

TOM SWIFT
And The
Space Friends Return

BY
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Tom Swift and the Space Friends Return

By Victor Appleton II

Tom Swift and his father have known of the aliens they call the Space Friends for nearly fourteen years. But, a few years ago those beings disappeared back to their own home world and have only been in contact twice since then. Briefly.

Now, and to the shock of all involved, a message delivered in a decidedly definite manner leads them to believe their “Friends” might be coming back, it starts looking like a nice return of the strange little beings, but it soon looks to be more like an unfriendly visit than a friendly little drop in, and that worries Tom.

The leader Tom once met and liked, named Row, sends the inventor numerous small messages by hand gestures and even resorts to a type of telepathy he fears could bother or anger Tom. What Row and the others don’t realize is the “voices in your head” is nothing new to the people of Enterprises who regularly use TeleVoc communications.

Tom catches on quickly, but he cannot reciprocate sending Row and the others such silent messages. And, anything overheard could lead to disastrous consequences!

This book is co-dedicated to Edward Stratemeyer, the man who got Tom into being, and to the author-for-hire, William Dougherty, who took Stratemeyer’s outline and character bible and fleshed out the Tom Jr. we all knew so well. He is the man who gave us the description of that very first missile of the Space Friends and how it came to the grounds of Enterprises. I always end up picturing the spaceship that the baby Kal-El (Superman) was placed into by his father, Jor-El, and mother, Lara Lor-Van as Krypton was being destroyed, but I also picture it made mostly of what looked like a rocket made of stone. Funny that.



Instead of coming down in one corner of Enterprises, this missile buried itself in one of the walkways between the Administration building and the one occupied by Security. **CHAPTER I**

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Well, I'll be switched! Thirty novels actually *is* possible even when it is coming from a single author and not a group of writers-for-hire tag-teaming book after book, with someone sitting behind a desk writing small checks and providing outlines of what he or she wants to see.

But, enough patting myself on the back. I *will* now congratulate James Duncan Lawrence for his authoring 24 of the 33 Tom Jr. novels. Wow! And Howard Garis for all the original TS novels he pumped out.

I would not be in this writing game had it not been for Edward Stratemeyer (and possibly his daughter, Harriet) and his desire to publish uplifting novels for young boys and teens. And then his desire, or Harriet's, to haul Tom out for another round of books in the 50s, 60s and early 70s. After that I sort of lost interest what with all the changes to characters and locations (Shopton moved to California??!! Tom a 10-year-old?) and that sort of stuff. The latest books were not *real* Tom Swift novels! (IMHO—see, I can get down with the kids!)

Then, along came Scott Dickerson, a man with a love for Tom Jr. and a desire to modernize the stories that had mostly been disproved from a scientific point, and to shuffle characters and get rid of weak ones (sorry, Phyllis, but you were too prissy!) and bring in new modern characters.

I have extended that universe, and with this book have reached a number I never could have conceived back when I started in late 2009. With this book I am trying to hint at a full swing back to the first Tom Jr. story but taking things far beyond that point in the saga of Tom Swift.

Is this the end? Well, since I am writing this bit a full year before I will complete the actual story (the title sort of popped into my head today—late-2018—and I had to get something down), I might have more titles by then. I certainly intend to keep writing and may have more Damon Swift or Anne Swift stories to tell you by then as well.

Let's all find out together.

Copies of all of this author's works may be found at:

<http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/tedwardfoxatyahoodotcom>



My Tom Swift novels and novella collections are available on Amazon.com in paperbound and Kindle editions. BarnesAndNoble.com sells Nook ebook editions of many of these same works.

Tom Swift and the Space Friends Return

FOREWORD

Did you see this coming? I certainly did not see this coming. And, heck, I see *everything*... well everything this author writes because I am his conscious, his self-editor and his idea buddy.

And, he informs me the concept for this book came to him back in 2018. Really? Well, he insists on that story and I have seen the very first and very preliminary file for this tale so I have to believe him (unless he had reclaimed Tom's time portal object and has gone back... but no. That was only good for going back one day, so bang goes that theory!)

From their very genesis, I have liked the idea of the Space Friends. I have not been exactly pleased that a few of my fellow authors have decided to make them villains or vicious reptilian beasts. But, I do see that they have a race controlling them, one that *might very well be* these horrible thunder lizards. I even hinted at some ancient remains deep inside one of the moons of Mars attesting to this fact.

But, the Space Friends I see when I close my eyes, are smaller and benign, a little over their heads when it comes to the assignment they were tasked with completing, and very grateful to Tom Swift for his assistance. Unfortunately, I also tend to picture them looking a bit like Roger, the alien in the *American Dad* shows. Goes to show how suggestible I can be. However, before I wrote the adventure of how Tom got them down to the Earth, I had not seen any of those shows.

Maybe I am precognitive? Perhaps I can picture the future as it will unfold. Perhaps I took a stab in the dark and came up with something that, once I saw it, I said, "Yeah. That's kinda what I imagined!"

Maybe, perhaps and perchance, and other words found in any reasonable Thesaurus.

Victor Appleton II

CHAPTER 1 /

IT CAN'T BE!

TOM SWIFT, the about-to-turn thirty-two year old scientist and inventor and the son of Damon Swift who had, some seventeen years earlier, built Swift Enterprises on a large tract of unused land to the south of the town of Shopton, New York. It was located in the upper lakes area of New York State and was situated next to a long and moderately narrow body of water, Lake Carlopa, used by hundreds of pleasure craft from all around the area.

Shortly after Tom turned eighteen, an event occurred that shattered any preconceptions either Swift had regarding aliens from outer space.

It came in the form of a strange missile, made from some unknown substance but looking as if it had been carved from solid rock, that had crashed into the grounds of Enterprises one night.

Crashed was not *exactly* the right term. It had come streaking from space leaving behind a bright trail of superheated air molecules, but it did something no meteorite or space debris would ever do; it changed course at one point and actually slowed down before partially burying itself in the Swift's property. In an area with no people, buildings or even any of the company's runways.

There were two other things making this unique in Damon and Tom's eyes.

First, there was no discernible power source for it either being launched or for slowing the missile down they could find at the time.

Second, almost every square inch of the surface was etched with a series of mathematical and other symbols. Some were recognizable in terms of their similarity to mathematics concepts and a few looked like planets or even the Milky Way galaxy.

It was as if whoever has sent this to Earth meant for the Swifts to get it, and at some point be able to decipher the symbols.

But, that was history. The beings the Swifts called the Space Friends had been recalled by their rulers and disappeared into very deep space several years earlier. With that disappearance had gone all the Swift's communications with them.

"Skipper? Mike Jayston in Communications. We're getting a strange modulating signal coming in on the receiver used for the

Space Friends frequency. Nothing that makes any sense to the computer translator, but I thought you'd want to know."

"You bet! I'll be over in four minutes. I hope you've been recording that."

"Of course. Standard procedure but especially for that channel."

Tom raced from the office and down the hallway to the stairs at the north end of the Administration building.

He continued running a few dozen yards before he realized he was not in as great a shape as he'd been a decade ago, so he slowed to a jog making it to the front door in four minutes and into the receiver room less than half a minute later.

"What have we got?" he asked a little out of breath. As Mike began reciting the what and when details, Tom took a paper cup and filled it from the water cooler in one corner before coming over to take a look.

As Jayston had stated, the signal was only an electrical modulation. No audio was heard and certainly no images or video were visible. Since the beings had never spoken to or around Tom, he never expected audio. Plus, they had only figured out the visual forms of communicating shortly before departure and only then from something Tom had to send them.

"Let's pull out the old oscilloscope and see if anything registers," he suggested.

The first few years of their communications, all signals had come in and were visible on an oscilloscope screen. They formed various mathematical symbols that were transcribed by hand, collected and printed in a trio of "dictionaries" kept by the two Swifts and one in a special safe. Computerization had speed up things greatly, but Tom and Damon knew not all words of phrases were correct.

That had been followed by the computerization of the dictionary by Tom which furthered both the speed and understanding of what was being transmitted. But, it was not perfect by any means.

Then, after a breakthrough in how their communication did not adhere to the way an English-speaker would arrange words, Tom found a way to directly translate those symbols into text and that was run through a special translation algorithm that used all known Earth foreign languages and how they arranged words to form sentences. It had been an immediate success and not the very stilted and often incomplete messages received earlier were typed out for all to see with any questionable words or phrases replaced (inside parentheses) with what the computer thought logically fit.

With the O-scope set back up and warmed, Tom fed the signal

that had been recorded into it. He and Mike were startled when four symbols came up and repeated and repeated.

Tom recognized them and translated in his head, and then aloud:

Greetings. Message to come.

Tom took a seat and the two men stared at the face of the scope.

But, twenty minutes later the same message was being repeated at one-minute intervals. There were no changes.

On a whim, Tom pulled the old keyboard out and called up a few dozen symbols he could remember. One by one he fed them into the radio, one that was attached to one of the near-instantaneous transmitters the former Space Friends had given Tom as a gift for bringing them down to the Earth's surface, something they had been unsuccessful at doing themselves.

His broadcast message was basic but was all he could think to send as a quick response.

Greetings. This is later Swift. You know me as Tom Swift. Hello.

I am pleased to receive your new message. Hope you are now able to continue messages. Please reply via new system if able.

By "new system" he meant the more direct messages that their auto system could use for reception and to send out text not using the old oscilloscope.

Tom had to leave for a meeting with his father but asked the radioman to TeleVoc him if and when anything new was received, no matter which system was being used.

As he walked to the Administration building, Tom heard a high-pitched scream coming from high overhead. At first it sounded like the air brakes fighter jets pop out to slow quickly. He looked up but also kept moving as he scanned the sky.

His TeleVoc *pinged* and he answered it.

"Skipper. Got a new message. Says to expect a new first contact soon. That's it."

"Thanks. Seems to be coming right now!"

The scream was now becoming a moan sound as if something was no longer piercing the sound barrier and that noise was subjected to the same Doppler effect a passing train might sound like.

Then, and all too suddenly, it went silent for three seconds and Tom was tossed into the air by the concussion of something hitting the concrete just fifty feet behind him.

Instead of coming down in one corner of Enterprises as the first Space Friends' missile had, this one buried itself in one of the walkways between the Administration building and the one occupied by Security. And so it was with great caution a team of heavily armored and padded men came out two minutes later to see if this might be a missile sent by an unfriendly nation.

In the inventor's mind it appeared that history was repeating itself!

Sirens went off all over Enterprises and an announcement was made over the PA system:

"Attention. Incoming object has hit inside company grounds. Estimated location near Admin building and Barn hangar. No structural damage to be seen from the tower. All personnel not involved in emergency drills are to remain inside. No exceptions. All personnel outside, seek shelter immediately." And, it repeated one more time.

Tom picked himself up, saw that he had a bloody elbow—but it flexed freely so he knew it has not been broken—and ran back to where the back part of a four-finned missile was sticking out of the concrete of the walkway he'd been on seconds before the impact.

"You okay, Tom?" came a voice from the other side of the still smoking missile.

The inventor looked over and saw Phil Radnor, number two man in the Security department who was looking at his young boss through the visor of a hazmat suit.

"Yeah, Phil." He pulled up his right elbow to show it to the man. "Hit the ground on this and scuffed it up a bit, but nothing broken and unless I turn around and you tell me I've got a huge chunk of something sticking out of my back, I think I'm all right." He turned around and then back.

"Nope. Nothing sticking out or even a hint you took a hit. Darned lucky because a lot of small and large concrete bits and pieces hit in your direction. In fact, it's a bit strange you did *not* get hit. Hmmm? Oh, and I need for you to move away from the area—as in clearing the heck out of here... just in case."

"Got it!" Tom set out at a jog toward the Admin building.

As with just about anything happening in or around Shopton, or

even the entire Eastern Seaboard, if it involved something in or coming down from the air, Swift Enterprises was called by every legitimate and semi-legitimate news organization. Today was going to be no different.

By the time he got to the shared office he and his father used, Damon was on the phone finishing up dictating a press statement for George Dilling in Communications.

As soon as he hung up Munford Trent, their secretary, opened the door behind Tom and poked his head inside.

“I know it is about the last thing you might want at the moment, but that Dan Perkins with the *Bulletin* in on line six. Want me to tell him to take a hike?”

Damon sighed. “No, but tell him he needs to hold for about a minute, that I am on the phone with someone more important than the editor or Shopton’s former shopping coupon clipper paper. Thanks?”

Tom asked if his father wanted to include him on the call.

“No. I’ll try to make is short and not too sweet for Dan. He barely deserves my picking up the receiver.”

It was true. In the past more than a decade the publisher and editor of the paper had become a very painful thorn in the Swift’s sides. He had printed so many false, misleading and outright made-up stories whenever he felt like garnering some personal attention that he overstepped things and found himself in a Federal prison for about eighteen months when he published a half-researched story that involved two top secret Government contracts. That had him on a list for a very slim level of leeway before he would go back to prison as part of his parole agreement.

He would also forfeit ownership of both the newspaper and the radio station he owned and operated. Lately, he had been better, but there were still some lapses...

Damon picked up the phone and pressed the proper line button.

“Good late morning, Dan. Let me guess this call is about whatever it was that came down from the sky ten minutes ago.”

“Yes, it is, and in keeping with my legal status, I wanted to call to see if you had any information to give out yet.”

“Well, an official press announcement is about five minutes from release, and you will be getting that, so I have to tell you we know darned little at this short juncture. Something that we have no idea either the origin of or the actual object hit on our grounds at, well it would have been about 10:47 am today. I haven’t been anywhere

close to it to see for myself and neither has Tom. At the present time our hazardous materials people are erecting a protective tent and sealing whatever it is inside before they test for both toxic fumes or chemicals, or any radioactivity. I anticipate getting their report in about one hour. In the meantime, nobody from the Swift organization other than those five people is getting to within a hundred feet of the location. All personnel are being asked to remain indoors as only a basic precaution.”

He sighed before continuing. “So, for the sake of your publication which, if I recall, has a 10:00 pm deadline for tomorrow’s paper, I will trust that you will not try to report anything negative about us nor will you make something up you can deny later saying we were not forthcoming with information. I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt here, Dan. Not that you have done anything to deserve that for more than seven years and only *just* these past couple.”

The newspaperman coughed lightly. “I understand and hope you will find I can now be trusted. Nothing other than what is in the release will be written up.”

“Good. In that case, and understanding that good relations with local press is important, I will add this. I will call you before 9:00 tonight with anything else we discover and hold that information until 8:00 am tomorrow for another release. You play nice and you have the information. But, there is a condition. Nothing else other than basic release info goes out over the airwaves on your station tonight or tomorrow until after 8:00!”

Perkins agreed, thanked Damon for his offer, and said he would be standing by for any update.

“You are being rather nice to a not very nice person, aren’t you?” Tom asked giving his father a grin that said he understood that Swifts did not hold grudges.

Tom told his father about the communication from, presumably, their Space Friends.

“That’s not a lot, but I have to suppose the ‘Expect contact soon’ means that rocket that missed you. Any idea if it was under some sort of control and missed you on purpose, or did you duck out of the way by an amazing coincidence?”

The younger man had to think a moment. “Well, before impact it let out the same sort of noise a jet suddenly using their speed or air brakes makes. That low, whistling, moaning noise. Then, and as if those were retracted, it stopped a few seconds before impact. I would add that the missile both missed me and came very close but I don’t suppose that was on purpose.”

Damon snorted. “I would not put it past our friends if they made

certain you were just far enough out of the way to not be injured yet near enough to be one of the first people there. Any visual indications what it is?”

Tom told his father the part sticking out of the sidewalk appeared to be metallic and not like the more mineral appearance of the very first rocket coming, they found out later, from the vicinity of Mars.

“From first look it appeared to be about twenty inches wide at the base, four fins with some sort of cylindrical end pieces on each one. And, it was smoking from the back end. It may have been burning some sort of propellant before it hit.”

That was curious as the first missile had no visible means of movement and certainly no smoke. It had steamed a little from its contact with the wet ground, but nothing more. It also had cooled quickly so it could be handled in under ten minutes.

Their phones rang. Both picked up the receivers and said their names.

“Damon. Tom. It’s Harlan over in Security. We have the tomasite and Durastress quarantine tent erected and there is no sign of radiation. You will be interested to know the heat from that thing is just about gone, and also that one of the fins fell off. No, it actually came off when Phil reached out to see if he could move the missile. He says it must only weigh about three pounds and not the twenty or so he would have expected for something of that size.”

“Can we come see it?” Tom asked.

They both heard the Security chief let out a huff of air. “I suppose so. We are getting a portable winch over there to see about extracting it from the ground. One other important thing. There is no sign of anything crumpling from its impact so we all think it might just come out of the ground in one piece. See you in five minutes or so.”

They were both rising when Tom’s right hand went up to his left collar. He held a “Wait one” finger for his father to see.

On his TeleVoc pin he heard, “Mike Jayston.”

He answered with, “Connect.”

“Skipper. We just go a new message coming in on the newer equipment. It is a sort of warning about whatever it is that hit a half hour ago. Let me read it to you:

Greetings Tom Swift. You will be receiving important object from space from us shortly. We ask you open it and inspect the

message inside.

Do not communicate that message to us as monitoring is taking place. Still attempting to understand how we might be in communication in near future. For now, understand the message and believe we are not of a single mind about this.

“That’s about it. Want me to send any sort of ‘received’ acknowledgement or do you want to come over?”

Tom told him they needed to follow the instructions of the space beings. “For now, no. I am not sure what is going on, but it does not sound as if they feel comfortable about something in that message dad and I hope to discover in a few minutes. Thanks!”

After disconnecting the call he told his father about the message.

“Yes. I’d say that sound like either a warning or at least a caution for us to heed. Good call in telling Mike to keep quiet. Let’s go see if they’ve managed to get that missile out of the ground, and if so, what it has for us.”

They left the office letting Trent know where they would be.

“It could be an hour or more,” Damon told him as they headed down the hall.

“Hold your calls?” the secretary called out to them.

Damon called back over his shoulder, “For now other than Harlan or either of our wives.” He stopped. “Oh, and if Sandy calls, tell her I’ll get back to her in an hour unless it is life critical.”

They stepped onto the ride/walk moving beltway that had recently been replaced by a slightly more sedate version with a single band moving in either direction. It was built in sixteen, ninety foot sections with gaps between them making it considerably easier to get off and cross over close to your destination.

Theirs was between the final two sections.

Both Swift men moved down the stairs at a good pace and soon exited the side of the building. They walked quickly toward the point of impact and soon saw the gray tent of some fifty by fifty feet that had been set up between buildings.

Standing outside the contamination lock was their head of Security.

“Harlan. What have you got?” Damon asked.

“Well, the interesting news is that the other three fins all came off as we tried using them to pull the darned thing out. The good thing is those exposed indented hook points for our cables to be attached. Once we got the right size end pieces it slid up and out quickly. Phil and a couple tech brought over one of the padded V-benches from the Barn and it is sitting in that ready for you.”

Inside, Tom immediately recognized the fifteen-foot-long bench used to cradle rockets and small aircraft fuselages over at the open-sided hangar. Sitting in it and looking only slightly the worse for having buried itself two-thirds of the way into concrete and compacted ground sat a rocket or missile body. Of mostly a grayish appearance it still had small bits of dirt clinging to it, but a tech was slowly brushing that away with a long-handled soft-bristled brush.

“No signs it came in through the atmosphere and hit,” Tom commented. The other two men nodded.

“According to the winch, that entire thing weighs in at less than six hundred pounds.”

“That can’t be right!” Tom declared. “Something that light couldn’t have buried itself that deep.” Neither his father nor Harlan could contradict that statement.

Cautiously, the three stepped forward with Tom immediately pulling on a pair of offered Durastress gloves to protect against anything that might cut him. He moved his hands over the surface, once sliding over a very slightly indented area. Nothing happened so he moved on.

But, four minutes later he pulled the gloves off and placed his tight hand over the indent.

It began glowing.

He left his hand over the spot another second before a slight grinding sound came from just forward of what now appeared to be a sensor pad.

A panel of about one-fifth the circumference of the body and two feet front to back drew inside the body and moved toward the aft, finally disappearing.

The inventor pulled out one of his ever-present pocket pencils flicking the end to one side thus revealing a powerful flashlight. He shone the beam into the interior.

“Damonscope, please,” he called and the first technician came over with the indicated instrument.

“Well, there’s no radiation inside but there is some sort of small box. Here goes...” and Tom reached inside withdrawing his hand a

moment later with a box about the size of a paperback book.

He let out a great laugh on recognizing the form factor of the very portable computer he'd developed to translate, in both directions, for the Space Friends' one-time visit to the surface of the planet.

"If this works anything like mine, and I have no reason to believe otherwise, give me a second or two and we may be able to see what our friends have sent us."

He pressed the slight bump on the right side where he'd designed the ON/OFF switch. Nobody was surprised in the least when the screen came to life, glowing a second before settling down to an image of one of the friends' faces.

It wore what Tom believed they meant to be a smile. The camera panned down to the creature's hands, their primary means of communication with other races. They seemed to use telepathy for speaking with their own race.

As the two hands on screen began an intricate set of motions, a small speaker in the device began the translation into English.

What the being told them caused their heart rates to rise.

CHAPTER 2 /

QUESTIONS

TOM AND his father smiled on hearing the beginning of the message while Harlan stood to one side and scowled. The voice was electronic and without inflection so it all sounded flat and yet ominous:

“Greetings to Tom and to Damon Swift. I am Row and the one you assisted in visiting your planet many solar orbits of your planet before this time. I bring you information of importance to both our races but mostly to you.

“My people were sent to your solar planetary system three times. The first time was before we left any records. That investigation group perished. The second time was in your past when that team carved symbols in a stone building in a hot area close the equator of your planet. It is a place Tom Swift assisted us in visiting.

“Those of our race at that time also perished.

“We of the third visit came to your system more than twenty of your annual orbits ago, and it is the seven survivors of that expedition you met. We were twenty but many left the plane of life before we contacted you. Tom Swift discovered our leader’s remains inside the small moon object you know as Phobos around the forth planet.

“But, this message concerns a coming fourth visit by our people.”

Tom and Damon quickly shared a look.

“We will appear on the object you call Nestria in one-sixth of a solar orbit. Our ship will be like the one you have seen, only of greater dimensions. We do not wish to come directly to the planet for fear that vessel might be viewed as an enemy ship. It is not.

“We will contact you shortly. Please understand we hold both great joy at a meeting with you again, but feel problems might become evident on our arrival and do not wish it to become a point of fear from you.”

That was it. After checking with his father, Tom pressed the button again and the message replayed.

None of them could figure out the exact meaning of the final sentence.

“Do you think he means their possible visit might be contested by their Masters and those other beings might come to forcibly take them home?” Tom asked.

Damon looked bemused. “I honestly have zero idea, Tom. Harlan?”

The Security man shrugged. “The only idea I have is this might be best if we called them to thank them kindly but suggest they stay at home. I don’t like what sort of thoughts this brings to my mind.”

“But,” Tom countered, “it could be innocuous or even a misinterpretation by their translator. After all, this one seems to be based on the first version I built and not the final one I finished after they came for their visit.” He looked hopefully toward his father.

“Well... not that I want to rush to any judgement, but I believe Harlan is right in that we need to proceed with great caution until such time as we know exactly what Row meant. This could be a good thing having them come back and it could be a terrible thing. For us or even for this planet!”

Tom described the lengthy message to Bud that lunch hour. He did not bring the translator/message box as both he and Damon agreed the message was not to be broadcast around. In fact, they had formed a cover story regarding the missile.

“It wasn’t actually something from outer space after all. Just as happened a couple years ago, a test missile from the Navy veered off course and we are the lucky ones where it landed!”

That had been accepted until Bud and Tom were sitting quite far away from others in the cafeteria where the inventor admitted the truth. Bud took it for granted the Swifts knew what they were doing so he agreed the actual origin would never be revealed by him.

“Okay, I have a poser for you and it has been banging around in my head for years. Why, and I mean *exactly* why, did the Space Friends have an impossible time of getting down to the surface?”

Tom stopped walking and turned to face the flyer.

“Well, my favorite guess, and it is just a guess, is they might have spaceships capable of traversing great distances in very little time but those same ships never had the power necessary to land and take off from our gravity field. They might have made many attempts before contacting us, and those could be where the old UFO sightings came from, but they realized they might crash and then never get back off.”

Bud looked askance at his friend until Tom shrugged.

“Okay. That doesn’t come close to explaining how some of their kind managed to get to the surface down in the Yucatan and carve those symbols in the old temple almost five hundred years ago. I know. Theories that are based on uneducated guesses, according to the original Tom Swift, are no better than just guesses. Perhaps they did have some or at least one special ship, but ran into something down here that did them in. Illness, predators, angering superstitious locals... something. Still might have been our gravity. They did, after all, need to have their own gravity stone when we did get them down here.”

“Oh. I think that makes a great deal of sense. Then, and here’s my other question, how do they fly what has to be faster than light? But, that also begs me asking how their radios, like the six they gave you, and the couple you had their manufacturing box produce, work over great distances?”

Tom took a deep breath. He was about to reveal an idea he had not even discussed with his father, although he believed it might have come to the older inventor at some point.

“Do you remember a couple years ago I took apart one of those transmitters and found I could duplicate everything except for a small, round and impenetrable sphere?”

Bud nodded. It had been a challenge for Tom who desperately did not want to break one of the irreplaceable radios. He’d managed to get it back together and working to everyone’s relief. He had also figured out how to use a large crate-like box left for him on the Martian moon, Phobos, that could construct many of the alien being’s devices like the radios.

“Yes, I do. You said then it had to be the secret ingredient to the whole radio and it might work on a... umm, I think you said a sort of trans-dimensional wavelength.”

Tom nodded. “Right, only in a trans-dimensional *manner*, not wavelength. Well, I did some more experiments with that using all sorts of sensors to register what is coming out, and guess what? *Nothing* beyond a simple carrier wave was coming out. There is no radio signal that comes out even though I was right there sending the signal! At least that is what it appeared until I checked for micro data bursts. They are in there just not discernible as to what they contain.”

The concept stunned the flyer into silence. A moment later Tom continued.

“In some way they pierce an inter-dimensional, ummm, area in space and slip the ship inside like they do with the radio signals.

Eventually, and my belief it is not instantaneous, they arrive close to their destination and slip back out where they use their ship's standard sub-light speed—and remember they could get between Mars and Earth in about twenty minutes when the planets were aligned—to go where they want. Such as their home planet.”

“Heck of a lot to think about, huh?” Bud stated.

Tom nodded. An idea came to him.

“It might be a bit like how we opened a tiny wormhole, slipped inside, and ended up in another solar system light years away in a fairly short length of time.”

Bud let out a small groan recalling the discomfort they'd experienced back then. They had been left unconscious and in great pain from the ordeal. “I just hope their trip doesn't knock them out and feel like they've been steamrollered!”

The two men sat in contemplation for nearly five minutes before Bud tapped Tom on the wrist.

“Another thought or question, skipper. That whole ‘one-sixth of an orbit’ thing. I suppose that means they will be arriving in about two months. Do we all need to do anything to prepare for them?”

“Dad and I think we need to try to get more information from them regarding the ‘problems might arise’ part of the message. Like I told you, it could be a translation error or it might be they are being forced to do something against their will by their Masters. I'm pretty sure they would not come here to drop off a bomb or anything like that, but we believe it smacks of their trip having an ulterior motive. Don't ask me what that could be, okay?”

“Sure. Say,” he brightened, “if they are coming to land on Nestria, do you suppose that's where they will stay?”

“Could be. Why?”

“Well, if they stay up there they might be considered to be in quarantine so anything they do could be kept up there and not down here.”

That thought made Tom consider if it might be wise to evacuate the residents of the small colony up on the tiny planetoid before the arrival. He would need to discuss this with his father.

Bud wasn't the only one with questions for Tom. Harlan called him an hour later asking if the inventor might come over to talk to him, Phil Radnor and Gary Bradley.

“Sure. Give me ten minutes to finish a letter and I'll be leaving here.”

When he arrived, the Security chief asked him to bring the other

two up to date.

“I’m afraid I don’t know as much about dealing with those space beings as you do.”

Tom tried to fill them all in on what he knew or believed, including a review of the Space Friends and their Masters situation.

“When they came down here, and I spoke to one of their controllers, it was one race within their solar system... or so we all believed. They never contradicted that perception. Then, a year or so later those so-called Masters were deposed and replaced by an entirely different race.

“Do you both recall the derelict dodecahedron spaceship dad found on the other side of the Moon?”

Gary smiled. He had been in on the adventure getting inside and discovering two sad facts. A team of Brungarian astronauts had, more than a decade previously, evidently located the derelict saucer-like ship and managed to get the outer door of the airlock open.

The problem with that was the ship had no energy to allow them to open either the inner door or even to reopen the outer door once they had shut it. They were trapped and perished when their suits ran out of air.

Because the ship had built up a small power charge over that ensuing ten years, the second thing was that Damon and his small team had opened both outer and inner doors, found a bewildering geometric puzzle of doors, hatches, strange equipment and finally the control room. It was there they found the remains of a very tall and hairy crew long dead of exposure to the vacuum of space.

They were still “manning” their duty stations when something had caused the ship to decompress.

“Yeah. Pretty spooky place. So, what are your thoughts about that ship?”

Tom rubbed his chin in thought before responding. “My belief is the creatures in that saucer were either from the same set of beings as the first set of Masters, or were from the second set. We might never know unless we can take our friends out there, go inside and have them identify the corpses.”

Phil piped up with, “Sort of a gruesome, ‘Welcome back back to our solar system and now let’s go view the dead people,’ greeting. Not certain I would like that if the tables were turned. Also not certain these Masters would like that.” He raised an eyebrow.

“No,” the inventor stated with a shake of his head, “neither would

I. However, that is not what I am suggesting... at least not right at first. We need to find out their intentions once they land and then I can suggest we travel to the back side of the Moon to have them view the fallen beings in there. If they refuse, that is the last of that!”

“But, if they are amenable to that we can find out if they want to return the creatures up there back to their home planet?” This came from Gary. “I’m not too sure I’d be in a hurry to bring back corpses of the beings that have enslaved them.”

“Nor would I,” Tom said.

No word came from the Space Friends for more than twenty days. At that time, a brief message was recorded and automatically acknowledged”

To Tom Swift. We are almost on the way.

That was the entire message.

“So,” Tom asked his father the following morning when they arrived in the office. “Do we ask for more definite travel info, or do we just assume they’ll provide enough warning to us and not just show up here at Enterprises one day?”

Damon suggested sending their own message requesting at least two weeks fore-notice before arrival.

Tom agreed and headed for the Communications department to craft and send such a message.

When it went out it acknowledged both the understanding the Space Friends were on their way as well as asking for either a timetable or “...fourteen Earth planetary rotations of notice before anticipated landing.”

Tom did not hold out a lot of hope for a quick answer to that message.

What he expected, he received. In other words, nothing from the aliens.

He did receive a questioning message from Haz Sampson, Manager at the Mars colony, requesting a delivery of two specialty drugs for one of their people who had been recently diagnosed with cancer.

“Skipper? She’s not in great danger at present, In fact, our own doctor did the operation of remove visible mass of the tumor in her lower, right lung lobe. Got it all, or so she believes. It’s just that the

chemo drugs will make pretty certain it remains in check.”

“Any possibility the patient will want to come back to Earth for any additional treatments?” Tom asked knowing the attitude of the hearty people on Mars meant the answer was certainly to be negative.

“No. She feels that heading away from home is not going to make her feel any better. Doc concurs that the increased gravity would put a strain on her heart and that might be counter to the best effectiveness of the drugs. I, uhh, hate to ask since we are in about exact opposition to Earth’s orbit, but is it possible to get something out here in the next two weeks?”

It was true. Mars was nearly on the opposite side of the sun at present and would not be approaching Earth’s position for more than four months. It was one of the small perils of being on a planet with an orbit taking 365 days versus Mars with its 687-day orbit. On the slightly positive side that meant the two planets were within fairly easy reach twice each Martian year.

But, to overcome that Tom had an ace up his sleeve. His *TranSpace Dart* spaceship had the ability to grab hold of a tiny black hole the inventor had discovered lurking inside the Asteroid Belt years earlier. Once held firmly in place by one of his inventions, the Attractatron, a combination of the hole’s attempts to drag the ship into its gravity well and the Attractatron’s ability to keep it “at arm’s length” meant that the ship was drawn forward as it pushed the hole away resulting in inertia-free forward travel at speeds that could approach that of light itself.

Tom explained the probable visit from the Space Friends—and that something ominous might be coming—so he said he’d arrange for the *Dart* to take off in a day from Fearing Island and head for rendezvous with Mars some nine days later.

“Yeah. I figured whoever comes out is going to have to swing wide of the Sun before they can get here. Let me send you a list of the exact drugs and the amounts Doc says she needs. You should receive that in about an hour. Thanks, skipper. You are, literally, a life saver!”

His father agreed that sending the *Dart* on a mission of mercy was the only thing he could think to do and so once the list arrived, and was reviewed by Doc Simpson who suggested an additional drug to help alleviate some of the make-you-fee-bad symptoms caused in 90% of people from the main anti-cancer drug being prescribed, a team of Enterprises’ best pilots including Red Jones, Slim Davis, Deke Bodack and Zimby Cox headed to the island base with their iced container of drugs and took off the next morning.

Tom had computed they could actually cut an entire day off the trip by skirting one million miles nearer the Sun on the trip out.

“Solar activity is at a real low right now and nobody believes that will change drastically, so the corona is much closer to the surface. The tomasite shielding will not be taxed at all, so unless you see any change, go for the speedier route.”

One day later Tom received a call from the Swift's favorite politician, Senator Peter Quintana from New Mexico.

“Hey, Tom. I have a question for you and it involves the communications you have received from your Space Friends over the years. One of the local FBI agents up there spotted an article in your paper about that crashed *thing* and sent it to headquarters. They, of course, completely dismissed it as being from that crank editor, Perkins, so they nearly shelved it. But, someone decided to run it past me because you and your dad and I have a good history. So, what can you tell me?”

The inventor really wanted to be able to ask his father to be part of the conversation, but Damon was in a meeting at the Swift MotorCar Company a few miles away.

“I don’t want to sound like I’m stalling you, Senator, but give me a minute to run the question by Dad. He’s out of the office for a bit.”

“Fine. I’ll hold unless your music on hold is some old punk rock tune played on tubas.”

Tom tapped his TeleVoc pin. When his father answered the older man asked for thirty seconds. He soon came back. “Yes, Tom?”

Tom told him of the Senator’s question and wondered how much he ought to tell the man in Washington.

“See if he can come up and stay tonight and we’ll fill him in on everything, or if he can’t, tell him we received a strange message purportedly from the Space Friends and we are still trying to figure it all out. And, we would like him to come up at his earliest convenience.”

Tom passed that along and Peter Quintana drew in a breath through his teeth. “Okay. That tells me I need to come up. See you two in about four hours.”

Damon got back to the office twenty minutes later and Tom told him of the forthcoming arrival of the Senator.

“Good. This is the sort of uncertain news I’d rather deliver in person. We can both judge by this face how he takes things. I only hope the things we can’t tell him about are not going to turn out to

be to our detriment. Or, that he is angry we didn't tell him sooner.”

Peter Quintana had known Damon for about three-quarters of a year longer than he'd known Tom, and that was going on seventeen years in total. He had made a name for himself in Washington DC by helping Damon get permissions to build and fuel his first three nuclear reactors and to help the Swifts lease the piece of scrub grass and seagull droppings off the coast of Georgia that had become their Fearing Island base.

He knew they would not mislead him or sugarcoat anything they would tell him. He was correct.

As they ended the story of the new contact and the message that only said they were coming and it might be two months, he sat back and relaxed. He needed to form his next question carefully.

“Do they come with good intentions?”

Tom and Damon stared at him a moment before the younger man answered.

“It is a very good question. To tell you the absolute truth, Peter, we have no idea!”

The Senator nodded and pursed his lips before saying, “Then, I guess we need to be ready for both. I only hope whatever we do, we don't have to get into the very first interplanetary war with them.”

CHAPTER 3 /

AT HOME WITH THE BARCLAYS/SWIFT-BARCLAYS

LIFE WITH a child in the household was far different than one without as Sandy was fast discovering. Their recently-adopted son, Samuel—who Bud insisted on calling “Samster” and Sandy hoped he would start calling the boy Sammy at the very least—had taken to the two new parents as if he’d been with them since his day one.

It was gratifying, and they both resolved to never keep secret his adoption. Sandy had lost a friend in high school who, during a shouting argument with her mother, had been informed, “I wish we’d never adopted such an ungrateful girl!” She had not been able to cope with the sudden shock and no matter what her parents did to try to get past that, she had taken her own life a month later.

“Sammy is not going to find we have ever kept anything a secret from him,” Sandy declared the third day they officially had him as part of their family.

Bud found absolutely no reason to argue with that. He had two cousins, both adopted, who had been told about that way of becoming a family member almost before they could talk and had no issues with it. They felt loved and that was what was important to them.

Sammy obviously felt both love coming from his new parents and a deep reciprocal love for them. He especially loved Bud who would lightly roughhouse with the boy, never treating him like a fine porcelain doll the way Sandy started out doing. Even she could see he needed to jump and fall and tumble.

