive me. I keep forgetting that you really don’t know who we are. I learned so much about you in the past months and it’s all one sided. I’m the Andrew Flagger that mostly been the bane of your existence in your many worlds. Thomas is my ward, given to me by his mother when he was a child and she could not take care for him because of his illness. But that is nothing! I did the unthinkable. I had Thomas Swift’s father imprisoned for war crimes.”

Sandy gasped at this pronouncement.

“Our time lines don’t match up. After World War One in which Tom Swift senior was instrumental in ending, he turned his energy into helping Europe out of the mess it was in by his support of the League of Nations and through many private groups.”

“I took charge of Swift Construction for him and ran a big illegal rearmament campaign with Germany and other war hungry nations behind his

back. It came to a head finally in thirty-eight and we fought the Germans and pushed back an attack on California by Japan. We ended WW 2 in nine months with the use of the Electric Rifle which I supplied to the League of Nations' military forces."

He could see their continued lack of understanding.

"We never disbanded the League of Nations, thank God. Because we still had a world government setup we were able to hold what little remained of our world after the influenza and famines hit the Asian and European continents. The Americans were hit with the influenza and polio instead."

He held up a hand to stop any questions.

"We caused the spread of the illness ourselves without knowing it. The rapid population movement throughout the war zones did it. We did not realize that the new transport and passenger planes we developed during the war were the principle cause. We moved large groups of medical personnel from contaminated zones to safe zone and back again never thinking of the planes being the carriers. New crews used the same planes that were turned over for another flight as fast as possible. We could never catch up with the plagues until we had no pilots left to fly them and that's when it finally stopped spreading.

"We manage to kill off two thirds of my world's population by then. We have been hanging on by a thread ever since. We have only one government and we're a united people, something that seems to be rare in all the probabilities that the Swift's share. While Thomasina's invention could give us the electrical power we so badly need we don't have the natural resources or the manpower to develop it to its full potential.

"Our world has been short changed in oil deposits and other mineral resources that your worlds have. Even with our small population we are running out of resources fast. We noticed that both our sister planets, Mars and Venus are larger and denser than the ones your solar system's charts show, so much of our heavier minerals must be in there were we can't get at them." His head hung low.

"We're barely in your nineteen fifties, technology wise, and trying to update ourselves to your science in a quick fifty-year jump is impossible for us. There is the problem. That is what Thomas refused to understand. He insists that we can do it and that we have to. Since he was a child he kept saying that he was going to lead us to a better future, that he was the only one that could do it. It started when he was a child in the iron lung because of the polio and he could not breathe by himself. He is one of the few that ever made it back to a near full recovery from almost total brainstem and spinal cord damage. He used to tell us of his Night Angel visits and that he was the one that made him better. We laughed at him and after a while he stopped talking about the Night Angel and we though he had just out grown it."

Mr. Flagger reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a small talisman and handed it to Mr. Swift who looked at it and passed it on. It was a black shaped shield with the letters T S stamped on it. “Thomas said the Night Angel gave it to him, and when it was time for him to take his destiny back the talisman would be there to help him. When we tried to take it away from him once he threw such a fit that we had to give it back.”

The talisman was in Tom III hands and when he passed it to Tom Jr. it went by Aristotle and it started to beep. Tom III snatched it back and it stopped. “Aristotle, please scan this talisman,” he instructed his robot friend as he held it out to him.

“Master, I cannot. It’s some type of electronic device. But it has no individual parts to scan. It is solid in composition. Actually it is scanning me at this moment and it is not impressed with my intelligences. It has stopped. It finds me of no interest. Sorry, Master Tom, I can tell you no more or how I know what it thinks.”

Tom III gave it back to Mr. Flagger. “I knew it was more than what it seems. The machine that I used to get here would not work unless I had it with me and to go back home all I have to do is think really hard about going back with it in my hand. That is the way Thomas travels about because there is no control panel on the device. Thomas stands in front of it and comes and goes as he pleases.”

“Does he ever use a space ship in his endeavors?” asked Tom III interrupting Mr. Flagger, thinking of the Moon attack.

“No, he does not have one that I know of. He never mentioned one in his ramblings. We lack technology, as I said. This was the first time, by the way, that it has worked for me. Why I tried it I can’t say. I just did. I felt I had to.”

“Mr. Flagger,” Tommy addressed him, “This is all well and good that we know something about you and your world. But what about Thomas? You want us to help him but we through he was dead. You do know that he tried to kidnap Sandra and me a while back and that the only way we could stop it was to counter the portal he was going to use on me and the building he was in imploded into a wormhole. You know what that is, don’t you?”

