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THE TSE SECURITY TEAM SERIES

Harlan Ames & Phil Radnor: Swift Justice

As told to T. Edward Fox

The head of Swift Enterprise's Security and his second-in-command are drawn into a web of lies and intrigue.

Damon Swift, the CEO of Enterprises, is deeply involved in a research project to send a nuclear-powered probe to the surface of Venus, but is being threatened by an unknown group demanding that he admit the project is a cover-up for a more sinister purpose.

Harlan Ames and Phil Radnor spring into action trying first to trace the source of the blackmail demands and then to make the arrests before anything can happen.

Clue after clue come their way but many prove to be dead ends. What trail should they follow? When a health scare sidelines one of them, can the Enterprises security team continue? And, will they be in time to prevent a disaster?

This book is dedicated to both the men and women of Swift Enterprises' security department, and to other such professionals around the world. Often working in obscurity, these people and their organizations protect their companies as well as the people who work in them. As long as they are involved in righting wrongs, they are my heroes. However, if they turn their backs on legitimate duties, they are to be hunted down and exposed.

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FOREWORD

Although chronicled more than any other individual at Swift Enterprises, Tom Swift isn't the only person who is a pivotal character there.

Being a high-security facility involved in many secret and governmental projects makes having one of the top Security departments around a vital part of every day life.

Often unsung, the work of the men and women of the Swift's Security Department, is both a blessing and a curse. While Tom and his father, Damon, understand their important role, many fail to even understand how vital their work is.

When things go wrong, it is usually the security team that makes things right at Swift Enterprises. No question... just action.

Harlan Ames—former Secret Service agent—and his second-in-command, Phil Radnor, have been integral to the many successes Enterprises has made over the years.

These are good, hard-working men who deserve to be called out and praised. I hope this tale of one recent incident captures their spirit and drive. They spent an extraordinary amount of personal time helping me to write this story for you.

And, for them!

Thackery E. Fox

CHAPTER 1 /

Monday, 9:42 am

DAMON SWIFT—world-famous inventor and scientist—picked up his phone and dialed a four-digit number he truly wished he didn't need to call so often.

Especially, on this occasion.

His call was immediately answered by Harlan Ames, a former Secret Service agent and the current head of Swift Enterprises Security. The two had met years earlier when Ames was assigned to provide protection for Damon during a series of meetings with the President of the United States.

Upon hearing of Harlan's desire to leave government employment, Damon had no qualms about offering him immediate employment as his security chief.

"Ames. Security," he answered the phone.

"Harlan. It's Damon. I need to speak with you as soon as you can get over to my office."

"Can I get an idea what this is about?" Harlan asked.

"Sorry. Please just get here ASAP," the inventor replied in a harried voice.

Three minutes later, Harlan entered his employer's office. Slightly out of breath from running between the buildings where each had their offices, he asked, "Almost makes me wish I'd kept the office next door. So, what is it?"

Instead of answering directly, Damon motioned to a chair opposite him. "Take a look at this," he said sliding a letter across the desk.

Ames picked the single sheet up and began reading. The

further he got into the text the more angry he appeared. Finally, he practically slammed the letter down and exclaimed, "This is preposterous! Who the—, who the heck would send something like this?"

All Damon could do was to shrug.

Harlan picked the letter up and read back through it. Looking at Damon, he laid the single sheet back on the desk and asked, "When did you get this?"

"Trent delivered it in today's mail. It probably hit the mail-room yesterday afternoon. And, before you ask again, I have no idea who might have sent something outrageous like this."

"Why would someone want to blackmail you over a project that has never been announced to the public? It is the Venus Eagle probe, isn't it?"

"It is. We've been working on this secretly for over five months. Tom has developed a Repelatron-powered spaceship to carry the probe while I have been involved in the scientific package."

"So, to your knowledge, there has been no announcement from anyone?"

The older Swift shook his head.

"Okay. I'll try to see what I might get from this letter. Can you put together a list of everyone you have come into contact with during the project?"

"That's a mighty tall order, Harlan, but I'll try."

Ames left the office a deeply disturbed and puzzled man. Once back in his office he buzzed his top man, Phil Radnor.

Where Harlan was tall and muscular, Phil was short, stocky—some might even say a little pudgy—and much more impulsive than his boss.

He entered Harlan's office a minute later.

"Hey, Harl. What's up?"

"Sit," Harlan ordered pointing at the chair across his desk. "Bad things are what's up."

Once Phil had taken the indicated chair, Ames continued.

"Mr. Swift just received this letter," he said holding up the single sheet. "Let me read it to you:

Swift,

We know all about your Venus project. We even know about your plans to set off a small nuclear explosion as one of your so-called tests. You cannot be allowed to export atomic destruction to another world.

Even your plans to keep the information from the world that a dangerous nuclear bomb will be flying over everyone's head as your rocket orbits the Earth before flying to Venus are secret.

You will do the following: one) renounce all plans for your bomb; two) tell the world about the government's tactics to fly a death device around the world; three) pay the sum of ten million dollars for our silence.

If you do not do as we demand, your wife and daughter will be taken hostage. If you further refuse, they will be killed.

You have been warned. We will contact you with more later.

"And that, is that," Harlan said, dropping the letter in front of Phil. "Except for the fact that it was typed on an old-fashioned manual typewriter and not printed out on some laser or inkjet printer. That, alone, is a very interesting thing."

After reading the letter for himself, Phil made a suggestion.

“Obviously, we won’t find any prints on this or the envelope that can be used. Ditto, tracking back to where this originated. I’ll take this to the lab and see if they can ID the paper type and possible printer.”

“And, I will get on to the FBI to let them know what we have.”

As Harlan made his calls, Phil took the letter and its envelope down to the laboratory where he worked with one of the technicians running test after test on the paper, the ink and even the small amount of finger oils that were present on the envelope.

Harlan began trying to match the typeface and relative force used on each letter to determine the make of the typewriter.

When Phil returned to Ames’ office he had a full report. “The paper is a standard mix of new and recycled fibers, but it is a proprietary mixture from a mill over in New Hampshire.”

“Which one?” Harlan asked.

“FliegenWove. They produce a line of specialty papers that are sold over the Internet. No retail sales,” he added raising an eyebrow at that significant fact.

“Then let’s get to them and see who might have purchased this stuff in the past month or two.”

As Harlan reached for the phone, Phil said, “We can’t. I already called and they won’t let loose with any info without a search warrant and the okay from their Swiss owners.”

Harlan let out a sigh. “It really use to be a lot easier before all the cop and detective shows. Back when I was getting started, all it took was a flash of the badge and a little ‘you *do* want to cooperate with us... *don’t* you’ sort of thing.”

“Oh, yes. You’ve told me. That was back when it was alright to beat a confession out of a suspect with a rubber hose... or chicken... or something like that,” Radnor replied with a sly grin.

“Right. Just after they took away our thumb screws and water drip apparatus.” He looked grimly at Radnor. “I’ll get the FBI to have a search warrant made out and get them to execute it. It’s early enough,” he said looking at his watch, “that we should have what we want before quitting time today.”

“And, in the meantime, I’ll run the wording through Tom’s new ‘inference and grammar’ program. Maybe it will give us a clue about any possible ties with known organizations or individuals.”