The boy loved his mother, and he was intrigued by the difference between Sandy’s blond hair and light skin and the dark, nearly black hair and very dark eyes and light brown complexion of his aunt, Bashalli. He kept stroking her face looking closely at her before turning his head to look curiously at his mother.

When on about week three of him being officially a Barclay, he looked between the two of them, he asked, “Same?” and shook his head.

“Do you think he will understand about my heritage?” Bashalli asked.

Sandy shook her head and her ponytail swept from side to side. “No, not really. I think it is best to just tell him,” and she addressed her son and pointed to herself, “I am mommy Sandy, and she is

Auntie Bashi.”

Sammy’s little face scrunched up and he looked both confused and curious. But, he pointed at Sandy and said, “Mommy,” and at Bashalli stating, “Bathy.”

This made Bud hoot and laugh. “Guess you’re going to be Aunt Bathy for a while, Bash. Hope you don’t mind.”

The Pakistani-born woman shook her head and smiled at the boy. “You go ahead and call me whatever you want. Just know that your auntie and uncle both love you!”

Bud laughed for nearly a minute when he heard Sammy repeating “Aunt Bathy.” Then, he sobered on realizing his son had not yet called him daddy or dadda or anything, It was obvious the boy loved him because he was constantly smiling and patting Bud’s face and even giving him kisses on the cheek, but so far, no name.

“Hey, Samster. How about saying daddy one time?” But the boy steadfastly refused to say it.

Over the next several days Bud kept trying. Even Sandy got into the game pointing at Bud and saying, “Daddy,” so Sammy could equate the two. Nothing.

It wasn’t until that Sunday morning when Bud took Sammy in his arms as he headed to the bathroom to brush his teeth and shave. The little boy started watching his father from very close, even crossing his eyes a little to try to keep Bud in focus. It wasn’t until he glanced over to the mirror that he let out a little scream of joy. Pointing at the mirror image of him and his father, he loudly proclaimed, “Daahdaa!”

With his face still covered in shaving foam, Bud raced from the bathroom, downstairs and into the kitchen with Sammy enjoying the jostling ride.

“He said it! He said it!” he told his startled wife.

Sandy carefully moved the pan of sizzling bacon from the burner, took off the protective glove she was wearing and came over to them. Stroking a little foam from Bud’s cheek and dabbing it onto his nose, she asked, “Sammy said what, Bud?”

In a whisper, he replied, “He called me ‘dada.’ He looked right at me and called me—” but he stopped. “Wait a sec. He was looking at me in the mirror. Hang on. Samster?” He looked into his son’s eyes and pointed to himself. “Dada?”

Little Sammy looked from Bud to Sandy and then smacked his little right hand into the foam on Bud’s left cheek before giggling, but saying nothing.

“Come on, San. Follow us,” he said before heading back up to the bathroom. There, and with Sandy using a washcloth to wipe the boy’s hand clean, Bud stood them in front of the mirror and tapped Sammy on the shoulder to get him to turn his head.

The little boy looked at the reflection and giggled. “Daahdaa,” he clearly said.

Sandy tried to hold back tears but she was overjoyed their son knew who they *both* were.

“Even though he only knows you backwards in a mirror, Bud, Sammy knows who you are.”

After they had breakfast, Sandy secretly called Bashalli and told her she and Tom needed to come over to see something.

When the Swifts arrived, along with Bart, Mary and little Anne, they all headed upstairs and into the big bathroom to watch Sammy’s “performance.”

Evidently suffering a little anxiety at having such a large audience, the boy steadfastly refused to utter a sound.

Bart assessed the situation and asked to hold Sammy. Once in his arms, Bart addressed the infant.

“Sammy, you have to call your daddy, daddy. Right?” He pointed to Tom. “He’s my daddy and—” he pointed to Bud, “*that* is your daddy. Got it?”

The two boys looked at each other for a moment before Sammy’s mouth split into a grin. He pointed to Tom. “Daahdaa... no!” Next, he pointed to Bud. “Daahdaa...yes!”

Everybody laughed, even little Anne who had already been through the who’s who of adults in her life. She took hold of Mary’s hand and tried to pull her sister out of the room.

“And that, my darling family, is our order to go back downstairs. Anybody for a little ginger ale and cranberry juice?” Sandy inquired.

On Monday morning as Tom was relating the Sammy and Bud story to his father, Damon was chuckling. “You won’t recall this, but when you were Sammy’s age you called me ‘Dame-o’. Took you maybe three months to either get the rest of the name out or change to calling be Daddy. Even at that, you shortened that to Dad within a few more months.” He looked with merriment at Tom. “Never really got over calling your mother, Momsie, though.”

“Absolute term of endearment, father dear,” the younger man responded with a grin.

Turning serious now, they discussed their thoughts on the forthcoming visitation by the Space Friends.

“I’m still flummoxed for a good idea of what they want,” Damon stated. “What do you suppose the timing of their announcement, and that rocket hitting right here at Enterprises, could mean? Surely they have the technology to land something a bit less violently?”

That was something Tom had wondered about.

“I would have thought that if they were coming back they might just arrive out near Mars and then communicate they are here and want to see us again. Not this months of waiting stuff. Uhhh, do you suppose they called that early as a way to warn us?”

Damon took a deep breath and let it hiss out. “That is one conclusion I am afraid I’ve come to, Son. I honestly can think of no other reason for such fore notice.”

Tom did have some good news to impart.

“Late yesterday the *TranSpace Dart* arrived at Mars and they got the drugs, plus a shipment of some fresh foods Chow begged for them to take along, to the colony. Haz called me to say their doctor was much relieved to get those and immediately started their patient on then.”

Damon smiled and nodded. “That is very good news. He and I had a chat three days ago where I offered to have them remain out there a few days to see how she responds and to offer to transport her to the *Space Queen* in case she needs enhanced medical care but can’t stand the full affects of Earth gravity.”

“I suppose we have to leave it up to the people out there,” Tom stated with a bit of reluctance in his voice.

“Absolutely. We must let them make their decisions based on their circumstances and ideals. We can’t go through any ideas of even a personal forced evacuation like we suggested when the Moon colony had their deaths!”

That had been a horrible emotional time for Tom and the other people from Enterprises who went up on a mercy mission when a skipping piece of space debris had destroyed one of the solid-sided buildings another contractor had built for the small colony. Not only were they asked to recover the bodies of the people who’d perished, but when Tom and Damon suggested rebuilding the colony using safer materials, they were rebuffed—for the second time—by the agency that had awarded the first contract to the other company.

The Swifts had not even been considered that first time even though their bid was for about 40% of the accepted one, their time to completing slightly over half the time, and their inflatable, self-

sealing construction had been refused as “not meeting with the specific terms of the request.”

Tom’s face showed his memories of that time were not positive.

What had eventually been discovered was the company winning the bid had been taken over by foreign nationals who, once the discovery had been made public, disappeared.

That left Tom the chance to create several of his inflatable habitat domes to be erected as both replacements for the two that had been destroyed, but to be placed in a position where they could protect the rest of the colony buildings.

“Right,” the younger inventor finally said. “So, unless their doctor and Haz and the patient agree, and I suggest we only give them four or five days at the most before the *Dart* must come back, then we wait until such time as they make a request for more medicines... or an evacuation.”

Damon agreed. “It’s all we realistically can do for now.”

Doc Simpson did not agree with this approach.

“What nobody seems to be taking into consideration is their doctor is not a full-fledged doctor in the *physician* sense; she is a Doctor of Philosophy who took a three-month crash course in field medicine before they all headed for Mars. Oh, sure. It can be argued that she has done a fine job so far, and I understand she keeps up with studies in internal medicine, but the fact they have all been fortunate to not require emergency surgery, not even an appendix op, does not make her more qualified! We have zero knowledge if she even got all that tumor out.”

Tom, more than his father, could sense the physician’s anger and frustrations. He bit his lower lip as he tried to determine what might be a good suggestion in the eyes of his friend and the man who had saved his life more than once.

The younger inventor turned to his father. “Could we call the *Dart* back and send Doc out there after a fast turnaround?”

Doc, who had been on a number of space voyages, and had even been operated on by Tom to fix a detached rib while outside the solar system, looked at his boss with hope. “I’d go in a heartbeat, but only if Haz and his patient ask for me. I can’t be seen as undermining their own colonists and their chosen local healer.”

With a nod from Damon, the three men headed for the Communications building for a call out to Mars.

Once Haz Sampson had been located and got back to his office—he had been on an inspection of their newest habitat dome

troubleshooting a small problem with the hydroponics set-up out there—he came to the receiver with a smile.

“Well, hello Swifts one and two, and hello, Doc Simpson. I’d ask what honors this call but I can think of at least one powerful reason. Am I close?”

“Well,” began Doc, “if you think this might be because of your colonist with the cancer, the one, by the way, I am just about worried sick over because there’s no way you could have everything out there to take care of her if she does not quickly and totally respond to the meds we sent, then yes. Got it in one.”

Haz, a large and powerful man who generally sported a determined look of a man who knew exactly where he stood, lowered his eyes and nodded. “Thought so. And, while I believe I can agree to just about anything you may tell me right now, I have to preempt that by telling you that Gloria Monday, our patient—and yes, we all grin when we say her name out loud—is just about dead set against coming back to the Earth.”

He was about to say more but Damon had a question. “Any solid idea why?”

“Sure. Unbeknownst to anyone when she applied and was accepted to come out here, she had a violent relationship. One she fears might lead to her being attacked if she comes back there. I’ve tried to reason with her telling her that nobody down there would say a thing, but she panics at the least idea of heading for Earth.”

“So, why not bring her back to the *Space Queen*?” Tom offered.

Haz, whose mouth had opened to say something, closed it again and looked thoughtful. “She’s going to ask how long and what security measures could be put in place.”

“First of all, if we can get the information on her former partner, then Harlan can find out where this person is and make certain they never get the chance to go out to the station. As for how long, Doc will have to answer that one.”

“And, I’d say at least four or five months. The lower gravity will help her by not taxing her system and no matter what she needs we can get it out there in hours and not days or weeks. Plus, if she is at the station she can still qualify for drug treatments that may not be exported outside of some nations. We have a little pass on that one because of all the medical research that goes on in the station.”

The four men sat in their respective locations looking at each other across more than one hundred eighty million miles. Nobody said anything for two minutes. Finally, Haz asked to be considered to be on hold for ten minutes.

“Think he’ll get though to this woman?” Tom asked.

“I’d like to hope so for her sake,” Doc stated.

Damon could only agree with them.

When the Mars colony manager returned it was with the base Doctor. She saw that Doc Simpson was with them and her attitude changed. Where she had come into the office with fire and determination, she visibly swallowed.

“Oh, hello, Doctor Simpson. Mr. Swift. Tom. Before we go any farther I want to thank you all for getting the drug treatments up here. Especially the new class of anti-nausea drugs Doctor Simpson thoughtfully added to my request list. They are, as I’m sure you know, things I had not heard about out here. I guess I’m not as fully qualified as I would like people here to believe.”

Doc responded with, “You and about eighty percent of the Earthbound physicians. So, before we get into the reason for this call, how is the patient responding?”

For more than five minutes they spoke using a jargon that the other men did not fully comprehend. Finally, she nodded to Doc and he nodded back.

“Okay. Then if she were my patient I’d want her to come back and get this fully taken care of. That likely is going to call for the surgical removal of a greater margin around that tumor even if it does shrink. Shrinkage will make an operation easier on everyone, and give her a more positive prognosis. Now comes the hard one; will she listen to you?”

“I do believe that if I tell her this is what I’d do if it were me, she will come. She’ll be scared out of her wits at the thought that monster she was once married to will find out. As far as she left things, she had led him to believe she had died in a climbing accident and the body never located.”

This was startling news to the four men. All of them had widened eyes at that information.

Finally, Damon told her she could assure the patient, Gloria, of absolute secrecy from anyone even at the *Space Queen* station, who did not have an absolute need to know about her arrival, treatment and eventual departure back to Mars.

“Okay, then can your big, pointy ship people pick her up tomorrow morning and get her back to you?”

It was agreed this would be exactly what would be happening.

* * * * *

Slim Davis had answered the radio call to the *Dart*. He quickly

agreed to get the small sick bay ready so the woman could be seen to, continue to receive her daily treatments, and be assisted by him or Zimby, both of whom had some training in “space medicine.”

“We’ll make her trip as comfortable as possible. Can Doc hang around so Zim and I can pick his brain a little on what we need to do and look for?”

Doc agreed to be ready to talk to them both as soon as Slim could get the other man up from a nap he was currently taking.

While he waited he told Tom and Damon they could go. He would take care of everything and come report to them in an hour or so.

When he did arrive at the office he told them all was well in hand. “They have all the necessary equipment for the injections and even her daily transfused medicines. One of the self-injection cuffs Tom devised a couple years ago will do that work all by itself!”

Word came to them just eleven hours later that the *TransSpace Dart*, with its semi-reluctant passenger, had taken off and was just about to grab onto the tiny black hole that would speed them back to Earth. By now the angle to get them around the Sun had widened by three degrees making their mid-course correction less and speeding the trip home by nearly a full hour.

Not a lot, but something to note.

While the *Space Queen* and Doc Simpson waited for the delivery of Gloria Monday, Harlan had been checking on her story.

“I hate to tell you this,” he said to Tom and Damon in a meeting a few mornings later, “but it appears Ms. Monday has a good reason for fearing coming home. She probably is sweating the proverbial bullets over leaving Mars at all.”

When Damon looked at him and Tom spread his hands out as if asking for more, he continued. “It appears she is wanted by the police out in Denver where she has been charged, in absentia, with the murder of her former husband. The extenuating circumstance is that she had a court order for protection from him—he had been witnessed on several occasion to have hit her in public—and the final time was one time too many. She must have snapped because he tracked her down, punched her in a grocery store and she took out a small hand TASER, shoved it against his chest about where his heart would be, and pressed the button. She kept pushing it until people nearby could get their wits about them and yank her away.”

“Too late by then?” Tom guessed.

“Gus Abernathy—her actual married name—had a bad heart and a pacemaker that got seriously shorted out and stopped his ticker ticking. She managed to get free before the police arrived and just... disappeared. We checked her out under her maiden name and that came through with a clean report. By then she had been living in New Jersey for three years and was reportedly a model citizen.” He made a humming noise through his nose.

Damon had to ask, “Do you believe there was any way we might have ferreted her history out before sending her to the colony?”

Harlan had to think about that for a minute before answering. “Our records check and the one the FBI sent us both missed her incident with Gus, even the fact she had been married. And before you ask how that record would not have come up, it was what is called a Common Law marriage, meaning they had lived as man and wife for greater than seven years so the State of Colorado recognized the relationship as akin to being legally married without the supporting public documentation.”

“So, what do we do now?” Tom inquired.

“We talk to Jackson Rimmer and see if we have any exposure in this and then whether we have to turn her over or if as a citizen of Mars she has some sort of protection.”

The two Swifts looked at each other, almost as if silently communicating. Finally, Damon spoke.

“Then, we have to do what the law says. Regardless of how or why she did what she did, if Jackson tells us she has to be brought down to Colorado to face charges, then we wait until Doc clears her for further travel... and *down she comes!*”

CHAPTER 4 /

PLANNING FOR SOMETHING, BUT WHAT?

“SAY, MR, Swift? Can you tell us anything about those space beings we hear might be coming back for another visit?” This came from a young woman Damon walked past while on a stroll one afternoon. She was with two others he also recognized.

“Well, Brandy,” he said pausing for a moment, “I believe you came to Enterprises a year or more after Tom finally managed to get a small group of them to the surface for a three-day visit. Is that correct?”

She nodded and admitted that was true and had only heard third-hand accounts—plus had been able to view some of the photographs Tom and Bud had taken featuring the beings.

“Fine. Then I can tell you that if you heard they had left this solar system a few years ago, and that we actually never believed we would see or hear from them again, that is true. If you have heard they might be coming back for a visit, all I can say is we have had communications to that affect, but I have no concrete info to give you... or anybody. The truth is we just do not know right now.”

“Oh.” She sounded a little disappointed at this news. “I sort of thought...” and she paused.

He saw her discomfort and added, “As soon as we know their plans, I will make a company-wide announcement as well as we will send out a press release so the world at large is not taken to panicking about tumors. In the mean time, please do not spread any information to either employees and especially friends and family. Okay?”

Brandy and the two other women smiled and said they would “keep it under their hats.”

As he walked away, Damon thought to himself, *You know, I kind of wish for a return of the days when young women wore hats. Some of them looked rather cute in the right kind!* He shook his head to clear that thought and headed on his way.

Later in the day he called for a meeting with the executive team of Enterprises. Also there were Jake Aturian from the Construction Company and Charlie Van deGroot from the MotorCar Company.

After a nine-minute recap of what was going on, and another three with what he and Tom actually knew versus supposition or outright guesswork, he asked for suggestions about what to do.

“Well,” George Dilling from communications stated, “if you are asking what to do in general that is a bit different from, ‘What the heck do we do if they are coming back with bad intentions.’ You know?”

Several of the others nodded their agreement to this.

Damon also nodded. “Okay. For now, let us say they are coming back just for a visit. If it is like before, where they could not get to the surface themselves, do we go back through the whole process of getting them from in orbit and showing them some more sights?”

Harlan stated he could not believe that was all they would come back to do.

“I’m thinking they have specific things they want to, or are being ordered to do. I, for one, want to know what those things are before they get here. Otherwise, I’m not entirely certain I want them back on this planet.”

All the others agreed with this.

“Okay,” Damon began with a little weariness in his tone. “Tom and I have talked this over at least ten times and we cannot come up with any good reason for them to come back here or for us to encourage them to even land. That puts us in a precarious spot, though. If they are coming back as friends, we will insult them—if they are even moderately subject to that emotion. If they are coming back with specific exploratory goals, that is another thing. But, if they are being forced back by this race of so-called Masters for anything other than peaceful reasons, do we owe it to the people of this nation and the world to forewarn them they aren’t welcome?”

The question caused more than fifteen minutes of side discussions and small arguments over what to do. In the end, Damon rapped on the table to get their attention.

“So, we seem to disagree on any course of action, only that we want to find out what they want before it is presented to us in our own living rooms.”

That was agreed upon and the meeting broke up a few moments later leaving the senior Swift to contemplate what to do now.

When Tom breezed back in from a test flight of the improved version of his HyperSonic Spaceplane—with a few changes to both the cockpit and the programming designed to wring the best fuel economy from the limited supplies the jet could carry—he spotted the worry lines creasing his father’s forehead.

“I’ll ask, but it looks like you have a lot on your mind. Care to share with me?”

Damon suggested they go over to the conference area.

Once they were seated he told Tom about the recent meeting.

“I’d have included you, but you and Bud and the test technicians had left on your loop of South America flight before it hit me I needed to have the meeting. So, given what I’ve mentioned, do you have any ideas?”

The younger inventor shook his head, paused and then nodded it tentatively.

“I think I do. First, I agree the Space Friends owe us an explanation of what they are coming back for. If it is just to land and stay on Nestria, then why? And, if they plan to then come down here, also why? It’s not that I don’t want them here, it is just they have been so... so... reticent to communicate, and we don’t actually know who is coming. I’ve superimposed the photos of Row from the visit with one or two frames I got from the translator video. It really looks like him.”

“And, yet, we can’t be positive he is part of this expedition back to the Earth, can we?”

After a moment of thought, Tom shook his head. “Not until they arrive and we can get a good image to have the computers do facial recognition on.” He shook his head a little. “Do they all look alike? Not really, but the differences are not easy to catch. I agree we need to craft a message out to them and hope they can receive while in their transit here. If they cannot, then we are going to have to plan for a number of scenarios including both positive and negative ones!”

The two men agreed the President of the United States needed to hear what was coming but that would be best approached by first calling Senator Peter Quintana, Senior Senator from New Mexico and a staunch ally and friend.

While the call was being placed by Trent, the two men agreed to not sugar coat things in any way, but also to not try to raise any level of alarm.

“Well, hey, Damon and Tom. What’s new up in the land of the Swifts?”

“Not a lot, personally, but we do have something rather potentially serious to talk over.” Now he had the man’s total attention, Damon gave him a fourteen-minute rundown on everything they did and did not know, quite a bit of which the Senator did not yet know about.

Peter Quintana did not interrupt them knowing the Swifts rather well and that they would eventually get to just about any

information he might ask about. When Damon ran out of things to tell him, Tom added a few more salient facts.

Finally, they both stopped but not before asking Peter what he thought. “And, sorry for the sudden declarations of all that. As dad said, we are still awfully short on real facts.”

Following a pause where both Tom and Damon felt they might have slightly angered their friend by not bringing him into the broader discussion at an earlier point, Peter spoke.

“Okay. I’m feeling a little shock over this—but that is no different from when you first told me about a likely visit—and guess all I can do is ask what the next steps might be. I’ll tell you we did hear about something hard landing, or crashing, up there, but the reports were so laced with rumors and outright contradictory info we, well, believed it must have been something of yours.”

Tom spoke up. “We were hoping you might help us get in to speak with the President about this.”

“Ahh. Yes. And, also yes to the request. Can you send me a one-pager with any absolute facts plus any best guesses? Also, a short list of totally unknowns. He will probably want you down to the office post haste, so once I tell you I am going in, prepare for a fast flight down.”

“Do you believe we ought to demand more information from them?” came from Damon.

Peter paused again while he considered this.

“An interesting question and one I am certain the Oval Office will insist of hearing more about. So, I say go for it in whatever passes for a diplomatic manner with those beings.”

Damon inquired, “Want anything passed by you first?”

“Naw. If you will recall I never met them nor spoke to them. You two did. Good luck.”

Over the next hour the two inventors put together a message they eventually felt expressed their concern as well as should leave it clear they wanted an answer as quickly as the Space Friends could manage it. It spoke of the frustration of a lack of communications over the previous years, of their wonder about the reason for this mission, and about how the Government of this nation, and indeed the world, would want answers before they would allow a visit.

When Tom pressed the **SEND** button, they both sighed.

“This could have the unintended affect of making them not wish to come for a visit, you know?” Tom stated more than asked.

“Certainly, but I do not want our former friendship to be taken

advantage of. If their intent is peaceful they should be forthcoming with information.”

* * * * *

But, they weren't.

In fact, no return message was received for the following twenty-four hours. And, by that time Peter Quintana had called asking Tom and Damon to drop everything and to come to Washington for a meeting at 1:00 that afternoon.

They met Peter at the front of the White House and proceeded under armed guard to the outer office of the President. The woman there greeted as if they were old friends. In fact both Tom and Damon had met her many times.

A small beep came from a box on her desk and she smiled up at the three men. “The President will see you now. Oh, and because of the importance he places on this meeting he has asked me to clear at least one hour for you. If you are able, please adhere to that.”

The door to the Oval Office opened and they stepped through to be met by the President with warm handshakes.

“Please, you three take the sofa,” he instructed as he took the facing leather chair. “Now, Peter tells me we have a situation that may very well not be any sort of situation. I've read the pages you provided and have to tell you all I am stuck somewhere between over caution and uncertainty. Help align me if you will.”

Damon began by handing the man a printout of the translated message from the device plus all recent communications, both outbound and received, which the powerful politician took a minute to read. When the pages dropped into his lap, the President looked up.

He bit his lower lip.

“Well...” he said before rubbing his forehead with his right hand, “I see. And, I do not see. I'd venture a guess none of you also totally see. Uhhh, do you think your space beings are purposely hiding facts from you... from us? Have you ever known them to be untruthful in the past?”

The others admitted they had no idea if the concept of “untruths” or of hiding facts was understood by the aliens.

“Back to square one, then. So, tell me what your and our options might be, please. I'll assume that outright violence against them is not called for until we have proof they are malevolent, and even then would we succeed?”

Tom and Damon told the man everything they knew about the

aliens including how they had required help at least twice in solving problems they could not handle by themselves. One was the visitation to Earth and the other was when their living foods for the outpost around Mars had begun to die. Both times it had been Earth technology to save the day.

“I won’t say they owe us anything,” Tom stated, “but they might never have survived to return to their home planet or system without us.”

The President’s gaze turned to the Senator. “Peter? You’ve been uncharacteristically quiet. Your thoughts on this? And, and this goes for you two Swifts, for right now in this office, forget the formalities. I’m John for the time being. Okay?”

“Yes, sir,” the three visitors chorused before starting to laugh at their response.

“John,” Peter started. “Without a solid idea of their intentions, we cannot even begin to put some measures, as of yet undecided, in place. I would also caution people such as our rather hawkish group of Senators and Congresspersons to not rush us into something that could be counterproductive. In fact, I would advise against any outright notification, private or publicly, of anyone outside this office for at least a few days. Give Damon and Tom the chance to try to get more information. I may be talking out of turn here,” and he looked at the Swifts as if begging for forgiveness beforehand, “but they are the only ones with the knowledge and the ability to build anything remotely capable of fending off an attack—if, that is, there is going to be one. A big if! But, as with the planet Wanderer thing last year, they cannot be held accountable before or even after the fact by a bunch of unknowing morons who happened to get elected by a slightly less than brilliant voting public.”

He sat back and took a deep breath before continuing. “Damon and Tom have the brains our average politicians lack. Even your Vice President, while an eager to please the scientific community sort, is woefully inadequate for the task coming up. And, I have to ask, what if these others have their way and build weapons of destruction that either anger our visitors, or get used in a panic and cause unmentionable damage to both the space beings as well as our planet?”

With a sigh, the President spoke. “I suppose we do have far too many of the sort that fit into the old Herman Wouk saying:

*“When in trouble or in doubt,
Run in circles, scream and shout.”*

He looked at his visitors trying to find some hint of recognition. “*The Caine Mutiny?* Classic novel and Humphrey Bogart movie?”

The Swifts and Peter Quintana nodded. It had finally registered.

“Anyway, I tend to agree that this is best handled in the short term by keeping it from leaving this office. Ummm, is that still possible?” He was looking at Tom.

“Well, Mr. Pr— ummm, John. The general employee population of our company or companies have been told a missile, possibly from the Space Friends, landed inside the grounds of Enterprises weeks ago. They have been told nothing else.”

“Fine. Let’s keep it that way. So, unless you have anything to suggest for me, I’ll let you get back to New York and to start doing whatever you need to start doing.”

They thanked him for his time and understanding.

“Well, let’s not go so far as to say I understand this, okay?” He gave them a sad chuckle.

After parting from Peter outside the front of the White House, Tom and Damon took their limo back to the downtown airport and flew home. On the way, Damon asked his son what he might think of trying to get the Space Friends’ manufacturing box to come up with a weapon.

“Or, do you believe it may report back to them somehow and they’d be automatically on the defensive?”

Tom had to digest the question and the implications. Was his father, a staunch hater of weapons, asking him to think about the creation of something that might either repel or destroy the space beings?

Finally he answered. “I am going to think long and hard about that, Dad.”

Damon nodded, reached over and squeezed Tom’s leg before saying, “Please think especially hard about it, son. As in all our lives could be at stake if *we* get this wrong.”

Waiting for them once they got back to their office was a note from Jackson Rimmer. It said:

Damon and Tom,

Regarding the matter of Gloria Monday (Abernathy);

According to the Attorney General of the State of

Colorado, Ms. Monday (her actual last name is

Swanson—yeah, as in the movie star she was named

for) has been gone from both the State and the Earth

long enough to be considered to be legally deceased. I know... took me by surprise, too.

So, they are not actively looking for her, or to punish her, for something that they consider to have been caused, in major part, by his heart condition and that was caused by his excessive drinking and smoking cigars for more than twenty-seven years.

That means she can be treated up at the station and can then return to Mars, unless she petitions to be allowed to come back. Then, they might want to at least interview her.

“Interesting, don’t you think?” Damon asked.

Tom gave his father a grim smile. “Makes me wonder what we can or should tell Haz, if anything, other than she can come back once she is cleared from treatments.”

“Let’s stick with that until he asks otherwise.”

They talked a little about a project Damon was working on before the conversation turned to the forthcoming visit.

“I don’t mind telling you I am more than a bit nervous about what motive or motives they have for coming back. Once they had gone I figured them for being gone forever,” Damon said giving Tom a slightly worried look.

With a quick nod, Tom agreed. “I do believe they did not willingly leave their base out near Mars, and maybe this is them coming back to take care of unfinished business.” He looked hopeful.

“Whatever that might be.”

“Yeah.” The younger inventor did not sound encouraged at all the questions that statement brought up. He also was growing more and more uncomfortable by the nagging thought in the back of his mind that this visit might be the precursor for a lot more; a lot more that was not going to be for the better of mankind!

Everyone had heard something and had questions Tom could not answer. Even Bart had questions for his father. When Tom arrived home the boy waited for his mother to get her kisses—something the child realized was of utmost importance to his parents—before launching himself into Tom’s legs. He looked upward to make certain he had Tom’s attention before asking in a hushed voice, “Are

the funny people from Mars coming?”

Tom looked at Bashalli and slightly shook his head. She lowered her eyes with the understanding she should not have mentioned it to the children. She mouthed. “Sorry.”

“Well, Bart. The basic answer is that we just do not know. For starters we do not know they are definitely coming. And, that makes me want to have you promise that you will not say anything about them, or tell anything you might know, to any of the other kids at school.”

His very stern look told the boy his father was absolutely serious about this.

“I promise, Daddy. I won't tell anybody. Ummm...”

“Yes? What else do you want to know, Bart?”

The boy looked curious before asking, “Do they ever smile? The pictures you showed me? None of them are smiling. Are they angry?”

Tom had to inwardly chuckle as he sought to find the best answer. Finally, he said, “They are so different from you and Mary and Anne and your mother and me that I don't think they ever learned to smile before they came here for a visit. They seemed to have learned about smiling from people like your grandpa Swift and me. So, they don't do it often, but they can smile. Did that answer your question?”

“Yes. About the smiling.”

“Good boy. Now, as to your main question, even if you have not yet asked it, you want to know why they are coming. Am I right?”

Bart's head bobbed up and down. “Yes!”

By this time Tom was sitting and he pulled his son into his lap.

“The truth is, I don't know. They haven't told us. But, I would not let that worry you, Bart. We used to call them our Space Friends because they were just that.”

I only hope they continue the tradition, he said to himself, because I have no idea what we might do if their intentions are not friendly!

CHAPTER 5 /

FIRST ANSWERS

THE PHONE ringing at 3:27 in the morning woke Tom with a start. Generally, Enterprises called him via his TeleVoc pin, which he attached to the collar of his pajama top. This one was the regular phone sitting on the nightstand next on his side of the bed.

They generally received few calls because of a screening system that only allowed certain, well-known number, through.

Groggily, he answered. "Yes?"

"Tom, it's Harlan. I just got called into work by the Communications people. They received a message from space, and it would seem to be those Space Friends. But, it isn't anything like they've seen before. It is more like that video message box that came in the rocket last month. Uhh, I hate to ask, but you have your translator thing locked up and we can't access it. Could you either tell me this can wait, or come in and get it for us?"

By now the inventor was wide awake. He took the wireless handset with him as he slipped out the bedroom door.

"Okay. I'll get some clothes on and be there in ten or twelve minutes." He paused and added, "I sure hope this is good news!"

"Don't we all?" the Security man answered.

"Can we get the phone disconnected, Tom," Bashalli asked from under the covers when he stepped from their closet a few moments later. "It ruins your sleep, and mine too, too many nights."

As he pulled on a striped shirt he came over and gently pulled the covers from over her face, giving her a kiss.

"Sorry, Bash. It's the Space Friends wanting to talk... or something. I'll try to get back in time to make you and Amanda breakfast. I owe you both. Love you!"

Already falling back asleep, she muttered, "Love yOOohh..." Her breathing slowed and she was asleep before he closed the bedroom door.

Tom raced his car down the special fire road the county had put in years earlier to replace the dark and dangerous dirt lane where he had been waylaid far too many times. Since it had been paved as a lane-and-a-half-wide road, he had only run into trouble twice and both times he was only mildly inconvenienced.

The guard at the main gate had been called and he waved Tom

through after the inventor started to roll down his window. His next stop was in front of the Administration building where he jumped out, raced upstairs into the large office, and over to the hidden cabinets on the right wall. After pressing a disguised sensor pad, and having it recognize his handprint, he keyed in his 15-digit security code and the drawer in front of him slid silently open.

He scooped his translator device up and used his right hip to shove the drawer closed. It slid back in, clicked in place and would remain locked until he repeated the open sequence.

With the translator held tightly in his right hand he raced from the office and back down the hall to the stairs at the far end. He had to pause at the bottom of the stairs as he felt a little dizzy. Within a minute he forged forward and out the doors. Then it was a one-minute jog to Communications where his TeleVoc unlocked the doors and allowed him to slip inside.

Harlan and two of the communications technicians were standing there, waiting for him.

“Great!” Harlan exclaimed seeing that Tom did, indeed, have his device. “Come on.”

They all headed down the central hallway to the second of the equipment rooms. On entering, Tom stopped short. He could see exactly why they had needed the translator device.

On one of the monitors, and for the first time ever, one of the aliens stood flexing his hands in intricate motions.

“That’s their hand-speak,” he stated. “He is saying, ‘Greetings to Later Swift.’ Is it live or a repeating loop, or what?”

“Your guess, skipper. It all looks the same to us. But, we have been recording it. When you’re ready I’ll start the playback,” said Keith Woeltje, the Korean radio tech.

The recording *was* a repeating loop of about a half-minute in length. Tom tapped the keyboard sending the acknowledgement to the computer to cease recording. Two minutes later the video changed. This time it was more than a minute in length. Once it was obvious it was just repeating, Tom turned to the others and read off what the message said.

“Tom Swift. Must be fast message. Masters do not wish communication between our people and you now. Our voyage and visit delayed. It is best this way as we do not believe voyage is for good. Can not provide new time but believe delay of additional one-sixth solar orbit about correct. We ask you do not respond. Repeated, do not respond in any way to our message. Problems may happen if you do.” It began repeating.

He looked up and told them that was the entire message.

While he had been reading it, the monitor in the rack had gone black indicating the message had stopped being sent.

“I know we woke you up, Tom, and it is late... or early... but do you have any idea what that means?”

“Well, Harlan, and I’ll need to talk to dad about this, but my first thought is that they are trying to say this trip of theirs is not their idea. It might be their Masters are forcing them to come back here. What *that* might mean is anyone’s guess right now. All I can believe, given they absolutely do not want us to send them anything, is they have been working to delay the trip. Maybe with the hope it would be cancelled or something.”

Tom had to sit down. He suddenly felt woozy and asked for a cup of water. When Keith brought it to him the inventor drank it, then his eyes rolled up and he passed out.

It was only because Harlan and Keith grabbed him he did not fall off his chair. They set him on the floor while the other tech called for a doctor.

The duty nurse and a medical attendant hustled over from the Dispensary one building away and were kneeling next to Tom, now covered in a Mylar emergency blanket, in ninety seconds.

“I can feel he’s got a fever,” she told them. “Pull that gurney in here, Johnny, and let’s get him to one of our comfortable rooms.” As Keith and the attendant lifted the unconscious man and the other radioman slid the gurney into place, the nurse turned to Harlan.

“Not certain what’s going on, but he has a fever and is clammy. I’ll call Doc as soon as we get him in bed and get a full set of vitals. Uhhh, I’m no doctor but I believe he will be fine. Maybe don’t call his family just yet other than possibly Mr. Swift. But, I’d actually hold off on that for about a half hour until Doc can get in and tell me I’m right or deluded about this.”

With that said, she and the attendant left pushing and pulling the gurney with them.

Doc, who lived in the next neighborhood toward Shopton from Tom and Bashalli, arrived in record time and still in his pajamas. As he pulled on a pair of scrubs over those he was looking at the basic vital signs the nurse had recorded from Tom.

“Draw blood if you haven’t yet...” he said and looking at her could see she had done that, “fine, so get that in the machine and give me white cell counts, and any indication of poisons. I’m going to get the Sonic Scanner in here and check him out internally.”

The scanner was more commonly called the SimpsonScope, or DocScope, and was one of Tom's inventions that used a combination of ultrasonics, invisible and very penetrating light waves, and a few other things to allow a physician to look inside a body and to move and rotate various locations around to get about the best look inside without actually cutting a patient open. And, in 3D and full color.

When the base plate had been slid under Tom's abdomen and the trio of emitters positioned above his body, a 3D image appeared in the air right over Tom's stomach. Doc looked around, moved a few views around to get looks underneath organs, and then moved things up to the inventor's chest.

"Well, there it is," he stated. "The skipper's got a chest infection going on. Likely he's been ignoring it for a few days."

"Four," came the weak response from Tom. His eyes had fluttered open a few seconds before. "I had a cough four days ago, unless I've been out for more than a day, and it went away but I've been wheezing a little. Guess the running around this morning got to me. Sorry."

Doc turned the scope off and motioned to the attendant to help slide it out from under Tom.

"Okay. I seem to recall we had a little deal that if you feel bad, you come tell the man who has patched you up and kept you alive more times than either of us want to remember. Right?"

Tom let out a small cough but replied, "Yeah. I've just been so busy with preparations for the visit from... oh, shoot! I have to call dad."

Doc placed a hand on Tom's chest to prevent him from trying to rise.

"Been done. He'll be here in ten minutes. In the mean time I have a little inhaler for you to use with some antibiotics." He held out one hand and the nurse, now back in the room, placed a white plastic device connected to a corrugated hose in his hand.