“Yes I do know what a wormhole is and Thomas was not caught in the backlash that imploded your laboratory. He came back home in one piece but his mind was affected somehow. He has been catatonic since then, a prisoner inside his own head. He won’t eat or speak by himself or even look at anything. His eyes are open and responsive, he’ll eat when we put food in his mouth and walk if we get him up and started but he’ll walk right into a wall or off a cliff if you let him. His body is here but his mind is elsewhere, and he is slowly dying.” Flagger chucked sadly. “The doctors of my world have bets on who will die first, Thomas or me! So now we’re at the reason I’m here. Can you save him? Can you reach into his mind

and bring him back to our world?” He looked into everyone’s eyes, looking for the *yes* he so desperately wanted. He stopped for a moment at Tommy’s and stopped totally at Tom III. “Do you have it in your heart after what he has done?”

“Wait just a minute there, Mr. Flagger” Tom III sharply spoke out. “You said the talisman never worked for you before and this time it did. And how did you find out about what Thomas did if he’s not talking?”

“Why I used the talisman, I can’t tell you. I said that before. Something compelled me to try it. Something I could barely ignore. And as for Thomas talking, that I can’t completely explain either.” He was shaking his head slowly back and forth. “At times if you ask the right question, just at the right time, you get an answer. Not always a whole answer but an answer. It took us months to piece together the story out of him. It was just a chance question asked by someone in front of him that he responded to that started it. It took twenty-four people, working night and day with a recorder constantly running, and all of us always asking all types of questions. At times we would get lots of answers and at times they came days apart.”

He looked slowly around at the people in front of him. In spite of now being warm, he shivered.

“Do you know how awful it is to hear your son tell you things that you would never think were possible for him to do? It’s hell I tell you, and I know I’m responsible. I hope I die first before I have to face him again!” He fell silent and tears rolled down his cheeks.

## Chapter Nine: Mind Scan

Everyone was nonplused. They looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders or just shook their heads in disbelief. Mr. Swift after a few minutes took Mr. Flagger by the arm and led him out of the room. He whispered to Sandy as he passed her he was going to his office with the older man.

The room broke out in bedlam after the door closed behind them. Mostly they were in shock that this man could have been so evil and uncaring to what happened to his own planet that he literally caused a worldwide war because of his greed! He was worse than Hitler or any other mass murderer in known history and it still seemed he was held in high esteem in his world because of his electric rifle, that most of the Tom's agreed that he had stolen from Tom Senior somehow.

Tommy called for silence after a time and spoke her thoughts to them. "We may know he has done evil things in the past. Apparently his world does not. We cannot judge him for this and his past is now catching up with him." A burst of comments assaulted her and she held up her hands for silence.

"We must be concerned about what is happening to us and why. The only way we can get the truth is from Thomas. The cause of his behavior is inside his mind and Tom III's medical devices may be our only way to get our questions answered. That means we must go to him and at least try. We cannot be concerned at this time about Mr. Flagger's past."

Protests started up again. Tommy quieted them.

"There is more going on than we know," spoke up Tom Jr., and we must protect ourselves. I have come to the conclusion that we are being attacked by two separate people. Thomas was using the NZ device on Tommy's world and at the restaurant. But the Moon attack and the double NZ tunnels Tom III encountered in space is not possible with one machine. Thomas might have sent him off in the first place but someone else placed that second NZ tunnel in his way that almost killed him." He folded his arms over his chest and waited for a rebuttal. None came.

TSL spoke up next. "I agree with Tom Jr. and I would like to add that that *Night Angel* started Thomas down this track of destruction in the first place and he may be the other person that is after us. In fact he may be the only one after us. Thomas may be just a pawn in a game we still don't know the rules of, and if all of this is because of probability travel then we must definitely give it up." And he too folded his arms.

"What I would like to know," Tom V asked, "is how Thomas got his NZ device. He certainly did not invent it. His world doesn't have the technology, evidently. So that leaves the Night Angel again!" and he folded his arms. Smiles and chuckles started to surface from various people in the room. Without realizing



it both Tom III and Tommy had folded their arms too.

Sandy could not contain herself. “Don’t they look cute! Five peas in a pod. Or, five Ts!” She chuckled at her own little joke.

The Tom’s looked at each other and burst out laughing and Tommy quipped, “I hate you, Sandy!”

“I know, dear, I know.” And she patted her arm. The tension in the room was now broken and they all began to relax.

“So, Tom III, are you willing to go with me to Thomas’s world and pay him a visit?” Tommy was looking at him in earnest.

“Can I talk you out of it?” he answered back.

“No, you can’t. But you have the medical devices and I can’t force you to give them to me. Anyhow, who else knows how to operate them?” She smiled back.

“Road trip, and I ride shotgun!” Tom III shouted.

\* \* \*

It took awhile but it was settled. Only Tom III and Tommy would return with Mr. Flagger. Contingency plans were made in case complications developed and this whole trip was just a trap. Their options were limited but they were Swifts and knew how to make do.

With a knock on Mr. Swift’s door the two seekers of the truth let themselves in and Sandy followed them in a moment later. “You don’t think that I would let you two sneak off without a good-bye, do you?” she answered their unasked question.