Tom, Jr. had devised a computer algorithm that could detect patterns, word usage and even punctuation patterns in anything of at least three paragraphs. So far, in its experimental state, it had assisted Enterprises security in detecting a dangerously deranged now-former employee from a threatening letter she had written a month earlier.

The optical character recognition software pumped out the necessary text file that was then processed by the I-and-G software. In minutes Phil was looking at the raw results. While there was nothing in the Enterprises electronic files, he felt certain that one of the outside agencies might be able to help.

He made three calls and soon had transmitted the data and the original text to the FBI, the CIA and Interpol.

“Fingers crossed,” he told the secretary that he, Harlan and two of the other senior security people shared.

CHAPTER 2 /**Monday, 3:03 pm**

“DIDN’T HAVE to wait very long for the FBI to come through,” Harlan told Phil. “They got the search warrant and had a team at the FliegenWove offices just after noon.”

“They get the sales files?”

“Yep. About eighty percent of their sales are large lots. Not just reams, but pallets of cases of reams. I’m going to ignore them for the time being, but I do want you to run a cross-reference of those buyers against any terrorist organizations. Okay?”

Phil had his boss transfer a copy of the file to his computer and began the cross-reference.

At the same time, Harlan began pouring through the reduced list of possible suspects. “Hmmm,” he muttered, half out loud, “that still leaves over a hundred twenty small purchasers.”

He sorted the list electronically and then ran a checking program that would weed out the known-legitimate purchasers. Probably mostly small businesses that only ordered paper by the ream or the single case.

In minutes his list was pared down to fifteen possibilities. Scanning down the list he felt his blood freeze at number seven.

Kranjovian National Embassy, Washington DC.

After years of animosity between the United States—and Swift Enterprises—and the barely-legal government of the former communist country of Kranjovia, a sort of détente had been reached and the foreign nation was granted permission to open a small embassy in the nation’s capital.

He called Phil over and showed him the list. Phil’s eyes went wide when he reached the Kranjovian listing.

“Jeez, Harl. This has all the earmarks of an international incident. How do we do this?”

Harlan thought for a minute, and then replied, “First up, we contact Quimby Narz at the FBI. He’s the local guy and we all know each other.”

He picked up the phone and placed the call. When he got off the line he told Phil everything he now knew.

“Narz already had a copy of the note from earlier. He has begun making inquiries, but suggests that we follow up on the others while he has fun tiptoeing around diplomatic immunity and all that.”

He split the list of the remaining possible suspects and handed half to Phil.

“Let’s make calls to each of these and try to sound them out. Record everything so we can do voice analysis later. Maybe one of them will hear the Swift name and give something away.”

A little over two hours later they had reached the end of their respective lists with no indication one way or the other on most of them.

“I’ve got at least five of my seven that are legitimate businesses, Harlan. One number that has been out of service for more than a year, and one with no answer.”

Ames asked Radnor to follow up on the ‘no answer’ number the following day. He had three unanswered numbers on his own list.

Phil took off at 6:00 to attend to a personal matter while Harlan stayed behind, hoping to hear from Agent Narz.

Several minutes later Harlan placed a call.

“Narz, FBI.”

“Hey, Quimby. Harlan. Have anything for me?”

Agent Narz told him that the initial inquiries had been made, and that the State Department had been notified of a possible Kranjovian crime on sovereign soil. “Now that they’ve managed to convince a few people that they are legit, it gets very difficult to just clomp in and start shouting questions. Sorry.”

Ames understood and told the FBI agent so.

After hanging up, he began performing an old-fashioned technique of hand examination of the original note. It was time-consuming and tedious, but sometimes yielded interesting results.

As he scanned down the page using a magnifier he started to notice little imperfections and indentation in the paper that had nothing to do with the typed message.

Taking up a second light—a multi-spectrum ALS or alternate light source—he began a second full-page search. At first, he used a green light at varying angles. It highlighted a large number of letters that appeared to have been imprinted by pressure alone.

“Must have used this sheet as a backing sheet for something else,” he muttered.

He set up a digital camera above the page. Although he knew of automatic systems that might assist him, Harlan hadn’t yet invested in it. “*Penny wise and pound foolish,*” he thought to himself.

By carefully moving the light source around and varying its wavelength through several colors, he was able to input a great deal of data into his computer.

Before leaving for the day, he set up some parameters for the processing that would take most of the night. He selected to

ignore all of the instances of the specific color of the ribbon used in the typewriter along with several other factors.

The following morning he arrived about fifteen minutes earlier than Phil. By the time his second-in-command came into his office, Harlan Ames was sitting back in his chair with a smile on his face.

Phil saw the look and sat down without asking anything.

Harlan slid a printout across the desk for him to look at.

Phil looked.

Phil let out a long whistle.

“Now, *that’s* going to get somebody in a great deal of trouble!” he exclaimed.

CHAPTER 3 /**Tuesday, 9:02 am**

THE LETTER sat on the desk between the two men. They looked meaningfully at one another, not saying a word for more than five minutes. Finally, Harlan spoke:

“Now the question is, is that a legitimate clue, or is it something that was specifically planted to throw us off the trail?”

Phil thought for a moment before replying. “Have you determined what kind of typewriter was used? And, was it the same for both the letter and the background imprint?”

“It is an old typewriter from Germany, the Dejur-Triumph Perfekt, probably made back in the mid-1950s,” Harlan told him. “They have one really interesting defect that makes them ultimately easy to trace. The letter ‘e’ was created with about a seven degree rotation anti-clockwise.”

“What now?”

“Now, we call Narz and read this to him.”

The call was made, but the agent was not available. His voice mail was not enabled, so Harlan hung up and tried a second number.

“Home number, Harl?” Phil asked.

Harlan only shook his head. A few seconds later he said into the receiver, “Quimby? H. A. Need you on Swift line ASAP.” With that, he hung up.

As Phil looked at him questioningly, Harlan simply held up both hands and began extending finger after finger, counting up to ten. Just as he reached ‘nine’ his phone rang.

“Yes, Quimby?” he answered the phone. “Of course it’s important. We’ve found something you need to know about.”

He told the agent about the second imprint on the piece of paper, and about the maker of the typewriter. “Yes. I thought that would get your interest,” he told the FBI agent. “I should have the translation in an hour or so, but it is definitely one of the Cyrillic languages, and from the use of the modifying character, ekkratka, it is either Russian or Kranjovian. Guess which one my bet is on?”

He listened for a moment and then told Narz he would get back the instant the translation came through.

Ames got up and left the office a minute later telling Phil and their secretary that he was heading over for Damon Swift’s office. “I’ll be there in case the call comes in from the translation folks. Call me. Immediately, you understand?” The secretary nodded.

Minutes later he approached the desk of Damon and Tom Swift’s secretary/assistant, Munford Trent. Nodding at the man behind the overly neat desk he asked, “Is the big chief or little chief in?”

Trent nodded, again. Yes. They both are, but they’re on a call with the NASA Ames research Center out in California. Should only be another two or three minutes. Coffee?”

Harlan rubbed his upper stomach. “No. Thanks, but I’ve got a touch of indigestion right now and coffee would only make it worse.”