"That end in the mouth, clamp your lips around to seal it, and breath as deeply as you can. I'm running straight O₂ though that for the first minute and then filtered air after that. If you behave you'll have that finished in six minutes. Now, open!"

Tom did and within a few seconds he felt as if his lungs were relaxing. When he looked questioningly at Doc, he received an answer.

"Oh, and there is some bronchodilator, Albuterol, in there to relax the lung tissues so the medication gets where it is supposed to

go. Now, relax and breathe.”

By the time Damon breezed in, he had been briefed on Tom’s condition by Doc and was considerably more relaxed than he’d been since receiving the phone call.

“Well, Son. Doc tells me you have a little infection in there and has asked me to remind you that you owe this company the courtesy of notifying him any time you do not feel tip-top. I also have been told, by Harlan, there has been a development in the Space Friends saga. Feel up to telling me about it?”

Tom nodded. The fact was he felt considerably better.

He pointed to the translator that Harlan had handed to Damon and told him what button the press.

The older Swift read through the message, a frown coming to his face.

“Your ideas on what this all means?”

Tom told him his belief the Space Friends were telling him their Masters did appear to be forcing the trip to Earth on them and that they were about to or had already done something to delay things.

“Just not *forever* would be my interpretation,” Tom finished. He did not sound particularly happy at the thought they would come to Earth with less than good intentions.

His father nodded. He also felt it would be best to not have the aliens coming back unless everyone understood it was to be a totally benign visit.

Doc, who had been standing just outside the cubicle came back in. “Umm, it isn’t my place, and as a healer of people it is sort of against what I stand for, but if these Masters are coming, do you believe they might be sickened or weakened by our Earth germs and bacteria? Sort of like in *War Of The Worlds*?”

Damon turned to look at the company physician. “What are you saying, Greg?”

Doc had known both Swifts for over fifteen years and could never think of holding back an opinion or keeping a secret.

“I think I was mostly trying to come to grips with having aliens to treat should they fall ill. I mean, if they all come with smiles and happiness follows them wherever they go, then what might I do to prepare to treat any illnesses they might contract? Take Tom’s chest infection for example. I can treat the symptoms with one medicine, treat the infection itself with another and then give him time for his body to do the rest.

“I recall the efforts of the medical and scientific community when

their plants and animals were on the verge of death.” He looked at Tom who had been more directly involved than his father. “As you will recall, it was a virus that managed to get inside their environmental protections. It was so closely related to a couple Earthly ones we were able to find a cure. And, if their plants and food animals are susceptible, then how about themselves or these Masters of theirs?”

The three men went onto a discussion of some things they might all do in preparation for eventualities, but the only conclusion they could come up with meant waiting until something happened and then trying Earthly tests to see what they might be facing.

Tom suggested the aliens had duplicated the treatment medicines and possibly knew more about how to fight off anything they might encounter on Earth.

“I do not know if they have extended a courtesy of that information to these Masters. They are, after all, not the original ones from when they came and set up shop around Mars. Plus, I am certain they do not feel anything like sympathy or even compassion for the other race they will be bringing.”

That gave the other men pause for thought.

Doc was thinking the hardest of them as he had more of a responsibility to his Hippocratic oath than the others did. But, he also considered the oath was meant to cover *man* and creatures of the Earth.

What if this all came down to an invasion scenario?

Would he be like doctors during international wars and faced with situations where they needed to consider both their ethics as well as the fact some of their patients were likely to be enemies? Enemies that may have already killed citizens of that doctor’s nation? Or, in this case, humans!

He knew the instinctive answer but wanted time to research what had actually transpired decades earlier and even to place a call to someone he held in the highest esteem when it came to all things dealing with the ethical practice of medical.

Doc excused himself telling the others he wanted Tom to get some sleep and he would check back in before lunch.

Damon left to call Anne Swift who he would suggest call Bashalli to tell her of Tom’s small infection than could keep him at the Dispensary for the full day—and likely he would come home that evening unless he was in danger of infecting his family. Something that was unlikely according to Doc.

After one of his bosses left and the other closed his eyes slipping

back to sleep a few minutes later, the doctor headed for his office and his computer.

This, he told himself, is going to be a long day and likely to be one of many to come.

His phone call at 9:00 that morning was to a woman who had been one of his Medical School Professors in his final two terms at school. She had been his Advisor the entire three years.

“Dr. Philidia Patterson, please,” he requested the young woman who answered the department’s phone. “Please tell her it is Dr. Greg Simpson and that I absolutely need to speak to her.”

“Certainly, Doctor. She is in her office so can I ask you to wait?”

He told her he would. He was rewarded when in less time than it took him to try to review how he was going to word things, she came on with a hearty laugh.

“Greg Simpson? My most successful student ever and the man who set the bar for what at least five years of doctor wanna-bes wanted after graduation at *your* very unachievable level? How in the world are you?”

“Personally, great. I’ve never regretted bypassing the Resident program and taking this position with the Swifts. Sorry if that had any negative impact on people coming after me. But, I have a huge, but only theoretical for now, question. I was hoping you might help me decide.”

He told her of the possibility of an incursion from one nation into another that the Swifts could be drawn into, and that might include him in his medical capacity. They spoke of the likelihood of enemy combatants—or perhaps terrorists or civilians—being involved and injured.

“So, do I treat them as if they are just another hum... I mean person, or does my first and only duty rest on helping my people?”

There was silence for a half minute before he even detected humming at her end. When she spoke, she sounded more serious than she had when discussing treatment of plague victims back in school.

“Greg. I have to say right now this scares the willies out of me. Please do not tell me otherwise because it will cause me nightmares, but I choose to believe you are writing some novel that will include such an invasion and this is only for research. My... my...” she faltered and he waited.

“My opinion is likely to get me into trouble within the medical community and so I beg that you do not attribute anything to me.”

When she paused once again he hurried to assure her this was only for his knowledge.

“Fine. Then my opinion, or at least what I believe I would do—and mind you I am not facing this on any operating table so this is personal opinion and guesswork—but I believe your only duty is to your own people! If and only if you have nobody from your side or team or country to treat, then you can allow yourself to consider treating your enemy. The Oath only goes so far in the real world. I will remind you of that oft quoted portion Hippocrates supposedly wrote regarding ‘First, do no harm.’ I ask you how that flies in the face of medical research? How many animals or people suffered or died in the name of research by medical professionals?”

Greg felt a headache coming on but he had to agree that the woman was right.

“Good. So we both know there is a lot of hoey behind how the Oath is carried out. If we truly did not wish to harm anybody, why put almost every doctor, other than you my friend, through the torture of Residency where you treat far too many over far too long a period each shift and even when you are physically and mentally so exhausted you are naturally prone to making mistakes?”

The call went on another five minutes at the end of which Doc admitted he now felt only minimally better at any decisions he or any other physician might need to make, but he thanked her profusely for her time and wisdom.

“I only wish we all had the answers, Greg. If we did, then we of the healing professions would actually be the sort of godlike individuals people expect us to be. Whatever the outcome of this research, I have enjoyed talking with you and wish you all the best.”

Later that morning he headed for the big office to both give Damon an update on Tom’s condition—rapidly improving—and to tell him of his phone call... and his answer to one of his boss’ questions.

“In all, I believe we might decide or conclude these Masters wish us absolutely no good will and therefore we owe them *absolutely nothing in return*. If they become sick while here on Earth—and this goes for anything such as we humans doing something to make them sick—unless they prove from the outset to have only the best of intentions, they can be ignored by the medical community. And, if I sound rather harsh about this it is because I got about four hours of sleep last night and am feeling a little sorry for myself.”

He informed Damon that the person he had spoken to was the leading Medical Ethics professor at his school.

“I know she hated answering the basic question, but she is one of

the true realists, Damon. I tend to disagree with her on the surface, but can see the reasoning. So, I will be ready and willing to provide treatment to these Masters or even the little Space Friend aliens if asked, but I would not blindly rush forward to provide anything unless ordered.”

* * * * *

Damon had a conversation with Peter Quintana that late afternoon. When the subject of a possible invasion came up, the inventor had to tell his friend it was almost an impossibility given they had only been advised of a single ship coming.

“I cannot think of a scenario where they come in great numbers, Pete. But, I also can’t think of a scenario where one of these so-called Masters is coming just to shake our hands and smile for the cameras.”

He mentioned the medical ethics of any injuries or illnesses in any of the aliens.

“Of course, Tom and I both agree that our former Friends ought to be given some benefit of the doubt and returned to friendly status if warranted. We would help them with any infections or injuries. It is just this Master or Masters thing. I hate weapons... but you know that.”

“Don’t I!” came the response.

“You do. So, while I cannot consider coming up with a device to repel these Masters, if we become aware of their intention to harm us I will not put up a fight against having the armed forces come in. I will only insist that nothing be done to attack Swift Enterprises or our beautiful town or to use biological agents that could kill many people. But, I do want this registered at least with you. I will not order my own doctor or any other professional healer in this area to treat the Masters should they become violent and are injured.”

Peter Quintana had rarely heard Damon Swift this adamant about anything and certainly not regarding the harm or attack of anyone... anything.

He sat back after they hung up contemplating what he needed to tell the President about.

It was not going to be an easy conversation.

CHAPTER 6 /

A LITTLE SIDE RESCUE WHILE WE WAIT

VERY LITTLE was going on during the next week. And, with at least six weeks to go before anyone might anticipate the start of the trip that would signal the return of the aliens, Tom was at a loss for what to do.

He didn't, for example, want to take on anything that could not be set aside when all his attention was needed once the arrival happened.

The inventor sat in his office looking alternately from his screen to his father's desk. The older Swift was in Washington talking with Peter Quintana and they were about to head over to give their weekly briefing to the President.

He was about to get up to take a walk when his phone buzzed.

"Tom? It is agent Bernt Algren on line three. He said to tell you this involves someone you knew once."

Tom thanked the secretary and picked up the receiver.

"Hello, there, Bernt. How are things in DC?"

"And, hello back at you, Tom. Things are hopping and I am hoping I caught you at a good time. I, or someone I believe you know, needs your help."

Tom was interested and told the agent so.

"Well, not so very many years and months ago you and one of your other pilots, I believe it was a man named Cox? Anyway, the two of you took a test flight over to Europe and ran into some foul play. It involved a sort of crash that was not a crash?"

The inventor sat up straight. He well recalled most of that adventure including the revelation a saboteur had stowed away on the business jet, had cut some wiring—too many wires as it turned out—which led to Zimby Cox bailing out and Tom then on the receiving end of a knockout drug shot to the neck. The other man had wrestled with the jet's controls but too much fuel had been used or accidentally dumped and it ran out near the border between Moldova and Ukraine, eventually having a hard landing in the second country.

As that man hid from authorities, Tom had been rescued, unconscious and with a hip injury, by some revolutionaries who stashed him in an abandoned hotel until they could arrange to

transport him to safety.

“Right,” he responded to the agent. “So, what does this need my skill set or knowledge for?”

“Well, I shall say a single word, ‘Yara,’ and then tell you that individual has managed to get word out that she and at least two others you might remember are in desperate need of getting the heck out of Dodge, as the saying goes.”

Tom felt a moment of a blush come over his face at the thought of the female, Yara Formova, who had taken him from the hotel to her old family house in the country, had seen him naked from the back as he sat in her bathtub, and then had crawled into his bed that night when the outside and inside temperatures made the unheated structure almost unbearable.

Nothing had occurred, but that never stopped him from feeling a little uncomfortable at the memory.

It was something he’d never told Bashalli about. Bud barely knew of the nighttime incident.

“You have my almost undivided attention, Bernt. What else can you tell me?”

“All we have is a message delivered through another place and group you may know. They were the ones who patched you up until your *Sky Queen* could fly over to pick you up. Umm, Miss Formova did not provide any information of her whereabouts. I believe she thinks you will know how to locate her and the others.”

When he inquired whether the inventor might have a good idea about the situation, Tom had to tell him he had been moved around by others at a time when he was in fairly considerable pain, but thought it might be possible to do some research before committing himself.

“Good. Only, do not take too long. This Yara’s message stated she believed haste was called for. Thanks, Tom. I’ll let you get to whatever it is you need to do.”

Tom immediately called up a satellite mapping application and set the first criteria for “Ukraine.” He could see the Moldovan town of Chisinau over the border to the west, and the road he most likely traveled on both in her car and on the motorcycle that eventually delivered him, safely, into the friendly nation.

The road into Ukraine passed by the turnoff to Tiskolun and another place he recalled seeing a sign for before Yara dropped him off, Okny.

By counting the miles, or kilometers, and thinking back to the

travel time, he had to make a guess her home had been somewhere between Okny and the next town that exited from the main road, Stavovo. Now, he zoomed in.

Suddenly a shiver ran down his spine. He was looking at the only house and farm visible close to the main road.

It was very likely this was Yara's home and farm and the place he knew he was about to head.

First, however, he had phone calls to make.

Bashalli asked him if the trip was absolutely necessary.

"I have to believe at least three people may be in danger of capture... or worse," he told her in all honesty. "These are the folks who helped rescue me when Zimby and I had that horrible test flight."

Now, she understood the situation, and she told him to go as quickly as was safe.

"Take Bud with you and some of your people from Security. Your *Sky Queen* is sufficiently large enough to fly a hundred people to protect you."

Tom felt bad now about not telling her he intended to take only three or four others in one of his flying saucers, but it was a superior vehicle for this mission. They could get to the farm about five times faster, land quickly and silently and be hidden from direct site of the road behind one of the only still standing structures other than the long house.

As they spoke he was still looking at the property in Ukraine. Now he had this view, he saw there were a dozen, or more, small houses farther beyond, also mostly hidden from the road and any military or police that might be driving past.

Bud was anxious to get going and said he only had to notify Sandy. Tom suggested *he* make that call as he was only her brother and not her husband.

"If she blows her top, I'll take the hit and not you. I will have to promise her the same thing I told Bash. We leave in an hour and will be back before breakfast tomorrow."

His next call was to Harlan who told him he wanted to send at least ten people, but Tom told him of the small craft and the need to pick up at least three, maybe as many as five, people, so the Security man relented saying he'd have Phil Radnor and two others meet Tom just in front of the Security building in thirty minutes.

"They will come with e-guns and a couple of the e-rifles your father authorized get built."

Tom had not known about the larger, likely to be more powerful, rifle versions of the handgun he had built as a modern version of his great-grandfather's electric rifle.

Finally, he called Sandy. She listened for a moment as he tried to explain how very important this trip was. Finally, she interrupted him.

"Tomonomo. I love Bud and you love Bud and neither of us wants to see him hurt. Or, you!" she hastened to add. "But, Bashi called me a couple minutes ago and told me that if I put up any stink about this she will spill the beans on a couple girl's secrets she has, so take him but bring him back safe and in one piece!"

On the chance Damon was not totally occupied with his Presidential briefing, Tom TeleVoc'd him.

"Hello, Son. Give me thirty seconds while I let Peter finish a little bit. Hold, please."

When he came back on he asked for Tom to be brief.

"Okay. Ukraine, not real crash, and the people who saved me. Bernt Algren says they are asking for pick up and delivery somewhere safe. I have to go."

There was a ten second pause, then, "Go. I'll let your wife know. Sandy as well as I'm guessing you're taking Bud. Any of Harlan's people?"

"Sandy knows as does Bash. Harlan is sending three, with their new e-rifles. Anything I should know about those?"

In his mind he heard his father chuckle. "No. Just an update to the original electric rifle. Modified to not be deadly." *And, hopefully*, he told himself, *they might come in handy with our uninvited aliens.*

Tom had to take a moment to think of how difficult it must have been for his father to make the decision to have them built.

Bud had gone to the hangar where the four flying saucers were stored and brought one over to the Barn. Tom, Phil, Gary Bradley and another Security regular, Lindsey Provost, met him and quickly climbed in.

The tower advised them Chow Winkler was on his way out to supply them with food, so they waited for three minutes before the chef's food truck—a gift from Tom a few years earlier—came around the corner to the east and skidded to a stop.

The former ranch cook and now chef at Enterprises jumped out, reached into the passenger side and hauled a large box out and over to the ship.

Bud met him at the landing leg and took the box.

“Wish I could go with ya but I got a big fancy meal ta get to fer some group Mr. Swift is bringin’ up from Washington. Have a good’n!”

A minute later the ship lifted, the legs withdrew into the lower body, and they shot away.

During the one-hour trip Tom filled the others in on his adventure in Ukraine. He did not tell them about his *encounter* with Yara. But, he did tell them these were brave and important people and that they needed to be rescued as quickly and without any real fuss, or noise, as possible.

Both because of the time of year as well as the fact Ukraine time was five hours ahead of Shopton time, they arrived more than an hour after the sun had set. However, it was to a full and very bright Moon so they could see all around them.

Of course that meant others could easily see the saucer or anybody coming from it!

Nobody was certain of the reception they might receive and so when the saucer had settled down behind and to the western side of the building perpendicular to the main house, Tom suggested he go outside and see if he could let Yara and her people know they were there.

Both Phil and Gary crossed their arms over their chests and stood looking at the inventor, shaking their heads.

“Nope!” stated Gary.

“Not gonna happen, skipper,” Phil added. “We will go out and scout the situation. If it looks safe then, and that is a maybe sort of then, you can come out as well.”

“Look!” Bud nearly shouted pointing to one of the screens he had dropped down from the ceiling. All around them were views of the 360-degree area. Crouched near the north corner of the house were four people, all with very visible guns.

“That’s Yara,” Tom told them as he stepped toward the airlock. “Let me go down and let her know it is me.”

But, he didn’t have to. The four, Yara and three men Tom recognized, stepped forward and quickly ran to the saucer. Tom dropped down and told them who he was.

“Oh, I am thanking you for coming to rescue us, Tom Swift!” she exclaimed nearly throwing herself into his arms and kissing his chin and cheeks several times in her joy as both seeing him and the

forthcoming rescue.

A polite cough came from above and Bud and Gary's heads popped down. Both were grinning.

"Don't want to interrupt the, uhh, festivities, skipper," Bud said trying to look serious, "but there appears to be a trio of trucks just behind us and close to the first of those small houses. And... what?" he asked above him. "Oh." His head came back down. "They are moving this way. Get a move on, kiddies."

Tom politely shoved Yara to the steps and helped her get up. She was followed by two of the men who'd been in the truck that had been part of the charade of killing him, plus the shorter man who'd driven the motorcycle.

That man reached out and clasped Tom's right hand before he also scampered up.

Tom had just about reached safety when the first rifle shots sounded.

"Damn!" he exclaimed as he hit the button to close the hatch. "Bash is gonna kill me."

He pointed to his right foot where his shoe heel had been blown away. The heel had obviously been pierced by one of the bullets and it was bleeding enough for them all to see.

"Getting out of here," Bud stated as the ship lifted from the ground.

Barely noticeable to them was the sound of at least three hundred bullets hitting the hull, not of which had a chance of causing any damage.

Yara knelt by Tom and gently untied his shoe, her face an undisguised mask of concern. Gary quickly opened one of the storage compartments and pulled out their large first aid kit. He brought it to her.

"Is the heel broken?" he asked as she pulled out several of the bandages, stopping when she got to the small band that was one of Tom's compression casts. One that could be squeezed into position and then set to maintain that squeeze using a small electric charge.

"What is?" she asked looking at Tom.

He explained it to her and she shook her head in wonder.

"Is this the magic of the United States of America, which is where I hope we are going now?"

"That's the magic of Tom Swift," Bud said as he came over. The ship was rising and could manage to fly without anyone physically

at the controls.

Bud helped Yara get the band up over Tom's foot and set it just above the Achilles tendon area. He showed her how to squeeze it to halt the bleeding and then the small button that turned it on.

She cleaned up the heel and everyone, including the inventor, was relieved to see it was a grazing cut and the bullet had not hit any bone.

When she had the nick covered with an antibiotic salve and had wrapped the whole heel area in sterile gauze, she slid forward until her head rested on Tom's chest.

"I am so happy pleased you came to get us. I could maybe believed you had forgotten me... and them," she said a little sadly sweeping her hand around to the other men who sat on the floor looking both relieved and worried.

Phil saved Tom from having to answer that. "Naw. The skipper never forgets the people who have been good to him. Umm, miss? You do know he is married, right?"

She lifted her head, looked at Tom to see if he was giving any indication about how much she might tell anybody, before turning back to Phil.

"I do know the marriage of Tom and... ummm, is it Basheeba?"

Tom corrected her on the name and then thanked her for taking care of the wound.

"Would any of you like food or something to drink? I am not sure what our cook brought us before we left, but he is very good."

They all gratefully took the self-heating meals Bud provided based on what they recognized. He tried to explain what a tuna noodle casserole was, but gave up. He took one he would eat, pulled the small tab and a minute later opened it.

Yara made a displeased face at the aroma.

Tom's motorcycle driver smiled at the smell. "Is best more to nose than shuba!"

Gary quickly looked that up to find it was a herring and vegetable salad with potatoes, beets and mayonnaise.

Yara tapped Tom on the shoulder to get his attention.

"How did you know to come for rescue of us? We send message to our people in Moldova four days ago. I almost never believed anyone would come." Suddenly, the emotions of her struggles and of the rescue cascaded out and she began sobbing.

Tom, although he knew he'd get a ribbing for it, held into her

while she cried it all out.

“How many days may it takes to get to United States of America?” one of the other men asked quietly.

Gary answered for them all. “Just about one hour from where we are. *Adin chas,*” he added trying to recall his high school Russian classes.

“*Odin chas?*” the motorcycle man asked eyes wide in wonder.

“*Da.* Just one hour.”

“*My vse govorim po Angliyski,*” she told her companions. “I have just told them we speak only in English now. Is okay?”

In spite of his growing discomfort, Tom chuckled. “Is very okay!”

They ate in mostly silence with Yara setting her food down to check Tom’s foot. Sensing his toes were slightly cold from the lack of circulation she asked if it was permitted to open the cast for a minute. “I will hold onto white medical cloth to keep bleed from happening,” she told him.

Before she could do that, Bud suggested a small shot of painkiller.

“I’m sure Doc would approve, skipper.”

Giving his friend a nod, Tom waited a minute for the quick-acting shot to numb most of the heel area before he told Yara she could touch the power button and cause the cast to relax.

Once she had been satisfied his toes had warmed up, she re-squeezed the cast and pressed the power back on.

“Is good now for more time until your doctor can make good. Okay?”

Tom nodded. The fact was with the immediate pain gone, and he had seen that it was not heavily bleeding any more, he was certain that Doc Simpson would give him some sort of antibiotic shot, re-bandage the thing and send him home.

That made Tom ponder on what to do with their guests. He decided to ask Yara what she believed they all wanted.

“Sleep in clean room with real bed. Perhaps more food like you bring in this ship of the sky.” She wrinkled her nose, pointed at Bud and shook her head. “Then,” and she sighed, “will need to see political people asking a request to be able to remain here until everything in Ukraine is normalize. What is it you call this?”

“Asylum,” he told her.

“Yes. Then we ask asylum be given for now. Do not know what

we do after that. We are so normal to fight against military police persons and police persons.” She sighed again.

“We will help you all,” Tom offered and this made her smile brightly. She turned her back slightly toward the inventor and leaned back into his shoulder.

“I maybe sleep for a minute,” she told him before closing her eyes.

As Tom believed, once Doc heard about the gunshot wound he rushed into Enterprises and ordered Tom to lie down while a complete examination could be made.

It turned out to be as Tom thought; the bullet had grazed the heel in the soft tissues and the normal blood vessels had leaked about four ounces of blood before the tourniquet had stopped that.

Tom got his anticipated shot and a clean bandage and was told to go home.

“I will after I call Bash and also find out what is going to happen to the people we rescued,” he explained.

“Well, I can help you there. They are all sitting in my office with Phil guarding them. In a moment I will take them one-by-one into the other exam cubicle and give them a good going over. I believe I will find they are slightly malnourished, likely to be dehydrated a little, and may have become hosts to small livestock. The first and second can be taken care of while they get a night’s sleep and the third one will take a good, soapy shower with some rather nasty-smelling soap. By tomorrow they can be leaving to wherever they eventually will end up.”

“It might help things if I reassure them they will be well taken care of.”

“Yes, Tom. I believe you are right.”

Yara was asleep and her companions were looking as if they might be in slumber shortly.

Tom gently squeeze her shoulder and when her eyes opened, and she got over her shock at seeing him and remembered the rescue, he told them they would be well taken care of in the small hospital.

“You will be here tonight and can get a lot of good sleep in a clean bed plus as much food and water as you wish. I will be here tomorrow morning when you will be allowed to leave this building. But, I need to speak to our legal experts about what to do with you after that.”

She told him they all understood and would behave and also thanked him, again, for coming to save them.

By the time Tom got home at 6:40 that next morning, the pain relief shot was starting to wear off and he was slightly limping.

Bashalli was concerned, as was natural, but Bart and Mary thought their daddy limping was something quite funny.

“Barton Swift,” she cautioned him, “you and your sister go to the play room. Your daddy is in pain and it is definitely not funny. Understand?”

“Yes, momma.”

Having heard the exchange, their nanny, Amanda, came to take the two older Swift children to the room off the kitchen where their toys were.

“Sorry to hear about any injuries, Yom,” she said picking Mary up and leaving the room. “I hear you are a hero!”

When they were gone, Bashalli let a single tear run down her cheek before stepping forward to hold Tom.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Yes. It was just a small wound to my heel. Ought to be sore for a few days and then it will be back to normal.”

She sniffled once. “Did you rescue those people who once rescued you?”

“There were four of them and we got all four, uninjured although only a few minutes from being captured. So, it was great timing for them and a second too soon for me getting my darned foot inside. Sorry, Bash. I tried to live up to my promise of not getting hurt.”

She stepped back and looked into his eyes. “Just as long as it is not going to keep you from holding and kissing me tonight, and that you did save those people, then I shall let this one pass.” She smiled, leaned forward and kissed him once.

“Now, for the most important question. What do you want for breakfast?”

CHAPTER 7 /

THE MESSAGE

TOM STOPPED into the Dispensary to see how things had gone with their new guests overnight. Doc was attending to the man who drove the motorcycle when he got there and asked the inventor to meet him in his office in five minutes.

When Doc walked in and plopped into his chair, he shook his head, looking at Tom.

“Did you know that Dimitri, that is the man I was looking at, took a bullet to his abdomen within the previous week?”

Tom sat forward, shocked at the news. “No!”

Greg Simpson nodded. “One lucky ba— I mean son of a gun. Did you know there is one place on the entire human body where you can get shot or stabbed, and it very likely will not kill you? Whatever intrudes misses everything other than some fat and muscles. It’s right here...” and he stood pointing to a spot about half way between where Tom knew the man’s navel might be and his left side.

“It isn’t a large area, but a few people who know about it have used it in faked shootings or stabbings to get whatever it is they wanted at the time. A good physician can spot it and see from the trajectory that it is self-inflicted. Anyway,” he sat back down, “Dimitri was shot right in that location and the bullet is lodged close to his back.”

“What can you do?”

“Well, once Agent Narz gets here we’ll both accompany the man to Shopton General where he has a reservation with a surgeon in about two hours. It’ll come out, he’ll get sewn up and come back here for another three to four days until he is healed and we are certain there is no infection.”

Tom puffed his cheeks out and let out a breath before asking about the others.

In all, the two men and Yara were pretty much in the shape Doc had figured the previous evening. All in need of good nutrition and fluids; all of them, including Dimitri, had been given at least three liters of fluids with important electrolytes and some glucose.

“With the exception of poor Dimitri, they have had a meal around midnight and another one about half an hour ago. Uhh,” and he looked at Tom with a slight grin coming to his lips, “that woman, Yara, has been asking about you and your injury. It would

appear she believes that to be of greater importance than her own condition. Maybe you should go in and see her... and maybe I should accompany you. I get the feeling she is kind of ga-ga over you, Tom.” Now he openly smiled at seeing the red rise up the younger man’s neck and cover his face in a deep blush.

“Umm, yeah. I should go see her and the others and let them know things are going to be okay... and it might be nice to have a chaperone.”

The two men were in side-by-side beds with the partition open so they could see and talk. Yara was on the right side of them with her partition—a screen that allowed communication but no sight—in place.

He stepped into Yara’s space first and greeted her with an encouraging smile. When she appeared to be ready to get out of her bed, he placed a hand on her closest shoulder.

“No, you stay in bed, and good morning, Yara. How do you feel?”

“Is more important of how you feel, Tom Swift. Is bottom of back foot hurting?”

He grinned. “Well, since you are going to be in America for some time, perhaps it is time to start teaching you a little more English. First, you may just call me Tom, as I call you Yara.” She nodded, a serious look crossing his face he took to be her wanting to remember all of what he told her.

“Then, the bottom back part of the foot is called the *heel*.” Another serious nod. “And, you can just call this nation either the U.S. or America. It is not necessary to use the full name. Anyway, please now tell me how you are.”

She said she felt strange in her abdomen. When he looked at Doc, the physician said it was likely to be her intestines reacting to strange foods after a prolonged period of not having a lot.

Doc pulled back the partition so they could all see each other.

“Where is Dimitri?” she asked looking over the tops of the other two me.

“Dimitri was shot some time in the last few days. Did you know that?”

She looked over to her two companions. “No. Did you know this?” she demanded.

The closest one, who Tom had found out on the flight back was named Sebastian, nodded but said nothing.

Yara let out a string of what both Tom and Doc believed would be swear words aimed at the other two in their beds. When she took a

breath and looked at Tom, she apologized. “Is Dimitri dead?”

“Oh, goodness, no,” Doc stated. He would go into details later but for now told them their friend was in no danger but a more qualified doctor must take that bullet out and it would happen soon.

Yara leaned back into her pillows and sighed. She also, Tom noted, visibly relaxed.

“He will be back tonight and then this room will be opened so you can all see him,” Doc told the group, “but you must promise to allow him to sleep as much as he wishes to so he gets better quickly.”

They agreed to be quiet once the man returned.

“What does happen with us?” Yara’s question was spoken so softly Tom almost didn’t catch it.

He looked at her and reached out to hold her right hand.

“We do not have that information right now. But, believe me when I tell you all we will do whatever we can to ensure you are safe and well cared for until you can care for yourselves.”

Dimitri’s operation was a simple one and the bullet was removed, and his abdomen sewn up, within an hour. If all went well the hospital assured Doc he would return to Enterprises by seven that evening.

By the time Tom got to his desk in the shared office there was a message waiting for him from George Dilling. It said:

“Tom, it’s George in Comms. We had another very brief message coming in almost certainly from the Space Friends. All it says is, ‘Coming.’ I didn’t acknowledge it because of their earlier message. Do we need to do anything?”

Tom immediately called him to say if that was all that came through then there really was nothing to do except notify all the appropriate people.

“I’ll take care of that. Thanks, George.”

Damon, he knew, had headed straight for the MotorCar Company that morning for a review of the latest sales figures and projections. As well as things were going over there the decision to build and start up another production line was fast approaching.

Tom tapped his TeleVoc and subvocalized his father’s name.

“Yes, Son? Just taking a brief coffee break so you got me at a good time. What’s going on?”

“We just received another message from space. All it says is, ‘Coming.’ I guess that means the Space Friends are on their way and we have about two months to get ready. We did not respond.”

After a few seconds pause, Damon responded with, “Probably the right thing to do. Can you call Peter Quintana and advise him of this message and stress, again, what we know and also what we do not know for certain?”

The younger Swift said he would and disconnected their conversation. He stepped out of the office and asked Trent if he could connect to the Senator’s office to find out if he was available.

“If he isn’t, let his daughter know this is sort of a priority, but not to have him drop things. He just needs to be told about the latest happenings out in space. Thanks!”

The secretary buzzed him a minute later. “The Senator is in a committee session that recesses in about an hour. She’ll let him know then.”

“Great. I appreciate it.” Tom sat back to ponder the situation, or at least the forthcoming possibilities.

What he did not expect was a phone call from the office of the President of the United States that came thirty-two minutes later.

“Tom, it’s Peter Quintana with the President. Say hello, please.”

Stunned, Tom barely got out, “Hello, Mr. President. Ummm, is this regarding my call to the Senator’s office a half hour ago?”

There was near silence on the other end of the line before Tom detected a whispered conversation of about fifteen seconds. Finally, “Oh. And, no, Tom. This is a call to see if the President might get you and your dad to come down later today to talk about the, well, recent little emergency evacuation situation and what you both feel ought to be done. You see, the president of Ukraine, basically a Russian puppet administrator now, evidently got word a flying disc of some sort invaded Ukraine yesterday and that a number of troops were shot and killed or injured. Thoughts?”

Tom had to believe the President had been advised of the request for the evacuation by the State Department or the CIA.

“Well, we received a call from a man in the CIA, Bernt Algren, who told me they had an emergency request from a small group to get out as quickly as possible. Did you know of this, sirs?”

“Yes,” the President responded, and, “A glimmer of a hint,” said Peter.

“Okay. We headed over in one of my flying saucer ships, landed behind the farmhouse where the leader, a woman, had helped hide

me when she saved me.”

He gave them a short reminder of what had occurred back then.

“We got the four people into our ship, I took a bullet through the heel for my troubles, and we left in a hurry. Absolutely no shots were fired from our side. You both know we never carry weapons. All I can think is those troops shot at themselves in their panic.”

There was another pause with a whispered side discussion. When Peter came back on, he said, “Thought so and that’s what I’d told the President. We just needed to hear it from you. You can forget about coming down for a briefing. Oh... wait. You started with something about a call to me?”

“Yes, I did. We’ve had a new message from, we are certain, are the Space Friends. All it said is, ‘Coming.’ Just the single word. Unless they have an increased ability for travel we believe this gives us about sixty days before anyone gets to our solar system. All I wanted to do was tell you that and ask if you have any special thoughts on the matter. Like, should we be ready to tell the President about this?”

The two men on the other end of the line laughed.

“Seems like you’ve just done that,” the President told him. “So, I’m guessing that anything you might tell me now is just that, guessing. When do you believe you and your father might have some solid ideas to pass along?”

Tom had to honestly say he did not know, and that he and Damon Swift had already spent many days discussing what might be expected. They’d come up with nothing.

“I was afraid it would be something like that. I am still keeping this from the military because they barely listen if they believe a threat is coming. I can tell them to stand down and they go into DefCon Five, ready to shoot at shadows.” He sighed. “Keep me informed via Peter if anything happens or any thought come to you folks. Thank you.”

With that the connection was broken.

The following day both Swifts devoted to brainstorming in their office. At various times they had Jake Aturian, and others, in to talk about how quickly his part of the organization could respond to orders to build anything from more flying saucers to—and this was a long-shot pie-in-the-sky thought on Tom’s part—a heavy aircraft capable of being remotely controlled and used to ram into the alien ship.

Damon and Tom had to stop when Jake asked, "What makes you certain it is a single ship coming?"

As Damon sat, now pondering this possibility, Tom said, "They have only ever been here with a single ship... except that isn't right, is it? They had their own ship and the one they sent into orbit so we could tend to their sick plants and animals."

"Playing Devil's advocate again, how do you know those weren't the same single ship?"

Tom looked at Jake who looked right back at him.

Carefully choosing his words, the younger inventor replied. "We do not know, but we never detected anything around Mars until that specimen ship started coming toward Earth. And, unless they have conquered the whole putting more space inside something than the outside would say is possible, there was barely enough area under the floor where we worked for more than their propulsion systems. The top of that area curved to match the outside shape."

Jake nodded. "Good. I just wanted to get those things on the table to see if we had information or just suppositions."

Turning to Tom, Damon asked, "Given your experience with that out-worldly lifting system you built for the HoverCity, do you believe they had something like that and would that fit into the available space under the floor?"

Tom nodded. "I believe so, but they must have quite an advance on that to get the speed of travel they manage."

All three sat in silence until Jake stated he had an answer to their true question.

"We can and will turn on the proverbial dime to ramp up to build just about anything that is possible."

After he left them, the two Swifts talked about how far they might have to go against their beliefs about not creating weapons.

The agreement was *that* needed to be set aside for now and a discussion of more peaceful reasons for the visit put on the table.

Tom had to ask a reasonable question both men believed might not be the case. "What if they come in absolute peace? What if they see or sense hostility on our part?"

His father could not dispute this might be the case, but he cautioned, "If they come in absolute peace, why the secrecy about their intentions and communications? Why does it feel, deep in my gut, they are going to be coming under orders from their Masters and not necessarily for the good of all mankind? I mean, if they do come as friends, we can explain that any precautions made were

because of their lack of information.”

“I believe you are right, but I’m like you. My gut is really bothering me over this. *And*, our eventual need to do something to get them to either not come here or to leave once they do arrive.”

Every large company has one or even many employees who find out something and cannot help but gossip about it to others. So it was with one of the secretaries in the Chemicals department. When she heard a rumor about the aliens coming back for another visit, her imagination, and mouth, went into high gear.

“You won’t believe what I just heard, Sarah. It’s all over the place here at Enterprises. Those ugly little gray men from outer space are coming back, and I hear they are coming to take over! What do you think about that?”

Things went downhill from there.

Sarah, an older woman who—in an earlier time would have been considered to be “The Town Gossip” began beating her drums and calling and emailing everyone she knew to tell them to put up a lot of food and toilet paper because they soon would not be able to buy anything. Aliens were coming and they would strip every store of everything that humanity needed!

When one tells someone else, and that person tells twenty others, and they tell even five others... well, the news got out and around very fast and it came to the attention of Dan Perkins at *The Shopton Bulletin*.