They found Mr. Swift and Mr. Flagger talking quietly from the small guest corner in the room. Two easy chairs sat in a corner on opposite walls with a small serving table between them made it easy for them to talk to each other. Both older men stood up when they came in.

“Mr. Flagger, Uncle Damon, I know this is quick, but downstairs we have come to an agreement that both Tom III and I are willing to go back with you to try to help Thomas.” Tommy held up her hand to stop him from talking. “You must understand that we want to limit to how long we will stay. Tom III says that if we get no results in two days it is hopeless and his equipment will not be able to help. You cannot hold us responsible if anything unfortunate happens to Thomas while under our care. We are not doctors and this has a slim chance of working.”

A glow came to Mr. Flagger’s eyes, a brightness that was missing before came back. “Yes, Thomasina, and thank you Tom III. You have saved my son’s life. I’m sure of it.” And he reached out to shake their hands in gratitude.

“Save it, Mr. Flagger, till we have done our work and we are ready to leave

one way or the other.”

Mr. Flagger took a step back. “Yes, your right. My trust must be shown first and I don’t blame you for being cautious. When will we leave?”

“Now, if you’re ready.” Tommy answered back. “We have the med kits in the packs on our backs and that’s all we need. But remember if we are not back in two days the rest of the Tom Swifts will be coming after us and they won’t be happy about it!”

He nodded his acceptance. “Please hold hands, and Tommy will you be willing to hold mine? If we are to go, we must be linked.”

Mr. Swift stepped forward, “Tommy, are you sure? he asked in a worried voice.

“Yes, Uncle Damon, I’m sure this must be done. Talk to the other Toms and you’ll see our reasoning. Give my love to Bud if I’m not back before he gets here.” She gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Sandy gave her cousin a long hug and stepped over to stand next to her father. Taking both the men’s hands into hers, Tommy nodded her readiness.

Mr. Flagger closed his eyes and a weird feeling came over them. A shimmering blackness formed before them and Mr. Flagger stepped into it, pulling them along. The blackness parted and a dim light took its place. Cold air filled their lungs. They had held their breaths unknowingly.

“Guards,” called out Mr. Flagger immediately on stepping out of the portal and into the probability device room. Tommy and Tom III froze in their tracks.

“We’re screwed,” thought Tom III to himself as he hit the fob in his pocket. The NZ tracker that they had hurriedly taken apart and reconnected to a quantum phone, placed in his backpack, sent the needed coordinates back to Tommy’s probability and the recording device in Tom III’s ship. “If nothing else, they now know where we are.” And a satisfied smile formed on his lips as their first contingency plan was put into play.

“Guards, turn on the lights and unlock the gates. Take these people to Thomas’s rooms. Treat them with full respect. Do anything they ask,” he lowered his voice, “and I’ll join you two shortly,” now speaking to his guests. I have something important to do and it can’t wait any longer. It’s twenty years overdue.”

\* \* \*

It was unnerving to see Thomas just sitting there and staring out into nothing. His room was large, well lit, and full of medical equipment. He was attended by a nurse and a doctor at all times. Two glass IVs hung from a metal pole and their combined brown rubber tubes connected to a needle in his arm. He was pale and scrawny looking. Death was coming fast and his eyes never blinked at its

approach.

“Can we have two chairs and a table large enough to hold these two back packs, please?” Tom III directed his request to one of the two guards that accompanied them. As the guard acquired the needed items the other guard talked to the doctor and nurse. The doctor got red in the face and puffed out his chest as he stepped forward and stood between Thomas and them. “How dare you presume that I’ll let non-persons like you attend to my patient? I’ll see that you never get near him!” He abruptly turned to the guard, “Where did consul-man Flagger go?”

“He did not tell us, sir. But he did head toward his residence.”

“Keep them away from my patient till I get back,” he ordered the guard as he stormed out of the room. The nurse watched him go.

“Good riddance,” she murmured to herself. She was young and very pretty. Looking at them she added. “He may be my father, but he has done nothing to help Thomas for a long time. He believes that Thomas got what he deserves for meddling in things that belong to God! What can I do to help?” she asked as she longingly glanced at Thomas.

Tommy took her to the room’s entrance where the guards were standing watching them. “The best thing you can do for us is to make sure that we are not disturbed. Let no one in unless it’s Mr. Flagger. We need complete quiet. Do you understand?”

“Oh yes, Miss. Anything to help Thomas.” And she proceeded to push the guards out into the hallway.

Both Tommy and Tom III looked at each other and smiled an understanding that the nurse was in love with Thomas and that her father/doctor was never coming back in.

They started to unpack their equipment on the table that had arrived as the doctor left. Tom III placed Tommy’s chair near Thomas’s so the Auto-Doc, placed on the floor in front of them, could monitor both of them at the same time. He then pulled the table off to one side and turned his chair so he could watch them and the mind scanner. He pulled out a few additional items he was going to need from their sealed packages. They were ready.