He took a seat. A minute later he looked up to see Trent standing before him, a glass of water and a bottle of antacid tablets in his hands. Smiling, Ames took them. I appreciate it, Munford.”

Normally, Munford Trent corrected people who referred to him by his first name. He preferred to be called ‘Trent’ as it felt more professional. While he couldn’t define the reason, he

actually preferred to have Harlan call him by his first name. “You are welcome, Mr. Ames. I see the phone light has gone out. I’ll buzz them.”

Half a minute later Harlan sat facing both Swifts. Damon was looking particularly strained at the moment while his son, Tom, merely looked curious.

“What have you got to tell us?” Damon asked.

Harlan pulled out copies of the original letter, the processed imprint, and his notebook.

“Take a look.” He handed the original to Tom who had not yet seen it, and the scanned page to the older inventor.

Both looked over their respective pages, and then Damon handed his son the scanned page. Tom’s eyes widened and his expression became more and more angry.

As he finished his page, Damon turned to his son and described how the letter had come to him.

“Why, those Kranjovian jerks!” he exclaimed. “Or,” he looked at Ames, “is this Brungarian?”

Ames scratched his ear before replying. “Because of the use of a particular letter modifier, I’m convinced that it is either Russian—although doubtful—or more probably Kranjovian.”

Damon was about to speak but Harlan interrupted him with, “Now, both of you. Sit tight for a minute. I said that it was probable that the language is Kranjovian. We have no proof that it is from a Kranjovian source. We don’t even know if it is a mistake on their part or a red herring designed to throw us off the right track.”

Taking a moment to collect his thoughts, Damon asked, “Do we know what this translates to?”

“Not yet. It should be finished within the hour. I thought that

I’d get this to you while we all wait. And, before you ask, the FBI is on top of this. They have what we have.” He described his conversations with agent Narz and what he believed the FBI was doing on their end.

“So, we have something to go on that might or might not be a true lead. What we absolutely have is the need to get the Venus probe finished, launched and on its way,” Damon stated.

Tom volunteered to assist his father. “I’ve got a few days right now. Tell me what I can do.”

As Harlan was preparing to depart, his TeleVoc pinged him. Touching the small collar stud device he began a series of mouth movements interspersed with periods of listening. Finally, he turned back to the waiting Swifts.

“We have a translation. It appears that this is a mixture of Kranjovian phrasing along with a few words that they don’t use, but the Russians do. The trans-lab folks are sending the file to your terminal, Damon.”

The three crowded around Damon’s computer screen. He called up the new file and enlarged the text so they could all see it. It read:

Comrade,

It is in the best interests of our glorious leader and members of the ruling party that certain efforts by America and the Fast (sic) (Swift?) people be interrupted. To this end, I am sending a letter to encourage them to stop development of their orbiting bombs.

Although my source claims that it is intended for launch away from the planet and toward planet number two, it is my belief and the belief of our leader that our people will be targeted and might face destruction at any minute.

Cease current activities and assist us in achieving the leader’s objective of halting this project. It is for the greater Kranjovia that you will succeed!

Boris

The three stepped back and tried to absorb what they had read. Harlan was the first to speak.

“It looks like a legitimate letter from someone named Boris, but we have no idea who it was written to. We don’t even know if the translation is one hundred percent accurate. The trans-lab lists accuracy at eighty-two percent.”

“You have to admit, Harlan. It appears to have come from a Kranjovian source and that means that the people at the embassy may be involved. And that makes this a *very nasty thing indeed!*”

CHAPTER 4 /

Tuesday, 12:58 pm

QUIMBY NARZ called Harlan just before one that afternoon. “Got something for you,” he said. “You’re not going to like this.”

He detailed a conversation he had just finished between himself, his Washington, DC supervisor, and the Secretary of State. In it, the decision had been made to ignore the threat.

“They feel that the success of the probe you are completing is of greater importance than trying to track down what the Secretary termed, ‘an annoyance more than a threat.’”

Harlan was aghast. “Where does that leave us, Quimby? Especially if this is a legitimate threat. What do we do if we are attacked? What do we do if these thugs go through with their threat to tell the world? Will Madam Secretary get up off her fat fanny and cover ours?”

Narz chuckled at the other end of the line. “I’ll take care of the physical threat part. As to the threat to go public, I will try to get to someone in my org with a bit more punch and try to impress on the Secretary that she can’t let Swift Enterprises take the rap if the word gets out. That’s all I can offer right now.”

Not one to make idle threats, Harlan chose his words carefully. “Quimby. I am not speaking directly for the Swifts when I say this, but if anything comes down on this organization that could have been handled by a bit more attention from the Secretary, she might do well to look for a new job. Swift Enterprises supplies so many vital components and systems used by many branches in her department that cannot be obtained through anyone else. If we get shut down

by protesters or if domestic terrorist groups target us over this, Enterprises may have to stop delivery on those vital items. She needs to stop with the ‘politics as usual’ and get her best on this.”

Narz understood and told Harlan he would push to get more power behind the request.

Harlan sat back, rubbing his stomach. The indigestion had come back.

He headed to the dispensary. Doc Simpson made him sit still for a minute while he took Harlan’s temperature and blood pressure.

“You have a normal temp, but your BP is high. Have you been taking your meds?”

Harlan grinned sheepishly at the young medico. “Most days, Doc. I kinda ran out of the Alpha blocker a week ago and haven’t had the time to refill it.”

Doc stared at him, almost as if his eyes could deliver the proper dosage of the three different medications Harlan was suppose to be taking. Finally, sighing he walked to his drug locker. Taking out a sample vial he tossed it to the security man.

“Consider yourself refilled for at least the next five days,” he said.

“Ummm, I actually ran out of the other two as well, Greg,” Harlan admitted.

Simpson took out two other drug samples and carried them over to Ames. Handing them to him one at a time, he said, “You have a serious problem with your blood pressure, Harlan. To top it all off, you are in one of the highest stress positions in all of Swift Enterprises. If you won’t listen to me and take your medications for yourself, then for god’s sake take them for that daughter of yours!”

Harlan paled slightly at the mention of his teenage daughter. When her mother had died, it had been left to Harlan to continue raising her. And, while he was a good father, his job was incredibly stressful. However, his love for the girl was even greater, so he promised to do better.

He even took his daily dose of the three pills right in front of Doc Simpson.

Returning to his office he was intercepted by Phil.

“Got something that came in via email. Untraceable. It went through at least a dozen anonymous servers and filters, and came initially from some computer that we can’t identify.”

He showed his boss the readout of the attempted trace. It reached back from Enterprises general email box to several servers in Europe, three in various Asian nations, Somalia, China, four South American locations and then back to Europe before petering out.

Sighing, Ames asked to see the message. It simply stated:

Swift,

You will be contacted at house your today. Five on clock.

“That’s it?”

Radnor nodded. “That’s all that came through. I checked the file header and tail info and it has a normal closing tag, so my guess is that, other than the mixing up of a few words, this is all they sent.”

Harlan called Damon Swift and informed him of the coming call. “I’ll get the full setup of tracing equipment over to the house in the next hour so we’ll be ready,” he told the inventor.