Years or even months earlier he might have jumped on the story and began printing captions in the three-times-a-week paper in the largest type size possible announcing:

WE ARE ABOUT TO BE ATTACKED AND KILLED *FROM SPACE!*

But, Dan had learned a lesson at his expense and so when the third report came in from someone claiming to have heard it, “on good authority,” he set the phone down and took three deep breaths. Then, he called Enterprises.

“The office of Damon Swift. May I assist you?” Trent answered on the semi-private line.

“Hello, Trent. It’s Dan Perkins at the *Bulletin*. Is Damon or even Tom available. We have a real problem brewing out here and it concerns rumors about those space beings Tom helped all those

years ago. The ones they hinted may have sent that something to crash on your grounds...”

Munford Trent took a breath to calm his voice. “One moment. Damon is not in but Tom is at his desk. Hold.”

He quickly informed Tom of the nature of the call.

“Hello, Dan. May I ask, what the heck is going on? What rumors?”

“Tom, I know you don’t owe me anything, but I am trying to make up for my past sins. So, I’ve just fielded at least three calls that came through to my desk all about rumors of space aliens who are on their way to enslave us, coming to kill everyone, ready to steal babies to raise as warriors for their nefarious causes at some later time, and god only knows how many other ridiculous things are streaming around out there!”

The young man’s heart was now racing. How had the information gotten out?

“Uh, Dan? I need to talk to dad and Harlan Ames about this. Can we get you out here in a half hour? Or, we can come to you... but I recall most of your staff really do not like us showing up. I don’t suppose you have any of these conversations recorded...”

“Yeah. I do that as a matter of course. Let me email you the audio files. And, I’ll head out to be at the gate in twenty minutes. I can sit and wait if need be.”

The call ended and Tom tapped his TeleVoc stating both Damon’s and Harlan’s names. They both answered within seconds. After hearing both of them curse, he suggested Dan was playing fair with them on this and asked if they could all meet in the big office.

“I’m up with Legal,” Damon informed them, “and will be down in five.”

“I’ll be there is about ten minutes,” the Security chief told them before the three-way call ended.

The two men entered within a minute of each other and they all sat down to talk about what Tom knew. He admitted it wasn't much.

“It sounded like Dan was sort of in a panic over what to do, but he did say at least three rumors came in by phone and he just sent those files. Take a listen.”

He started the first one.

“Mr. Perkins? It is Eloise Porter, the Mayor’s sister. Listen. I’ve just been on the phone with a very reliable source and she assures me something is really fishy out at that Enterprises place. Their little green men are coming back and they are out to kill anybody

they spot. You need to alert the public to head for the shelters!”

They heard Dan try to get more information from her but she stated she had to get on to warn her Bridge Club ladies before she hung up.

The other two were no better and contained contradictory information to the other calls.

Damon looked stunned by the recordings while Harlan was getting more and more red from the anger he felt.

“Hang on,” he told them as he tapped his TeleVoc pin. A minute later he told them, “Phil and Gary and the rest of my people are going to see if they can find where that first rumor came from. As for the exaggerations, those are, unfortunately, normal in a situation where no information is actually available. I’m surprised someone hasn’t announced that the President has been taken over and that nuclear missiles have been unleashed!”

By the time Dan Perkins arrived they were nowhere closer to finding out how any information “leaked,” but Harlan had instituted an electronic search of all calls made to the outside within the previous three hours.

Dan sat down and looked at the others.

“I love a good juicy story as much, or maybe more, than the next guy, but this has all the markings of another *War Of The Worlds* broadcast!”

CHAPTER 8 /

“IT’S ALL A MISTAKE”

DAN PRINTED a short but concise story to dispel rumors about any alien takeover the following morning. Of course, by that time the damage had been done and word had left the Shopton area and articles were being printed in most newspapers across the country even before the light of dawn reached the East coast.

Just before 8:04 that morning, Damon received a call from Peter Quintana telling him the President had been awakened at 3:00 am with the news and was in a fury.

“It is nothing we released, Pete,” the inventor assured him. “Harlan is on the case trying to find out if someone here leaked the information. I’m just afraid that since we could not announce the truth, as we believe it to be, to the general employee population that someone may have heard something and called a friend who called a friend and... well, this!”

“He wants you and Tom down here by ten. Can to do that? And, if you have a head and a platter on which to display it, that would be all the better. Only partially joking about that, by the way.”

Tom arrived about then having been called by Trent to tell him of the morning papers from Manhattan that had the story blasted all over their front pages.

He was in time to hear Peter’s last statement as his father had turned on the speakerphone.

“Peter? It’s Tom. I just heard and am about sick over this. What can we do?”

The Senator repeated the President’s wish—or demand—they get down to the White House ASAP.

Tom promised to get a jet warming up and they would take off within twenty minutes.

Damon nodded his agreement to that before the call ended.

They notified Trent where they were going and he nodded. “I thought it might come to that so I took the liberty of rescheduling your executive review with Darryl Forester, head of Sales. He will gladly come down the hall tomorrow at eleven.” He paused a second before adding, “Good luck!”

They talked over many of the things they might be asked in their forthcoming meeting and both men agreed they likely needed to

play it by ear, but to have a few answers to the how and why of the rumors and the news articles. “And, how to possibly go about getting those retracted,” Tom stated.

It was not an easy meeting for the Swifts, but neither was it adversarial. The Speak of the House of Representatives had insisted he be there as had the Vice President in his capacity as Leader of the Senate.

He’d asked to kick off the meeting with a reminder that while he was not normally a voting member of that body, he did have the deciding vote should there be a 50-50—or any other lever of—tie vote by the main members.

Tom looked at him and the others before speaking. “We understand and appreciate your position sir. We also appreciate the faith this office and this Government have placed in us.”

“Can I ask why nobody told any of us about this supposed attack?” the VP asked.

The President held up a hand. “That is on me. David,” he said turning to his second in command, “that one is totally on me. The Swifts probably never would have kept this as quiet as it has been if I had not asked them to. And, I think you can understand why I did that. The general public, the very people we owe everything to for their faith in us, just seems to have a problem with misinterpreting information. I could say it is an educational thing, I could claim it is a general dislike of concentrating on the facts without making wild assumptions, but the fact of the matter is we are now seeing how no information, and a little rumor, is making this a horrible situation.”

The Vice President nodded. “Yes, Sir. I do see that. I only wish I had been read in on this as it appears the Senator has been.”

The President let out a mirthless chuckle. “Again, on me and not Damon or Tom or anyone else. Even Peter here is faultless. His knowledge comes from having been the one person they have been able to trust in at least three Administrations over the last, what is it? Nineteen years or so?”

Damon nodded but said nothing.

“So, nearly two decades and it is no small wonder why they work so well with the good Senator. He is up front with them, they are up front with him, and he tells me, and my predecessors what we have needed to know to protect this nation. Worked pretty darned well so far. Oh, and it’s now your time to talk, Damon. Or, Tom.”

Between them, the two Swifts covered everything they knew and were up front with the things they did not know but were apprehensive about.

“We’d like to be able to tell you more, but until our friends, or possibly our former friends, choose to let us in on the reason for this trip, we just do not have anything solid,” Tom explained.

As they left the Oval Office fifteen minutes later, Damon asked out the side of his mouth, “Son? *If* we have to make some sort of weapon to use against our alien visitors, do you think we can do that? Notwithstanding my hatred of guns and such... but if pressed? *If ordered?*”

They walked behind their escort Marine guard to the elevator and got in. The younger man said nothing until they had checked out and were walking to the limousine that would take them back to the airport.

“To answer that I have to come back with an are you certain, Dad? I mean, I guess the basic answer is yes; it is a matter of degrees to which we need to go. I can think of a couple that might prove to be effective, but they will be really obvious... as in likely to be huge. A railgun cannon comes immediately to mind.”

Harlan was waiting in the outer office when they got back.

“First, please tell me how it went, then how much damage control I need to do, and then I’ll tell you what we found out.”

Damon filled out most of the story of their meeting with Tom adding a couple smaller details. All through the twenty-minute dissertation Harlan sat, silent and nodding, listening and taking an occasional note.

“That is really about the extent of it,” Tom stated as he finished.

Their Security man looked back through his notes, even flipping his old fashioned paper notebook—he’d never really taken to note taking on a tablet or cell phone—back to pages he had not filled in during their conversation.

“Okay. Here is the good news. We checked all outgoing phone logs for the three hours prior to Perkins calling with his info. We found one call going out followed by seven incoming calls from the local area on one extension. Now, I’m not going to tell you who has that line as we are still investigating the situation, and if it comes to it I will personally escort that person to the gate and give them over to the FBI myself. I say that because I have been informed that when we do find out who spread the rumors—always assuming it was an internal source—that person is to be treated to a little time in either their Albany facility or all the way down in Manhattan.

“The President called us right after you two departed his office to order that. No rubber hose or sleep deprivation, but this person is

going to be made to understand how she might have been the single cause of a great panic that could have devastating consequences across the nation and around the world.”

He now stood indicating he really didn't want to entertain any questions, but Tom had one.

“Why would anybody inside of Enterprises want to hurt us—hurt other people—like this?”

Harlan sat back down.

“From what she told Phil, and yes, he did confront her as part of our investigation, was that this was, and I quote, ‘All a mistake.’ She claims she just mentioned it offhand to a friend who happened to take it all the wrong way and it was the other woman who started to spread the rumors. As usual, each person added his or her own spin to things and it grew quickly from a message like, ‘A young man from Japan is coming for a visit,’ to ‘The Japanese Imperial Navy is bombing Pearl Harbor again... and they're bringing Godzilla!’ within the first ten people it got to.”

He looked disgusted.

Tom told him it wasn't any fault of anything the Security people did; it was something even the President had acknowledged was human nature to fill in what you don't know with supposition.

“Unfortunately, we live in a time when not everyone can be told everything,” he said.

“So,” Harlan began standing again, “what are we going to do about all this?”

Damon also stood. “The President is going on the air at nine o'clock this evening with an address to the nation. As we have been led to believe, he is going to take the news media to task for publishing wild rumors and unsubstantiated non-news and demand everything be retracted until an official announcement of anything that is actually known can be made.”

“Great. Oh, and just so you know, the woman who we believe started all this is going to be in my office in fifteen minutes. I'd like to not have the big guns there, but I cannot stop you if you feel the need.”

Tom and Damon agreed to let Harlan take care of things.

That evening, all commercial broadcast networks, even the pay services, interrupted their programming for the Presidential address.

“My fellow Americans and to our international audiences as well, yesterday, the nineteenth of this month, a rumor was started

by a single person in a small corner of one of our states that has spread like the proverbial wildfire we have all heard about. It concerns some totally unsubstantiated rumors about a supposed visit from the same alien beings who visited the Earth several years ago. I will stress that it was a totally benign visit. During that time they acted more like tourists and visited several points of interest before departing. Now, with a brief message announcing an intended second visit, we know... absolutely nothing else! All we know is they intend to come back to Earth. That is it!"

He looked into the camera lens and scowled a little.

"In great part to a media that seems to have totally forgotten to fact check before they print or broadcast things, and the general public's willingness to just believe anything they see or hear, small information such as we have gets blown out of all proportions and that causes a bunch of people, often those who only hear something from a friend or overhear a snippet of conversation somewhere, to panic and they spread even more rumors.

"It all needs to stop and I mean right now!"

He continued on telling the audience their best course of action was to ignore the rabble-rousing of the general media, forget the conspiracy theorists who would have them believe this was a cover-up and that they were in peril, and to tell friends and acquaintances that they did not wish to hear their favorite tidbits of gossip.

He also demanded the press and media retract their fear-mongering articles and broadcasts and to remove all streaming media until such a time as the truth could be determined.

The following morning saw a spate of articles from various outlets saying their belief was that the President was hiding something from them. At least three major newspapers and two of the networks ran editorial pieces telling their readers and watchers that this might be something the Swifts in Shopton could answer, and should be taken to task to provide the answers.

That brought an immediate response from the White House directly to the owners of those outlets they be in Washington the next morning, or face criminal charges. Also, they were to publish nothing about their summons until after the meeting.

Damon and Tom stood ready to get the call to be there, but it never came.

What did come on the third full day were a series of well-written and straightforward articles and news reports telling people to ignore what they had been told and to not even consider doing

anything in or near Shopton, New York.

Period.

End of sentence.

The two Swifts sat in a meeting with all the executives of Enterprises, The Construction Company, the MotorCar Company and even the managers of the Citadel and Fearing Island.

There were enough people there the Executive dining room had to be taken over. That made things very easy for Chow and his small staff to provide refreshments and a nice lunch.

Damon began by telling them exactly what they knew including showing them all the entire set of messages in and out. There was lively discussion from most attendants about what this might mean with several of them stating they believed some of what was being discussed—from outfitting each facility with surface-to-air missiles to simply arming each employee with a persona e-gun for protection—was the same sort of fear-mongering the President demanded be stopped.

“I don’t want to quash any discussion,” Damon told them, “but that is correct. We cannot have a call to arms when we do not know if there is any reason for that course of action.

Tom, who had been sitting, saying nothing for more than two hours, suddenly stood. That act had the room hushed and all eyes on him within two seconds.

“Only four of us in this room actually met with the space aliens when they finally got down to the planet. Dad, Bud Barclay, me and Jackson Rimmer. All any of the rest of you or all our employees here at Enterprises saw were videos. You may notice I just did not call them our Space Friends. I do this because we just do not know their intent right now. We have no information as to the why of their visit. All we have is the history with them showing they are friendly and totally benign to us and this planet.

“Please stop thinking along the lines of an invasion. Please?”

He sat back down and took a deep breath. He expected some push back from these older and more experienced men and women. He got nothing like that.

What he received was a round of applause from the thirty-seven other people in the room.

It was decided by unanimous approval to let things continue to develop and that Tom and Damon would keep everyone advised.

Before the meeting broke up one man asked for a moment of the group’s time. Damon nodded.

“You all know me. I’m the head of Chemical Development and have had the honor of being in this position for over four years. You have all heard that a single source of all the rumors was somewhere within the walls of Enterprises. I need to tell you it was from someone in my group. A secretary who thought she could laud some special information over a friend. I will not name her but she is no longer employed here. I will tell you if there is someone needed to take responsibility for not controlling that, point to me.”

He was so nervous that when people all over the room started pointing at the ceiling, the floor or the walls—anyplace but toward him—his legs collapsed under him and he sat down heavily. Luckily it was onto his chair so the only thing anyone saw was a relieved man sitting rather hard.

Things passed into history, even if only by a day or so, and the general public began forgetting how they had been led to worry and even panic. Without television and newspapers to constantly remind them they should be in a dither, most people stopped.

Store shelves that had been almost stripped of all foods and other items, restocked and a sense of calm and normality spread around the country, and even most of the rest of the world.

In two places—Brungaria and North Korea—totally separate plans were started in action for how to invade the United States and take possession of whatever tremendous alien technology was coming with the space travelers.

Within the week Tom came to a decision.

A message must be sent to the aliens asking... no, *demanding* an update on their timetable as well as wanting to know the ultimate purpose of their visit.

“They can answer and put our minds at rest, Bud,” he stated as soon a Chow had left the underground office where they had been discussing several things, “or they can ignore our questions in which case I’m afraid we have to expect the worst and get ready for that.”

Bud set his hamburger back on his plate.

“Are we going to be okay? I only ask because Sandy has been pestering me just about twenty-four hours a day. And night. She woke me up last night around midnight to tell me she is afraid for our son.” He chuckled. “Not me, mind you, but Sammy. I suppose that means she is truly a mother.”

After a moment, Tom told his brother-in-law he was welcomed help write the message to the aliens.

“We’ll run it past dad, obviously, but I’d love to have your input.”

It required an hour to craft, but when they showed the message to Damon, he nodded and told Tom to send it.

Over in Communications, Tom called up the file from his computer and fed it into the transmitter, sitting back before pressing the **SEND** key. Then he reached out and gave it a press.

Tom Swift to Space Friends. It is imperative and mandatory your communicate as fast as is possible. Your intentions for visit are unknown and many people on this planet demand to know if this is a visit for good, or if your Masters have a not good intention.

If you can not or will not give me an answer, then we require that you stop coming back to our system. You will not be welcome unless you tell us what we can expect.

“Well, let’s see what that gets us,” he said to Bud and George Dilling who had been asked by Damon to work with Tom.

“I’ll call you as soon as we receive anything. Even if it is a request for us to wait?”

“Yes. Anything that comes in, please.” He and Bud left a minute later. In truth, Tom was apprehensive about receiving anything from the aliens. Whatever they did or did not send could mean practically anything. A simple ‘Can’t talk now,’ might mean they were under scrutiny by their Masters... and that could mean one or more of the unknown beings would be on the ship; it might also mean nothing other than their ability to travel at such impossibly high speeds precluded much of anything getting in or out.

Bud had to go to the Construction Company to ferry over a SE-11 that was to be tested the following morning and then outfitted for delivery to the United Kingdom, and to one of the shirttail relations of the current King.

Tom headed back to the underground hangar and his small office. When he got there and sat down, he reopened a file he’d

started with a preliminary design for something to use to combat the aliens should their intentions prove to be other than friendly.

He was interrupted by a phone call.

“Tom. It’s the President’s office. As in the big U.S. White House office holder. On three.”

“Thanks, Trent.” Tom took a deep breath and pressed the proper line button.

“This is Tom Swift.”

“And this is the President, Tom. I wanted to thank you and Damon once again for coming down and hope a lot of what we have attempted to do has taken a load off. Toward that, I want to tell you I have assigned an individual, one you have worked with in the past, to act as your connection point to the politicians in DC who will attempt to attach themselves—qualified or not—and also the various military organizations.”

“Uhh, I suppose that is good news. May I ask who this person is?”

“You once knew her as a Lieutenant Commander Angela Jackson. But, she has retired from military service and is now with the Office For Strategic Intelligence and has been given the charter of working with the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon, the heads of the Senate and House, and me. She has been told, by me, that she is to not allow those military types to even dream of riding roughshod on you, your father or anything to do with this. She is a reporting and open communication platform for you.”

Tom was too stunned to say anything.

“I will take it from your silence that you have no objections to having a nearly free rein in this matter and that she will be able to get you answers quite possibly faster than Peter Quintana might.”

“Mr. President. It is an honor to have you make this call, and rest assured that I can and will work with Angie Jackson. She saved my life once. I owe her.”

The man on the phone chuckled. “Owe or not, she is going to be on your side and will keep the general population of knuckleheads down here off your back.”

Tom thanked the President again and hung up.

When Damon found out the new situation, he was extremely pleased.

CHAPTER 9 /

ANSWERS

IT TOOK two days but an answer was finally received from their soon-to-be visitors. It was short and not exactly to the point, but it was something.

Tom Swift. We are distressed at the words selected in your message. We are also distressed to tell you there is no beneficial answer to be coming from us. We may not discuss this new visit. We are being watched.

“What the dickens do you think that means?” Damon asked a little stunned as he read the message for the third time.

Tom shrugged. “I think it means they are being watched closely by their Masters and everything coming in or going out is being scrutinized. What I don’t think it addresses is our main question, that being why are they coming.”

He was tempted to send out a message stating he didn’t care what the Masters thought; he and the people of Earth demanded answers or they would be repelled as strenuously as possible.

He didn’t, but he thought about it.

Tom wondered what the disposition of Yara and her compatriots had been once they left Enterprises. According to Bernt Algren, they had been given provisional asylum and moved to a safe location in the Midwest, but he was not allowed to know where that was.

“Sort of like witness protection?” the inventor guessed.

“Well, not exactly... but similar. Anyway, they are safe and I see a weekly report about them. Umm, maybe I shouldn’t say anything but the woman, Yara, asks about you. They get the local newspaper but she has said she doesn’t understand why you are not daily news.” He chuckled a little.

For some reason the information made Tom a little nervous. “Can I ask when I might be able to visit?” Suddenly, he wasn’t certain why he was asking.

“Okay. Cards and table sort of stuff. They have been in the

seclusion location for a month and are about to be moved.” There was a pause before Algren continued. “No... you deserve more than just the standard line, Tom.

“Actually, Tom, the young woman and her companions asked to be taken back into Moldova so they might carry on their fight against the interlopers in their beloved Ukraine. We, the Government, were prepared to offer complete asylum here in the U.S., but they all believe so strongly in their cause—and I can’t say I find a lot of fault in their reasoning—we could not tell them they are stuck here. They were taken back the day before yesterday. Sorry.”

“Oh.” Tom was at a loss for what to say. His heel still twinged when he walked a little too hard on that foot reminding him of how he had rescued them. That reminded him of how she and the men had once rescued him. The issue was he had performed the rescue gladly as repayment for the kindness she had shown him, a total stranger, earlier.

“Not any easier to swallow, is it?” Bernt asked.

“No. Not really. Do we... uhh, do we have any way of checking up on them?”

“Not today. We only have a few people in the area and none of them are able to follow individuals or groups other than in the grander sense. They would, however, get word to us if your friends were attacked or in peril again.”

Tom thanked the man and hung up, still worried about the four Ukrainians and what they must be facing. But, he realized he might never know about their situation unless he took an unannounced trip over and...

He shook his head to get rid of that thought. He was happy they had been rescued and had gained enough health and energy to want to go try to be part of reclaiming their country... but he did dislike being out of the loop on knowing if they remained safe.

He wondered if Doc had been informed of their condition or of any follow-up to Dimitri’s operation. When he checked, the medico admitted he’d heard nothing.

He had only a few seconds to ponder what he might do when his phone buzzed.

“Skipper? It’s the tower. We have an Air Force Gulfstream coming in with a single passenger to debark in twenty-two minutes. We have been informed it is a she and that she is expected. Uhhh, is that right?”

Tom laughed. He knew it would be Angie Jackson being delivered. He told the woman in the tower that the passenger was

expected and that the jet could be allowed to taxi over to the Barn where he would meet it.

“Want us to call Security to be there with you?”

“No. I’ll do that. Thanks!”

Harlan agreed to meet Tom at the Barn where they arrived about five minutes before the jet touched down on the opposite side of Enterprises. It required another three minutes of fast taxiing before the nose of the gray jet poked around the corner and headed for them.

“I never did ask, Tom, but do you believe the President was telling the truth and Miss Jackson is truly coming here to be a help? On our side, I mean.”

“Yep. I do, and for a couple reasons, but the best one is that she saved my life when her wacko ex-husband tried to kill me. She dove in between and took that bullet and still tackled him. But the other thing is that even though the President didn’t actually say it, I got the feeling she is held in pretty high regard for having made it way up the military ladder.”

So,” Harlan tried to concluded the thought, “she’s got what we used to call the chops for the job.”

“Right.”

The jet came to a halt just fifty feet to their east and the turbines began winding down. In thirty seconds they no longer made much noise and the front door popped out a few inches before swinging partly back inside and then coming out and around to rest on the outside of the fuselage. Stairs rolled out from under the doorway and unfolded to the ground.

An attractive woman with dark blonde hair came to the door and took a step out onto the small platform before reaching back inside. It took a lot of effort but she finally dragged out a large suitcase that Tom thought must have required two people to push and yank inside. He jogged forward to offer his assistance.

Which, once she saw him, she abandoned the case and came down the stairs to give him a big hug.

“Gee it’s great to see you, Tom,” she exclaimed softly into his left ear.

“You too, Angie. I have to say that you look even better in civilian clothes than you did in uniform.”

Between them, with Harlan coming to their rescue once they got the heavy case to the ground, it was pulled over to the car Tom had called for.

A serviceman in uniform came to the door. “Do you have everything, Ma’am?”

Angie turned to him, did a count and called back, “Uh, no. I forgot my shoulder bag. It’s on my seat. I’ll come get it.”

“No need, Ma’am. I’ll bring it out.” When he did and handed it to her he grinned. “Feels good to get out and stretch my legs. But, got to go. Hope the flight was okay for you, Ma’am.”

She assured him it had been and asked him to convey her thanks to the pilot and co-pilot.

Half a minute later the stairs were retracting, the door had been swung shut and latched and the turbines were once again winding up.

Standing there watching, Tom had to admit, “I don’t know why I like just watching a jet taxi away.”

“I do. Ever since I was a little girl I loved watching the jets move away from a terminal and go to the runway. I think I sort of felt a responsibility for making it all work.” She laughed.

They soon joined Harlan at the car. It only took the inventor a minute to get them parked at the Administration building. During that time, Harlan had given Angie a TeleVoc pin, helping her position it correctly. “Tom will cover the finer points of using it. Good to have you with us, Miss Jackson,” he told her as they got out.

“Thank you, Mr. Ames, and I’d like you all to call my Angie, or at least Angela while I’m with you.”

“Okay then. I’m Harlan and that man jogging toward us from my building over there is Phil Radnor. And, I now have to find out why he is coming this way at what passes for fast from him.”

The dark-haired and slightly overweight man came puffing up to them.

“Brought you a TeleVo— oh! I see she already has one. Sorry. I wasn’t sure if you had one and didn’t want the system to track and report her. Hello, Miss Jackson. Hope you remember me. I might have been introduced as Phillip Radnor. We met, once, while you and Tom and the others were chasing around undersea to find those old sunken submarines.”

“Of course I remember you, Phil.” She told him her preferred form of address and shook his hand.

He offered to get her bags up the hill and to the house where she’d be staying while assigned to Enterprises. Other than her shoulder bag she gladly allowed him to drive off and out the front

gate with them.

“He’ll come back and see us in the big office and let you know which of the four guest houses we keep up there is yours. Then he’ll get you permissions to take any of our little electric cars outside the gate.”

When they sat down with Damon, Trent brought in a tray with a pair of coffee mugs and one filled with near-boiling water and a teabag.

Angie looked at it and then up at the secretary.

“How did you know I prefer tea?”

He favored her with a knowing smile. “A few phone calls sufficed to discover any number of things, such as your preference for beef over pork, cooked as often as possible to medium rare. The fact you do not eat anything for breakfast other than fresh fruit. And a few things I hope to surprise you with in the coming days. Welcome to the Enterprises family, Miss Jackson.”

She was about to correct him when Tom’s hand was placed on her wrist. After Trent left he told her their executive assistant always called Damon, Mr. Swift, and all visitors were so referred to.

“Even Senator Quintana has told him to call him Peter inside this office, but Trent refuses.”

“Umm, what is his last name?” she asked taking a sip of the tea. It must have been to her liking she removed the bag and sat back.

Both men smiling at her, they replied in unison, “Trent.”

Tom added, “He dislikes his first name and so, other than in a few moments of high stress and forgetfulness, we always call him Trent.”

“I suppose that makes sense. So, what,” she said changing the subject, “can you tell me, even if it is something I am not supposed to pass along, about what we have coming?”

They told her just about everything they knew along with the things they believed might happen, or not happen. In the end she leaned back in her seat and sighed.

“Is there any hope of getting answers from these aliens before they get here and figuratively land right in our laps?”

Now, the two men sighed and shook their heads.

“We’ve been trying to get answers. All we do know is they plan to land up on Nestria. It might be they land there first before moving on... as in coming down here, or it could be that is all they plan to do. We just don’t know,” Damon told her.

She looked at Tom. “What about Nestria? Why would they want to visit there?”

He asked if she understood the history of the planetoid.

“Well, just what I read in the papers. It sort of ended up in orbit and there was an almost battle to decide ownership?”

Tom set her right about how the Space Friends—or their previous Masters—had sent the small round piece of rock into orbit in the hopes it might allow the Friends to use it as an interim station so they could get down to the Earth.

“They even upped the gravity to give them something to get accustomed to. Not really close to Earth-normal, but more than they had been used to.”

“I don’t suppose I could go up there and see what all the excitement is about?” she asked with hope in her voice.

“Sure. We can go up tomorrow. I’ll get Bud and at least one other pilot and we’ll fly up in in one of my saucers. Oh, and Chow is likely to want to come along with some special foods for the locals.”

When asked, the cook gave Tom a look that said, “Duh!”

“Of course I’ll go with ya! Gimme a couple hours ta get some foods together... maybe ‘till tomorrow mornin’. That be okey-dokie with ya?”

Tom said he planned to take off about 10:00 in the morning.

At 9:30 Chow met them at the hangar where the saucers were parked. With him in his food truck were nine boxes of various foods and a cooler.

“Got some grub fer us an’ a lot o’ stuff ta leave with the folks up there. Somebody give me a hand with these,” he said looking right at Bud.

“Guess I have my marching orders,” the flyer said with a grin as he headed to the truck.

Chow nodded to their guest. “Howdy there, Miz Angie.”

When the saucer was loaded and Tom had shown Angie the basic interior, and explained that the ship pretty much flew itself once told its destination, they sat down and took off.

“This is incredible,” she said as they reached the upper atmosphere on their one-hour flight. “I always thought that when you took off you had to be on your back and got pressed down really hard. I barely feel anything.”

Bud leaned over. “Tom’s created a sort of inertia damper that works at slower speeds. We could even be standing up when we take off and you’d never be inconvenienced!”

Tom radioed ahead and told the colony manager, Colin Masterson, they were coming.

“Official visit or just want to see what we’re doing?”

Tom explained about their guest and her desire to see the settlement and the planetoid for herself.

“Uhh, can you and I have a little chat once you get the others on a tour, Tom?”

“Sure. Is this about something you need or about the rumors of the Space Friends coming for a visit?”

“Second one.”

The saucer slowed down to a crawl when they were less than a mile from the surface. They needed to go very slow through the protective net of fibers that helped hold the atmosphere down and let the colonists breathe.

“We’ll touch down in about two minutes,” he announced.

Angie was standing near the forward drop-down screen totally entranced by the sight below. When they pierced the fibers—a layer of about ten feet—and they traveled from bottom to top, she gasped. She let out another one on seeing the crystal clear view of Nestria below.

“It’s... I mean... It’s so...” She gave up.

“Yeah,” Bud told her coming to stand beside her. “It definitely is so...”

They set down with the barest of bumps before Tom announced they were about to equalize internal air pressure with that of outside.

“Otherwise,” Bud told her, “when we open the hatch our air will whoosh out and cause a small dust storm. Lesson learned the hard way.” He winked and tapped the side of his nose.

They climbed down the landing leg and stood on the surface watching as a man with bright, yellow hair approached. When he got to them, he held out a hand that Tom shook.

“Colin, I’d like you to meet Angie Jackson. On temporary assignment to Enterprises. Angie, Colin Masterson.”

“Pleasure. So, Tom, can we have that talk?”

The inventor turned to Bud. “First, help Chow get the food

unloaded and then you take Angie—Chow if he's up to it—on a little hike over to the cave.”

“Sure, skipper.”

Chow added, “Yep!”

Tom followed the colony manager to his office in the corner of his personal living tent. While many lived in small structures that had been brought up and erected over the years, the manager seemed quite happy with the tent he could seal up in case of any atmosphere troubles.

He sat indicating the other chair to Tom. “Okay. What are we in for?”

It was a point blank question that Tom tried to answer as truthfully as possible.

“Only guesswork, Colin, because they won't tell us much of anything. Angie represents the government and military and is going to try to help us keep anything bad from happening. Either up here or down there.”

Ten minutes later, Colin reached over his desk to shake Tom's hand. “You know how fiercely independent these folks are, Tom, so I can't tell you we'll all jump and scurry back to Earth even if someone like the President tells us to. Can't say I'd do that myself come to think about it. We'll be okay unless those aliens want otherwise. Then...” and he shrugged because there was no answer.

Tom took advantage of the lower gravity to bounce jog over the distance to the small cave in which the gravity stone meant to give the one-quarter or so gravity resided along with walls covered by strange symbols.

Bud was trying, with a little help from Chow, to tell her about what they supposedly said, and how Tom and Damon had come to be able to decipher them.

“Is that how you used to have to communicate?” she asked from her seated position on the cave floor.

Tom nodded. “Yeah, and on electronic oscilloscopes at that.”

“Well, no wonder you can't tell if they want to come here in peace, or what.”

Bud explained how the technology had changed over the years with Tom now pretty much understanding everything they said or sent, assuming what they sent had any meaning.

“Tom here has even build a gizmo that translates their hand jive so we all can see what they are saying just about instantaneously.”

Her head swung back and forth between the two younger men. Chow was simply nodding.

“Translate... their... *what?*” She jumped to her feet.

“What Bud means is they communicate with others than their own kind by a system of intricate hand gestures. Oh, and I’d better tell you they have four fingers and two thumbs. Anyway, I built a translator box that videos their making the gestures and over time I was able to add the English equivalent of about eighty percent of the words or terms they use.”

“And,” Bud broke in, “they had never seen video before so when Tom sent them a video request for some things we needed to know, along with a camera system, they copied it.”

Angie had to sit down again. She had been led to believe that “talking” with the aliens was a laborious task and that a large amount of either language would not be made sense of. Now, to learn that Tom had simply created some computer system that—

“Uhh, just how large is this computer? Can you pack it up and bring it up here?”

Tom, Bud and Chow laughed.

The inventor came to her rescue when he held his hands four inches apart, then moved them ninety degrees and increased the span to about seven inches, then showed her his thumb and index finger just about an inch apart

Angie put her head between her knees and tried to breathe deeply and slowly.

“Are you in serious distress?” Tom asked worriedly.

She shook her head but remained face down.

“Too much to process?” was Bud’s guess.

She nodded several times, but now she held up her right hand. Tom took it and helped her to her feet.

“It is just too much to even make it all the way through my brain. I guess I ought to have known you all would have miracle things. So,” she brushed the seat of her trousers off and faced Tom, “unless you have more things to show my here, let’s go back, I’ll get a good night’s sleep—if that is possible—and tomorrow we start with you showing me everything you have sent or received. Deal?”

Tom’s smile told her this was completely acceptable to him.

The next morning, both physically and mentally refreshed, she sat down with Tom to go through the history of their

communications with the Space Friends.

They took a break for lunch and worked right up to 4:30 before she said she had so much better an understanding than before. “Possibly better than anyone outside of you and your father,” she admitted.

“I hate to ask this, but is your entire world as complex as this?”

Tom smiled. “Sort of. I mean, I do get onto more than my fair share of adventures and have been very fortunate to have both a supportive family—dad, mom, my sister Sandy, who you haven’t met, and my wife and kids... and their nanny and my in-laws—”

“Stop!” she requested holding up a hand. “A simple yes would have sufficed.”

Now, she smiled back at him.

“Okay, then, yes. It is but I generally find it rewarding. The only thing is, I usually have a better idea of what I can expect. This forthcoming visit actually scares me. *I don't have enough answers!*”

CHAPTER 10 /

THE GENERAL SLOWDOWN

AND, THEY were not forthcoming the next day or the one after that. Many of the people who believed they were “in the know” about the forthcoming arrival began to pester Tom and Damon with requests for information.

Should they be thinking about evacuating their loved ones?

Should they hire someone to dig a shelter in their back yard?

Should they take time off to be with their family?

So many shoulds that Damon got a little fed up with them and issued a company-wide statement which he regretted the tone of but it was out there:

To all Swift Employees at all Swift installations—

There have been rumors and some actual information regarding a possible visit by the alien beings we have known only as the Space Friends. This much is true.

The press and media got hold of one rumor weeks ago and whipped up a good panic across the nation. This much is also true.

The President of The United States addressed North America and told everyone there was NO INFORMATION that was really known by anyone on Earth. That is incredibly true!

What is also true is that I have been stopped at Enterprises, the Construction Company and the MotorCar Company by employees voicing their fears and asking me what they ought to do. It has become so intrusive of my time, and that of several other executives here, that we cannot get our own work finished unless we sequester ourselves in our offices and refuse to take any phone calls.

This needs to stop. Today.

There is no new information, but I can tell you it appears the Space Friends are coming back with a stop or possibly a stay up on Nestria. We JUST DON'T KNOW THEIR PLANS.

This does NOT mean we expect the worst. It also *does not mean* we can all stop what we are doing and sit and worry. It means we need to be diligent in our work, as always, and wait until there is information to be had.

Do not distribute or share...

He signed it and sent it out to the general email address for all Swift companies.

It would ring hard and true with a lot of people; people who had heard of the one-time secretary at Enterprises being led into a dark sedan in handcuffs once it had been determined she was the original source of the first leak. They didn't want to be part of a repeat of that.

He knew the message/warning would work for about seventy percent of the employees but not for many people who just would not accept the Swifts not having all the information, the truths and the things to do.

But, he didn't have those.

Five minutes later Trent brought in a half dozen individually folded pieces of paper and set them on his desk.

"You might want to slip these in your inside jacket pocket to hand out to anybody who did not read their email by the time you need to go out of this building. Maybe even inside when not in this office."

Damon thanked him as he unfolded one seeing it was the complete text of his message along with his real signature, not the electronic one he'd added to the note.

Tom and George Dilling came in fifteen minutes later.

"We had an idea and wanted to bounce it off you, Dad. Maybe to keep people from following you around or even being outside your house at night—and Momsie told me there were a few last evening when you got home—we ask Dan to print that message, or something similar, in the *Bulletin*."

With a nod the older Swift placed a call to Jackson Rimmer in Legal asking him to step down to the big office as soon as he was able.

"We'll see what the lawyers say. Also go ahead and TeleVoc Angie. I believe she needs to be in on this and to let the President know of our likely intention."

Jackson and Angie arrived on the run within a few minutes. With her now having a small office on the same floor as Damon and Tom, all she had to do was save what she was entering in her computer and jog down the long hallway.