“Tommy, you realize that this will be a strain on you? And if you are tired we need to wait till you have rested.”

“No, I’m fine. Let’s get this started, and then I can rest later.”

“As you wish. But I will pull the plug if the readings indicate that you are physically or mentally in danger.” She nodded her understanding and sat down. Tom III handed her a thin helmet that would completely cover her head, eyes and ears. She would be totally isolated from hearing or seeing anything as long as it was on her head.

She watched as he placed another helmet on Thomas’s head. She was about

to put hers on when Mr. Flagger came rushing into the room. "I'm sorry," he told them as he got near them, "I should have realized that Doctor Michael would be upset over you two showing up. I've dismissed him for now so he won't be back. What can I do to help?"

He seemed younger and livelier than he was just a half hour ago.

"Just sit and please do not interrupt. Sometimes the people that are being scanned vocalize what they are hearing or saying, so don't be surprised. With those helmets on they cannot see or hear us but you could distract me and if I miss even the smallest nuance on the monitor screen it could be a disaster for one or both of them." Tom III watched the color drain from Mr. Flagger's face. His breathing got faster and Tommy thought he was going to collapse.

"If... if this is that dangerous to Tommy I don't want her to do it. It's bad enough that Thomas is like this. I don't want Thomasina to become like him!" his voice shook with raw emotions.

"Then just watch and it won't happen." He motioned to Tommy to put on the head gear as he turned on the Auto-Doc and the scanner and linked them together. He then chose the psychoanalytical program he needed and let it run its preliminary reading on both of them to get a base line on their mental activities.

Tommy's mental state went through several quick changes and settled down as she adjusted to the loss of two of her senses. She knew what to expect and she just stayed calm waiting until she was in Thomas's mind.

Thomas's mental state was all over the board. He was a confusing mass of randomly firing synapses. Tom III knew that Tommy was going to have a rough time of it. Finally he found a spot that was stable and he could insert Tommy's consciousness into it. He was not surprised that it was the motor functions of Thomas's brain. His motor cortex was so damaged as a child that large portions of this area had never healed properly and nearby brain cells had retrained themselves and took over the needed functions.

Tommy felt dizzy for a moment before it settled down to a small rocking notion that slowly stopped. Her visual center registered strange gray surroundings that undulated in shades of gray opposite to the rocking notion. It too slowly stopped but it stayed light gray in color. Sound came in waves also. Loud, then soft, fuzzy and then sharp and clear. It was then that she realized that the sounds were like hundreds of voices calling out for attention. But there was a rhythmic chanting sound always in the background. If she concentrated on just one sound it became clear and loud, the grayness would recede and an image would take shape that corresponded with the sound. A clear picture formed in the center and fuzzed out towards the edges. By moving her focus around she could redirect the visual and sometimes the sound.

She definitely felt like she was dreaming but was also half awake. Suddenly

it was all gone and she cried out in pain and then all her senses were working again and she felt sick to her stomach and before she could get up she heaved up her last meal. She was disgusted with herself and to her surprise she was being lead away by the young nurse that came running to help her.

She was taken to a nearby room, stripped of her dirty outfit, put into a hot shower and then to bed. She slept for a full twelve hours.

When Tommy woke up, she found her clothes cleaned and waiting for her. The smell of coffee and cooked bacon drew her to a small covered patio that was off of Thomas's room.

The nurse, Phyllis, had Thomas out in the sun and was reading a book to him in hopes that he would react to it in some way. Mr. Flagger and Tom III were talking quietly at a table sipping coffee. Dirty dishes were piled neatly on the other side of the table, but one setup was still unused next to Tom III waiting for her. A small side table was covered with a chafing dish of hot food, a coffee carafe, and a small bowl of fresh cut up fruit.

"Sorry for what happened yesterday," Tommy began somewhat red in the face.

Tom III interrupted her, "No, it's my fault. I should have pulled you out of there much earlier than I did. That was your first time in and a physical reaction on being pulled out that fast is known to happen. It won't happen again. Eat a good breakfast and then we can go back in. This time you'll stay no longer than ninety minutes at a time. With a hour break in between if you can handle it."

\* \* \*

Tommy was watching a boy, about eight years old, struggling, and trying to walk using parallel bars. His legs were encased in heavy-looking braces. The grimace on his face showed pain and determination. After a moment she realized that she was seeing Thomas. He was looking at a full-length mirror that covered the whole wall he was facing. A man was standing near him dressed in a sparkly black skin-tight outfit. A hood of some type was pulled off his head and bunched around the back of his neck.

"That's right, Thomas, you can do it! You are the one. The only one that can make it happen. A couple more minutes and you can quit and have the special candy."

"I... love... those... candies," the child managed to say between steps.

"You are doing well Thomas. I must go for a while." Thomas stumbled but regained his footing. "I'll be back just like last time. You must know that I have other obligations besides you."

Thomas face took on additional pain. "But you are the one that I don't want

to leave.”