“Isn’t there any way to do this here at Enterprises?” the older Swift asked. “I’d like to keep Anne and Sandy from hearing about this and getting them all worried.”

Phil, who had been listening in on the conversation made a suggestion. “Why don’t we get Bud to go over and take Sandy out for a burger of something? And, you can suggest that Anne meet you at some restaurant. You’ll get there a little late, but she would be out of the house when the call comes in.”

Damon thought about it. “That will work for Sandy, but Anne knows that I never eat as early as five. I’m not sure how I’ll do it, but I’ll try to get Anne out of the house.”

Harlan then said, “As long as she’ll take the right sort of bait, I think I know how to get her out of the house for an hour.”

Fifteen minutes later he called back to Damon to tell him, “It’s all set. Bashalli Prandit is going to drop by to ask Anne for some serious ‘Tom’ advice. They’ll go for a drive and spend a little time at her brother’s cafe. Bashalli won’t let her go home until at least five-thirty.”

It was decided to have a van with all of the equipment stationed in the neighborhood, ready to swoop in and set up the special lines and equipment some time after 4:30 that day.

Anne Swift was surprised to receive a call from her son’s girlfriend, Bashalli Prandit. The beautiful Pakistani girl had been Tom’s constant date and girl for more than a year. Anne knew that the two were getting quite serious about each other. She also knew that her daughter, Sandy, was Bashalli’s best friend and confidant.

“I wonder why she wants to speak with me,” Anne asked Sandy.

“My guess is that she doesn’t feel comfortable talking to her mother about things having to do with—ummmm—you know? S. E. X.”

Anne blushed. “And, after I talk with Bashi, do I need to have another mother-daughter talk with you about, *ummmm—you know? S. E. X?*”

Mother!” Sandy practically gasped. She recovered and tried to look the picture of innocence.

But she couldn’t hide things from her mother. At the age of eighteen, Sandy had been dating her steady guy, Bud Barclay, for more than two years. Anne was fairly certain they had gone beyond hand holding by this time, but Sandy had not confided in her.

Bashalli arrived just before Bud. As Anne climbed into Bashi’s car, Sandy blew her a kiss and got into Bud’s bright, red convertible. They each zoomed off in opposite directions.

For her part, the beautiful Pakistani girl was prepared to speak very frankly with Tom’s mother. Harlan had impressed on her the importance of getting Anne Swift away from the house and engaging her in a serious enough talk to keep her occupied.

“Besides,” Bashalli thought as she started her car, *“I really do want to ask her some things about Tom.”*

Anne’s conversation started off awkwardly, but the two soon were chatting about the girl’s feelings for Tom and their relationship. In fewer than ten minutes they were talking about things Anne might have felt uncomfortable about with someone else, but seemed natural with Bashalli.

She thought to herself, *“I really, really hope that she and Tom get married some day. This is the girl I want for my son!”*

CHAPTER 5 /**Tuesday, 4:58 pm**

THE PHONE in the Swift's house rang twice. With a finger poised over the button that would begin both the recording of the call as well as the trace, Harlan motioned Damon to pick up the phone.

As Mr. Swift lifted the receiver, Ames pressed his button.

"This is Damon Swift. Who is calling?"

There were a series of clicks, indicating to Ames that the call was being routed through a number of locations, some of which still used mechanical switches and not the silent digital ones used in the USA and most of Western Europe.

Finally, a voice with a hint of an accent came on:

"Your project to orbit nuclear warheads over the People's Republic is doomed to failure!"

"But we aren't putting warheads into space," Damon argued.

"You are lying, Swift. We have proof. The whole business about Venus is a ruse to feed to the people of the world if word ever gets out about this project!"

"I will say again. There are no plans that Swift Enterprises is involved in that include nuclear weapons. We are merely supplying a reactor-based power system that will allow the probe to have ample power for its multi-year—"

"Pah! You are a liar! The Peoples Republic will not stand idly by as you prepare for invading or destroying our glorious nation. You will be destroyed unless you publicly reveal the nature of the project and then agree to dismantle the warheads. In public."

Damon thought for a second, and then said, "We can't dismantle what we do not have. Could you publicly destroy the weapons of Kranjovia?"

This seemed to take the caller aback. He sputtered a few words in English and in Kranjovian, and then hung up.

Turning to Harlan, Mr. Swift smiled. "Well. That went well, don't you think?" He then sat down and stared at the security man.

"Could have been better, Damon," Ames told him. He checked his instruments and the computer readout. "We got a trace on most of the routing. It looks like—hmmmm." he stopped and looked more closely at the screen. He took out a piece of paper from his briefcase and compared its contents to the information on the screen.

"Well, this is interesting. The trace on the call follows back almost location for location the route of the email we received. And," he looked up at his employer, "it stops at the same place. Somalia."

"Do you think we put a scare into him? Or, them?"

Chuckling ruefully, Harlan replied, "You sure surprised him with your comment about Kranjovia. I'd almost say that you startled him well beyond his ability to respond right now. My guess is that we'll hear more, later, but possibly not for a few days."

He and his technical assistant spent the next ten minutes taking out all of their equipment and packing it into the van. When they finished, he went up to Damon.

"Now that we have some idea where the call came from, I'll try to set things up so that any future calls don't make it to the house. Can't promise anything, but it may be possible to switch them to Enterprises. Goodnight, Damon."

And with that, Ames and his assistant drove away.

Damon was still sitting in the living room when his wife returned a few minutes before six.

“Have a nice chat with Bashalli, dear?” he asked her.

A small smile playing around her mouth, Anne replied, “Oh, you can’t imagine what an eye-opening conversation we had.” She told him all about their talk. Several times he blushed but he mostly looked thoughtful.

“That is a girl with a great head on her shoulders. Has everything planned out, even with contingencies. She sounds like she is truly in love with our Tom,” he told her. “Sound like anyone you remember?”

Anne looked at him with her brows furrowed. “I’m not sure,” she replied slowly, looking at her husband.

“It’s you, silly!” he replied. “She reminds me of you. You took a year or more and made plans for us. You had alternate plans made just in case I balked at anything. I have to say that I am impressed.”

“We have to make sure they get married, Damon,” she told him.

He smiled. “I’m sure she has a plan for that as well!”

CHAPTER 6 /

Wednesday, 10:11 pm

THE NEXT DAY Harlan and Phil met to compare notes. Phil had been following up on the paper and typewriter angles. Harlan had been concentrating on the specific communications as well as working with Narz and the FBI.

“What have you got for me?” Ames asked.

“Of all the purchasers of the paper, there are two that run into the same dead end. And when I say the same, I mean they end at precisely the same point. With the same individual.”

“Do we know who that is?”

“*Ivor Bronich!*”

“What!” Harlan exclaimed as he jumped from his chair. “Bronich who gave us so much trouble in the Antarctic?”

Ivor Bronich was a Kranjovian agent who had first tried to steal Tom’s atomic earth blaster technology, and then to take over the multi-nation installation at the South Pole where Tom eventually drilled into the molten iron deep inside of the Earth.

He had been repelled in the end and had disappeared. But, it seemed that he had reappeared.

“But, I thought the Kranjovian government disavowed him. Cut him loose. So, is he actually working for them or has he gone rogue?”