"Okay," she said taking a deep breath and standing up straight and tall. "I'm here... oh! Mr. Rimmer is as well."

"And, that is the sum total of whom I've asked to be here. Have you read the email I sent out twenty minutes ago?"

They all nodded.

“Good. While I might have written that in anger that may have come through as scolding people, it is basically exactly what is going on. Tom and George brought up a good question. Can we also have that printed in the paper so the people of Shopton might be told that we can’t answer their questions and to stop pestering me... us.”

Angie held up a hand. The men turned to look at her.

“Not school, Angie. You can speak up any time.”

“As part of my, umm, agreement and orders from the White House I did make a call to the President on receiving the memo this morning. He wasn’t in so I left a message telling him you are being so harassed that he needs to allow you to get the local police involved, and allow you to broadcast the message to the entire town of Shopton. Surrounding towns as well.”

Her gaze went to the floor. “If I overstepped my boundaries here, I apologize.”

Damon let out a laugh of relief. “Not a bit. In fact, that was the next thing on my personal agenda for this meeting. I... well... I will redraft the message and pass it by Jackson and then discuss it with the Chief of Police here—that would be our friend Chief Slater—and then get it to Dan at the paper. Should the President call back and ask us what we are or plan to do, let him know, if he believes in allowing us the liberty, I would like to put the phrase, ‘By Presidential Mandate,’ somewhere near the top of the thing.”

Everyone agreed it was a good plan. Angie went back to her office while Damon and Jackson sat down at his computer to do a rewrite of the morning’s memo.

“Change the opener to read... To all citizens of Shopton and surrounding areas, then I like the next couple paragraphs. I’d add the mandate bit right after your ‘This needs to stop’ and ‘Today.’”

After a call to Chief Slater, they added one new paragraph:

The Chief of Police in Shopton will be issuing orders to include stopping and questioning anyone who drives past the houses of any of the Swift executives or that head out to harass people at the three facilities here in town (Swift Enterprises, the Swift Construction Company and the Swift MotorCar Company).

“Then I’d play the Presidential card again at the end by adding...” and he reached over and typed one new line:

Infractions and major offenses must be reported to the White House by order of the President of The United States of America. This is NOT an attempt to stifle rights; it is a mandate to stop uninformed panic from being spread.

They read through what they had before Asking Angie to come back. When she did she had a smile on her face.

“The President agrees and suggest you play up him ordering this and that it isn’t on your orders.”

They pointed to Damon’s monitor and she came around to read the note. At the end she smiled again. “Oh, he’ll love that, and he will certainly make sure the FBI office up here gets involved. Neat!”

When contacted, Dan Perkins hastened to the gate of Enterprises where he was met by Gary Bradley, the number three man in Security, and was escorted to the office.

“We have something for you to read and print in your paper, verbatim!” Jackson told him using a scowl that stated, unconditionally, that he meant exactly that.

Damon turned his monitor around so the newspaper editor could read it. He gulped twice before going back to the top for a second read through. In the end he looked at Damon.

“I guess I have no choice. And, I also now understand I have to tell my reporter to stay away. Ummmm,” he frowned for a moment, “is this supposed to be the one and only piece coming out about these aliens?”

Jackson took a seat on the corner of Damon’s desk nearest their guest.

“Daniel. You have been good to your parole conditions and we,” he pointed to himself and then Damon, “wish to believe this is truly a new Dan Perkins. So, and with my boss being able to interrupt me and tell me to stop, I am going to tell you something for *your ears only*. Okay?” Dan nodded and gulped a little again.

“Fine. The space aliens that we all have called the Space Friends, with capital letters on those words, *have* let Tom and Damon know they are coming back to our solar system. They have *not* let anybody know when, but we assume it will be in the next four weeks. They also have *not* informed anyone here of their actual reasons for visiting. If you will recall, the last and only time they came was to take a little tour that turned out to be the Western Hemisphere. For all we know, they want to see the rest of Earth. That is it. End that with dot dot dot or even hashtag hashtag hashtag. Whatever you are using these days to note the absolute end of the story.”

The three men sat looking at each other without saying anything for several minutes. Dan lost the staring contest and looked away first.

“So, print the disclaimer then not be one of the people or companies bothering you for more. Will you tell me when you have

something else?” It was almost a plea.

Jackson looked at Damon before responding to that.

“We will, Dan.”

One side effect to the internal memo, the one that had not indicated it was something the President was involved in, was that a few people within the walls of the three Shopton-based companies increased their levels of worry all the while decreasing their productivity.

The general slowdown was unexpected, but Tom believed he understood the feeling of the employees.

What he did not expect was many of those same people who would greet him with a wave and a smile now saw him and turned to avoid him.

“You don’t hate me, do you, Bud?” he asked as they sat in the lab on the second floor where Chow had just brought them grilled cheese sandwiches and slices of cherry pie.

Around a partial mouthful the flyer stated he could never hate Tom.

“It isn’t that I can’t hate, but just not any of the Swifts. You all have not just been *like* family, you are my family!” He took a few moments to have the rest of the sandwich before saying, “As far as the whole Friends and Masters thing, I kinda do not like the whole idea of those Masters and how I think they treat the little guys, but I absolutely do not believe the memo to everybody went too far. Not far enough given what I’ve overheard lately. We seem to have more than our fair share of gossipy old Chicken Littles. Running around like idiots, chanting about how the aliens from the sky are falling and are going to do... something. They are not very clear about that, but a few who have tried to pass that guff on to me have heard no uncertain terms on what I think about their rumor milling.”

Tom reached over and patted his now red-faced friend on the forearm. “It’s human nature, Bud. In the absence of truth a lot of people let their own fears and insecurities fly.”

They both agreed it was a sad state of affairs when people who were supposed to be intelligent acted otherwise.

“I guess until we all know what is happening, none of us know what to expect,” Tom concluded.

When the inventor caught up with his father late in the afternoon, it was to the news that a number of disgruntled people living in and around Shopton had tried to storm the *Bulletin’s*

offices demanding the paper print, “The truth!” When Dan tried addressing him he was pelted with a few overripe pieces of fruit. If it hadn’t been so serious he would have laughed at how ludicrous it was becoming.

The police, who had been called by one of the paper’s employees, responded by sending all eight cars and the fourteen officers who were on duty at the time to disburse the crowd.

That also went spectacularly poorly and ended with four arrests of people who had tried the rotten fruit tactic with the officers.

Damon wanted to go address the people in the cells and tell them protests such as this were fruitless, until Jackson pointed out how sarcastic that phrase would ring in their ears.

“Ah, yes. Poor choice of words. But, should I go down there?”

The lawyer shook his head. “No. All some of those hardcore people will do is yell at you and accuse you of being part of the cover-up. Sorry.”

It had to be left at that over the weekend.

On Monday, Shopton’s own Judge Cadwalather agreed to the release of three of the prisoners, but the fourth one, a woman who had begun chanting obscenities during the hearing, was led back to her cell on contempt charges. An hour later she had shouted herself hoarse and sat in the cell feeling sorry for herself and angry at her sister, the one who had prompted her to go to the newspaper in the first place.

Angie received a call that evening from Peter Quintana advising her that the DC rumor was a couple of Generals, one Army and one Air Force, had been overheard in a bar that lunchtime discussing how they should pool their forces, and people, and head to Shopton to take care of, “those damned space monkeys!”

“The FBI has been alerted, and I’d like you to have a good talk with Damon, Tom and Harlan Ames tomorrow morning. It can’t hurt to be ready for acts of General disobedience—and yeah, pun *fully* intended there—to come your way in as few as four or five days. If it is needed, the President says he can lend you an Air Force One jet. Not a full one and not with him there, but... oh, did you know there are more than the two the public knows about?”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

“Good. Then ask the Swifts if they want one of them parked over close to their front gate. I can even detail some Secret Service people to make it look real. Might lend a supporting hand to the notion the

Swifts are not working on anything alone. Give me a call once you speak.”

The moment she mentioned the offer to Tom he got a huge grin on his face.

“Not too sure dad will go for it, but I like the idea. Let’s get Harlan in on this before we say anything.”

Harlan sat back as Tom and Angie, standing in front of his desk like two school kids giving a report to their principal. He was stone faced until they stopped.

“Let me tell Damon. I *do* want you two there, but if I present this as almost a *fate acompli*, he is more likely to go for it.”

When he heard of the Presidential order, Damon nodded but said nothing for nearly a full minute. When he did open his mouth, he quickly shut it again. The truth was, he wanted to say “Absolutely not!” but realized immediately that was more a knee jerk reaction of someone who wanted to do it all themselves.

When he did speak, it was, “So, it was an actual offer and not a request from our side?” He looked pointedly at Angie who nodded.

“Yes, sir, Damon, sir,” she responded in her best former military manner. “I got the call from him about fifty minutes ago and—” She stopped, realizing that he now knew she had held it all back from him for that time. She blushed deeply.

“Of course you had to run it past our Chief of Security.” It was a statement and not an accusation or even a question.

Harlan stepped forward. “Right. Miss Jackson and I have an agreement that anything that could mean outsiders coming to Enterprises, even by official order from the top, needs to come straight to me. I have to check these things out before we get you and Tom all excited or angry about something that might not be real.” He looked at his boss and hoped the man did not call his bluff.

“Okay. I understand and just about reluctantly, but with a dose of realism in my heart, agree with the concept. I’d rather it be brought to Harlan *and* to me at the same time from now on.” Now he set his gaze on Tom.

The younger inventor nodded but kept his face a mask of innocence.

When the three departed, Damon sat back with a small grin. He had hoped to receive more than just moral support from the White House, but he had feared an outright military invasion of his property, his company, and a takeover of the “situation.” It was not, to his mind, yet any sort of *situation*. It was still a vast unknown.

Outside the office Harlan stopped the two younger people and faced them in the hall just outside of Trent's office area.

"Now, listen you two. And with all deference to Angie's orders from above, please do not do anything else regarding reporting things to DC without telling me first. Okay?" Angie, reluctantly and simply because she so highly respected the Swift's and their organization and people, nodded.

"Good. Now I need to go arrange a special spot for our forthcoming giant jet visitor. Do you know if the Secret Service detail will stay onboard that jet, or is it not outfitted for anything other than the flying thing?"

"I'm nearly certain they stay on the jet in the evenings and when off duty. They need to give the full appearance of protecting the President."

He asked if she knew if the White House would notify the military, "And, by that I mean both the Marine detail up the hill as well as any troops I believe they have snuck into the woods to our west and the just over the hills to the east of the lake."

When she looked somewhat shocked that this had evidently happened, he sadly shook his head.

"If that is the level of their ability to infiltrate an enemy, much less a friendly, then we are all in trouble. They came in, even at two in the morning, with all the finesse of a herd of elephants outfitted with steel-soled sneakers."

Tom smiled. "In other words, a bit on the loud side?"

"No. In other words, those slightly more than nine hundred... and don't look so surprised, Miss Jackson... I have my ways. Anyway, those nine hundred and eleven came in between thirty-two and twenty-nine hours ago. They would only be able to sneak up on an enemy during times of moderate to heavy shelling. Just as long as you promise that anything you now learn here remains here, Tom can tell you a couple things about how sensitive some of our monitoring capabilities are. Like," he said looking at Tom, "the trackbots up the hill."

His look told the young man he hoped that was about all he told her about.

Tom and Angie left the office and headed for the cafeteria for an early lunch. On their walk he told her about the low-profile system that encircled the secure neighborhood above Enterprises.

"An unspecified and random number of fast and highly-sensitive robots race around a track embedded in the top of the wall twenty four hours a day. They move in a random patterns so nobody can sit

there, even for a week, and be able to determine when there would be a gap in the coverage that extends all the way to the bottom of the hill.”

He told her of the time he had been shot in the arm by a sniper who ultimately had perished after the attack and how there had been three more attempts to gain access by climbing the hill only to have those people arrested before they could get even half the way up.

“It doesn’t surprise me, then, that Harlan knew about them. I have to tell you that I did not! In fact, I need to call the President to tell him what is going on. I have a sneaking suspicion this might be outside of someone’s authority.”

Before they went inside she made a call. She had to leave a voice message but told Tom it would be returned within the next hour.

They had picked their meals and were sitting down when her phone rang.

“Excuse me, Tom. Got to take this outside.”

She came back just four minutes later, her face clouded with anger and determination.

“Some knuckle-headed Army type called his troops out on a ‘special maneuver,’” and she made finer quotes, “to come here for special training. My fanny! I heard some words coming from the President I had not heard since I was married to the Navy jerk who shot me. He’s going to do something drastic about it and wants me to warn Harlan and Damon.”

“Then, let’s wolf down a little of this food and head back to Security.”

CHAPTER 11 /

PLANS ARE AFOOT... BY OTHERS

TOM KNEW his Security man and his father would be nearly incandescent over the news. He asked Harlan if he'd mentioned the situation to his father yet.

"Did it first thing, Tom, just as soon as I had the evidence in hand. He wanted to work this from the Peter Quintana side even though I suggested Angie be brought it. By some sheer coincidence he and I spoke just twenty minutes ago about this very thing. He now wants to have the President notified, which evidently had happened. From this point we wait."

Angie could barely believe what she'd just heard. "Wait?"

Harlan nodded and crossed his arms over his chest. "We wait. We have the ability to attack, and wouldn't do that anyway, and we have no power to go out and tell them to just go away. So... wait we shall. You, however, can keep on the big man and see that he acts with reasonable haste."

Angie found herself agreeing with this tactic and mostly because she could never imagine the Swifts going on the offensive. That brought on her tiny fear they might not be able to do anything to attack a hostile visitation by the aliens, but she put that to the back of her mind.

Sitting in a circle, surrounded by camouflaged tents, about two hundred feet over the crest of the hills east of Shopton and Swift Enterprises, five young soldiers were discussing why they were where they were.

"I have an aunt and uncle who live in Shopton," one redheaded eighteen-year-old was complaining in a low voice. "I get letters from them all the time and they are dam— *darned* sure the Swifts ain't holding anything back. I think we're out here on a wild ghost chase."

"Wild goose," one of his companions corrected him. "And, yeah. I got people from around here who think this whole aliens are coming is a bunch of hooley!"

The 2nd Lieutenant in charge of their platoon came walking over. "Whatha chatting about, men?"

Only one of them looked up. "Nothin', Sir. Just sorta wonderin' if we're gonna get any time off in town."

The officer shook his head. “I can bet what you’re wanting in town and it isn’t going to happen. We have to remain sharp and alert, so no town stuff. I came over to get you up and ready for some maneuvers in an hour as the sun goes down. We’re going to crest this hill and do a recon down to the lakefront. So, saddle up, as my old Major used to say.”

He stalked off leaving behind a small group of men—basically barely boys—taking their time to get up and put their coffee cups away.

They knew it was going to be a long and boring night.

Harlan, Phil and Gary sat in the main office in the Security building listening to the practically nonstop chatter among the troops across the lake. The listening stations that had been dug into the hill over five years earlier picked up the general babble.

“They aren’t going to give up, Harl,” Phil stated wearily.

“I suppose that means we can’t either,” Gary offered.

“Nope. Tonight is going to be moderately long for us all, but I do have something we are going to try. Gary. Call over to the Construction Company and ask them to fly over that extra drone we had them build a year ago. The one with one of Damon’s searchlights and the audio blasting system. I propose to give them a little something to think about.”

Down in Washington, a small group of very junior Senators and Congresspersons, five in total, were meeting in a bar a block from the Union train station. They had been doing this for three nights already without coming to a conclusion about how to handle the forthcoming invasion from space.

“I think the President has—” the only woman in the group began but stopped when someone started to walk close to their corner table. In a hushed voice once that person passed, she continued. “I don’t think you-know-who is going to do anything. He might even be under the influence of these space aliens already!” Her eyes went wide and she nodded with as much authority as she could muster given the three gin and tonics she’d consumed and the half of one in front of her.

The other four were similarly in a very relaxed mood from their own drinks. It had, they all reasoned, been a very trying day what with them trying to save the entire world!

“Talk like that will get you slammed with a treason charge,” the

junior Congressman from Iowa whispered loud enough to get the attention of three tables around them. He was the only one of the five who was not a lawyer by training. He'd been a local war hero who'd parlayed that fame into a State office and then a run for his current position, one he'd held for about the same five months as the others.

"Nobody's going to tell him now, are they?" she hissed back across the table.

"Listen, you two," a man from Montana stated after rapping his knuckles on the table to get their attention, "we've already got the start of a resolution in *that* area. Right? I mean, if the Army can't get a handle on things and protect all our ass— *assets*, then we're sunk in a boatload of junk!"

Fifteen minutes before the sun went down over the western hills, the stand-in Air Force One landed at Enterprises and made a great show of taxiing around to take up a position to the north of the buildings where it could be seen by anyone on the hills around the facility.

The drone rose from the grounds of Swift Enterprises ten minutes before the sun dropped behind the western hills. Made from a very black and dull finished form of Durastress, with no direct light hitting it, the vehicle was all but invisible. And, it certainly was totally invisible to the men of the Army division just getting ready to march out of their camp.

As the first fifty or so came to the top of the hill, even in a crouch they believed would keep them both from any sight as well as safe from attack, the silent repelatron-powered drone was floating just three hundred feet overhead getting great video of the scene on its combination infrared and low-light camera system.

Individual faces that turned upward from time to time were plainly visible to the men waiting back in Security.

Over the following hour groups of between eighty-five and ninety-two moved down the slope, around the occasional tree and the many bushes until they were tired, sweaty and just three hundred feet from the side of Lake Carlopa.

Many of the soldiers saw the large Presidential jet but their leader seemed to be blind to that fact. the attitude of the troops was not a happy one.

With their Major, almost shouting to be heard by all, they waited for the order to advance.

That was when Harlan reached out, pressed a button on his

computer keyboard, and the entire area was bathed in near daylight brightness.

He picked up a headset and adjusted its position on his head. “Hello down there,” his voice thundered from above them. “Peek-a-boo, we all see you! And, we have clear images of each and everyone of you who looked up once the lights came on.”

Below the drone the young men and women tried hiding their faces and many of them turned to race back up the hill.

“If our reconnaissance drone was armed, a lot of you would now be dead or injured. If it carried bombs, the area on which you all stand would be pockmarked with craters, and you would be dead or dying. I could go on and on about the many what ifs of this situation, but just wanted to let you know—oh, and I’d appreciate not having to do this all again for the three hundred sixty-one people in the hills to our west so please call and tell them to pack it in. Anyway, please trudge back up the hill to your camp and pack up. Tomorrow morning would be a great time for you to all go home!”

When the men at Enterprises saw the Major raise his gun to point it at the lights, Harlan added, “Oh, and Major? Unless your brain is information proof, the drone overhead is bullet proof. Now, skedaddle!”

He turned the lights off and scooted the drone closer to being right over the lake as the officer let loose with a volley of bullets. The only damage any of them did was once they returned to Earth where at least three of them tore into his personal tent and one into the hood of the official U.S. Army Jeep he’d arrived in.

Most of the men did exactly what Harlan told them. A few pulled out cell phones—contraband while on maneuvers—and called family to tell them of how their Major had gone berserk and to “call a Congressman or something!”

During the previous week, and this one, Tom had not been idle by any means. He’d begun by going over each translation of the messages from the Space Friends since his adventure in putting Phobos, one of Mars’ moons, back in place and detaching the erratic gravity stone.

After examining his translation software carefully, he decided to make several subtle changes to the way it handled certain variables.

The work took three days, but once he ran it—with only a minimal amount of debugging necessary—he reran all messages back through the computer. In some places, a nearly exact result

came through; in a few places, and especially in their most recent communications, there were subtle differences.

With a shrug he set the results aside after deciding these occasional syntax or choice of word variances did not actually change the message.

He was sitting with Bud in the lab down the hall from the big office going back over a few things with his friend when the flyer asked, “So, does that mean your little hand translator needs to be updated?”

Tom sat, thinking, for long enough Bud believed he’d “gone off” in his mind and was about to get up and leave when Tom shook his head a little.

“Bud? That is an incredibly insightful question. I think I have to make changes to the translator. The problem is, I’m not sure just how to go about that. Hmmm?”

“Would the Universal Translator help?”

Bud meant the small dictation device Tom had created for sale by Enterprises a few years previous. It could listen to any of more than thirty languages—even up to a half hour of dictation—and then translate that into any of the other programmed languages and either play that or send a transcript in the resultant language to anyone with an email address.

It had been dubbed the Universal Translator by the press and was still a very good selling product.

“Well,” the inventor responded slowly, “because that deals with mostly verbal input, and our alien friends do not speak, I am a little at a loss for how to incorporate that.” He thought another minute while Bud gave him silence. He knew Tom did not need to be interrupted at a time like this.

When Tom did speak, it was with a bit of a sparkle in his eyes.

“Bud, I think I might have an idea. I believe that if I take everything already translated into English on my little box, and run that through the... uhh, let’s call it the Earthly translator, turn that into text and then run it through the big computer with my new software we might get something interesting. But, only maybe. Let’s try that first message that came in on the missile.”

He went to the safe in the big office and brought out the alien’s version of his translator box as well as his own from the safe. Back in the lab he got things ready with his friend’s help and soon was playing the message. It was not the translated one that he and Damon and even Harlan had read. This was just the hand speak from the original recording. He played it into the pickup camera on

his own translator box.

Twenty minutes later and with several intermediate steps necessary, the two friends sat back looking at the monitor of Tom's computer at the re-translated message. All changes had been automatically underlined so they could readily see them. Now, it read with slight differences:

"Greetings to Tom and to Damon Swift. I am Row and the one you assisted in visiting your planet many solar orbits of your planet before this time. I bring you a warning of importance to both our races but mostly to you.

"My people were ordered to your solar planetary system three times. The first time was before we left any records. That investigation group perished. The second time was in your past when that team carved symbols in a stone building in a hot area close the equator of your planet. It is a place Tom Swift assisted us in visiting.

"Those of our race at that time also perished.

"We of the third visit were directed to your system more than twenty of your annual orbits ago, and it is the seven survivors of that expedition you met. We were twenty but many left the plane of life before we contacted you. Tom Swift discovered our leader's remains inside the small moon object you know as Phobos around the forth planet.

"But, this message concerns a coming fourth visit by our people."

"We will appear on the object you call Nestria in one-sixth of a solar orbit. Our ship will be like the one your have seen, only of greater dimensions. We do not wish to come directly to the planet for fear that vessel might be viewed as an enemy ship. The ship is not.

"We will contact you shortly. Please understand we hold both great joy at a meeting with you again, but feel a dire problem might become evident on our arrival and believe you must prepare for something to be feared."

"So, it would seem they never came here willingly after all," Bud stated.

"And," Tom added, "they now seem to be telling us to be wary or even afraid of what could happen once they get here. I have to show this to dad."

Damon reviewed both the original translation and this new one. He muttered concerned sounds at several points before setting the two pages aside and looking at Tom.

"It appears that our worst assumptions might come to pass. Now,

I am uncertain if having Harlan chase off those Army troops was the wisest course of action.”

“Is there anything you can do?” Bud asked. His face was turning from Tom to Damon and back again as the two inventors pondered the situation.

“First thing to do is to get Angie in here. She needs to contact the President... no, wait. We need to contact the President and perhaps get some time with him toady or tomorrow,” Damon told them.

When she arrived in the office three minutes later, Damon asked her to take a seat while he and Tom went back over some of the events that occurred prior to her assignment and arrival.

Then, Tom handed her the first sheet. Even though she’d read it about five times already, she re-read it thoroughly.

“Okay. I’m guessing that isn’t it.”

Tom shook his head and explained to her how Bud’s idea along with his recent changes to the translation abilities of the computer system at Enterprises had led to the retranslation. He handed that to her.

At just about all the same points Damon had muttered, she gasped but none louder than on reading the final sentence. Her head snapped up and she had a look of almost panic in her eyes.

“My god! I have to tell the President!” She began to rise but a small cough from Tom stopped her.

“Dad and I believe it would be best if we all are in on that call. Or, that we give him the general information and request a hasty meeting down in the White House.”

She had to think about that a moment before agreeing it would be the best course of action.

The five renegade politicians met again the night after the Army had been told to vacate the area around Shopton. They were angry.

“How dare that Swift order our American troops around?” came the demand from their Montana associate. “They were sent in for a good reason even if the Pre— I mean even if *that man* can’t see beyond his own nose and understand we are in grave danger!”

Their female member was strangely quiet. When the others looked at her she shook her head. “I had a quiet word with a friend who is a Judge about this. She warned me that we have already passed the boundaries of treason and are heading into sedition. She’s one of the preeminent legal minds of today. We must start to tread very softly and quietly!”

What she had not told them was this friend had just been appointed to a municipal seat in her hometown of Saint Petersburg, Florida, only a week earlier and only because none of the area's other attorneys wanted the unglamorous and underpaid position in the city's traffic court.

Everyone let Tom take the lead in their meeting in the Oval Office the following morning. He methodically set out the various translations he had run through the new system. Starting with the hand speak one and going through the few others that had either been sent with the full understanding of the Master, or had been snuck out to Tom.

“So, we might just be looking at an attack situation?”

Tom shook his head as he replied, “We still do not know, Sir. One part of me says we need to get ready for a possible attack, but the very thought the Space Friends were able to delay the flight by nearly six weeks tells me they have some hidden influence or even a power over the Masters they do not want known.” He looked to his father for support, which the older Swift gave him with a small nod.

“We did something you probably heard about two nights ago. We have been watching the troops that set up in the hills to our east and west and when the eastern group started to try to sneak over that hill and down to the lake, we... well we sort of sent a drone up with a camera, a ten-point-five million candle-power searchlight and an audio broadcast system to tell them to go away. The camera in that drone got clear face shots of nearly everyone, including the Major leading them who tried to use his service pistol to shoot it down.”

The nation's head man nodded. “Yes, and once I heard about that I ordered them to go home and that officer to be arrested. They did leave, didn't they?”

All three visitors nodded, but it was Damon who spoke. “Yes, they did. But with this new information we're wondering if we were too hasty.”

The President shook his head. “No. And I'll tell you why. It is nobody's prerogative to send in troops anywhere or any time inside the United States and our protectorates but mine! Nobody! Even the entire might of the Congress can't do that inside our national boundaries without my approval. Oh, they can activate the National Guard and even begin the process of calling up reserves, but what happened in your area is an internal invasion. That is certainly not allowed by any document or law of this nation.”

Damon leaned forward. “What do we do about the possible attack from our former friends, or at least their Masters?”

The short discussion turned to possibly interfering with the drive capabilities of the alien ship. All eyes turned to Tom.

“Anything you can come up with like in that old movie, *Earth Versus the Flying Saucers*? You know... knock ‘em out of the sky?”

Tom and Damon had the same thought. If the alien craft operated anything like the HoverCity, there might be some way...

That evening the five renegade politicians were sitting in slightly drunken conversation when each one received a strong hand clasp on their shoulder. And although they tried protesting, they were dragged from the bar, practically tossed into a waiting van, and driven off to FBI headquarters.

Even the woman’s threat to have her friend, the Judge, get them all out on various charges from harassment to manhandling a U.S. Congressperson, fell on deaf ears.

Several states would find out the following morning they needed to find replacements for their representatives in DC.

Damon looked at the three sitting around the conference table. He looked quite satisfied about something they all hoped would be revealed.

“I wanted to let you three know that we won!”

Tom could not help but mutter, “Huh?”

“I said we won. I got word from the White House and also Peter Quintana that five Congresspersons who decided they knew best—even when they didn’t know anything—have been requested by the White House to resign. The Army General and the Air Force General who were planning additional staged pre-emptive maneuvers have not been asked for their resignations, they have been handed their demotions to the lowest officer rank and booted from their respective services. All troops in the area and all air bases within a thousand miles have stood down and will go back to normal operations.”

“What does that mean for us?” Harlan asked.

“It means that from now on and until we request otherwise, the entire Space Friends’ visit is being handled by us. In its entirety!”

CHAPTER 12 /

ARRIVING MOMENTARILY...

OVER THE next two days Tom studied all his plans and computations for the anti-magnetic device he'd built to support the flying ability of the HoverCity. He even called in the Swift Fellow, Farley Fairchild, on whose original idea it had been based.

"Darned if I know, Tom," he responded to the question of, *Can we knock the HoverCity from the sky?* "Why would you want to do that?"

Tom told him about the potential for an invasion, even if only by a single saucer, from aliens that had probably been forced into the attack.

Fairchild sat back, eyes mostly closed, trying to absorb the information. Even though he received a hefty stipend from Enterprises, he still worked from his home in another state and only came up to Shopton about five times a year for special meetings.

"Tom. I spent so much time and a chunk of my life trying to make the hover system a reality, one that you eventually managed where I could not, that I hate to even think about it. That said, if this is to prevent some sort of attack, then count me in. And, I might have a couple ideas."

They sat in the office for more than three hours talking over a few possibilities, only interrupted by lunch. Neither man really noticed what sort of sandwiches they were eating they were so absorbed in their conversation.

"So, if the whole anti-magnetic field can be disrupted or at least altered in some way, that might cause their ship to falter or at least drop. Now," Farley told Tom in all seriousness, "I would never want to just knock them from the sky without warning, so I'd suggest a temporary setting, a reminder that we can do just that if provoked, but *that* makes me wonder what happens to the field if it is, ummm, stopped for even a few seconds? Just enough to give them a bit of a drop to tell them we are not powerless."

"Then, if I get your meaning, I also wonder if interrupting their lift field even for a couple seconds might mean it takes them too long to regenerate that, causing a crash."

Tom thought about restating the Swifts' aversion to weapons, but lately he and Damon had been agreeing that probably needed to be set aside in this case. But, he had thought, if we do that this time,

how easy or difficult would it be the next time to make a firm decision one way or the other?

That was more than a small moral dilemma for the inventor. It was the source of more than one headache over the past month.

“Farley. Let me ask you this. Do you believe—all the while assuming their drive works like yours—that something might be built to send out a pulse, perhaps one or two seconds in duration that can then be reset quickly in case it is needed again?”

“Hmmm. Well, if you are asking me if we need to build up a significant charge, then I would say that is likely to be true. It all depends, then, on the power source. Or,” he stated excitedly, “what if we built a couple of these devices so that one can rest and recharge while the other is used?”

Tom silently hated himself for becoming excited about the possibilities. He also regretted the immediate thought that several could be stationed in the hills surrounding Shopton and the three companies, hidden somehow, where they might be ignored as the aliens concentrated on their supposed landing zone should they decide to come to Earth, Enterprises.

Then again, what if they didn’t come to Enterprises? Could several of the devices be built—and powered—so as to be transportable?

Damon walked into the office at this point.

“Have the two of you come to any decision how to proceed?”

Farley looked to Tom to speak for them both.

“Well,” the younger Swift began, “we both feel there might be some method by which we can disrupt, or interrupt, the flight abilities of their ship. Not,” he hastened to add, “that I feel good about what that might cause.”

Damon understood. “Such as sending their ship to the ground?”

“Yeah.” It had a reluctant tone coming from the younger inventor.

His father sat down next to him and reached out to pat Tom’s knee. “We have been very anti weaponry for many, many years. And yet, we have not run into this sort of situation where just about anything might happen. I believe that is why it is so difficult for you or me to make any definitive decision on how to proceed. I suppose I would tell you, or anyone asking, that I’d make every effort to put things in place to cover us in case this turns out for the worst.”

He rose, walked to his desk and picked up a folder of papers before leaving he office without another word.

Tom looked to Farley Fairchild. “Guess we have our marching orders. I’ll call to get the small test ring out of storage and then you and I head for the lab to get started on one or more solutions.”

Three days were to fly past as they attempted to understand how to mess with the flying power they had both been intimately involved in creating.

When the call came over his TeleVoc, Tom immediately hoped it would be good news. It was, after all, coming from George Dilling.

“Answer... Yes, George?”

“Hey, Tom. We just received another brief message and... oh, wait one. Looks like a follow up coming. Want to hike over or should I read them to you?”

“Be there in four or five.”

As he left the office he told Trent he’d come back as soon as he could. “Let dad know we have another couple of messages.”

“Will do, Tom,” Trent said to the young man’s retreating back.

In Communications, George had a seat waiting at the console.

“Text only for the first one, but the second one came in video strength. Take a look.” He pulled up the single sentence text message.

**Friend Tom Swift. Notice to
you of we longer to visit the
small body you call Nestia as
Master says not important at
this time.**

“That was it?”

George nodded. “Yes, until this came five minutes later. I still have that translator box you brought back over. So, let’s look at what they say together. Unless you want privacy.”

“No. This just gets filed under ‘Can’t discuss’ with the rest of the things. So, let me see.”

The hand gestures began about three seconds before the verbal message.

“Tom Swift. Master can not intercept this so we must tell you of why plans changed. Master does not believe your (and there was no translation for what Tom believed might be “Nestia”) has been used as planned for our benefit. Master does not wish to view it so we will be landing on main planet. Please prepare for us to land at

your location.”

Tom so desperately wanted to send a further query to the aliens about the when and the exact location, but he was stumped. Until, that is, he decided simply asking a general question regarding any timing for any landing could not be thought of as being a response to the recent message.

After TeleVocing his father, who agreed it was about darned time the aliens gave them a timetable, Tom sat at the computer and composed his message. When he pressed the **SEND** button, he sat back, satisfied.

Tom Swift to Space Friends.

Urgently request or demand to know at what time and date you will arrive near our planet.

This is a demand from the head of our government. He is of belief this could be a hostile invasion. He is bothered by lack of any information to come from you regarding visit. Respond immediately.

He didn't believe he'd get anything back for some time and was a little taken aback when the bell gave a little *ding* announcing receipt of something less than a minute later.

Friend Tom Swift. Master is annoyed at demand but agrees to allow us to inform you. We are still one Earth week away from coming back into space. At that time we will be two of your daily rotations from our landing.

Addition. We will land within confines of your location. You are asked to provide coordinates of such location once we are in space.

“Oh,” was all he could think to say to the questioning look he received from Mike Jayston, the duty radioman. “Okay, then.” He sent a simple receipt of information back and left Communications expecting nothing more from them for about seven days.

That did not give him and Farley much time to come up with anything so he headed back to the lab. He arrived to find the man sitting at the computer monitor with a small grin on his face. He seemed so engrossed in something either he had seen, or within his own mind, that Tom nearly left.

“Oh! Tom. Glad to see you’re back. I believe I’ve found something we can, ermmm, exploit in the drive system. All the while assuming theirs works like the one you built.”

“The one you came up with the math for,” Tom reminded him.

“Sure. Whatever. But, take a look at this.” He pointed to the screen, so Tom sat down, scooted his chair closer and studied something he’d seen many times before. It was part of Farley’s original computations and formulae.

It took a few minutes before it dawned on Tom what he was looking at.

“Oh, wow.” He moved forward even more and took a new look at the part of one formula he believed was the one Farley had seen. “Well,” he said taking a deep breath, “that says a fairly concentrated magnetic beam aimed at their rings will set up a disturbance in the ability to create lift.”

They chorused, “Assuming that’s what they use.” Both men, in spite of the seriousness of the situation, laughed.

That statement was almost becoming a mantra.

Of the four days they allowed themselves, only two passed before both men believed they had their device designed. It was looking as if it would include a small radiating antenna of just five inches across, but the resulting emission had to be contained and even concentrated or over a mere thousand feet of travel the force “beam” would dissipate far too much.

“Of course, Tom,” Farley said with a sigh, “would that we had that containing field as an option. I don’t have an idea at all how to go about that!”

Tom could only grin. He told his Fellow about how he had devised a way to surround a double field of power beams. He said they could begin by looking at the generating ring from Tom’s own Attractatron. That ring of energy kept both the attracting and the repulsing fields from interfering with each other as well as containing the outer limits of the overall bundle.

It added another four inches in overall width to the design for the *anti-mag ray* antenna width, but that still made the radiating

portion appear puny and insignificant unless viewed close up. Under that fully aim-able antenna would need to be one of Tom's largest power pods. At more than nine feet across, the globular pod could still be dug into the ground along with the electronics necessary to operate the thing.

Then, a cap could be placed over the main bulk leaving just the antenna and a short swivel mount above ground.

Tom immediately ordered three of the pods to be delivered from the Citadel. He got no argument over his "in one day" demand.

Next, a team from the Grounds Facilities group headed across to the far hill where they used a combination of one of Tom's atomic earth blasters along with some heavy-lifting containers to haul away the debris left over. That was soon taken to a dumpsite fifteen miles to the south.

Tom came over to inspect the three holes—spaced about four hundred feet apart.

"Looking very good, guys. Thanks. We are having the contents for those holes built at the Construction Company and we'll get you back in to cover the upper plates at ground level tomorrow late in the morning."

He reminded them of the need for secrecy regarding both the holes and what they had been told would be in them.

"If you're thinking about the old loose lips sink ships thing, then amend that," Bud told them as he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Tom, "to 'One loose tongue and we're all hung!'"

Everyone agreed secrecy was of utmost importance.

When they got back to the office Damon suggested he and Tom craft a memo to go out to all employees. When Bud asked about telling the press, the older Swift shook his head.

"Presidential orders to not do that right now, Bud."

"Nuts!"

The power pods required a couple extra hours as Tom had requested a small modification to them so he might run them at 99% full power for a few minutes longer per charge cycle.