The man’s face brightened up. “I am always with you in the talisman. If you ever need me just hold on to it tight and think of me. It may take a few tries, but I’ll come.”

Young Thomas took a final step and then leaned against one of the bars.

“Good, you’re done. Do this in secret every other night for ten minutes and at the end of a month increase it by five minutes. Continue it till you’re strong and on your feet without help. But I caution you, your left leg may always need a brace. Those witch doctors of yours did not do you any good by operating on you and scrapping your leg bones hoping to remove the polio infection when you were a child. Ignorant butchers!”

“Could you not stop them?”

“It was done before you even collapsed and had to be put into that iron lung. My young Thomas, even I can’t know everything that will happen. Now, take your candy and we’ll tuck you in for the night and in the morning you’ll feel a hundred percent better.”

As the boy slept, his dreams recalled a time gone by.

\* \* \*

The constant noise of the machine frightened him. The hissing, the whizzing, the clanking of metal against metal and the whine of the electric motor that if stopped, and no one was near, meant he would be dead in minutes. He could not even scream for help—without the iron lung working he had no air to scream with, no muscles to force it out even if he had just taken a breath. Why he understood all this was beyond young Tommy’s understanding. He just did. And it happened when he woke up in the machine on the first day.

It was late at night now, and he could see the night sky overhead through the skylight. He was so alone and he knew that this was going to happen. He saw other children his age on the hospital ward go through it, which didn’t help much. It was him that it was happening to! Panic filled his mind, he want to cry, to call out, but couldn’t.

A face appeared in the mirror that he viewed the world with. It was just a face in the blackness. The mirror showed nothing else.

“Hello, Thomas, I’m your Night Angel.”

Tommy stared at him in wide-eyed wonder. “My guardian angel. Am I about to die? Are you taking me to heaven?” Only a child could ask so devastating a question and see no horror in it.

“No, Thomas, you’re not going to heaven yet! It will be a long time before it happens. I’m not from God. I’m your Night Angel. I’m to get you ready for your

destiny—your future. You have a great future waiting for you. But first remember you are Thomas, not Tommy. That name belongs to someone else. You are Thomas, the one and only Thomas. There can be no other. You are unique in all the universe and there can be no one else like you. I have a small treat for you. Take this piece of candy and it will make you feel less lost. Tell no one about me and if you don't, I'll be back tomorrow night with more candy and something to help you remember me by.”

\* \* \*

“So the God, Chaos, filled with mischief, jumped from one star to the next changing their color and making them different sizes. Chaos's twin brother, Tranquility, shook his head in dismay. He had worked a long time on this particular galaxy of stars turning them into a very intricate and orderly pattern. It was ruined now. It would take too long to set it right. Chaos was all smiles and happy looking at how all the stars are now moving and colliding with each other making outrageous solar flares, fiery fragments and swirling color gas clouds. Clapping his hands together he called out to his brother, ‘Look, Tranquility! Even brighter and prettier colored stars are forming out of my chaos.’ Did you like that story, Thomas? I have others if you like to hear them.”

“Yes, please, Night Angel. I kept my promise and told no one about you! Can I have another piece of candy?” Joy filled his eyes for the first time in months.

“Not so fast, Thomas. First, do you remember what I told you?”

Thomas thought it over and a smile crossed his lips, “I am Thomas. I am unique. I'm the only one, there can be no others!”

“Good boy! Here is your candy and the present that I promised you. Open wide.” And he dropped the candy into Thomas's mouth. He then held up a chain with a talisman attached to it. It was black, shiny and shaped like a shield and on one side, Thomas, could see the letters T S pressed into it as it turned in the light.

The Night Angel put the chain around his neck and let the talisman dropped onto his chest. “Ouch, it burns,” Thomas yelled out.

“Yes, but only for a second. Now it's truly yours. It will only answer to you. Never let them take it from you, for without it, you have no destiny!”

\* \* \*

The water in the swimming pool felt good. Here he could imagine himself whole and his one weak leg did not bother him in the water. He did lap after lap, forever pushing his body.

“Thomas you are doing well. Why did you let the girl take you here in a

wheelchair? You can walk, and you must always be strong!”

“Night Angel,” Thomas pulled himself out of the pool and stood before his mentor, as happy as a puppy. “I let Phyllis do it because she is fun to be with. She wants to be a nurse and does not mind that I’m a cripple...”

“Never, Thomas, never say that!” viciously shouted the Night Angel. His voice echoed in the enclosed pool area. “You are a whole person in mind and body. Never let anyone look down on you. Remember, you are the one, the only one. You can’t possibly lead your people into a better world if you think you’re inferior!” The Night Angel shocked Thomas. He’d never raised his voice before.

“I know you are fourteen and lonely, and may be starting to get curious about girls, but don’t let that girl distract you from your goal. It is time for me, Thomas, to set in motion the future you are destined to follow. I will be gone for a long, long time. Maybe we won’t see each other again.”