Phil looked at Harlan, “Good question, Harl. Tell the truth, I actually thought he had been imprisoned or even executed. Shows what I know, huh?”

“Well, if it is him, then we have to figure out if the hidden message is actually a ruse to point the finger at his former

Kranjovian masters, or if he is—and I hate to use the word, here—legitimately working for Kranjovia.”

A call to Narz set that agent on edge. He told them that the last thing he needed was to have a known Kranjovian agent going out on his own. “Who knows what he might do if there is nobody to reign him in. Now I have to get the Secretary of State to directly question the Kranjovian Ambassador. And, guess how favorably she sees me these days.”

After hanging up, Phil went back to his report on his findings. “We sort of got sidetracked there, but I did find out a few other things,” he said.

Among his findings was that the typewriter in question was truly one of the German models that Harlan believed. What was surprising was that it appeared to be a later model that had been given old keys.

“At least, that ‘e’ key is old. The rest of them seem to have come from a new model made in the 90s. You can tell because the letters are more sharply chiseled so they make a deeper, v-shaped indent, while keys from the older models were made with more rounded characters.”

“What do you think that means?”

Phil frowned and pursed his lips before answering. “Even though we are missing examples of at least the lower case ‘j’ ‘q’ ‘x’ and ‘z’ letters, and most of the capitals, only the lower case ‘e’ shows the tilt. And, that was fixed in the later model. Somebody has either chosen to swap those keys on purpose or they have a typewriter that was serviced using an old key.”

“What is our next trick, Phil?”

“Already performed, Harl. I did a check of typewriter shops in the East coast area. There are only eleven that still repair old manuals and only two of those have seen a Dejur-Triumph Perfekt in the past five years. Neither one of them did any key substitution. Just a cleaning and straightening. I thought that

would be a dead end until I widened my search to the entire U.S.”

He was smiling, so Harlan knew he must have discovered something. “So, tell me—”

“So, a repair shop out in California still works on Perfekts. And, they keep scrupulous records of everything they do. It turns out that one was shipped to them about three years ago from Washington, DC. More precisely, from an address that is now directly across the street from the brand new Kranjovian Embassy.”

Harlan’s eyebrows rose at this news.

“Anyway, the original ‘e’ key was bent so badly that they had to replace it. And, get this... they also did a little tweak to another of the letters to make room for the slightly larger ‘e’ key arm then had to give an ever-so-slight bend to the ‘r’ key next to it.”

“You checked our note?”

Radnor nodded enthusiastically. He told his boss that a carefully examination of the original letter revealed that the ‘r’ key was indeed just a fraction out of true.

“It’s ours, then,” Harlan concluded.

“Right. The bad news is that there is no real name to go with it. Everything was paid in cash, up front, and the only indication of who might have sent it is that address.”

Harlan asked if they knew who had owned, rented or leased that address about the time of the repair.

“Waiting for city records,” Phil replied. “But, even if we don’t know who sent in the typewriter, my guess is that it is someone who is or was involved in setting up the Kranjovian Embassy.”

Harlan cautioned his associate about jumping to

conclusions, but was secretly getting excited at the prospects of getting to the bottom of this mystery.

The two are lunch in the Enterprises dining room. Phil tucked into a large helping of chicken piccata while Harlan decided to treat his stomach nicely by having a simple bowl of cream of mushroom soup and a small turkey on white sandwich.

By the time they returned to their offices, Harlan had a voice message from Quimby Narz.

“Harlan. We traced past the point where you lost that phone call. After it dead-ended for you it went back through China and North Korea before terminating, or originating, right in Washington, DC. Not certain where, but our guys are pretty sure that DC is the point of origin.”

Harlan and Phil looked at each other. A smile played across Harlan’s face, matched by Phil seconds later.

“Now, all we have to do is connect the Bronich dot with the Kranjovian Embassy one and we’ve got ‘em!”

CHAPTER 7 /

Thursday, 7:13 am

HARLAN was jolted out of a sound sleep by the incessant ringing of his bedside phone.

Groggily, he reached out and picked up the receiver.

“Yeah,” he mumbled in a ‘I’m not awake’ voice. “What’s going on?”

“Harl? Phil. We’ve got a real problem. Damon’s been shot!”

Ames was immediately awake. “What the hell happened?” he demanded.

“Before you go all off the deep end, he’s okay. It was just a shot to the arm. His left one, by the way.”

He made a full report to his boss. Mr. Swift had risen about an hour earlier and had decided to go for a walk before breakfast. On his route through his neighborhood, a dark gray car with all of its windows covered in dark film had driven past heading in the opposite direction.

Not thinking anything of it, he continued on. He was only aware that it had turned around and was coming back at him when he heard the gunshot and felt an intense, searing pain in his left arm, just below the shoulder.

“The car sped off before he could get a good look, Harl, but he doesn’t believe that he saw a real license.”

“Did he get anything?”

“Just the impression that it was red, white and blue and began with the letter ‘D.’”

Harlan groaned. “Sounds like a diplomat plate. Dark car,

blacked out windows, 'D' plate. Oh, boy. Where is Damon now?"

After hearing that the older Swift was at Shopton General hospital, he hurriedly got dressed and raced down the hall. He woke his daughter up and told her to get her won breakfast. "Sorry, honey. Daddy's got to go see if we can get the people who shot his boss."

She got up and hugged him, saying, "You go get them, dad. I'll make one of those bagel breakfast sandwiches you bought. I'll be fine."

By the time he arrived, Damon was in a recovery room and mostly awake. The bullet had lodged in the upper arm, but had spared any bone or major arteries or veins.

The surgeon was just handing Phil a small sealed vial with the bullet inside.

"How's he doing, Doctor?" Ames asked.

"Still a bit rocky, but he'll be just fine. The bullet didn't hit anything except for soft flesh. Given the apparent caliber, my guess is that it misfired. Normally a .32 caliber bullet, even fired at thirty feet or so, should tear right through an arm. Good thing this one didn't. It is mostly intact."

Damon cleared his throat. "Did you get the number of that bus?" he said trying to smile.

"Something from out of town, Damon. How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been shot. Where's Anne?"

Seeing the look of sudden panic on Damon's face, Harlan assured him that Anne and Tom and Sandy were waiting up in the family waiting area. They would be allowed to see him once he was taken to his room.

"Got to get out there and find those people, Harlan," he told

his security man.

After promising that no stone would be left unturned, and giving the inventor a brief description of some of Phil's findings, Harlan was about to leave when Damon asked for a favor.

"Please see if someone can bring my briefcase from my den. It has some papers I can work on while I'm laid up here for a day or so."

An hour later, he returned with the inventor's briefcase. After dropping it off and assuring Mr. Swift and his family that the FBI would be briefed on the possible diplomatic plate issue, he headed for Enterprises.

"You have just dropped another bombshell into my lap, Harlan," Narz told him when they spoke.

"Sorry, Quimby, but it's looking like the Kranjovians are either up to no good, or that they are being played by someone who wants us to think the Kranjov leaders are attacking us. Either way, very bad things are afoot."