His *Super Queen* was sent to New Mexico to stand by for them to be readied for transport. Red Jones and Zimby Cox sat in the giant jet's lounge waiting for the word to come from the loading crew. When it did—at 7:42 that evening—Red headed for the cockpit while Zimby headed outside to watch as the cargo pod was first lowered into the special pit, Red taxied the jet directly over the top, and the

cargo pod was quickly hoisted and secured inside the fuselage.

They took off eleven minutes later, jetting straight to Shopton.

During the time of their three-hour flight, Tom and a team of eleven were doing final preparation to the three holes into which the pods and equipment would be lowered. His plans were to have everything installed and covered before the sun came up the next morning.

That would give them at least one full day before the expected arrival.

But, the inventor pondered as he helped get a special lining membrane into the third hole, will that be enough?

Not the sort of man to stand around and boss people, he had jumped into the first hole to help even out one spot that might keep a side of that pod tilted. By the time he'd finished inspecting and working in the third one, Tom's trousers had two torn knees, he had a small place below his left knee that was bleeding a little, and he was exhausted.

As were the others.

Twice, before the pods actually arrived at Enterprises, one of the company's Whirling Duck helicopters rose from the grounds and landed fifty or so feet from the first hole. The night staff in the cafeteria provided the workers with cold drinks and warm food to see them through.

At 1:05 am the first of the power pods had been air-lifted to the crest of the hill and lowered into the hole.

The helo was unhooked and immediately flew back to pick up the second pod.

Tom TeleVoc'd Slim Davis who was doing pilot duty.

"Slim? Can you delay coming with the next pod by about half an hour? We have a lot of stuff to do before this one is ready to go."

"Roger that, skipper. I'll get things connected and stand by for your call. It's just a two-minute hop over to where you are. Need anything else while I'm able to grab it?"

"Don't think so, but thanks!"

The team had uncovered the power connection to make certain it was clean and dry. It was. Next, they'd begun connecting the electronics package to a small tie down loop on the side of the case. That performed both the duty of allowing the pod to be lifted and moved, and now it was perfectly positioned to hang the oblong box of outside equipment from.

That left just the mounting of the antenna and its aiming base to the very top.

Tom and Farley had debated if the antenna required a deep mount or not. Tom reasoned that the beam they would send out did not actually bear any weight from the targeted vehicle; it was energy only.

Farley had suggested they might want to put a very large steel plate over the top of the hole and weld the antenna base to that.

“Perhaps I’ve seen too many movies where physics are ignored and some four-year-old can pick up and toss around an Army tank without that weight being transferred to her tiny legs!”

It was something the inventor ran into all the time, especially when talking about his Attractatrons. Sure they could grab onto an object with a practically unbreakable grip, but it took anchoring them to something like the Moon or Earth or even Mars to give them the leverage to actually move objects and to not get flung around themselves.

Farley relented and agreed the plate approach was unnecessary.

“Besides,” he said with a slight blush, “I just figured out all that metal might be detectable even if covered by dirt and stuff.”

Work was complete and a non-firing systems check accomplished by a quarter past four in the morning.

Most of the installation team headed back in the Duck while Tom asked Slim to come back for him in ten minutes. He had one more thing to do.

A call to the control tower had him connected with Bud who had been standing by in the office, sitting at Tom’s desk.

“Okay, flyboy. Hopefully I can make my mouth form the right words, but it is ready for the comms interconnect test. Go ahead.”

“You sound bushed, skipper, but here goes.”

He pressed a button on a small box that was connected to the computer. A red LED came on then another and the third. They soon turned green and blinked.

“I’m seeing three greens. How about up there?”

“Three, Bud. Thanks. Now head home to Sandy and give her my apologies for keeping you after school.”

Once Slim picked up the weary man, he dropped him off right next to his car. Tom climbed in, started it up, and drove home.

Bashalli woke up as he entered the bedroom.

“Want me to let you sleep in?”

He took off his filthy shirt and got out of his trousers. “No,” he told her coming over to give her a kiss. “I have so much to do; get me up at seven-thirty, please.”

“Kay,” she told him and was soon back to sleep.

Tom followed her into slumber within less than a minute.

* * * * *

It was difficult, but he forced himself to get up and climb under a warm shower at 7:34 am. He was dressed in clean clothes and downstairs eleven minutes later.

“I don’t know how your mother, or any boy’s mother, puts up with how hard you all are on pants!” she said with hands on her hips, but a smile on her lips for her husband.

“At least Bart prefers books and journals to sliding around on rocks and concrete,” he told her taking the waiting travel mug of coffee and the breakfast burrito she had already made for him.

Another kiss was shared, this time longer and stronger than the one a few hours earlier, and he departed for Enterprises.

He stopped at the Executive’s gate and asked the guard if there had been any messages for him.

“Nothing so far, Tom. Need me to check with anybody?”

Tom told him that was not necessary and drove through and over to the parking lot next to the Administration building.

Trent—a man who could anticipate requirements with uncanny accuracy—held out a steaming cup of coffee to Tom as he started walking by the outer desk.

“No notes, messages or missives for you, but your father left word yesterday he’d appreciate a call,” and Trent tapped his own collar to indicate the TeleVoc pin —something he tried to never use —”any time after 7:45. Which, by coincidence, it has been for exactly fifteen minutes.”

Tom headed into the office, set his coffee down and tapped his pin.

“Good morning, Son. Not sure how late you were up there but you must be beat. So, quick update and then maybe you head for the little apartment next to the lab?”

“Maybe, Dad. So, everything went perfectly up the hill...” and he mentioned everything they accomplished even up to the test Bud assisted with before they’d gone home.

“Wonderful. I am heading for a meeting with the Mayor and Town Council to let them know to not call out the forces or call in the military until we say they need to. They all need some reassurance. So, you still thinking it could be today?”

“No. They said they would call once they reach normal space, which I suppose means they slow down to sub-light speeds. Then, I think it will take them another day or thereabouts to get close.”

His father said he would be in the office before 10:00 and they disconnected.

Nothing was truly going on so Tom went to the conference area of the office, pressed a button to lower a few of the armrests, and lay down on the makeshift couch.

He was so tired even his father coming in laughing at something he'd said or heard in Trent's office area failed to rouse him.

Damon let his son rest until noon when he gave Tom's shoulder a little shake.

“Rise and shine, Son. We just received a new call from the aliens.”

Tom opened first one eye, then the other, and sat up with a yawn. Damon handed him a fresh and hot cup, which the younger Swift drank before standing.

The two men walked to Communications and to the small special room down the main hall. George was waiting for them, pointing at the monitor.

“Look.”

**Friend Tom Swift. We now tell
you our landing will be in two day
rotations of planet. Please send
coordinates of location for our
vessel to set on.**

Tom looked at his father who agreed they might just as well send the specific place within their grounds where Harlan was getting ready to set his team up.

“They're coming whether we like it or not so we might as well get them here on our terms!”

CHAPTER 13 /

LANDING AND DEBARKATION

ANGIE STOOD with Tom, Damon, Bud and Harlan as the incredibly dark gray saucer ship became visible once it dropped through the cloud cover over Enterprises.

In each of their minds was the question of whether any of the military groups who had endlessly groused about not being allowed to protect the United States were actually somewhere in the surrounding area, weapons poised and ready. Or, had they finally gotten through their collective heads that this would be a very bad thing for them to do?

Angie had worked night and day trying to hammer that concept into few of the harder-headed individuals and organizations out there.

Without thinking, Angie looped her left arm through Tom's right and he could feel her shivering. When she realized what she was doing, she whispered, "Sorry," from the side of her mouth. But she did not let go.

It had been agreed that nobody knew of the capabilities of these aliens when it came to intercepting radio broadcasts, or even the TeleVoc pins, so anything needing to be said was going to be just that... said verbally. Harlan stepped over to them.

"Do you have the remote for those mag rays up the hill?" Harlan inquired from the side of his mouth.

"Yeah," the inventor replied. "Because they are seeming to be coming in for a nice landing I'm a bit loathe to press the button."

Harlan lightly cleared his throat. "Okay. Agreed. As soon as they touch down and we see one of them, please use that device of yours to tell them we need their ship in the hangar we've prepared. If they want to know why tell them it is for security from anyone outside of our walls."

Tom knew the hangar was outfitted with surveillance equipment and had been coated on the inside with the spray-in tomasite to keep all radiations, including, they all hoped, communications that were inside, just that, and to keep the aliens from snooping on things outside the hangar.

It could if required, within fifteen seconds, have the big doors in front slide shut and locked.

"I know you have reservations about our ability to keep them

shut inside, but I feel better about this.”

Or they will just slip through whatever other dimensional thing they use and go wherever they want, Tom was thinking.

Tom had scoffed at the Security man’s idea four days earlier because if the alien ship could traverse light years of space, they certainly could just smash their way out should they not wish to be confined.

Harlan and Phil Radnor had finally convinced him it was more of a measure the public might be told about should there come a great cry over what the Swifts were doing to protect them.

Tom, and especially Damon, marveled at how slowly the ship was dropping. Given its speed capabilities it seemed almost like they were being very tentative about their arrival.

Then, seven minutes after the ship was first visible to the naked eye, it touched lightly down on a set of five extendable legs that unfolded all around the perimeter of the vessel. These held the ship above the asphalt by about three feet.

Over the next nine minutes nothing happened and so Tom stepped away from his people and approached the ship. It had landed almost two hundred yards away; he halted at the halfway point and held up his translator and waved it a few times.

With a suddenness that startled them all, a doorway opened and a ramp extended to the ground all in less than two seconds.

Tom held his ground muttering to himself, “I’d better be right about this!”

He could not see into the interior of the ship, but something was moving. A moment later one of the beings came to the door holding his own translator device.

The one in the inventor’s hand vibrated indicating an incoming message. He looked down at the screen.”

“Greetings Tom Swift. I am pleased you have come to greet us. May we come outside of this ship?”

Tom messaged back, “Actually, for reasons of security we wish to ask you to move the ship to the structure directly behind you. The one with the opening in the front.” He thought if he should add something more and then sent, “The local individuals are overly curious about your arrival and we do not wish to have them view your ship or your fellow beings.”

Row was closely studying his device. When he looked up it was to make a sort of bow to Tom. He then turned around, the ramp came up and the door closed. Ten seconds later the ship lifted its legs and

hovered at that same altitude slipping backward and into the hangar.

The legs came back down as did the ramp. Once again the alien came down the ramp. This time Tom was standing within fifty feet of the ship. He was quickly joined by the others.

Row was also soon joined by all but one of the other aliens Tom had already met. But, coming from the ship behind them were nearly three times the number, and like the first beings he'd met, Tom had trouble immediately telling them apart.

Row knew Tom had the portable translator he'd developed for their first Earth visit years earlier in his hand and reached out to tap his own version gently.

He began the complex, six-fingered finger speak the beings used to communicate other than to their own kind. For that they apparently used telepathy.

"Greetings, Tom Swift," the device spoke as it performed its near-immediate translation. "I am Row. We have met. We are friends to Tom Swift."

"Greeting to you and the others," the inventor returned. "I see many more of you today." His eyes scanned the group before him.

"Yes, that is a correct observation. With me you will view Beings you have seen on previous visit. Ruv, Ral, Rux, Ryd and Rol. Now, I bring others of my race. Four are designated Rol in addition to Rol. These are Rol One, Rol Two and others similarly designated."

Others mentioned by name included Rac, Raw, Ran and Rop. Each one, at mention of their name, stepped forward.

He noticed a difference in the coloration of two of the beings. They were not the almost uniformly gray of the others; they had a blue tinge to their skin. They had not been specifically introduced.

"Are those two different from you and the others?" he asked.

Row turned to look at where Tom was pointing. He did an upper body tilt that was his version of a nod—a motion they had learned from Tom on their visit.

"That is what you designate as a female of our kind," he explained.

Tom was unable to say anything for a moment. This was a momentous occasion for him as all the Friends he had previously met were males.

"I feel honored," he told the alien leader. A thought occurred to him, so he asked, "May I address them directly or is that not allowed in your culture?"

Row, again, nodded. “You may speak to them, but they will give no answer until they come to be finished with their... their... I believe your word is *frightening* over seeing someone so different to them. Do not touch them on their appendages as that is reserved for their mated one.”

Tom laughed, something he knew Row would understand. It was also slightly odd they recognized alien races that became their Masters. Still...

“We have similar customs with our females, although some of them like being touched.” This brought out what sufficed for a smile on the alien’s face.

Damon stepped forward to address the alien leader using Tom’s hand-held device.

“Row, I am Damon Swift. We met when you came to Earth before. At one time you referred to me as ‘Earlier Swift.’ May I ask a question?”

Row looked uncomfortable, if that were possible on a face that had little by way of facial expressions. He finally made his bow as if saying the answer was ‘yes’.

As Tom recorded his father and the translation was sent to Row’s device, the older man laid out the concerns of humanity over this visit and the lack of communication of the reasons for them coming back after a long period of absence. He included the bad feelings that had come about with the aliens’ lack of answers about their intent.

“Can you understand this?” he ended with.

Row watched the translation before turning to several of his crew. Over the next few moments at least five of them looked studiously at the translator device as they appeared to be seeing both sides of the recent conversations.

When the leader turned back to Tom and Damon he bowed, now his face showing what seemed to be sadness.

As his fingers began moving again, Tom and Damon looked at the device in the younger man’s hand.

“There is a great sadness among us. We fear we have displeased you and that you no longer wish to view us as your friends. If this is true all we can do is to state we have been ordered to be here by our Masters. This was not our decision. We have no desire to anger you. We can not state similar about Masters. Great sorry is inside us.”

Tom could not help but ask, “How can your Masters control you now? Can you not make decisions for yourselves?”

Row looked at his box before doing something Tom had never known any of the aliens could do. With a look of deep concentration on its face, Tom's TeleVoc pin made a strange noise inside his head.

A ghostly *hint* of a voice came to him.

"Tom Swift. Sorrow. Master control absolute. Would have perished if no visitation made now. If you able to hear me and understand, touch fleshy object in center of your face."

Tom reached up to touch his nose. He was absolutely amazed the alien could communicate directly with him. And, where many people would be greatly bothered by a "voice inside my head" communication, the truth was that anyone within the Swift's organizations who used a TeleVoc was fairly used to that phenomenon.

"More communication later," came to him slightly louder this time and he understood this was a great strain on the alien. His small device vibrated again and he looked in time to see it was announcing the aliens must return to their ship. At the end of the brief message was:

"Gravity and your atmosphere make remaining outside ship difficult. We will be back to speak in one planetary rotation from landing time."

This communicated, the aliens all turned as one and walked slowly—and to at least Bud's eyes, rather laboriously—up the ramp and into their ship. The ramp slid up and the door slid down and it was sealed.

Damon stepped forward.

"Did you get something inside your head from them?" he asked rather astounded at what he had heard and felt.

"Yeah. I guess they can do things we never dreamed. Maybe even they have to do that to keep their Masters from overhearing them. Uhh, do we dare shut the hangar?"

Now, Harlan came over. "I heard that and I say we give it a try. You did explain about prying eyes from our neighbors. Let's hope they remember that and do not take exception. I'd hate to have to rebuild that hangar out of my Security budget!"

Damon reached into his jacket pocket pulling out a remote control for the door mechanism.

"Here goes..." he said pressing the only button on it.

Slowly, the doors began coming in from both sides. Without any consultation or conversation, the Enterprises people began moving back, also slowly, as if a few yards might make a difference.

But, there was no indication from the ship they were doing anything other than allowing this closing off to happen.

A minute later the doors touched and the noises of the electric motors and the closure belts ceased.

“Can someone please grab me?” came Angie’s voice. “My legs seem to want to collapse.”

Bud reached over and put an arm around her shoulders. “Need to sit down?”

She took two ragged-sounding breaths before saying, “No. Just give me a minute. I’m not used to this sort of action or drama.” She reached up with her right hand and wiped a slight glistening of perspiration from her face and neck before nodding.

Bud loosened his hold but did not remove his arm until she stepped to the side and nodded once again. “Better. Thanks, Bud.”

They walked back to the car and drove to the Administration building where they went up and sat in the conference area of the big office.

On the way, Tom had TeleVoc’d the control tower asking them to keep a very close eye on the entire hangar and to notify him and Damon if anything changed.

“Will do, skipper!”

After Trent brought in coffee for most of them, and a tea for Angie, they sat in silence, each one contemplating what they might say. Nothing came to any of them for five minutes. Finally, Tom broke the silence.

“Dad says he also heard something that must have been projected from Row into our TeleVoc pins. Did any of you hear his message to me?”

Everyone else shook their heads.

“Okay, that tells me they can be selective in who they telepathically talk to. Basically he passed a message they are being forced by the Masters to make this trip and landing. He did not give any hint of why or what is to come, but I detected a great deal of sadness coming from his thoughts.”

Angie looked at the younger inventor. “Are we in deep trouble here? I only ask because I agreed to call the President after the landing to provide my assessment of the situation.” She looked from Tom to Damon hopefully.

Damon answered for them all. “I believe you can tell the President they have landed and have communicated with Tom and they are not immediately looking like a threat. Do you agree, Son?”

“Yes I do. Not sure exactly why, but I do not get a feeling Row and the other Friends—and yes, I am going back to thinking of them as our Space *Friends*—will allow something bad to happen. Even if it is inevitable I believe he or they will tell us in advance. Now we all know they can get to me via the pin, that is.” He reached up to point at his collar.

They asked if everyone should step outside while Angie made her call and she shook her head. “Nope. I need you all here in case a question comes up I can’t answer.”

Thirty-two minutes later the call concluded and they all sat back feeling better about what was going on.

The President told Angie and the others he had already received about a half dozen reports, mostly from the military, telling him of the apparent peaceful arrival and that he knew they had been locked into the large hanger at the east side of Enterprises.

“Yes. That does mean I have eyes in the area. And, as long as you promise no reprisals I will tell you it is the Marine guard detail up the hill from you folks at the gate of that controlled neighborhood. I had no idea they had been ordered by their General, but rest assured that sort of surveillance is not what I intended and have counter-ordered it to cease.”

Angie looked with concern to Damon. He shook his head and mouthed, “Perhaps it is better,” and raised an eyebrow.

“Mr. President? Mr. Swift wonders if it might not be a good idea to have them keeping an eye on things. As long as they are the only ones. As for me, I am going to suggest that the FAA tower team up there be cautioned they are to not be making any reports about this. For one, if they use radio it might be intercepted and we could find ourselves right back in rumor hell.”

The man in Washington agreed, thanked them for the report and asked to be advised after the meeting the following day. “Or, if anything else happens in between!”

Harlan’s eyes went wide two minutes after the call ended, and he reached up to tap his TeleVoc. The others watched as he “spoke” to someone for only a few seconds. He tapped the pin again and looked at them

“That was Gary. He’s on duty watching the monitors from the six cameras inside the hangar. He just was reporting the ship lowered itself down by retracting its legs, and then... nothing. He’ll call if there is any other movement.”

That night as they prepared for bed, Bashalli asked her husband

if he could tell her anything.

“Well,” he replied coming over to take her in his arms, “the Space Friends landed, a bunch of them came down a ramp and we talked, or what passes for talking, for about ten minutes. Then, they got back into the ship telling me they could come out again tomorrow. Don’t worry, though. Harlan has an entire team keeping watch visually and through microphones. If someone in that hangar so much as lets out a tiny burp, we’ll know.” He tried to grin reassuringly at her. It didn't work. She still looked very concerned.

“So, you have called them your Space Friends for the first time in many months. What has changed?”

He tried to explain how the communications had gone and even the evident sadness on the face of Row and his fellow beings.

“I really do believe they did not want this trip to happen and will do everything they can to mitigate anything less than good.”

She hugged him tighter for a few seconds before heading for the bathroom to remove what little makeup she wore—mostly a little eye shadow and some nearly unnoticeable blusher.

When she joined him in bed she snuggled against him.

“Bart is very curious and wants me to ask you if he can come see the funny aliens. I have to say I really do not believe that is a good idea. What do you think?”

“Until we know more, or until they have been here a few days, I am not even allowing employees outside of dad, me and the Security people to go within five hundred yards of that hangar. Other than, of course, the people who work in the next building over who are finishing an order for the Toads. Even then, they are two hundred yards away with a double row of trucks and vans parked in between. We have several people carrier trucks standing by to evacuate them in an emergency.”

She nodded into his chest and then rolled to her back, picking up a magazine she wanted to read.

A half hour later they turned off the lights and fell asleep holding onto each other’s hand.

At breakfast, which was a little early so Tom could get back to work before 7:45, Bart asked about the aliens.

“Well, they came to land yesterday and we talked for a few minutes before they got very tired from our planet having more than twice the gravity their planet has. So, it won’t be until later today I see them again. Why?” he asked knowing his son’s desire.

“I want to see them for myself,” the boy stated. “I want to be the

first one in my school to see them. Can I, daddy? Can I?”

“You’ve seen pictures and videos of them from the first time they came here. And, I can show you more from today when I get home.”

This was not a satisfactory answer in the young boy’s mind. He made it clear he meant he wanted to see them live.

Bashalli came to Tom’s rescue. “You will not see them today because your school is taking a bus trip down to Albany to see this state’s capital and to meet a couple of the men and women who represent our area. You will not be back until just before dinner and your father will be home about then. So, not tonight... and not until he says it is okay. Now, stop asking about it, eat your omelet, and let Amanda get you and Mary ready for school.”

When he got up to leave, Tom kissed Bashalli on her cheek and whispered, “Thank you for the save. I’ll call if anything interesting happens.”

With that he was out the door.

He drove straight out to the hangar with the alien ship. Outside, sitting in one of the Security trucks, were Harlan, Phil, and a woman Tom knew had been a recent hire from the FBI. She had passed all the tests, took all the training in Quantico, Virginia, and then decided the sort of hours and inherent dangers of the job was not what she really wanted. She had a young daughter to think about.

Harlan had heard about her being an exceptional student from an old acquaintance in DC, so he had spoken with Damon and a job offer was made that same day.

Tom climbed in saying hello to them.

“Before anyone asks,” the woman, Olympia Carpenter, told him, “Everything has been more than quiet. Nothing from the microphones, nothing from the visuals and nothing from any sensors in there.” She pointed at the hangar.

Tom grinned. “I guess I tuckered them out yesterday with all the small talk.” He knew both Harlan and Phil understood it was anything but small talk.

Phil asked, “When do you think they’ll pop back out?”

“Well, we saw them around two yesterday and they went back inside at five before three, so... two again?” he said making a guess.

The four sat in the truck another five minutes before Tom excused himself.

“Of course, if anything happens or we get a peep out of them, I’ll let you know immediately. Oh, by the way, I did get a call and message last night around ten from Dan Perkins. He said to let you

know he'd received a call from an unnamed man who told him he had exclusive photos of the aliens and some sort of fight you had with them before you subdued them. He wanted ten thousand bucks for the files."

Tom had to smile. Some people would try to do just about anything to make a dishonest dollar from a situation such as this. He walked back to his car shaking his head.

Because Dan Perkins had been living up to his promises, Tom decided he should tell him about how any photographs would be faked and worth less than the emails they were printed on.

CHAPTER 14 /

OH, (*unprintable*), IT'S A MONSTER!

AS IF keeping to an absolute schedule, the ship's door opened and the ramp slid out precisely at 2:06 pm, the landing moment from the previous day.

Spotting this on the monitor Tom was now seated at, he TeleVoc'd his father who was sitting in a Security truck in front of the Hangar.

"They have opened their door but have not stepped out. I think they might be waiting for the hangar doors to open, Dad. I'll be right there."

He left the building in a hurry and jumped into the car that was waiting with Bud in the driver's seat.

"Step on it, flyboy. They seem to be ready to come out."

The convertible zoomed off kicking up some loose dirt and gravel as it hurrying toward the hangar more than a mile away. They arrived in record time coming to a screeching halt.

Both men got to Damon and Harlan's side in seconds and took a few deep breaths.

In a few seconds, and to Tom's mind as soon as the Space Friends had spotted his arrival after the big doors opened, the first of them appeared at the top of the ramp and sort of waddled down. At the bottom, it—and Tom was fairly certain this was Row—waited until the next four appeared and repeated his waddle to the bottom. The stepped forward to the edge of the hangar opening and paused.

Tom and the others began walking forward. In a moment the aliens also stepped forward coming to a halt just inside the hangar doors. Tom's device told him there was an incoming message, and he could see Row's fingers moving.

"Tom Swift. We find the brightness of your light to cause pain to our eyes. Forgive us for not coming farther out of this structure."

It was obvious he was starting to sign something else when a blood-curdling roar came from the ship. All eyes turned to the ship.

Something hideous appeared in the door of the space saucer. It was something out of a nightmare or at the very least an exceptionally scary movie. It also roared like something primal and frightening.

From behind the main group came an audible gasp from one of

the technicians and the sounds of running feet.

What now confronted Tom and Bud was a veritable monster! The flyer felt his heart skip a beat and his knees go a bit wobbly.

He looked to Tom who was standing there with a knowing look on his face.

Bud was confused. Then he swore before adding, "It's a (and he used an unprintable word) monster!"

He was torn between turning and running, and remaining to ask his friend why he was not in a panic.

Tom made that decision for him. "Bud? I'd like you to meet one of the aliens that we located the remains of in that cavern on Phobos. The ones that left the crumbling equipment and that rather spooky statue."

It was true. While on a mission to push the small Martian moon back into position—a positional change later determined to be the result of an errant gravity-generating stone that would surge into full power periodically—Tom and Bud had located a huge underground cavern near what would have been the equivalent of the north polar region of the larger of the two moons swinging around the distant planet.

Inside had been the crumbling remnants of some civilization that had once used the moon as a base.

It was mostly in ruins, but at least two exhibits had taken everybody's attention and also their breath.

First, was a statue of a huge beast easily twice the size of a man. It had lost one of its long and dangerous-looking fangs but stood in silent testimony of the ferociousness of the former residents.

The second one appeared to have been an actual one of those beings preserved inside a display case. Time had done its best to ravage the flesh and features, but the eyes—no doubt artificial—continued to stare with malevolence at those standing in front of it.

The shocking thing had been, both examples looked exceptionally reptilian and gave every indication these creatures had some distant cousins in the Tyrannosaurus Rex, or Thunder Lizards, of Earth's early days!

And, so did this monstrosity in front of them.

"What the you-know-what is that?"

Cautiously, Tom ventured, "I do not know, Bud. The good thing, it does not seem to be charging at us right now, so—"

He stopped when a noise came from the nearby saucer ship.

They glanced to their right in time to see six more of the small alien beings rushing from the ship trying to get in between the lizard and the two men. Four of them were making what looked like, “Go back!” motions with their thin arms.

While the others attempted to get to at least one side of the beast and herd it away, Row approached Tom, head leaning forward in what the inventor recognized as their version of a bowed head. With no actual neck they could hardly do anything more than that.

Tom was stunned when his TeleVoc responded to a signal. The identifier came in as, “Friend.” It was as clear as if it came from another TeleVoc. He slowly reached up to tap his pin.

“Friend, Tom Swift. We make greatest of apologies for the appearance of our Master.”

Tom’s eyes went wide as he looked at Row who was doing his best to nod while the others were attempting to herd the beast inside.

“Yes. We have computed more completely how your little communication device functions and believe it will provide the better method than the picture boxes. Also, there will be no opportunity for the Master, or others, to hear what we tell each other.”

Tom whispered what had come into his mind to Bud who stood by his side, saying nothing but watching with a small level of amusement as the six Friends managed to get the dinosaur to begin moving back toward the ramp of the ship.

Tom silently spoke back to Row.

“I understand your message and am flattered you would use my technology in this way. Thank you.”

Row once again nodded. “Yes. We are not allowed to hide our thought communications with each other from the Masters. Can you see the small area on the front of its skull above its eyes? The shape we believe you call a *circle*?”

Tom looked. There was a three-to-four-inch disc of about one inch in thickness visible at the very front of the creature’s skull, something Tom had not noticed until it was pointed out.

“Yes. I see that.”

Another nod came from Row. “It is implanted in all Masters so they can track us by our thought communications. If we were capable of violence, we would smash those so we might be free of their control. The previous Masters were more fair with us. These Masters are cruel. It is not able to listen to this form of

communications.”

Tom was doing double duty communicating with the Friends and passing what was going on to those around him.

“Can you communicate with the small devices worn by these other people who are with me? I can tell you their identifiers.”

After a conference between Row and the four others who were not involved in getting the Master to turn around and go inside, Tom was asked what these new identifiers were. He told them, one at a time and pointing to that person.

His father’s hand flew up to his own pin. “I’ll be damned! It is talking to me now.”

Harlan repeated this info and Bud as well.

They all heard the question, “Does the female who was with you the previous time belong to the same group of those we might speak with as we do with you?”

Tom turned to Angie who was looking like the last kid on the playground to be picked for a team.

Looking back at Row, Tom nodded. “Yes. Her identifier is Angie Jackson and she is a special liaison—do you understand that concept?”

“Yes.”

“Fine, then she has special status within the rulers of this nation and they communicate to others around our planet. She may be trusted with all communications.”

Row stepped forward but quickly retreated when the sun was obviously a source of pain.

Tom whispered something to Bud who jogged back to his car.

“I have just told the one called Bud Barclay to go have a special piece of, well, it is not quite equipment... anyway, he is going to bring back something that might provide protection to your eyes from our sun... I mean our star.”

“I must return to see the Master is subdued and is not about to do something not pleasant.” Row turned and walked to the ship, heading up the ramp and inside.

This time the door did not close.

“Sunglasses, Son?” Damon asked with a quizzical smile.

“Exactly. Bud can use a photo of them standing next to me to figure head size and the Optics folks can run up a pair in a few minutes.”

Angie left with Bud to report to the President.

The flyer returned twenty-six minutes later with an apparatus of a stretchy cloth band and a shield tall and wide enough to cover the entire upper “face” area of the aliens.

On a hunch, Tom tapped his pin and intoned, “Row.”

After a minute he looked at his father. “Well, I guess they can call us but we can’t call them. So, here goes...” and saying that he stepped forward heading for the inside of the hangar.

When he was ten feet from the ramp he called out, “Row? It’s Tom.”

The alien appeared at the door almost as if he had been standing right there, waiting.

He looked down at Tom and then at the band and shade hanging from the inventor’s right hand. With a smile he came down the ramp faster than Tom had seen any of them moving. Inside Tom’s head came, “It pleases me to see what I can consider to be your solution to the pain from the brightness of your star... I mean your *sun*.”

Tom sort of mimed how to put the shade on and handed it to Row.

Now, it became obvious why the aliens never wore headgear. Their arms were about three inches too short to properly position it on his head. Looking a little sad he began to hand it back.

“Wait. Let me put that on you and then figure out a way, if it works, to make something to place them on all of your heads.”

“Except for the Master if you will be that kind. It does not make me feel gladness to believe the Master will be spared.”

Tom smiled and nodded as he reached over and slipped the band over Row’s head. With a small adjustment the sun shade and glare shield was in proper position.

He followed the inventor out of the big doors and into the direct afternoon sun. Looking around, the Space Friend appeared to be very satisfied with the effect.

“This will allow us to move freely outside. Our thanks to you.”

A thought came to Tom. “Why did you not say you had a problem with the sun on your first visit?”

Row seemed to ponder this a moment.

“We did not believe it was a proper statement to make to you, our host. And, when inside that ship it did not bother us. Outside, and mostly in the jungle area you took us, it was sometimes fine and

sometimes not fine. We could not decide what information might assist you so we kept silent.”

Tom was about to reply when he heard the sounds of brakes outside. He looked in time to see Angie launch herself from one of the small electric runabouts kept on Enterprises’ premises. She called out to him as she approached.

“Thought you were going wait on those shades and to keep me in the loop, Tom.” It was just a statement and not a rebuke. He could see that in her face.

“Sorry. I thought about how to help our friends with the whole sunshine thing as quickly as possible. Look.” He pointed to a rather pleased alien who was turning around and looking everywhere.

“Nice shades,” she responded. “Umm, do you think I can have a word with our visitor? Is this the one known as Row?”

Tom told her it was, indeed, Row, and she was welcome to have a talk. “I can just wait over there,” he offered pointing an to place in particular.

“No. You stay and be part of this as well.” She faced Row and tapped her TeleVoc pin. When she got no response., Tom told her of his belief they had not managed to decipher calls coming in. Aloud, she addressed the alien. “Can we speak?” She pointed to her collar and the visible pin. Row stopped moving and closed his eyes.

“Yes, Angie Jackson.”

“You can just call me Angie,” she told him but seeing Tom’s slight shake of his head she did not follow up on that. “I wish to ask questions that come from the man who is the leader of this nation. May I?”

Row nodded.

She put several questions to him, which he answered with short, often one-word replies, but it was the last one that made Tom tense.

“What is the ultimate goal of your Masters for coming to the Earth?”

Row took a minute to answer. Tom believed he would not be conferring with those inside as that method left things open to the Master hearing their thoughts. When he spoke to them, it was with evident sadness.

“Tom and Angie. Mine is a race that would have perished fifty generations ago had we not been discovered by the first Masters. Those were five Masters ago for us.”

He told them of how each race that had taken over had done so by slaughtering the previous race. Only in the case of the first ones

did no killing occur. In fact, that race simply landed, accessed the situation with the native race, and decided there was a danger the small, unprotected and weaponless race could fall prey to just about anything, including at least two predatory species on their own planet.

They had offered their protection so long as Row's ancestors agreed to perform all menial tasks requested of them.

At first they had been simple things dealing with maintenance of clothing, gathering and presentation of foods, and other such things. Within two generations these Masters began to train their conquests in the repair of their space ships. Then came their weapons and many other items of technology.

Rows people were not stupid nor were they without motives of their own.

“However, over the generations that came the first Masters were attacked by those who became our second Masters. Like the first they wished to give protection to my people in return for manual labor.”

Angie broke in. “I would suppose the relationship grew stronger with each new generation. Were there problems with new Masters?”

“Our third Masters were impatient and harsh when they believed my people were not performing to their standards. Some of my people died and some were forced into the service of exploration. Places the Masters did not wish to travel themselves. You see, that set of Masters lived for only one-fifth the lifespan of my people.”

That explained to Tom how the first of the aliens had found themselves on Earth. But, unable to fend for themselves, and likely with little or no medications or research capability to devise any, they succumbed to both animals and bacteria on Earth.

The fourth Masters had been more gentle with Row's people but they had lasted only one-and-a-half generations before the reptiles took over.

That made Tom curious.

“But, on one of the moons above Mars we discovered the remains of their civilization. And it was many millennia old.”

“They were the third Masters and it was early in their control of us. We believe these new Masters to be related to those but not the same beings.”

Both Tom and Angie had to digest that information. While they did and held a verbal chat, Row returned to his examination of the surrounding area.

Once they were ready to speak again, he turned to them.

“I have considered an unspoken question. Why did we never rise up and kill the Masters. Is that an acceptable thought?”

They had to agree it was on their minds.

“Then I shall inform you that we remain unable to direct our own people for greater than about one generation. Tom may be able to concur that the longer we were away from our home world and the influence of the Masters, the more we came to try to do things on our own. And, we were mostly not successful. We simply do not have the knowledge or the training or understanding of how to function without some sort of ruling race.

“We prefer it to be this way... except for now. For this voyage. Because we never wished to have any of the Masters visit your planet we were most disruptive of their plans and of the functioning of this ship. But, we could not delay for all time. For this I am so, so sorry to you Tom. I believe it to be a betrayal of our being your friends.”

Tom had to ask, “Can you leave when you wish?”

“No. The Master would certainly kill us and then we could exert no influence over its desire to take over.”

Tom didn’t want to ask what the Master might like to take over. He could do without another night of nightmares.

By the sixth day of the aliens being at Enterprises, Tom and the people in Optics had not only created just the right number of band and visor sets for their Friends, they had also built a device one of Row’s people could walk under, press a switch, and the band would be placed on their heads, or removed when that was desired.

Something Tom noted with satisfaction was that the three times the Master came out of the ship, it had great trouble looking directly outside while the sun was up. Even better, the inventor could see the band and shade that worked quite well for the Friends could never be worn by the reptile.

Of course, with good news comes bad, and the reptile Master figured out it ought to only leave the ship as soon as the sun went down.

And, that brought some more good news.

The reptile had exceptionally bad night vision. It once tried to focus on a source of lights—on of the closest buildings—but Tom put an end to that by having all outside lights turned off. The Master had roared and stormed around in a small area in front of the

hangar, but had not ventured farther than about one hundred feet from the doorway.

Row reported to Tom, Damon and Angie the Master had been ordering them to attend to it and assist, but they responded that they could not because the length of the day was too much for them and they were weary.

The Master accepted that for about a week before it began to ask why Row and his beings could not adjust their time of being awake.

It was something the small alien had difficulties coming up with a satisfactory answer to.

Between the three humans they could come up with no good answer.

Harlan, however, came to everyone's rescue.

While Tom tried to come up with a rationalization to the dilemma, Harlan had an entire proximity fence constructed, complete with laser and infrared and ultraviolet lights ringing the building.

"Just tell the beast we have been ordered by our military to protect them, and that includes not allowing any of them outside at night because the locals might take potshots at them."

"What about just locking their doors?" Angie asked. It had worked for the first night.

Wearily, the Security man answered, "We tried that, but that huge lizard just sort of tore the lock apart. Hardened steel with an inch-and-a-quarter steel bolt. We're pretty certain if we jacked that up any, the lizard might just rip a hole in the door or a wall."