“No! You can’t leave me.” He almost reached out and touched the Night Angel, but stopped himself. No physical contact was ever permitted. “Is this because of Phyllis? I won’t see her again. Please don’t go,” he begged.

“You have learned nothing! You must never plead. You must demand!” Then he was gone.

Phyllis was coming back to the pool. She had a surprise for Thomas. She had talked her mother in taking them to the beach at Lake Carlopa for the afternoon. She heard a strange whimpering sound from inside the pool area as she opened the door. She instantly became frightened, fearing for Thomas. She ran in and found him on the other side of the pool, curled in a fetal position making that horrible sound.

She ran to him and dropped onto the wet floor and tried to get him to stop. As she struggled with him she also tried talking softly to him. His eyes focused on her face as he recognized her voice. “You!” he shouted as he pushed her violently away. “It’s all your fault! He would never have left if you were not around. I hate you! I hate you!” And he heaved himself up off the floor. Phyllis, in a heap, looked up in terror at him.

“I never want to see you again. The Night Angel was right. I must be strong. I am the one, the only one!” He turned from the girl and left the building, never looking back.

Off in a dark alcove a figure stirred. “At last,” he thought, “he’ll listen to no one but me from now on.”

\* \* \*

Thomas lay in his bed in the middle of the night. He clasped the talisman in both his hands. “Night Angel, come to me. I command it.” He had been calling out



for the last two nights, forcing his will into the talisman.

“I came as you commanded, Thomas.” And the Night Angel was there before him. Thomas sat up in bed and was determined not to show his feelings. He was going to hide them forever.

“I have had the girl dismissed from her job as my helper. I will have no one ever again. You were right. I was curious about girls, but they showed themselves weak and I do not need weakness in my life. I’m ready to do all you ask of me.” He watched the Night Angel’s face for a reaction. A small smile appeared.

“Yes! I knew you could do it, Thomas. I had to wait till you were old enough to feel toward someone other than me. Then I could find out if you were up to the rigorous challenges you’re going to face. You must, through necessity, face most of them alone. You will understand more when the time comes.”

“I am proud of you. But things have not changed. I will be gone for a long time but on the night of your eighteenth birthday I’m going to send you a tool that will give you access to what you have to do in the future. The Prism, as I call it, will also be a teacher and help guide you on your way. I am the master of the Prism as it is the master to your talisman. What it teaches and directs you to do is the same thing as if it comes from me.”

\* \* \*

It was midnight and the talisman was burning. It was getting hotter every minute. “Yes, I came.” Thomas thought to himself. He slipped out the patio doors leaving his eighteenth birthday party behind. Phyllis watched him go and decided to follow him.

He was never the same since the incident at the pool. He avoided her. She was not permitted to help him; no one did after that. But she caught him at times watching her as she went to the school of nursing and industrial trades on the Flagger Education Campus, which Mr. Flagger had established free for the best young minds in the world, which was part of the whole Flagger complex. When she tried to speak to him he would turn cold and walk away. It hurt so much and she could do nothing to help him.

He went up the seldom-used walkway of the old polio institute that had not been used in years. It was dark and foreboding. They have been trying to decide what to do with it for the last few years. He went straight to the front door, took out keys and soon was inside.

A small light appeared, and then the hallway lights lit up. Phyllis hesitated for a moment at the door and went in. She followed him by the sound of his bad foot. He went to the far side of the building to the vast empty iron lung ward that was used by so many of the polio victims that had volunteered to be research

subjects.

Again the keys came out and he unlocked the iron grid gates and slid them open. He then unlocked the large double doors and it was then that Phyllis made a noise. Thomas whipped around and spotted her.

“You! Why is it always you?” he demanded.

She came forward and reached out to his arm, touching him softly. “Because I care about you.” It was a simple statement and it hit him hard. He looked at her lovely face, her long silky black hair, her womanly body, and raged inside himself. He wanted her so. And he knew that he could not have her. His world depended on him being the one, the only one; even if at this time they did not know it.

He brushed her hand off and the contact electrified him. He shivered inside of himself. “I am the one,” he murmured, “the only one.” He laughed out loud. He turned back to the doors and threw them open, “Come,” he shouted out with glee. “Come and see what my Night Angel has given me for my birthday. Be the first to see what the future has for us!” and he took her hand and boldly walked into the room.

It was awe inspiring. Huge, black and shimmering, almost too hard to look at. I was eight sided and smooth as glass, even smoother. All the sides were the same but one. On one side were a shield and the embossed letters, T S. Thomas could not take his eyes off of it. Phyllis wanted to run away from it, screaming in terror. She could feel only turmoil coming from it. Insanity or chaos, take your pick.

Thomas ran his hands over it. It was calling him. He came to the shield and moaned. Reaching for his talisman he nearly tore open his shirt. Trembling he placed the talisman between the T and the S.