Several leads he thought they had disappeared under scrutiny. By early afternoon, Harlan was pacing around his office, a sure sign he was trying to put pieces of far too many puzzles together into a single picture.

While Phil was working on following up with the DC housing authority, still trying to ascertain who had occupied the house from where the typewriter had been sent and received, Harlan was looking for a pattern in the telephone and email traces.

The phone on his desk rang.

"Ames," he answered.

"Mr. Ames? This is security officer Steven Krane... with a 'K' that is. I'm with Shopton General. We've had a little situation happen that I thought you should know about."

“What is it? Is Mr. Swift okay?”

“He’s fine, sir. Just a bit fit to be tied. He was taking a nap a little while ago when someone entered his room and went through his briefcase.”

“His case? Oh, no!” Harlan had a sudden sinking feeling and a wave of hopelessness swam over him. “What happened?” he asked resignedly.

“We have a man on camera opening his case and grabbing a folder of papers. He put it under his hospital scrub shirt and left. We couldn’t get up there fast enough and he got away. I’m so sorry.”

Harlan almost couldn’t breath he was so angry. All he could get out without screaming at the man was, “Call the police. Now!”

He told Phil what had happened. They sat in silence for more than ten minutes and would have been there longer but the phone rang.

“Harlan. Chief Slater. I understand you had a little theft at the hospital. Right?”

Harlan admitted that such was the case.

“Well, I’ve got some good news for you. We have the man!”

“That’s great! Did he have the papers on him?”

“That’s the bad news. He had nothing on him. The hospital got us a video still so we know we have the right man, but no papers. Important?”

“You have no idea, Chief. Thanks. I’ll be down to question him in an hour or so.”

Harlan hung up the phone. He was furious and Phil could see his face was about as red as it had ever been.

“The absolute nerve of that guy,” Harlan exclaimed. “They have him on video taking the files from Damon’s briefcase and he has the nerve to—”

“Nerve to what, Harl?” Phil asked. Suddenly, seeing the panicked look in his boss’ now ghostly white face, Phil jumped up and lunged toward Ames’ desk.

“Chest—tight—don’t know what’s happening—” Harlan managed to gasp out.

Thinking fast, Radnor grabbed Harlan’s arms and pulled him up and out of his chair, laying him on the carpet next to the desk. “Just breath deep, Harlan,” he said, trying to keep his voice level. “I think you’re having a heart attack. Just breath as deep as you can.”

Phil picked up the phone and dialed the company operator. “Get a medic to the security office immediately!” he ordered. “Harlan Ames is having a heart attack!”

He hung up and turned back to his boss. Harlan seemed to be doing a little better on his back. Some of the color was returning to his face, and his breathing seemed to be a little easier.

Doc Simpson and two medical technicians arrived in less than two minutes. While Doc was working on Harlan, one of the techs took Phil aside and asked him what had happened. He took a few notes and then placed a comforting hand on the worried security man’s shoulder.

“You did good, Phil. Great in fact. Got him right to the floor. We’ve seen evidence that just that simple action if taken in the first thirty seconds can mean the difference between a severe attack and one that people walk away from. Takes a lot of stress off the heart.”

Doc Simpson had an ambulance called and Harlan was loaded into the back and transported to Shopton’s hospital shortly thereafter. The news that came from the hospital a

short while later was good. Harlan was expected to make a full recovery, but he was undergoing an operation at the present time.

At the end of the day, Phil dropped by the hospital to see how his friend was doing.

“Well,” Harlan told him, sitting up in his bed, “the cardiac surgeon did a little angiogram to see what was going on up there and found that I have one artery that is about ninety percent blocked in, not one, but two places. He put a couple little mesh stents up there to open the blockage. Right after they got them in I felt absolutely fine.”

“What about long term, Harl?”

“I’ll be out of here tomorrow and back to work the next day. The doctor tells me this wasn’t an actual heart attack; more like a little skirmish. A wake-up call of sorts.” Seeing the concern in Rad’s eyes, he added, “I’ll be fine, Phil. Really. Cross my stents, and all that!”

By the time Harlan arrived back at work, it was Saturday. But, as he had to remind several of his younger security people, crime doesn’t take the weekend off!

CHAPTER 8 /

Saturday, 3:47 pm

PHIL JOGGED out of his office and down the hall. “I don’t see how the old guy does it. Has a heart attack one day, takes a little rest and then pulls everybody in for a full weekend. I get out of breath just thinking about it!”

He was bringing the latest information to Harlan regarding the loss of Damon’s notes. Fortunately, there had been nothing in the notes that might be used as political ammunition by their enemies.

Also, and also fortunate, was the report by Chief Slater’s weekend commander that they had broken the man in custody that morning.

“He confessed to everything, Harlan. once they told him that he was going to be charged with both Mr. Swift’s attempted murder, but also with causing you to have your attack, plus they showed him the video of the theft, he caved.”

The man had been hired by a foreigner whose description matched that of Ivor Bronich. He had referred to himself as ‘Boris,’ so the noose was tightening on him. Things were fitting together.

Harlan only hoped that it wasn’t going too smoothly. He hated to be played by an opponent.

“Were they able to retrieve anything or had he already handed the papers off?”

“Turns out that he was on his way to meet with Boris when the police picked him up. Since he didn’t have the papers on him, they figure to be wherever he hid them. He won’t talk right now, but the police figure to let him sweat for a day or two more.”

Harlan didn't want to wait. He contacted the police headquarters and received permission to go down immediately. "You stay here and coordinate things. Besides. There's no use in two of us getting arrested if this guy suddenly turns up dead!"

Gary Bradley, another of the Swift Enterprises security team, poked his head into Harlan's office as the man was preparing to leave. "Thought you might like to know that the ballistics on that bullet came back. .32 caliber as we all thought, but with a difference. The rifling on the bullet definitely comes from a Russian gun—very specific to their manufacturing methods—and the jacket on the bullet is an alloy not used in this country."

"Where?" Phil asked before Harlan could get the question out.

"Serbia, Bosnia, and... Kranjovia!"

And, with that, Harlan stalked out of the office.

At Shopton Police headquarters he was shown into their one and only interrogation room. He had requested that all video and audio be turned off and that the observation room be emptied.

"I want a one on one with this guy and he needs to understand what a desperate fix he is in. Give me this one, commander. Please."

Once he sat facing the thief, he introduced himself. "I'm Harlan Ames. I am an ex-Secret Service agent. While I worked for the service I had explicit permission to kill anyone who threatened my employer—ultimately, that was the President of the United States."

Seeing only a small reaction, he added, "And I had occasion to do just that twice!" As he hit the final word he saw the man wince. "*Got him!*" Harlan thought, but didn't show anything on his face.

"One reason why you need to know who I am is that I am the man you almost killed the other day. Gave me a heart attack. Put me in the very same hospital you stole those papers from. I don't like what you did and I'm damned certain that you will never walk out of here under your own power if you don't tell me what I came to find out."

Sweat was beading up on the man's forehead and upper lip. His eyes kept darting around the room as if he were looking for a way to escape.

"The man you stole from is my employer. I *will* kill to protect him. Do you understand?"

The other man was visibly trembling by this time. Harlan caught the faint aroma of liquid panic coming from under the table.