CHAPTER 15 /

A DAY TO PONDER

THE ROARING and sounds of an angered and caged beast increased by the day. It was obvious to everyone the lizard Master was unhappy with what it likely saw as its incarceration.

It did not, however, make any attempts to leave the hangar. It only left the sauce ship twice and for a few minutes at most. This made Harlan a more relieved man than he had been for weeks.

During the next two weeks Tom, Row and several of his fellow beings had opportunities to speak, privately, about many things. But, the one subject that only brought out shrugs—something the Friends had obviously picked up from the humans—had to do with the intent of the Master in their ship. It had, quite clearly, not confided in them but held some power over them whether that was real or assumed.

One of the best conversations the inventor had included a walk around Enterprises' East hangars and construction buildings, and revolved around what Tom believed the aliens should do if their Master became violent.

“And, you have no weapons or systems designed to subdue other creatures? Even if attacked?”

Row and Rux, Tom's walking companions, stopped and went into a silent hand speak conversation. When they'd finished, Row's voice came into the inventor's brain.

“We are, what we have discovered by studying your language, pacifists. We are very much like you and Damon Swift. We do not want to use weapons and so we do not have weapons.”

“What if you truly needed one? Is it within your capability to design and construct any weapon?”

Another silent talk went on for only twenty seconds.

“We do not feel a level of comfort in such a discussion, Tom. Please understand that to even speak of such a thing makes us more likely to consider its... possibility. Possibility that could lead to creation and that could lead to use and that would make us no better than any conquering race of beings. Having said that, Rux and I could not agree on the impossibility. Please, say no more.”

Tom decided to drop the subject but would certainly discuss it with... well, perhaps not his father given his dislike of weaponry. *Maybe best to chat with Harlan about it*, he considered silently.

The rest of their walk was cut short when Rux told them both he was feeling great fatigue. As they waited for a vehicle Tom requested via TeleVoc, he inquired about their gravity stones.

“If you can make one to give additional gravity, I recall there a similar technology that would allow you to make one that lessens gravity? I remember you came with one to use here on the planet inside my aircraft.”

Row admitted it was possible, but their current ship did not have the manufacturing abilities of their former ship around Mars. He added, “We remember we provided you with such an equipment, but please do not use it for gravity stones as you have told us. One of the powers we still maintain over the Master is that it is as weak from your high gravity as we become after brief exposure.”

Rux added, “We would not wish the Master to possess such a stone. It would mean loss of any control by us and might mean problems for all.”

Tom agreed he would not mention it again and would certainly not attempt to make such a gravity stone. The subject was dropped and they soon climbed into the car that drove itself to their location. Tom took the wheel and had them next to the hangar a minute later.

Even if he would not discuss it with the aliens, he planned to talk about it with his father.

Sandy breezed into the big office the following mid morning. “Hello, Daddy. Hey, Tom. Bashi and I—oh, by the way she is on her way over right now—anyway, she and I have been talking about the Space Friends and the females they have on their ship. We both think they must be bored and maybe a little scared and... well, in need of somebody who might understand. I can't begin to think they like having that dinosaur towering over them all the time.”

Tom could not form any words so he sat looking at their father.

Damon, after a pause and a brief glance to the ceiling as if something up there was going to help him with this, spoke. “Sandra Swift-Barclay. First, we know absolutely nothing about the genders of the aliens. I mean, sure, we can tell them apart by relative size and a bit by color, but we don't know if they are adults, or what passes for that, or juveniles. We don't know if it is totally taboo to speak to them or for them to speak to us.

“We, and I hate saying this, but we don't have an idea in the world if they even communicate! Perhaps they are totally mute and themselves slave to the males as those are to the Masters. Do you know something we all don't?”

Sandy flopped down on one of the conference sets. "Well, poot!" she said adding a solid, "Harrumph!" to punctuate things. "It's unfair to think of them as poor, helpless little women. Geez, you guys. It's a few years past the dark ages!"

The door opened a little and Bashalli poked her head through. "May I enter?" she asked.

"The more the merrier, Bashi, except Daddy is being a stick in the mud. Tell her, Daddy, how the poor little alien women are all off limits and frail and weak and probably ridden with rickets, beri-beri and scurvy!"

Tom laughed at her statement making his sister turn red.

"Sorry, San, but rickets? Listen, I agree with Dad to a point, but I think we ought to leave it up the Row and the rest of them—except maybe that lizard of theirs—about whether you and Bash can try to talk to them. Uhhh, you do know they don't use their mouths to talk, right?"

"Well, duh! But, I heard you talking with Bud about how they can use the T-pins to speak to you and Daddy. How about introducing us," and she pointed to herself and Bashalli, "and asking if they might be willing to give it a try?"

The two men looked at each other and silently came to an agreement.

"Okay. Let's head out there and I'll see if Row can answer for them. I know we have been told to not directly try to engage the females, but perhaps after this long on Earth they have changed their minds. We'll see." He stood and told them to follow.

Downstairs the threesome climbed into one of the electric runabouts and headed to the east *and* the hangar. As they came to a halt, Tom noticed one of the aliens he believed to be Row standing just inside.

In his mind came the message. "Tom Swift. I observe that you have brought two of the females of your people here. Is this to have them look at us?"

"No," he subvocalized back, "the one with the lighter hair—uhh, do you understand the concept of either blonde or at least lighter color?"

"We do."

"Good. Then the blonde one is my sister, a younger female sharing the same male parent, Damon Swift, as me. The one with the darker hair in my wife. Spouse. Uhhh, mate."

"I do not have the same viewpoint as you, but I would estimate

these are both considered to be attractive to the males of your people, and especially your wife to you. Am I correct?"

Tom smiled causing the two women to look at him as if expecting to be told what was going on. He decided to have a little fun.

"Row was just telling me a dirty joke. Hang on—" and as they tried to come to terms with that, he began a silent message to Row. "Can you communicate with them as you do with several of us, even with the one designated Angie Jackson?"

"If it what you wish. Yes. What are their designators for communication purposes?"

Tom pointed to Bashalli and said her name then repeated it with Sandy.

All of a sudden, both women's mouths dropped open and they looked at each other and then at the alien in awe.

Tom waited for the interchange to happen. It went on for more than a minute. In the end Row's words came back into his mind.

"The one designated Sandy is very determined to begin a dialog with our females. I inquired why this was important and she informed me that she believes she and the one named Bashalli are better suited to speak with them that you are. Is this true?"

Tom told him it was true in that both women believed their viewpoint, female, might be better suited for communication with the alien females. He asked if that was forbidden or if the Master would take exception and respond with anger.

"No. My belief is they might be able to, and I will use your word, *talk* with our females. However I can not say with any certainty if the females will respond back. It is to be their decision. As to the Master, there is such high disdain for any of our females I believe there will be no reaction either positive or negative."

He turned away and waddled back closer to the ship. For nearly four minutes the alien stood perfectly still. Then, a small face appeared to the left side of the open hatchway. The female stepped into full view and began the intricate finger speak of their race. It continued for more than five minutes, and Sandy was now getting nervous this was not a good sign.

Tom, to her left, could see her starting to open her mouth and he made a slight hushing noise. She stopped but her eyes narrowed and she looked to the side as if she was cataloging this *infraction* away for future use.

All thoughts ceased as Row began to turn around to face them at the same time the female started down the ramp.

Sandy gulped and Bashalli's hand clenched Tom's even harder than it had in quite some time.

In all their minds came the thought, "The female coming behind me is of the same family orientation as Tom Swift is to Sandy Swift. She is called Pow. I have indicated to her she may talk directly to you three or individually without informing me of the conversation. If we may leave the females alone—" and he bowed to Tom before turning to his right and walking off.

Tom followed.

"I study language of you," Pow's voice came to both women through their TeleVoc pins. It was not as deep as Row's but it was not totally feminine to their ears. Sandy guessed it was the pin doing this and giving nobody the exact sound of a voice that never spoke.

While they sought to find areas they might talk about, Tom and Row wandered farther away from the hangar.

"Tom Swift. It is known to you and to us that Damon Swift encountered a vessel of our former Masters on the large orb you call Moon. This is correct?"

It was no secret; Tom had been in on the messages to the Friends regarding that oddly-shaped saucer craft.

"Yes. Might I ask you why?"

Row did not speak for a few seconds. Then, "There is an object inside that vessel that I must retrieve and take to my planet. It contains... it is the resting location of something very important."

They walked another two minutes before Tom inquired what the object might be.

"It is a many-sided cuboid that would be in the main control area of that vessel. I am not certain you would understand what it contains. But, I will attempt to tell you. When the former Masters perished, not all but individually, they believed their final... is *essence* the proper word? I believe it to be. Their essence transferred to that cuboid. Then, direct members of that individual's family would be given the chance to retrieve their person's essence and to store it in a place of final rest."

Tom nodded and grinned. "We call that their *soul* and have similar beliefs in some areas of this planet. Others do not believe there is any existence after a life ends, but I am not the person to ask about that. If it is important for you to understand our beliefs, I can locate someone appropriate."

"I do not believe that is needed. I must ask if it is possible, or permitted by customs, to take me to that vessel and to allow me to

bring back that cuboid.”

Tom hoped his next statement would be taken as intended. “It is very possible, but I must request two things in return. The first is that your current Master is not to be allowed to come with us. The second is that we truly wish to keep possession of that vessel and would not wish you to take more than the cuboid. Can you agree to those?”

Row held out his left hand and moved one thumb and its closest finger until they were about two-inches apart. “This is the size of the cuboid. It only requires a container of a material that can not allow pulses or radiants to leave it until it is opened on my planet.”

Tom told his Friend about tomasite and suggested a small container could be made ready for the following day.

“The trip in my space saucers will require nearly two of our hours—one-twelfth of a planet rotation—to get there and the same coming back. If we land close to that vessel, do you have a way to transfer to it in the vacuum of space?”

It was agreed it would be the only method of travel as the alien ship could not be moved without taking the current Master with it. There were the bag-like protective bubbles once used to transfer to Tom’s *Challenger* available.

“If you are able to come with me and push me to the airlock, I can open the systems to put an atmosphere back inside.”

Tom inquired how this might be accomplished with the ship’s low power state. Row simply stated he could do it, so the inventor decided to ask nothing more about that.

They returned to the hangar to find Bashalli and Sandy sitting inside the car, both crying. Tom rushed to his wife’s side and knelt down.

“What’s the matter, Bash? Are you okay?”

She practically threw herself from the car and into his arms with Sandy clinging to her back. It overpowered Tom’s balance and they all tumbled to the asphalt.

None of them were hurt but Sandy began to snuffle and giggle at the absurdity of their predicament.

“Oh, Tomonomo. Those poor women. They are absolutely willing to be slaves and serve their men. We tried to tell them Earth women were different but she all but laughed in our brains!”

“And,” Bashalli added, “they hate the Masters but have to deal with the one on the ship because they are the ones who can soothe it.”

Sandy looked over her sister-in-law's shoulder. "They sing!"

Tom was stunned. "You mean they transmit something like a song into the mind of the lizard?"

His sister's blond ponytail swung from side-to-side. "Nope! They actually sing songs to that monstrosity."

"But, they don't have vocal chords. That's why they use telepathy and hand speak."

Again, the hair swung back and forth. "No, Tom. I said they sing and they *sing*. We both heard it. It's kind of like those experiments where researchers recorded male mice serenading potential mates in voices so high it can't be heard by people. Hers is a little lower and very faint, but she sang is one of the songs she and her fellow female use on the beast. It's a little haunting."

"It hurt my ears, but Sandra is correct. It is singing with a melody and all."

Tom got up and helped the two women to stand as well. This was something he needed to process so he suggested they head back to the big office where they could tell their stories to Damon.

He decided to let the ladies have the first chance to tell about the unexpected singing ability.

Damon was thunderstruck. "Did we know any of them made noise?" he asked.

"No. First time I've heard anything about it."

"After she sang a song she told us she had to go back inside before that ugly reptile found out she was missing. I feel so sorry for her and the other one we never met, Daddy."

He nodded but looked at her as if he was about to deliver a lecture.

She preempted him. "Yes. I know they are not humans and they have different ideals and ways of looking at things. And, I understand that I can't expect them to jump up and rebel against their current system, but Tom told us both the Space Friends almost believe they could not exist without some sort of Masters. What if they can and just don't know about it?"

Now, her father delivered his lecture. He covered much of what she'd just mentioned and added a warning for her to not make any attempt to introduce disharmony or even the ideals she believed were a god-given right.

"They may not have a god, Sandy. They live their lives and have some small level of control over the comings and goings, so let it be!"

When it was Tom's turn he told the older Swift about the cube that might contain the souls, or whatever else the *essence* could be, of the former Masters in the dodecahedron ship on the back side of the Moon. "I would like to take Row, and you, if you want to come, up there to bring that back. It seems very important to him."

"While I might enjoy that, someone needs to remain here to make decisions necessary to keep what peace we seem to have. So, you go. Take Gary Bradley and probably Zimby. Both have been inside. Oh," he reached into his desk and brought out a small box. He opened it and took out a small orb, a little larger than a marble and smaller than a ping pong ball and dropped it toward his desk.

To Bashalli it seemed like magic was occurring. The ball stayed in the air and only very slowly drifted toward the desktop.

"Oh, my!"

Damon gave the ball a slight thump with his index finger sending it toward Tom who caught it and put it into his shirt pocket.

He father relieved him of the explanation.

"That is the 'open sesame' key to the saucer up there. Weighs so little gravity seems set on mostly ignoring it."

Still mostly disbelieving what they had just seen, the two women left the office moments later.

Tom sat down and made a call to the Fabrication department telling them the size of tomasite box he required.

"I think a simple screw top would work for this, but it isn't round. Do what you can but it needs to be moderately easy to open."

Two hours later one of the technicians from that department dropped off a square box of some four-inches across. The top, when demonstrated, only needed to be turned a quarter rotation to unlatch. Then it came straight off the bottom part.

"That'll be great," Tom complimented him. "Tell the others, thanks!"

He was about to reach up to his pin but remembered the aliens could not be "called." They might originate a call but they did not "pick up."

He told Damon he needed to go out to speak with Row.

"See if they can figure out a way for us to talk to them on our dime," the older inventor requested.

Without Tom having any understanding how it might be possible, Row was waiting for him just inside the hangar door.

"You have returned, Tom Swift. Is there a problem?"

Tom smiled and held up the cube. This caused an alien version of that same smile to break out across the lower portion of what must be his head. It was sometimes difficult to tell as they had no true neck, just a narrowing of the head until the body widened out into the torso.

When he took it into his right hand, Row turned the box over and over, trying to discern how it might be opened. He looked to Tom for the answer. Once the inventor demonstrated how easy it was, Row opened and closed it five times until he seemed satisfied.

“This will be very adequate for the transportation of the Master’s essence,” he declared before handing it back to Tom.

For safekeeping, the inventor guessed.

He was right.

CHAPTER 16 /

TRAVELS AND THREATENINGS

THE FOLLOWING morning he met Row one hangar over and around a corner. It wasn't so much he felt they required a high level of secrecy—if he had there were other ways to ensure it—it was more that he just did not wish to confront the Master.

They met Gary inside the hangar and sometime construction building where the saucers were kept when not flying. It had the advantage of having a retractable roof to allow a saucer to fly straight up. Doing this allowed their ship to leave Enterprises without any potential for line of sight from the other hangar.

They soon left the ground. After the atmosphere was behind them, Row stated, "This vessel is faster than I anticipated."

"It is not the fastest one we have but must remain inside what we call normal space. I would love to learn the secret of your ability to travel between places by leaving that normal space. I suppose that is too much to ask for."

In side his head came what sounded like muttering. It quickly resolved itself. "That is not something I may be allowed to give to you. However, I have agreed to leave the vessel of our former Masters on your Moon. The secret may be revealed in time."

Enigmatic, Tom thought, but with possibilities.

The trip was accomplished in about ninety-seven minutes with a rapid slowing down and a swing around the Moon. After it entered the initial orbit the ship slowed even more and began moving downward. By the time it reached a point over the crater where the ship lay camouflaged, it was at a virtual standstill.

The alien seemed quite impressed Tom's saucer could hover in place. He began asking about it but stopped as soon as they headed down the final mile.

"I see nothing below us, Tom. Where is the vessel? Has it been moved or might some other entity have taken it?"

Tom only grinned. He told the ship's computer to land them at a particular point and touchdown occurred thirty seconds later.

He announced, "Time to get suited up." As he was saying this he headed to the rear of the circular room, opened a storage closet and pulled out his suit.

Gary cleared his throat. "What about me? What about taking

things safe and easy?”

“Come with us. If we need help you will be just outside the hatch!”

Row’s suit/bag had been placed before takeoff on one of the pop-up seats closer to the front of the room.

He moved to climb into it as Tom finished sealing everything other than his helmet. The suit was self-checking and his green status LEDs on the left sleeve told him everything was in operational order.

Gary was just a moment behind Tom.

Row’s voice came to him requesting the inventor’s assistance in closing the seal—it was not a zipper of any sort and not some variation of hook-and-loop... more of a self-adhering area on both sides of the opening.

“My appreciation, Tom. I am now sealed into this... suit as you refer to yours. We may proceed. Please tell me what we are doing as I am unable to view things outside.”

“Sure.” He moved the bag to the area of the floor that covered the airlock, opened that and lowered the alien inside. It was a very tight fit but he also climbed down pulling the top over them and decompressing the small space.

Just as when they had entered the ship at Enterprises, they moved down the built-in stairs on one of the landing legs. Tom tried to keep a good hold on the bag, but his hand slipped and Row rolled, slowly, down and onto the lunar surface. If he felt any discomfort the alien said nothing.

Tom left him with a word that he was required to perform one function. He stepped forward as Gary joined them outside and together they found the side of the cover over the ship and lifted it to reveal the left side of the entry hatch. Tom had guessed at the location based only on his father having mentioned there would be a heart-shaped rock in front of the area nearest the ship’s hatch.

“Are you still there?” he asked the alien.

“I am.”

“Okay. We need to roll you over there. We’ll do it slowly but tell me if you experience discomfort.”

“I will, but how will you gain entrance to the vessel?”

“I have the front door key. Besides, the ship was never fully drained of power when you gave it an energy recharge. It ought to have enough for our purposes.”

Gary held out his gloved hand and accepted the orb from his young boss. It was immediately accepted by the ship—glowing with some inner energy for a couple seconds—which the saucer responded to by sliding the outer hatch open. After checking the small space using his helmet's light, the Security man nodded handing it back to Tom.

“Okay. But, two-minute checks.”

Tom agreed.

For whatever reason, the ship seemed to have more than adequate power to not just open the outer door and also the inner one, once inside the lights came on as the inner door shut.

Too late, Tom realized this was one of the fatal mistakes the Brungarian astronauts had made before getting trapped, and perishing.

His only thought to the positive was the key orb had glowed intensely bright upon being inserted into a small indentation on the outer hull. He hoped that was a power boost for the ship.

“Tom. Please take us to the control room. I must energize the ship and provide for an atmosphere so I can locate the cuboid.”

“What if I can locate it and place it inside the box?”

“If that is possible, then we will save time and be able to return to the planet sooner.”

But, it was not that easy. Even with the key orb and the knowledge of where the opening button was located, when he attempted to search the control room, Tom came up empty-handed.

“Row? We might need to have you out here after all. I am unable to locate the cuboid.”

“Close the door to this room, then locate the repose position of the commander.”

That part was easy. Not only did the door slide shut, but the ship's commanding officer was still seated in his seat, right were he had suddenly perished when the ship lost all its air.

“Okay. Door closed and commander located. Now what?”

Before Row could answer, Gary's voice came over the radio. "Been more than two minutes, skipper. Can I assume I do not need to rip the doors off and come save you?" He sounded cheerful, but Tom knew he was completely serious.

"Doing just fine, Gary. Sorry for the delay, but we needed to do a couple things in here. I'll try to be better."

“Just think what your father would say.”

“Okay. Got it!”

Tom turned back to looking at Row in his space suit bag. “What do I do now?” he subvocalized.

“On the appendage rest of the commander’s repose position there will be many symbols. Look for a circle with no center. That was their atmosphere activator.”

Tom looked at the arm of the seat—once he deciphered Row’s instructions. No fewer than fifteen buttons, each with a different symbol or shape and meant for fingers easily twice the width of his, were set into the forward part of the left arm.

Mentally telling himself, *Here Goes!* Tom used his palm to press it down. He felt a slight click through his hand and then nothing. At least, not for about ten seconds when a slight hiss sound began to be heard through his suit and helmet.

Air must be coming in from somewhere, perhaps a hidden reserve, and it evidently registered on Row. As Tom watched his bag, the seal opened and the alien’s head came out. He had a smile on his face to Tom radioed Gary to tell him of the current status.

“It is likely is only in the command room, so do not try to come in, please.” To Row, “Need help getting out?”

“No, Tom.” and the bag just sort of fell away allowing him to step out of it. It was the matter of five seconds before he waddled over to one of the control panels, reached out and depressed an area Tom might have overlooked, and a small hatch opened to reveal a glistening rectangular cube that rose on some hidden mechanism.

With his other hand Row reached back to Tom who understood. He pulled the tomasite storage cube out and handed it to the alien.

In the cuboid went but not before Tom discerned at least six separate swirling somethings inside that gave Tom the impression they were some sort of energy, or energies. Two more seconds and the top was back in place, and it had been handed back to Tom.

“Do we just leave or can we withdraw this atmosphere?” he inquired.

“I must return to my transportation cover and then you will press the circle button twice. We will be able to depart in one minute of your time.”

Tom made yet another call to Gary when they had reopened the control room door. “Got what we came for. Stand by.”

The pair of unlikely spacemen walked and were rolled to the inner hatch. Tom pressed the place he knew was the release, but nothing happened.

He only had a tiny moment of panic before a possible solution came to him. He pulled out the key orb, set it into the indent on his side of the hull, and watched as it discharged another flash of energy into the ship. After that, the hatch easily slid to the side allowing them to exit.

“Row? About how many times may I use this power orb to enter the ship and perform things like adding back the atmosphere?”

The alien made a humming sound in the inventor’s brain before stating, “As many times as you have days of life, my friend, Tom.” That sent an icy chill throughout his body.

Seventeen minutes later with Row inside the saucer, Tom and Gary recovered the ship, reset the heart-shaped identifier rock so it was squarely in front of the hatch, and headed back for Earth

“It was incredibly easy to get what we went for,” Tom explained what had happened to Damon fifteen minutes after he and Row had parted ways at the hangar.

“Short trip but fruitful. Now we know the orb can give the ship a kick of energy and also how to put breathable air inside. I believe that, after this episode is over and our alien visitors, plus dinosaur, are gone, we might need to spend some time investigating that ship even more. And, you say the only thing Row took was the glowing cube he got from the control panel?”

Tom agreed that was the full extent of their retrieval.

They might have spoken more but both men received a message from Row.

“Tom and Damon Swift. The master has detected my having departed and returned and is frustrated and angry and has left our ship! We do not know what to do.”

The alien would give no further information so the two men hustled out of the office and down to the parking lot. Damon’s large sedan was closest so they piled into it and roared off. As they raced around the eastern corner of the building complex and headed along one of the diagonal runways they could both see the reptile standing outside the hangar doors, its forepaws raking wildly at the sky.

“Looks more than a little put out,” Tom observed. “What can we do?”

His father applied the brakes bringing them to a halt eighty yards from the angry reptile. All around it were the smaller aliens including, Tom noted, the two females. Each one was waiving its

hands around with a few doing their best to jump up and down trying to get the attention of the monster.

The Swifts stood rooted to the spot not wishing to make things worse. But, the reptile spotted them, pushed through the ring of Space Friends and stalked in their direction. As it did, it paused, roared three times and then did something Tom wondered if they had seen it correctly. The Master made a “come here” motion with its left foreleg and stopped moving. It tilted its head to the sky to roar again but the brightness of the sun made it duck away trying to cover its face with its far-too-short arms and taloned paws.

“Do we go see what it wants?” Tom asked.

“Let’s see where Harlan’s people are first.”

“We are behind just about each and every vehicle to the left and right of the hangar. Just keeping cover in case we’re needed,” Phil’s voice came from behind a nearby van.

Row came scurrying as quickly as his little legs could get him given the high gravity to stand between the Master and the Swifts.

In their heads, they heard, “The Master demands to know things, and it will not tell me what it wants to know. All it states is that the controllers of this area must be held accountable. What can I do?”

Tom thought back, “Tell it we will step forward but only so long as it guarantees to not attack us or you and your people. We can speak to it, but does that require that you provide translations?”

“It can be done. I can speak for you and then tell you what it states.”

“No violence?”

Row gesticulated at the reptile that lowered itself down on its haunches making a small, guttural noise.

“There will be no violence.”

A moment later and now joined by five Security men armed, Damon noted with both relief and sadness, with semi-automatic rifles of high caliber. Each man had, as they stepped from their positions, cocked the bolts on their weapons. He had little doubt they had also released the safeties on the guns.

“The Master demands to know why the planet leaders have not been brought to it.”

Tom thought a second before responding, “Tell the Master we have never been made aware that is what was desired. Also, tell it that until we are assured it has no violence intended for anyone, the leaders are not allowed to come to it.”

Row turned, gestured and wobbled his body around for a full minute. The reptile watched breathing in and out sharply twice. Tom thought this might indicate displeasure at what it was being told.

“The Master says it believes a meeting with the leaders is implied in its coming here.”

“Tell it that since you were never allowed to tell us of your intentions, we could not arrange that. Tell it that is not the way we work on this planet.”

Another exchange was made.

“The Master states it wishes a meeting.”

“Tell it we will request one, but that is not the same as a demand. A request can be refused. Inform the Master this might be refused.”

More gestures and wiggles. To Tom, if it weren't so serious it would be funny.

“The master states that if the leaders are not brought to it, it will take the ship and search them out.”

Ah, now we get a threat, Tom told himself. Evidently this was transferred via his TeleVoc pin to Row who turned, eyes wide in surprise.

“That is only a suggestion, Tom. It is not a direct threat. Not at this time.”

“Then, tell it we cannot arrange a meeting. It must deal with us. And, that begins by finally telling us why it, and you, came here.”

Row hesitated to pass on the message he received.

When it came into the inventor's mind, it was only semi-unexpected.

“The Master wishes to have something from this planet. It does not inform me what that is, and it is unwilling to discuss it with me. Or with you. It says only the planet leaders can be informed. If it does not receive a visitation it will take the ship from here and search. I do not recommend allowing it to search.”

“Another threat, Row. Will it insist on taking all of you with it? I only ask because if violence must be used, I do not really wish for you to perish.”

“Tom Swift. I can not relay that to the Master.”

“Can not or will not?”

Silence.

Another minute of very uncomfortable silence. Then, Row

bowed, something the Master evidently did not like and it again roared to the sky. When the smaller alien turned and informed his Master of something—and Tom was unclear what that might be—the beast turned and stomped back to the hangar, up the ramp and into the ship.

To Phil he stated aloud, “Get the anti-mag system energized up the hill, please. I have the feeling we may need to give it a try.” Turning to Damon who had approached he informed his father of his intentions.

“If the Master forces them to take off, I want to get those anti-mag rays on that ship before it has the chance to get more than a few feet off the ground.”

Damon agreed and between them they got everything ready in under thirty seconds.

Just in time.

The doors of the hangar were forced open and outward by the emerging saucer. Once clear of the overhang, it rose slowly until it had retracted its landing legs. Then, it attempted to rise into the sky only to falter and hang unsteadily in place some fifty feet above the ground. From within the saucer came an increase in something that sounded mechanical—what Tom believed to be their drive system—but the ship refused to rise even another inch. It did try moving side-to-side but this caused it to lose a few feet of its altitude, so it soon halted.

Tom was jubilant. Even the Security team members were cheering.

The trio of anti-magnetic rays from atop the far hill were doing what they were supposed to do.

The only trouble Tom foresaw was that the power pods, running at full power, could only manage to keep this up for a bit over an hour. By that time either the ship would break free or it would have landed allowing the pods to regenerate.

But, it was over less than a minute later. With a bit more force than it exhibited on its first landing, the ship touched down barely getting its legs extended in time.

Phil shouted out an order to get weapons at the ready. That was also just in time as the door opened and the ramp extended and the Master came out roaring and spinning around trying to find an obvious enemy to attack.

Seeing only what it believed to be weak humanoids, it stopped. There was no way in its mind or experience that puny beings such as these could do anything such as happened to the ship. To the ship it

commanded; the one it had total control over.

Even if it had no ability to actually pilot the ship and was forced to totally rely on the creatures over which its race held dominance.

The standoff lasted an hour before the dino returned to the ship, it lifted just enough to retract the legs and it sidled back to the damaged hangar.

“Get a team out here to replace those doors and tell them to add more Durastress bracing!” Phil ordered over his TeleVoc. Turning to Tom and Damon he told them the crew would be there in half an hour.

“Until then I suggest you both head back to the office and allow us to do anything necessary to keep that beast contained.”

Reluctantly, Tom and Damon drove away a moment later.

Angie Jackson was waiting for them in the parking lot.

“I could see their ship try to take off. Did *you* stop it?”

Tom nodded. “Wasn’t certain it would work, but it did. And, before you ask, I am not sure it will always work. This time we had forewarning with them breaking through the front of the hangar. I am not sure what might happen if they decide to break straight up and through in the middle of the night. We never made those emitters to be autonomous and self-firing.”

“Well, do you both want to come talk to the President about this with me?” She said this as if she was telling them it wasn’t important they do so, but the look in her eyes said she wanted them in on the call. Very badly wanted them to be there.

“Lead the way,” Damon told her opening the side door to the building so she and Tom could enter first.

In her office she picked up a special phone both Swifts recognized as an un-interceptable satellite phone. She pressed a single button and waited.

“Yes, sir. It’s Angela Jackson. We’ve had... well, we’ve had a little issue here...” and she told the man of the attempt to fly away that had been thwarted by the Swifts. “May I place this on speaker so Damon and Tom can hear?”

He obviously told her to do that, because his next words came to all their ears.

“Damon and Tom? Am I going to need to send in the real military to assist? Not just the weekend warriors who were there weeks ago. I mean the ones with the very big guns?”

It was Tom who spoke first. “Sir. We would really rather not have

that sort of destructive power surrounding us or our little town. So far the locals have been nearly convinced to not panic. If you send it troops and canon and missile launchers, you'll have a full-scale panic exodus to deal with. Oh, and there are a lot of people who keep asking when the President is coming out of that Air Force One, and a few who want to picket having it, or him, here."

There was a pause and a sigh. "Right. And if this doesn't warrant that response that'll ruin any trust people have in this Administration. I hate to give into this, but I have to let you keep the reins. Just please do not let us all down!"

CHAPTER 17 /

“AT LEAST WE MIGHT DO SOMETHING GOOD...”

LITTLE WAS heard from either the Space Friends or their Master for two days.

During that time Tom arranged for three additional power pods to be delivered from the Citadel, landed at Shopton Regional Airport and then transported behind the east hills to a place just over the crest and completely out of sight of Enterprises... and the aliens and their ship.

A secondary switch for the main electronics would allow this new power source to be changed to in an instant giving the installations twice the firing time. The one thing Tom could not come up with was a way to increase the actual power output without burning out the systems.

The work of digging in the new pods took place during the day so there would be no lights to be seen even from as far away as Enterprises stood.

“That gives us a little more breather, Bud,” he told his friend as they sat in the large lab in the Administration building.

It did not last. One the third day the saucer, again, slid forward. This time Harlan was on duty and got the doors open in time to avoid further damage as it slid outside.

He pressed another remote button and the anti-mag ray units up the hill energized from their standby condition and aimed directly at the front top of the hangar.

This time the saucer tried racing skyward only to falter and stop, and even to drop a yew yards, at around eighty feet. It moved to the right a couple hundred feet and again the other direction by nearly the same amount. Tom caused another small drop just to remind the Master it was not totally in control of the situation.

The ship did not linger or make any other attempts at movement, but lowered itself, returning to what must seem the relative safety of the hangar.

Moments later and as Tom and Angie skidded to a halt outside, the Master stomped down the ramp roaring in evident irritation. Both of the new arrivals cautiously stepped from the car and stood next to it, waiting.

“What do we do if it charges us?” she asked nervously.

With more bravado than he actually felt, Tom replied, “Harlan’s team won’t allow that to happen.” *I hope*, he added mentally.

The lizard did not make a charge at them. It did stomp around in a few circles in what Tom felt looked like a small child who has been told they can’t do something and they stomp a bit.

Oh! he realized, *sort of like Sandy did when she was younger.* That thought made him laugh which Angie took as bravery. She linked arms with him holding him close for protection.

Down the ramp came what must be the entire ship’s compliment of the Space Friends. They got outside as quickly as they could, again surrounding the Master with waving arms and, Tom believed he could just barely hear, high-pitched singing.

It could only be a matter of time before the Master hurt one of the smaller aliens. It did happen when it had one of its increasingly more frequent tantrums at being unable to directly confront the planet’s leaders and make its demands.

When it came from the saucer out into the bright light of that particularly sunny Tuesday, it made an attempt to raise its hands in front of its eyes, but being far too short they did nothing. Angered to a high degree, once the first of the small aliens got to it—Tom later found out it was Ral—the dino kicked out with its right foot slashing the lower body of the small alien.

Ral fell to the ground trying to clutch at his wound.

Phil Radnor made an emergency call to the Dispensary to get Doc out as fast as he possibly could make it. There was some fluid he believed must be the alien’s blood, leaking from the gash.

He then did something that made the Master stop. Rising from his hiding position he stepped forward, yelling and waving his e-rifle in the air.

The Master had never been confronted by any being behaving in such a manner that it stopped moving to study the human. Then, it spun quickly, unable to see as Phil brought up the laser sight of the gun hitting the dinosaur in its right eye with the searingly intense beam.

With a roar that sounded to the Security team like a small cry of pain, it allowed the small aliens to lead it back to the ship.

Doc and an ambulance arrived forty seconds later with the three inside piling out with as much equipment as they could grab on their way out of the building.

Ral was lying on the ground, his eyes scrunched closed in what

appeared to be obvious pain. Row sat on the ground to Ral's left holding onto the wound with all his fingers and thumbs.

"Let me get in there," Doc said, and even though Row had never been provided with Doc's TeleVoc identifier, he instinctively understood this man would take care of his comrade.

At almost a total loss for what to do about anesthesia, and realizing he needed to get the gash stitched closed immediately, Doc took out a single-use syringe, tore the outer plastic wrap from it and uncapped the needle quickly inserting it into the flesh on to left side of the wound. He sat back watching for signs of any medication reaction but saw nothing that worried him, so he injected around the wound in five other spots. One minute later he prodded the first injection area with a gloved finger. Seeing no reaction from the injured alien, he asked his nurse for a small silk suture pack to be opened.

"Here goes nothing," he said under his breath as he pushed the needle into the flesh, up and through the opposite side of the tear, and created a surgical sliptie knot to hold it shut. It appeared to be holding so he applied another two inches farther along and yet another two more inches farther from that.

"Get steri-stips in between, cover that and get our friend into the ambulance." He turned to Row and nodded. "Your friend should be alright. Do you understand me?"

Inside Doc's head came a call from Tom. He answered it. "I've just attended to one of the—"

"Yes, I know, Doc. I got a call from the leader, Row, who is standing near you. I have given him your TeleVoc ID so you will be able to address him in a couple seconds. Keep us up to date."

Row's voice came into his head. "You are a healer. Is this correct?"

"Yeah, but about your friend—"

"The other is called Ral and he is greatly injured. I was able to see this before you arrived. You did a closure of the wound inflicted by the Master. Is it sufficient and when may Ral can be returned to our ship?"

"Uhh, not right now. I only closed a small portion of the wound. The rest needs to be carefully stitched together. We will do that in our medical building. Do you wish to come along?" He pointed to the waiting ambulance.

"I do."

When they arrived at the Dispensary, Doc assisted Row in

climbing down the one foot from the back of the vehicle and then assisted him to get into the building. The alien paused to look at things so many times Doc rushed ahead to get prepped for what might be coming.

In his head as he scrubbed came, “Ral will regenerate his fluids, but it is agreed his damage must be halted. Do you have or can you obtain the same sort of medical liquids used to save our livestock and plants years ago?”

Knowing it had been relatively simple antibiotics and some vitamins, Doc said. “Yes. I will inject small amounts around the wound once it is closed.”

When the medico came from the small operating room thirty-nine minutes later and pulled off his gloves and the slightly stained gown he wore, he was met by one alien and two people with concerned faces.

“He’ll be okay but that is mostly supposition that these... uhh, people can heal like we do. He won’t bleed any more.”

Row addressed Tom, Damon and Doc Simpson all at one time.

“I have communicated with Ral and he believes that the wound will heal but be uncomfortable. I must give thanks to you, Doctor Simpson, for your work. Once again your planet’s healing individuals have come to our rescue. I hope we might perform a service to you in return.” Row now looked at each of the men.

“If you will remember, Tom Swift was able to save the lives of my entire group of explorers when our food supply became ill and was in danger of extinction. That would have soon caused the same extinction in my people in this system.

“We did not have the ability to diagnose our issues then, but my people have overcome diseases of our internal organs when they become damaged or are overtaken by growths of mutated tissues.”

When he paused Tom looked at Doc. “That sounds a lot like what a cancer is, right?”