He screamed out in ecstasy, he threw his body against the Prism. “Physical contact has been made.” It intoned. “You are now able to access all my programming. I will teach you all necessary information you will need. I am ready when you are.” Thomas felt the power coming from the Prism, he stepped back. “Start, now,” was all he said. His body went rigid and he was lost the rest of the night.

Phyllis ran into the night, hoping to find Andrew Flagger and tell him what was happening.

\* \* \*

Tommy was entering Thomas’s mind for the last time. The four-eight hours were about up and she still had not found the lost consciousness of Thomas. “What if he’s not there at all,” She wondered, “and only an empty hulk of a body is left. I will give it one last try. Maybe thinking of Phyllis will do it.”

“Thomas! Phyllis!” she called out in the grayness. Shapeless forms drifted past her but none formed and answered her call. “Where would I go to be with her in my mind? No! In his mind. Before the pool incident, that’s for sure. She liked to read, and Thomas liked to listen to stories. Summer, by a pond or stream, under a tree, maybe?”

An image formed, just as she pictured it. It was the most real surroundings she had seen in Thomas’s mind. It was complete. Absolutely nothing was missing. She could smell the grass and nearby flowers, saw birds flying by, and bees buzzing and butterflies fluttering in the breeze. The girl, Phyllis with her long, silky black hair cascading over her shoulders, was sitting under the tree and Thomas had his head in her lap. She was reading from a book of poetry, and he spent most of his time watching her face. The blinking of her sparkling brown eyes, the words forming on her ruby lips, the slight smile that showed her pure white teeth, that came and went with the love sonnets. Thomas was free. He had love and happiness in this small made up world. He was determined to stay there forever.

“Thomas, do you hear me?” Tommy whispered into the air.

His face cringed. “Go away. I refuse to hear you!”

“Thomas, I come a long way to talk to you.”

“Go away!”

“Thomas, please. Phyllis is still waiting for you. She still loves you, and always has.”

“No! Go away. No one loves me.” The mirage disappeared and only Thomas was left facing Tommy in the grayness. “I’m a monster. I have killed people that have never harmed me. I’m as bad as my Father Andrew. I wanted it all. I wanted to be the one! And I am the one—hated by all! The one that has no love! The one that follows a machine instead of his heart!”

He grew larger and larger as he screamed at Tommy. He was huge. He reached down from his towering height and tried to snatch Tommy off the ground and throw her away like a rag doll. His hands went right through her. He roared with rage into the grayness.

Tommy enlarged herself to his size and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him in tight into her arms and whispered into his ear. “It’s all right, it’s all right. Cry, cry your heart out so you can see it and believe that you have one. Then take your heart to Phyllis and hand it to her. See what she does with it. I know if I was her I’d put it back in your chest so you can live again and feel all the love people have for you!”

“Phyllis, I’m sorry!” He shouted toward the sky. He wailed in anguish. And suddenly he could see. He could hear and feel. The helmet was gone and Phyllis had him in her arms, covering his crying eyes with kisses, whispering into his ears

that she loved him.

Tommy slowly took off her helmet and the sight of Thomas and Phyllis together seemed so right. Like it was always going to happen no matter where they were in the multi-universe.

## Epilogue

“Warning, Master Tom! Warning!” Aristotle, the robot, shouted from the hatchway of the starship, *Extreme*, the *Exedra* still in dry dock back in New America. He was waving his arms above his head. All five Swifts froze in place on hearing his calls. They all looked first at the robot and then at each other.

“Not again!” ran the similar notion of dread through their heads. Before they had time to react further, the shimmering black on black portal opened before them and a tall, lean, white haired and very old gentleman slowly came out. Each step looked as deliberate as it must have been painful to him. He clutched a walking stick in his right hand that he slowly waved at them once he stopped walking. His wrinkle-covered face had a smile that showed perfect white teeth and brilliant blue eyes.

“Yep! Thought this was the time and place. Got here right on time too, I see.” He was leaning heavily on his cane, now slightly bent over. He looked pleased with himself. “Never did see a finer group of Toms in my life, along with Andrew Flagger, Phyllis Michael and Mr. and Mrs. Swift. What a family reunion.

And you,” he pointed his cane at Tommy, “are the prize of them all. Never be another like you, Missy. No sir, never found another like you! Not that I tried, mind you, but I would have heard otherwise.” He started to rock back and forth from his heels to his toes and, for almost a minute, just looked at them all.

The group of Toms looked once more at each other and all four guys gestured for Tommy to go forward to the old man. They were all willing to let her handle this seemingly helpless old man, each of them convinced that he was barely on this side of being senile. This was woman’s work if there ever was such a thing.

Tommy started to move forward and the old man spoke again. “I got no time to chit-chat right now, Missy. Got places to go and people to see. I’m a busy man, you know! Very, very busy.” And once more he started to rock himself while staring directly at her.

Tommy, not intimidated by the old gentleman, reached out and touched his arm.

“Please, sir, before you go, do say what you came to tell us.”