"Tell me some things I want to know. First, did you do this work for your own employer or did you just get hired for the one job?"

Looking around, the man shook his head. "Not my employer. I just needed the cash."

"Fine. That's good. Let's try another one. Did the person who paid you tell you what to steal? Specifically, what papers?"

Another shake of the head. "He told me to go to the man's house and break in. 'Take anything that looks like new plans or papers,' he told me. Only thing is, by the time I got there, you were coming out with the briefcase."

"So, you followed me?"

"Nah. That foreign guy told me where to go."

"You're doing really good now. Let's go on. Did you look at what you stole?"

He shook his head.

“Did you hide that folder?”

The man looked right at him. “Sort of. It’s all safe, but I think the foreign guy knows where I put it.”

“Where!” It wasn’t a question. It drilled into the man’s head like a rifle shot. He flinched back as if hit by a sniper’s bullet.

Five minutes later, Harlan walked out of the police building and made a cell phone call to Phil. “I’ll go see if I can find anything. You get on to Quimby and tell him that our ‘Boris’ is almost certainly Bronich and that he was here in Shopton as recently as two days ago.”

Harlan drove to the address given to him by the thief. It was an old boarding house, now more of a boarded up house. Plywood and two-by-ten boards covered every window and door.

He parked and made his way to a specific window. He grabbed the lower-right corner and lifted up slightly. As he did so, the plywood sheet began to move away from the opening. He let it swing a few feet open and then stopped it.

Turning on his flashlight he peered into the gloom. The stench of rotted food, urine and feces—human, rat and other—filled the air. With a grim grin he told himself that he had smelled worse.

He swung a leg up and over the low sill and climbed into the room. Carefully, he pulled the plywood back over the opening and lifted the small pin that held it back into place.

“Well,” he thought ruefully, “*maybe I haven’t smelled all that much worse.*” He took out his handkerchief and tied it over his nose and mouth.

Using the flashlight he worked his way over and around several unidentifiable piles of filth.

Walking out of the main room he entered a bathroom. From

the discarded needles, condoms and such he could see that it had been used less for its intended purpose than for other things. He swung the light from side to side and found what he had been looking for.

Carefully, and only after finding a suitable piece of wood for the purpose, he lifted up the top cover of the toilet. He was happy to see that it hadn’t been host to water for a very long time.

Inside the tank was the missing folder. He picked it up and did a quick look through. Damon Swift had told him what papers were in it. They all seemed to be there. He stuffed the folder inside the top of his slacks and covered it with his jacket. “Time to get the H out of Dodge,” he told himself. He retraced his steps back to the window and was about to release the wood when he heard a noise outside.

A car had just pulled up. The breaks were squeaky and the engine was in need of a muffler.

Harlan didn’t dare risk taking a look. He did, however, turn around and head for a second doorway, one that led to a hallway. As he entered the long corridor he heard the plywood being ripped from its hinges.

Padding softly down the hall, and avoiding anything that looked as if it might make a noise if stepped on—which included a pair of rats—he made his way down to the end and went into the last room on the right, the side away from the now-open ‘secret’ window. He paused to listen and could hear someone making their way to the bathroom.

“*Wish I’d put that cover back on,*” he thought. “*Might have given me another few seconds.*”

Looking across the room Harlan could see a door and a window. The window glass was shattered around on the floor but the opening was totally covered in wood.

He tiptoed to the door and tried the handle.

Amazingly, it turned and the door opened. Not so amazingly, the opening was criss-crossed with two-by-ten boards.

Harlan wasn't a small man, but he was now thankful that he hadn't sent Phil Radnor. Phil's bulky body would never fit. Harlan bent and twisted and worked his way out of the door and onto a concrete slab that had been part of the patio area.

He thanked his ingenuity for parking a block or more away and nowhere near to where the other mystery explorer had parked. He walked quickly around the corner of the large structure and headed for his automobile. Just as he neared the final corner he heard the tires of another car squeal and shoot off down the road.

"Whew! Close."

He climbed into his car and drove back to Enterprises without incident.

CHAPTER 9 /

Sunday, 11:18 pm

DAMON SWIFT was sitting in his living room, having recovered quickly from his gunshot ordeal. Anne and Sandy had been puttering around all day long trying to make him comfortable, and not taking a "But, I'm already comfortable. Thank you," as a hint that he wished to have some alone time.

He had been through his folder three times. Each time he strove to remember if they were in the exact order he had left them.

"Blasted morphine or whatever it was they gave me," he silently cursed. It had made his memory a bit foggy, but he was practically certain that the papers were all in order. None of them appeared to have been handled, but he had asked Harlan to take a few for fingerprinting.

Those had been returned earlier in the evening with no prints other than his own.

Satisfied at last, he got up and locked the folder in his wall safe, then went upstairs and climbed into bed with Anne.

She snuggled into his 'good' shoulder and asked him, "You okay?"

"Sure. I'm home and with you. The kids are okay. Other than a little twinge in the arm, I'm a happy man!"

In the meantime, Harlan and his top three men were sitting around his desk back at Enterprises. With them was Quimby Narz. They had been discussing everything that they each knew and had been sharing additional information with each other for more than five hours.

"The State Department is going to be of no help to us," Narz

admitted. “The whole diplomatic immunity thing is making them want to back off of all this. We’re on our own.”

“What does that leave us with?” Phil asked.

“One of two things. Either we get really lucky and Bronich does something stupid, or we break the international law and go into the Embassy and grab him ourselves!”

There were grins all around the table. Finally, Harlan spoke. “So it’s settled. We wait for a lucky break. I hate to do it, but we aren’t above the law.”

There were nods around the table and comments of:

“Yeah. Can’t be above the law,” and “Not the Swift way,” and “We’ll get ‘em anyhow.”

Quimby’s phone rang. Picking it up from the table he answered, “Narz.”

Listening for a few moments, a grin began to play around the edges of his mouth. “And, you’re certain?” Again, he listened. “Sure. I can be there in three or four hours, unless—”

Narz looked at Harlan and took the phone from his ear. “Any chance of grabbing a fast flight down to DC? Two of our agents spotted Bronich in the vicinity of the Embassy. He has been hanging around for several hours—”

“Good enough for me. I’ll have one of the duty pilots get a Toad ready and we’ll be at Reagan National in less than ninety minutes!”

As Narz finished his call, Harlan placed a call to the evening lounge. This was a combination cafeteria, lounge and bunkhouse where a skeleton shift of mechanics, pilots and others stayed during the night and on weekends.

The five men took Harlan’s SUV over to the hanger area where one of Swift Enterprises SE11 Commuter, an odd

business jet with an underslung cabin and its two jet engines perched on top of the wing, giving it the appearance from the front of being a large toad with bulging eyes.

Their pilot, Zimby Cox, got them onto the runway and into the air three minutes after they climbed aboard.

Narz spent the entire flight on his phone coordinating with the field agents in the capital city. Periodically he would give Harlan and the others a brief report.

So far, the man believed to be Bronich had spend several hours in a local bar where he had played several games of billiards, apparently losing several twenty dollar bills in the process. He had been drinking beer but his tail stated that he seemed unaffected.

The jet touched down in Washington fifty minutes after leaving Enterprises, and it taxied up to a hangar off to one side of the field. Several black cars were waiting there along with a handful of FBI agents, all in “civvies.”

After a discussion with the agent in charge, Narz made introductions. That finished, he motioned the Swift team to one of the waiting vehicles.

“We’ll take this one and the others will follow in the van parked next to the hanger.

Harlan and Phil were on that side of the car and had a good look at the dilapidated panel van that was partially hidden in the shadows.

“Beauty, Quimby,” Phil commented. “Stylish as well.”

“Yeah, and lovingly distressed to look like that by a crack team of agents and artists. Underneath, she is a bullet-proof, armed response vehicle capable of over one hundred twenty miles per hour. Full communications setup along with mini armory, first aid gear and even a refrigerator and microwave.”

“My kind of stake-out vehicle,” commented Gary Bradley, Harlan’s number three man.

The two vehicles raced out of a back gate and onto the streets of Washington. In minutes they had pulled up to the curb in a neighborhood that could only be charitably described ‘run down.’

“The bar is a block ahead and around the corner to the right,” one of the FBI agents told them. He pressed a finger to one ear for a moment. then told the car occupants, “Bronich just went to the bathroom. Our man inside thinks he’s been made and believes Bronich may try to leg it out the bathroom window.”

“Then, let’s go!” Narz exclaimed.

Everyone except the driver piled out of the car and the van. In seconds they had scattered and were approaching the bar from several angles, hopefully cutting off any route of escape.

Harlan and Phil, along with Narz, came around the corner and into the alley behind the bar. They stopped when they heard a noise. A trashcan had been knocked over.

Looking at Quimby, Harlan made a series of hand gestures and the three men moved into different positions on either side of the alley. A minute went by, then another.

Harlan was about to stand up when a shadowy figure, crouching and staying close to the building wall, came close to him. Without hesitating, he hurled himself out of the shadows and into the man.

They tumbled to the ground with the unknown man twisting and squirming, trying to get out of the vise-like grip the husky Ames had on him.

As the man opened his mouth to yell out, Harlan clamped his free hand over his face, stifling any noise. A second later, Phil and Quimby were kneeling on the man and a pair of handcuffs were quickly snapped onto his wrists.

They jerked the man to his feet and pulled him out of the alley and next to the building where a bare light bulb illuminated their catch.

The man tried to keep his head down, but Ames grabbed a handful of hair and pulled him up so they could see their captive.

“Well, well, well. Ivor Bronich, as I live and breath!”

CHAPTER 10 /**Monday, 9:42 am**

BRONICH had been turned over to the local FBI agents and was sitting in a secure cell in that agency's headquarters. Although technically a citizen of Kranjovia, he was not an official member of the Embassy, so his initial claims of diplomatic immunity were swiftly quashed.

Narz called Harlan to give him some news.

"Interesting things are afoot, Harlan. It turns out that the vice ambassador for Kranjovia had just requested asylum!"

Harlan could barely believe his ears. "Asylum? As in, he is seeking protection from the Kranjovians?"

It turned out that the diplomat was a somewhat-unwilling member of the Embassy staff. Back in his native country, the government had taken his sister and her husband captive in an effort to force him to spy on the United States.

"His family escaped and got to a safe country yesterday. I guess that once he found out, and also heard that Bronich was in our custody, that he skeedaddled out the back door of the Embassy and right to the State Department."

"What have we found out, Quimby?"

Harlan could hear Narz ruffling some papers. Quimby then read off a list of items to the Swift security man. It included the hiring of Bronich to act as the main source of contact to Damon Swift. He had apparently used a long-ignored phone switch and cold-war routing path to both send the email and to make phone contact.

"It has been taken down so they can never use it again," the agent assured Ames. "Everything points to the Embassy. They

tried to make it look as if they were either not the source, or—and your instincts were correct on this—they wanted to give the appearance the they were being framed if things ever came to light."

"So, that secondary imprint *was* a plant?"

"Exactly. A carefully written ghost document that was meant to be 'discovered' either by our side, or by theirs to be used as evidence of their innocence should things go wrong for them."

Harlan was not surprised, but he was curious.

"The Kranjovian government is involved, right?"

"The Secretary of State is none too pleased with the hornet's nest we stirred up. She is not giving us a straight answer. What we have heard through her third assistant executive secretary is that, and I'll quote this—'the Secretary is considering options, but is not willing to jeopardize the budding goodwill between the United States and the Republic of Kranjovia at this time, unless empirical evidence comes to light' end quote."

"So, we get to keep Bronich as the criminal behind the attack on Damon Swift and the theft of his papers, and the Kranjovians and our State Department get to pretend that nothing nasty ever happened. How nice and neat for them all. I wonder what their attitudes would be if Damon had been killed?"

"Don't even go there, Harlan," Narz advised.

"Anything from the man himself?" Harlan asked, referring to Ivor Bronich.

"We've placed him into an isolation cell where he will sit for another couple of days before we try to question him. But, I can tell you that our closed circuit TV in the cell is indicating that he is one angry fella."

Three days later, Narz called to give Harlan a final report.

“Bronich is spilling the beans. A whole, big, pallet load full of them. Turns out that he *was* working directly for the Kranjov Ambassador and under specific orders from their ruling party. He claims that they not only knew of his actions, they sanctioned them, up to and including the killing of Damon Swift in order to stop the project.”

Harlan let out a growl.

“And, here’s the real kicker. Bronich claims that they really believe that the Venus probe project is a front for an orbiting nuclear arsenal to be aimed at them.”

“Talk about paranoid!” Harlan said.

“We’ve forwarded the interrogation tapes to State, but they sent them back.”

“So, the State Department won’t act on that info?”

“Doesn’t look like it. At least, not yet.”

That same afternoon, Munford Trent delivered a letter to Damon Swift. The envelope was devoid of anything except for the address:

Damon Swift

Swift Enterprises

There was no return information and no postage.

“It was checked by Security, sir,” Trent told his employer. “Nothing except a single sheet of paper.”

Damon picked up an envelope knife and slit the end of the envelope open. The one sheet was handwritten, just as the address was, and in the same hand.

He sat back and read it with a slight smile on his face.

Damon,

I am so, so terribly sorry that everything almost went sour. The probe project is so very important that we couldn't jeopardize it by getting too close.

Fortunately, we now have their number two man and he is giving us enough to keep the K's from making any fuss. We'll see how long this lasts.

I assure you that neither I nor any of our analysts thought that it would come to gunplay. My reports say that you are recovering and that there will be no lasting issues. For that I am thankful.

Some day, once the probe gets to its destination and the science is provable, we can release to the world what went on. In the meantime you should consider yourself a hero, both to this nation and to the science you are such a great part of.

Never doubt that what you did was necessary.

It was unsigned.

Damon sat back and re-read the letter twice to see if he could find any hidden meaning.

Finally, as he crossed the room and fed the letter into his desktop shredder, he said, “Don’t worry, madam Secretary. I know...” He let out a sigh. “I know.”

He sat back down as a thought hit him. "*What I don't know*

is who leaked the probe information in the first place?"

He picked up the phone and dialed a number he knew by heart.

"Harlan? Hate to bother you—"