“Well, girl! Don’t get pushy. This is for your own good, you know.”

“I will take your word on that, sir,” she replied maintaining a direct look into his piercing eyes.

“Thomasina, you and that Thomas here,” he nodded to him, “better live up to those promises you made each other. You want to help this world, so be it. You have exactly one hundred and eighty days from now to carry it all out. Thomas’s Prism will stop working at the end of that time and one hour later it will vanish.

Never to be seen again. And don't you young pups try to tinker with it, for if you do it will go 'poof' even faster. That's not a threat, just a promise not to be tested!"

Tommy nodded but checked to see if Thomas might have other ideas. He looked in awe at the old man, but glanced at her and nodded his agreement.

"Now, for the rest of ya. You, Tom III are right. Mr. Flagger had been tampered with and not all he did was by his choosing. And you, Mr. Flagger did the right thing by having Tom Sr. come back here. As long as you both realize that he was made to do all those horrible things by an outside force you two can work together, and with those two young'uns you can't lose." He flashed them all a smile.

"And another thing, take that old polio research center and turn it in the 'Swift Institute of Advanced Sciences.' Have Mr. Swift and Thomas made co-Deans of it and Thomasina, assistant Dean, at least for the next six months. That should help forge the family relationship that has been missing all these years."

Andrew Flagger cleared his throat and posed a difficult question. "Am I the lone wolf? The only bad Flagger out there?" He made a vague motion toward the sky.

The old man snorted. "Hardly, and yet I really do not know. I've never met them all and probably never will. There are Flaggers, Folgers and Fogers. Too many to count. What I can tell you is that the Andrew Flagger in Thomasina's reality is unique in having a granddaughter with even fewer scruples than yourself. But, she will get her due." He looked Tommy in the eye. "You can't save her when you get back, so don't try. I know how you think. She'll spend most of her adult life in institutions. Prisons... mental hospitals and the like."

"But, sir..."

"No, Thomasina. If you go down that road it will led to total destruction of everything you are trying to accomplish. The people that you love most will pay dearly if you make that mistake!" The old man held up his hand to forestall Tommy's rebuttal. "Young lady," and he rose his voice a little, "don't!"

Tommy felt her face go pale as a rapid sequence of three scenes flashed in her mind. She was in the boardroom at SEI, a baby on her lap, surrounded by smiling people. Next, as a wall exploded into shrapnel and smoke, a much older and ragged looking Peter Levenkov and Portia Flagger pounced into the room with machine guns blasting. Finally, Tommy saw herself standing alone, next to a double grave—one adult-sized and the other meant for an infant. She was horrified, and was left momentarily stunned. She looked at the old man and he simply shrugged his shoulders, turned away from her, and continued talking.

"Now, back to you, Mr. Flagger. Your leadership is something not to be questioned and the medical and trade schools you maintain for the whole world to use show what kind of man you really are. Build on that, you have time enough to

make peace with your soul. I'm afraid my brother, Chaos, really stepped over the line on this one and interfered way too much with this world and with you in particular."

Thomas step forward, "Chaos? He's just a story!"

The old man laughed. "All stories are based on reality. He has moved on from here and he so likes fireworks. He now has a whole galaxy going nova one star at a time. Pop, pop, pop. So you can see that I'm going to be very busy stopping the fires, you can say."

Everyone was in shock. It was so unbelievable.

The old man continued, "That notion of you young men not seeing each other is a good one. For your own good and the good of the multi-universe it's best to stop. Your individual ripples throughout the multi-universe is one thing, but when they bind together they form a tidal wave that wipes out all other possibilities and destroys so much..." he stopped there and sighed. "So, so much!"

TSL spoke out. "Sir, are you saying that if we continue to meet we will destroy the multi-universe?"

"Oh no, don't get me wrong, you Swifts are small potatoes in the vast scheme of things. You don't even exist in all the possible realities. But your ripples will combine with other ripples and those ripples..."

"Stop! I get the idea. Instead of a stone thrown into a pond with ripples of change, it's a mountain dropping on it. There are no ripples then, so there is no possibility left and no choices to make in life. There is no chaos. No randomness. It is then set in stone, so to speak."

"So right, young man, so right. And that is what Chaos wanted to stop. But like always he over does it. Way overdid it with Thomas there," he muttered, looking at him with a nod of his head.

"Please, sir, Thomas spoke up. "I think it is time for me to try to earn using the name Tom. I'd prefer that."

"Lots of very good people with that name, young man. I wish you luck."

"My Night Angel made that other name stand for evil. I don't want it anymore."

"Well, that is the nature of Chaos." He straightened up saying to the group, "It's past time for me to leave so—" a portal formed behind him. He took a few quick steps back...

Tommy's eyes opened wide. Did she just see him step back in or did he merely appear to move back? And the cane was in his hand and yet he did not use it?

He gave it a wave, took the final step back, and disappeared...

... *Forever More.*