The medico nodded. “If we put our interpretation to it, then yes. We will need to learn more of this.”

Row’s upper body swung side-to-side. He told them certain radio messages sent via the instantaneous transmitters they had supplied to Tom were intercepted.

“This includes messages regarding what we believe to be a female of your people with a growth inside her body we might be able to assist with.

“We do not believe that passing of a great or even significant

amount of time will allow us to succeed. We do ask to be allowed to examine this individual so we might determine if our ways of treatment might be of positive outcome. At least, should we succeed, we might be thought of as having done something good... for the positive.”

Damon appeared to be ready to state or ask something, but Tom beat him to it. “Will your Master allow that?”

Row swung around to face Tom directly.

“We would wish it to be kept what you call a secret from our Master. As we have already done, several of us may leave together with one of you for exploration of the planet. I believe an exploration of the large base you have constructed in space should take place as quickly as permitted. Perhaps within the following daytime.”

Doc was torn between hope and fear. How the little aliens actually might do something for the very ill woman, and fear of their actual intent. He had never been allowed more than a brief, cursory examination of the aliens on their visit to Earth years earlier, and that had not, at the time, nor did it continue to give him confidence in the differences of similarities in their physiology and that of humans.

When he mentioned this along with the warning, “They could be so different to us that what cures them of all ills might dissolve our flesh.” He realized it was a great exaggeration, but it was an uncertainty in his mind.

Tom decided he needed to see what the aliens had in mind and so he left the Dispensary with Row heading back to the hangar. Knowing the Space Friends kept a watch out for him to be outside, and they often either met him where he headed or intercepted him on the way, the inventor made it clear he was heading for the other hangar.

He only had to wait six minutes before Row and another alien he was fairly certain was named Roc scurried into the open-sided building and headed for the far side of the only solid structure inside, the storage and bathrooms area.

Tom checked around the area and could see no indication anyone was following so he and the two aliens headed to the far side of the small building-within-a-building.

Row extracted one of his translator devices from somewhere on his body—Tom could never discern where they kept such items—and energized it. Without making a single movement with his hands, the box began speaking:

“Tom Swift. Roc is not able to hear what I send you through your small device, so I shall use this. I can not tell you how very sorrowful we are about the Master being with us. And then, we are sorrowful for being not truthful with you before we came to this planet. We have done many things for which we are ashamed.

“We understand you are not wanting to have us travel to your orbital space station. If our places were reversed I believe we would not think it a beneficial thing to allow you to do this. However, the female person of your kind who is nearing the end of her life might be saved by us if we are allowed to see her. It is something we believe you are owed by us. It would be at least something good for us to do to repay you for everything you have done for us, both before and now.”

Tom wanted to form his questions to be precise.

“Can you cure her of the growth that is killing her?”

Row and Roc looked at each other as the translator showed them what Tom was saying on its screen. Roc bowed to Row and Row turned to Tom.

From the device came, “We believe this is possible. We can not be completely certain until we examine her. Do you have the belief she would feel threatened by our being with her?”

Tom stated he did not have that answer. But, he would check and come back in about an hour.

“Good. I require a rest from your gravity.”

The word from the *Space Queen* was encouraging. Gloria Monday was in enough pain she was kept partially sedated but had been responsive and even open to the proposed visit.

“It can’t hurt me any more than I already am.”

Row slipped around the hangar two hours later along with both of the females explaining they were the healers of the crew.

Initially hesitant to climb into the saucer of the Earth people, they gave into Row’s insistence, or pleas, a moment later. Because it would just take far too much time for them to struggle up the steps, Tom asked Row if he and Bud, who had come on the run a minute earlier, might be allowed to lift them all into the ship.

Following a discussing that was totally their hand-speak, Row nodded.

Three minutes later they were inside and the females appeared to

be brushing themselves off. Tom laughed in his head while Bud was too busy getting all the systems checked and their flight program sent to the control tower.

Before he signed off, Tom added, "Tower, it's Tom. Listen. Please pass the word to *not* call us on the alien's radio. Good old PER only. Thanks!"

As they lifted off the aliens all nodded thinking they understood how the ship operated. Tom believed they did not as he had never explained repeltrons to any of them.

He turned and asked Row if this was just to be an observation trip or might they do something to help the woman.

"We have in these females an incredible level of power. Had your Doctor Simpson not been there, these females would have attempted to heal the damage to Ral."

"Are they able to do anything if your Master is injured or becomes ill?"

The alien finally admitted to Tom their Master was feeling some ill effects from being on the Earth, but it was beyond the healers' ability to attend to.

"We have no certainty this is caused by the increased gravity which affects all of us, or it there is something inside the atmosphere that is causing distress."

Tom suggested they consult with Doc Simpson, but Row declined.

"If there is something wrong with the Master, it will never allow one of you to repair it. And, not after it purposely kicked Ral and did injury your doctor healed. That would be against everything the Masters believe. They are mighty and in complete command of every situation and never fall ill." Row did his version of a shrug.

The females were especially enthralled with the visual screens Bud lowered in the "front" of the circular room. Row explained they were never allowed in the control area so they never had looked out at space.

Too soon for their liking, or at least it seemed so to Bud, the aliens noticed they were approaching the giant space cylinder. Tom told Row it would require only about three minutes to come into the dock, and when Row looked at him unsure what that meant, he hastened to say it was the point of attachment to their base.

He'd been in such a hurry he completely forgot to have them bring along any of their suits, but he knew the tunnel dock would seal completely to the bottom of the saucer so they could transfer

without any protection.

It took several minutes for Row to convince the females they would be in fine condition once they arrived inside, and that brought up a hard discussion of whether or not to trust these beings from a planet so distant to their own.

By the time they finished and turned to the airlock, Bud had it open and was slipping down and through it. Tom would have normally followed but he believed Row still needed help with the females. It appeared they had never been exposed to zero- or minimal G forces.

It was an adventure in itself to get all three aliens into the airlock on the end of the space station and to hold them down in the zero-G of the hub area. But, it was the sights that greeted them he and Bud had the most difficult time in getting them to stop staring and get into the elevator.

“Got to love tourists,” Bud quipped making his friend smile.

At the bottom, where even the artificial gravity induced by the station spin was noticeably less than on Earth, the aliens all looked at each other and then at Tom with their smiles showing it met with all their approvals.

Residents of the station—ninety-two percent of whom were Swift employees—had been forewarned and nobody stared at them. There was no indifference, just a polite glance before people got on with whatever they were doing.

The hospital on the station was larger than the Dispensary at Enterprises with four full-time physicians doing ten-hour rotations along with twelve other medical personnel.

The aliens were shown to the private room Gloria Monday had been inhabiting for the past few months.

She was sitting up, propped into a trio of fluffy pillows. As she turned her head her eyes opened wider but she looked to Tom who simply smiled and introduced the trio of aliens.

Using the TeleVoc pin she had been issued on arrival—which also transmitted continuous vital signs—she was soon subvocalizing to Row. She tried addressing the females but they would not respond.

Ten minutes of conversation, none of which Tom was made privy to, Row motioned for the inventor to come with him. Outside, Bud had been chatting to one of the nurses. He turned and raised an eyebrow.

“The healers are with her and they wanted privacy. I suppose Gloria appreciates that as well,” Tom explained. To Row he inquired

about the length of time it might take.

“The females need time to study your female and to understand her makeup. Then, they will be a relatively short time.”

“Then, do we go back to your ship so they can prepare medicines?”

Row gave Tom a look that spoke of his incredulity. He also shook his head.

“No, Tom. You fail to understand. When they are ready to depart, they will have finished all things within their capabilities. Only then can I tell you if they might have been successful.

Twice over the following three hours Row excused himself to take in such things as sterile gloves (that would be difficult given the aliens’ extra thumb) and some sort of solution to sterilize Gloria’s skin.

When the females emerged they were attempting to remove the gloves using their mouths. Tom helped one and then the other. They gave him solemn nods and the tiniest of smiles.

Tom waited for them to report to Row. He believed the one doing most of the signing was either the senior or at least older of the two.

“The human female has been healed of her growth.” He turned to the older female and she held out a vial containing something that looked bloody and jagged.

“Your own healers will be able to verify this in five of your days as soon as your female heals inside her body.

By the time they arrived back at Enterprises seven hours after departure, Ral had been released from the Dispensary and was standing outside the hangar, evidently completely healed, to meet them. He had a very serious look on his face.

CHAPTER 18 /

NEGOTIATIONS FOR PEACE

ROW AND RAL went into a deep discussion for five minutes, keeping their hand speak between them and out of sight. Twice Tom believed he saw the leader glance at the hangar in a nervous manner.

While they waited, Bud suggested he might drive to the Administration building and bring back Angie. And Damon, if Tom wished to involve him at present.

“Just go get Angie. She needs to know what’s going on. I’ll call dad and tell him we’re back and that some trouble might be brewing. I’ll leave it up to him.”

The flyer drove off while the two aliens were still discussing the situation. A moment later Row held a hand up between them and all conversation evidently stopped.

Turning to Tom, he stated, “The Master is angry but wishes it to have it known it is prepared to give up on this visitation and wishes to have us translate between you.” Row pulled out his small translator and, with his back firmly turned to the hangar, signed into the pickup. On Tom’s screen came the message:

“I believe the Master is not being truthful and continues to hope that some trickery will get it what it wishes. Do not agree at present.”

Tom nodded and began walking back in the direction of the main building cluster. A minute later he turned to look, and he could see the two aliens disappearing into their hangar.

Bud pulled up to him with Angie in the front seat.

“What’s up?”

“Let me get in and while we drive back I’ll tell you. Then, we go talk to dad.”

“Preposterous!” Damon exclaimed once Tom told him of the warning regarding the intentions of the Master.

Tom was in absolute agreement. He had several more interactions with the alien reptile than did his father, and none of them left him feeling cheery or even slightly friendly toward the creature. To him, it actively seethed anger and malevolence.

* * * * *

North Korea attempted to sneak a well-disguised passenger jet over the North Polar region and down into the United States. They intended to slide along above the Arctic Circle until about even with Quebec and declare an emergency after they entered Canadian airspace, claim they could not get lower than about twenty thousand feet until they were almost out of Canada, and to set down at Enterprises, or any good nearby airfield, and to disgorge more than three hundred heavily armed troops.

Their intent was to swarm into the Swift facility, capture or kill the aliens, and then to get back out with whatever weapons the space people had brought with them.

They heavily counted on the element of surprise.

The only fly in the ointment was their jet. It not only was an old Soviet airliner, and an aircraft over-laden with fuel as well as tens of thousands of pounds over its flyable weight, it was an aircraft model that had a nasty history of crashing.

Which is exactly what it did as it crossed over the Gulf of Anadyr near the easternmost part of Russia.

That mission was the only one any foreign nation managed to get underway, and it was a failure with the loss of all hands on the TU-154 jet.

After that, Brungaria—who also flew several of the TU-154s—gave up its plans.

As he approached the friendly alien, Tom hoped he might be able to get Row to tell him some new and—to his mind—vital information about the race of the Masters.

He tried to introduce the subject and Row seemed interested in assisting, but he had no real idea what Tom wanted.

“What I actually hope to get from you are some details about their physiology.”

“This is a new word I do not understand, Tom. Can you explain what it means?”

“I believe I can. Every living organism is made of certain structures. In the case of beings and plants and animals here on Earth we call those individually living things *cells*. Small things are made of hundreds or thousands or millions of those all the way down to one-cell organisms. Humans like myself are made of millions of even billions of cells. The different number and types of cells mean the difference between something like the plant we call grass,” and he pointed to the stretches of green between the nearby

runways, and anything else.”

“How each plant or animal is put together from the various cells is their physiology. Cells require a certain type of nutrition, eliminate byproducts in various manners, and other things that go into how they do what they do for that person. Now, human have a single organ in our heads we call the brain. It controls everything from thought to breathing to motion. We do not live without the brain. However, this planet also contains small life types living inside the very ground we walk on called worms. Their physiology has outfitted them with a way to survive removal of the brain at the front of their bodies by giving them such a simple system inside they can easily use another part of their body for control. And, regenerate the head.”

“And these have a different physiology from you?”

“Yes. They have an exceptionally different physiology. So, what I am hoping to get from you is an idea of how the Masters function from a physiology point. Do they, for instance, have receptors in their bodies that feel discomfort or pleasure? Is there some part of them that can be... well, interfered with to make them unable to operate in a normal manner? What must they consume and with what regularity?”

Tom really, really hoped this was going over well with Row. About the last thing he needed or wanted would be that the alien informed him he had to tell the Master what they had spoken about. He did not believe that would happen, but he could not be totally certain.

For his part, Row was very willing to divulge about everything he could think to tell the inventor. He mentioned issues the Masters seemed to have with digesting anything that was not fresh—meaning, Tom inferred, alive—when taken in. He told Tom about how badly the gravity was affecting the creature whenever it ventured out of the ship.

At this, Tom had to ask, “So, do you have a gravity-lessening stone onboard?”

Row thought about this a moment. “It does not actually lessen your gravity. It simple constructs the appropriate gravity for us inside the ship. Ral, Rux and the other all feel bad pressures when we step outside, but we get used to such things very quickly compared to the Master.”

Next, he told Tom about something the inventor hoped might be turned against the beast. It had to do with how close to the surface of its skin all the controlling electrical impulses traveled giving the creature everything from motion to circulation. At least, in several

parts of the reptile.

“Their surface structure can barely be breached by their own kind in a battle, but we have heard about at least one planet their typed visited that repulsed them by attacking that...” and he stopped, not having a word for what he needed to say.

“Weakness?” Tom ventured.

“No, not a weakness but more of a reality of their structure. Their *physiology*.”

After thanking his friend, the inventor returned to the underground hangar and his small office and laboratory there. The remainder of the day was spent researching electro-impulses in a variety of living—animal and mammal but not plants—organisms. He particularly wished to discover some sort of list telling everyone just how to go about interrupting them in reptiles.

Preferably in alphabetical order with “Alien-reptilian” being right between algae and amoeba.

He did read a number of articles on Earthly reptiles and, in the end, had to agree there might be similarities he could exploit.

By quitting time he was ready to halt his research. He’d found precious little to help other than items that gave voice to some of his suppositions.

Might be on my own with this, he told himself as he prepared to leave. *But*, he added as he turned off the lights, *perhaps Doc can lend a brain tomorrow*.

“Well, that’s not an easy thing to say, Tom. Ummm, the mythical disruptor weapon of television and movies is more the myth than close to a fact. But, we both know that isn’t entirely true here on Earth, now is it?”

Tom nodded. “Great-granddad’s electric rifle, our own e-gun iterations of that and the TASER. They work, in varying degrees, on most animal life not in water.”

“Yes. And they do it by pumping a great jolt, an *overwhelming* level of outside electrical interference, into an animal in an extremely brief period of time. Very effective in the short run, but can be deadly to people and animals with health issues, particularly of the heart.” He looked at his young boss, only a few years his junior, and let out a huff of breath. They both briefly thought of Gloria Monday’s late husband. “But, you’re talking about that giant lizard creature, the so-called Master of the little aliens.” It wasn’t a question.

“I am. Do you have a moral or medical issue with trying to overcome it with some outside method?”

Doc told Tom about his conversation months earlier with his old Medical Ethics professor and his own feeling that had built up over the time the aliens had actually been on the ground.

“I might be more, well, passive on this but that attack and injury the thing did to Ral made me very angry. And, like the incredible Hulk’s alter ego, ‘You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry!’” He looked at his friend seeing if there was any recognition of the quote.

Tom smiled. “I agree. I used to be less angry but I am very tired of the stomping, the roaring and the demands. And, the threats! We haven’t actually made this public for fear it will go global, but that reptilian dictator has threatened to level the entire area before heading to one of the major centers of population if we don’t do its bidding.”

They agreed that it needed to be stopped.

So, for the rest of the day, Friday, they worked on coming up with a design and a plan.

When he arrived home that evening, Bashalli could immediately see a new, hard determination in her husband. The set of his jaw was more forward as if daring anything to take a swing.

She asked if he could tell her anything.

“Yes, but not until the kids are in bed.”

When the two of them were getting ready to climb into their own bed, he sat down and patted the mattress next to him She came over and sat, but not before giving him a kiss on his cheek.

“Okay. Doc and I might have figured out a way to disable that lizard if things go bad.” He told her how angry the creature was at not being given full access to world leaders or even freedom of movement.

“But, can’t it see that all this was brought on by its own actions? Its refusal to tell anyone why it was coming?”

“Perhaps if it thought like humans do, we might be able to reason with it. But, everything I’ve read say that reptilian life have brains that do not function like ours. More primitive and more geared to attack and defense and not so much on reason or logic. But, I might be able to use that against it. I’m just not certain if we have the resources to construct anything to do what I want.”

Word came down from the *Space Queen* the following morning that their patient, Gloria Monday, appeared to be cancer free. She

would be kept for another week and then hoped to catch a ride on the monthly supply flight to Mars after that.

The physician up there with the most experience with cancers was quite excited stating he hoped to discuss what the aliens had done before they departed.

Tom hoped they would be long gone before any such conference might take place. It wasn't that he wanted anything kept secret, it was that circumstances with the Master made it imperative it be removed as soon as possible.

Gloria had sent a note to Tom to be delivered to the aliens. It said that she thanked them for her life and hoped for them a wonderful flight home.

She could not know this was not something that was going to happen without some bad times before it occurred.

People began to act a little paranoid about what might and might not be overheard or traced or otherwise listened in to by the aliens.

Tom was not totally immune. He had several meetings that took place at his home and not in any of the offices at Enterprises, the Construction Company or the MotorCar Company.

"I don't like the skulking around in our own territory, but we just don't know what that Master is capable of," he told Jake Aturian, Doc and Hank Sterling three afternoons later.

Bashalli was at work and Amanda had left to pick up Bart and Mary from their schools and would take them to the Library—fascinating for Bart and less for his sister—before heading to an ice cream shop—absolutely tops in the girl's book and a pretty good deal for her older brother.

Doc was asked to explain a bit about reptilian physiology and also the theories on how electrical shock might affect that form of life.

"Experiments have been made in the past showing that it takes a lot of power to kill a larger reptile, but relatively less to nearly paralyze one."

Tom had to add, "The truth is we don't know if that thing is grounded or even if its skin can be targeted with electricity. I mean, just look at our own tomasite."

Hank asked about what level of power might be required to permanently finish their foe.

"I can answer that," Doc told him, "and it is a bunch. As in, for something that size, along the lines of one hundred thousand volts

at enough amps to blow out a small power station.”

This even took Tom by surprise. “Oh. So is that because of its size, the possible thickness of its hide, or some other reason?”

“Part of it is overkill, pardon the expression, but most of it is based on the levels of power necessary to disrupt a more primitive brain. Remember, there was a heck of a lot of lightning back when dinosaurs roamed the Earth, and yet we haven’t found any skeletons that were blown apart by that level of power. Oh, they likely died if directly hit, but close proximity, so close it might kill you or me, might have been a tingle to them.”

“We’ll never be able to carry that around in anything portable or hand held. That is going to mean one of our largest power pods just to generate enough oomph for a single shot!” Hank stated with a worries shake of his head.

“From pretty close I’d say,” Jake added. “That is going to mean a large, mobile platform that can get within range. If anyone is going to ask me, ‘Can we do that?’ I’ll have to tell you, if we can’t we might be sunk! So, we will.”

Everything was silent for four more days. Days when Tom, Angie and Damon brainstormed what to do next.

She was keeping the President advised of almost the hour-by-hour goings on while Peter Quintana came up to land on the opposite end of Enterprises about every other day for a conference.

“Think it would respond to me?” he asked. “We could play up my importance and see if it will be a bit more free with its expectations.”

“Or,” Tom said to discourage their friend, “it might simply want to kill the highest ranking leader and then try to take over.”

Peter shook his head. “Doesn’t it realize if you get rid of one leader, another pops right up?”

Damon came to his son’s rescue on that. “Pete. It’s a damned lizard. Or, a dinosaur, not a truly intelligent being. There seems to be no reasoning with it, and the Space Friends can’t disagree with that notion.”

“We’re still thinking of them as friends?”

Tom stated, “Yes. They are helpless and as scared about how this might play out as we all are.”

Once they had an hour of discussion following the Senator’s departure, Damon told Tom and Angie he wanted to go out to give things one last try at dissuading the lizard from attempting anything

foolish or dangerous.

"Talk to the President first," Angie requested.

The older inventor agreed, made the call, but only to advise the President of his intentions.

"Go for it," he was told.

After nearly two hours of receiving no further update, the President became worried. He had his secretary place a call, one he hoped was not about to turn into bad news.

Trent received the call, asked the woman to ask the President to hold for a couple minutes, and worked to transfer the call from the phone system to Damon's TeleVoc pin.

At the time, Damon was sitting in a Security truck with Harlan attempting to calm down after a lengthy, and unsuccessful attempt at negotiations with the Master.

It had left Row exhausted and in need of being attended to by the females.

For his part, Damon felt totally drained. "Answer."

"Damon? It's John in the White House. I understand from our intermediary things have grown, what? Tense? Between this Master creature and you and Tom, I mean."

"Yes, Sir," he said to the President. "That dinosaur started out trying to convince me it is ready for a truce and then started stomping around, demanding to confront you and other world leaders—although I still do not believe it understands the concept of different nations with different leaders."

"Hmmm? Well, as you might imagine I am not allowed to even consider coming there to face the possibility of a rampage. Secret Service won't allow it; Congress won't allow it; my darling wife has offered to lock me in the basement here if I even so much as mention the possibility. So, I have to ask you if you are *absolutely* certain you can still handle the situation from this point on. I ask because I am authorized to evacuate Shopton and all your companies and bring in some fairly nasty things."

"John. In all honesty I can't vouch for the effectiveness of any of that. All I can say is we've taken it this far and I know that Tom, especially, would like to get it all over with."

"Then, let's make it happen. I am just a phone call away and a eleven-minute flight by attack jets armed with very effective air-to-ground and air-to-air missiles."

There was a moment of silence.

“Thank you, Mr. President. We will do you proud!”

He turned and looked to Harlan.

“Call Tom and tell him,” his friend and the man most responsible for his safety told him.

He did and had his son replay the digital file from his conversation with Washington.

“You heard all that. Are we ready to absolutely deny that lizard the possibility of a meeting with anyone other than us?”

“Yes. But, come back and have rest. No use you being completely bushed when we tell that monster its days of trying to bully us are finished!”

They drove out two hours later in the largest of the Security trucks, more a show of possible force than easy transportation.

The Master was standing outside the hangar with one of the small aliens holding a piece of cardboard they must have found in the hangar that was attached, somehow, to a pole. It almost, but not quite, provided some sun shade to the eyes of the creature.

It began roaring a stream of demands which included, as before, direct contact with the leader of the planet, total freedom to fly their saucer where the Master decided, and for someone to turn down the intensity of the sun!

Over about eight minutes Damon attempted to explain that none of the demands could be acceded to. He sought to find ways to explain there were many dozens of nations around the globe and just about every one had its own leader or leaders or governing body. And, few if any would come.

He might as well have been attempting to teach advanced accounting to a two-year-old.

The Master stood, not moving for over thirty seconds before resuming its roaring and stamping.

Row tried to translate, but as he listened to one part of the tirade, Damon could see him turning a very pale shade. The inventor believed he was about to hear something very bad.

“The Master demands I tell you it will have its way. Even if that means leveling this area and removing all forms of life. I am sorry, Damon Swift. It is what it says.”

Damon told Row to translate a statement to the Master.

He began slowly and deliberately allowing his tone and volume to escalate as he went along.

“We do not take threats from others. You have stated you could, ‘Just fly off and do damage to this planet?’ if we do not bring to you any of the leaders of this planet. Well I now tell you that request is denied. If you have trouble getting over that, and do attempt to take off for a revenge flight, we have the ability to knock your flying ship from the sky and to cause it to crash, likely killing all onboard! We have used that before and your ship was unable to lift off more than a small number of our measurement units. That was on low power setting. *Do not try to leave without our permission!*”

CHAPTER 19 /

WHAT WE GAVE WE NOW TAKE!

THINGS BETWEEN the humans and this angry, demanding and haughty lizard were deteriorating. Following Damon's encounter, when Tom or Damon had approached the saucer and requested to communicate with it, and that had been relayed by the Space Friends, it would appear at the doorway—sometimes in as little as fifteen minutes—and stand silently and still.

Recently that time to appearance had lengthened as if it were purposely keeping them waiting and then, once it did come to see what they wanted, it stood with its clawed forefeet flexing and making small slashing movements. This change in attitude did not go over well with the humans, especially Tom.

It made the Space Friends visibly quake as they stood by almost as if they were watching a tennis game that might have a deadly ending.

On several occasions Row managed to leave the ship without the notice—apparently—of his Master and entered the nearby hangar requesting to speak with Tom.

“Our Master is a hateful being and we do not believe there can be a positive outcome, Tom Swift. We are at a loss for what we might attempt. The Master is far superior to us in strength and cunning and we believe it may know we do not wish to do its demands.”

“What are those?” Tom asked gently. He knew the smaller beings were not brave and it would do no good to shout or get angry.

“The Master has demanded on more than three occasions to be visited by the leaders of this planet. We believe there is no understanding that there might be more than a single controlling being. It has never encountered a planet where there are so many individual areas controlled by different beings or factions. While it attempts to understand new concepts, it does not try to cause damage. This may be a good thing for the eventual outcome.”

When Tom asked what *that* might mean, Row did his version of a human shrug. He could offer no other details or ideas.

On the third such clandestine meeting, the inventor asked a question he hoped would not make anything worse.

“Is there a way to defeat the creature you call your Master? By that I mean not to kill, unless that is the only way to rid our world of the danger. We wish to make it possible for you to remove it from

the Earth and, we hope, for all time.”

Row tilted his head upward as if searching for a higher source of information. He turned around twice during the eighty seconds of his consideration.

Or, as Tom believed, in telepathic communication with his shipmates. He hoped it was not being overheard by the lizard.

When Row looked back at Tom, his head tilted to his left slightly. “We do not know. And, the Master is not awake. We do not believe the answer to that is definite on either side. There have been a few instances on our home world where it is believed that a Master has been destroyed. I do not understand how that is possible. I do know that the one Master was replaced by another and there were no punishments given to my people.”

This was something Tom talked over with Damon twenty minutes later.

“Do you have any idea what that either means or what they did to accomplish the deed?”

Tom shook his head. “No. And, Row was of no help as this is something he has heard second- or third-hand. He was definite when he stated the Master was destroyed... killed is my interpretation rather than blown up or anything that violent.”

They discussed a few possibilities from the standpoint of the Space Friends and not what might be done on Earth. They had to leave it at simple speculation as Damon received a call and summons to come immediately to Washington to address a special joint Congressional committee.

“I guess that means the President had to tell someone and they told a bunch of others,” the older man said as he performed a quick download of some materials, photos and notes into his hand-held computer tablet.

“Do you need me? Moral support rather than for more information?”

Damon shook his head. “Not this time. From what little the caller told me they are more interested in assessing what we are dealing with rather than this being a full-fledged inquisition. Stand by, though, in case I need to open a conference call with you for any special insights you might have.”

Within three minutes of the start of the committee meeting Damon Swift nearly leaned back and smiled. For once in a long time the eleven men and five women sitting two feet higher than his

floor-level chair looked both nervous and apprehensive about what they might be told.

At least one man from Texas was visibly shaking as Damon detailed the saurian creature and its race being the “masters” of the smaller, friendlier beings. Things had to pause when he set up a small 3D Telejector and had a video of the creature apparently standing on the floor between him and the panel.

“I-i-i-is that blown up?” the Texan shuddered.

Damon shook his head. “No. That is about life size or within a few inches of the true size.” He might normally have added more but he waited for the politicians to keep things moving.

Senator Quintana, who had not been assigned to the committee but was sitting directly behind Damon in the audience leaned forward and whispered to the inventor.

“Should you stress how vicious it appears to be?”

“What was that?” came a question from the committee Chairwoman.

Peter Quintana stood up. “If I may, and since I was precluded from this committee even though I probably have more understanding of this situation and of the benevolent creatures that are subservient to that monster...”

Several of the panel looked at one another and there were nods all around.

“Please, Senator Quintana,” the Chairwoman told him. “But, do not editorialize or chastise this committee!”

“Fine. Then here it is. Only two of you were in your current positions when the Swifts assisted the *friendly* beings to come to visit this planet. Something they had been attempting on their own for centuries. I caution you all to not assess this and suggest it is because the Swifts managed to get their friends down here that we are in the current situation.” He held up a warning finger and looked at each member for a full two seconds before continuing.

“In point of fact, these Master creatures were not the ones in command of the Space Friends at that time.” He nudged Damon on the shoulder. “Do you have any images of the previous ones from that derelict ship?”

Damon tapped his tablet and soon an image of one of the dead, hairy and very large creatures was being shown floating in mid air. There were a few gasps from the committee.

“That,” the Senator continued, “is a dead member of the former Masters who were defeated and superseded by the dinosaurian race

about two years after the friendly visit from what we can gather. Another fact is that Tom and Damon Swift told that previous race they specifically did not want any of them to come to the Earth, a request that was granted given they were able to make the visitation by the friendly beings possible. So, they took care of this planet back then and nobody could have guessed the situation might change.”

He suggested to the panel there was still so much more to learn about the lizard race that nothing solid might even be hinted at as a possibility.

A rather hawkish old Representative from Arkansas told the committee they ought to call in the Army and blast the entire ship apart. “That’d get the message through to those blood-thirsty murdering monsters!”

Pete laughed. “Representative Deavers. Your statement is a prime example of ignorance given voice. Firstly, unless that ship takes off it is on private property and nothing has been done to give anybody reason for taking drastic and deadly action. Besides, how do you keep those gun jockeys from hitting other targets or killing good citizens?”

The Arkansan had nothing to say so he slid his chair back and crossed his arms looking sourly at the Senator and Damon.

The meeting lasted another two hours with Damon taking away the request/demand he keep the members informed of any and all things happening and even down to specific conversations he or Tom might have.

Damon, who had been standing for this last exchange, interrupted the Chairwoman before she might bang down her gavel to end the session.

“Madam. With none of you there to witness anything or to hear tones from any of the participants, even to the point where you could not understand what the saurian Master is saying without the translation by the small beings, how would any of that help you?”

She and most of the others sat with their mouths agape.

Peter Quintana came to all their rescue.

“I will be the Senate and House eyes and ears up there for the next few days or week. Anything that is germane will be transmitted to the Chairwoman’s office and you will need to ensure it is disseminated properly and without changing what I send you. Otherwise, misunderstandings and more *under* educated suggestions might be made.” Deavers would not meet his stare.

He and Damon left the building stopping by Peter’s office to make arrangements for his absence before flying back to Shopton.

Damon and Peter arrived at Enterprises just in time for Tom to TeleVoc his father with information the Space Friends had notified him they would be lifting off in about a quarter hour to go to the small, “phantom” satellite, Nestria.

“From what I can get out of Row, they have been ordered to take their Master there so he can see first hand what is being accomplished and to plan for a base of operations for the Master and possibly several more of its kind. They might depart to go home after that.”

When Peter had been advised of this, he stated, “I thought you said you could keep them on the ground. I don’t like that notion one little bit! Let’s go!”

Damon had not brought the SE-11 to a complete halt and he now moved the throttle forward, spinning the jet around and heading for the hangar where Tom was preparing to use his own flying saucer ship to follow the alien one.

The two older men hustled over from the SE-11 once it had been turned over to a flight line technician who would take it back for parking and a thorough check out.

Peter had never been inside one of Tom’s repelatron-powered saucers before and didn’t duck quite enough to not bump his head on the underside as he followed Damon to the set of steps built into one of the landing legs.

“Well, drat!” he exclaimed as he finally did duck and walked quickly up the moderately-inclined stairs and up into the airlock. As soon as they were both inside, Tom had the inner lock snap into place and the ship finished its self checks in preparation for flight.

“Tom. Can they actually take off?” Peter asked.

With a slight shake of his head, Tom responded, “I don’t actually know. They might have reserves of power they haven’t shown us.”

Bud, also there, added, “Tom just wants us to be ready to follow them... if...”

So far, he had not lowered the control panel nor had he “popped” up seats from the floor for them, so the interior was just one large, circular space with a ceiling about eight feet over their heads.

ping. Ship checks complete. Ready for flight. It was a ghostly voice that Peter believed he recognized as Tom’s wife, Bashalli.

“Order,” Tom stated into the air around him. “Lower control panel, raise four seats two behind two. Lower forward three monitors and set to display forward angles.”

ping.

And exactly what Tom requested was performed. He made a motion to the two back seats so Damon prodded Peter into one of them while taking the other. Bud also sat down to Tom's right with the inventor remaining standing for the time being.

"Order. Lift ship and continue to ninety thousand feet. Hold at that point and prepare to follow alien saucer-shaped ship at matching speed or our best possible speed."

ping.

Tom turned to Peter and told him the ping sound was the ship's way to acknowledging his orders.

Peter looked past Tom in time to watch the ship spin around and head out of the open hangar doors then rise so quickly his stomach and brain had a discussion about whether he ought to be feeling something. His stomach, not currently bothered, won.

In under a minute they slowed and stopped to hold the position Tom requested.

They did not need to wait long. The alien ship could be seen on the center screen—that had been changed to a downward view—to take off and head generally in their direction. The anti-mag beams appeared to have no affect now.

ping. Moving to match other ship speed.

The saucer sped past them at a distance of about five miles heading, Tom realized, directly for where Nestria was about to be in its orbit.

"Order. Head directly for Nestria and go into orbit at one thousand feet above surface."

ping.

The alien vessel beat them to the planetoid by four minutes but was sitting in a higher orbit. Tom really did not want to get in between them and the surface so he told the ship to remain fifteen degrees to what would be Nestria's west. In that relative position both ships made a complete circuit of the planetoid before the larger alien ship spun around and plunged back toward the Earth.

"Well, that was unspectacular," Peter exclaimed as they followed.

"Yes," Damon replied. "What do you think, Son?"

Tom rubbed his chin in thought. "I think they have some way to fully study something like Nestria in a very short time. I'm not sure why but maybe they were looking to see if we had people on it, actively using it. I know the Space Friends were aware of the conflict

it caused when they first placed it in orbit, and I am fairly sure they know that it is a peaceful settlement used for scientific projects now.”

They touched down within fifty feet of the alien ship and got out. Standing at the bottom of the sloping ramp were six of the smaller, gray beings with the dinosaur standing at the ramp top glaring at the world around it.

“What is going on?” Tom asked Row.

“Our Master demanded to be shown the small object in orbit to see if it is being used as intended.” Now he shook his upper body side to side. “It is not. It was intended by our previous Masters to be a peaceful place where our two races could interact. It is not.”

“But,” Tom protested, “it is not because we ever tried to exclude you. You never did come, or did not let us know of your presence there. Then, you were recalled to your home world.”

Row acknowledged this, but said, “This Master had stated it was to be set up as a base for our people so we could use it to visit the Earth. This planet. I have told the Master we did visit this planet but there is no acceptance of this fact. Nor does the Master agree that our recall was one consequence in the non-use of the planetary body.”

“What does that mean?” Peter demanded now sounding angry.

“The Master will not state how further visits might be made and does not provide information on what might occur now.”

Tom had a sudden fear for the fate of Nestria and all who were living on it!

The creature stood in front of Tom with its short upper arms crossed over its chest. The look in its eyes was one of evil and malevolence.

The only thing vaguely humorous about its appearance was the belt around what had to be its waist. It had nothing to hold or to hold up as the dinosaurian was unclothed other than the ridiculous band. It certainly held no weapon.

It growled and grumbled, frequently baring its arrangement of sharp teeth, and the little Space Friends nearby quaked in fear of what they were about to translate.

Row stepped forward one pace. He bowed to the humans and then to the lizard. “The Master says to tell you that what was once given to the people of this planet to be used to aid in our coming to see this planet for ourselves has not, in the Master’s opinion, been

utilized for any purpose that can be seen. And so—” and Row looked at the ground, his entire body shaking in fear, “—our Master says to tell you that the small planetary object we once placed into an orbit around this planet is to be removed as soon as it may be arranged.”

To say that Tom and the three other humans with him felt suddenly very cold and afraid would be to call a warm cup of coffee the same temperature as the molten rock coming from a volcano.

There was no comparison.

Everyone felt like collapsing to the ground, their legs no longer seeming to work.

Finally, Bud shouted, “What? You tell that... that *freak* he can’t do that!”

Row gave only a sad shake of his head as he and the others turned to follow their Master back to the saucer. They walked up the ramp—the Space Friends Tom and Bud no longer considered to be friendly at all—and disappeared into the ship.

The door silently slid shut.

An hour later the saucer slid out from the hangar and lifted into the sky. Again, and set to its highest output, Tom’s anti-mag rays were unable to hold it down for some reason. It flew around for several minutes before settling back to the asphalt at Enterprises.

It seemed the Master was just proving the point it could now fly away when it desired.

In any evacuation scenario there have been individuals, even entire families, who refuse to believe *they* can be affected by the storm, volcanic eruption, fire or earthquake. The peoples of Pompeii had continued their lives in the shadow of Vesuvius in 79 AD. A man had steadfastly refused to leave his cherished cabin on the slopes of Mount St. Helens nineteen hundred and one years later.

So it was with some of the people on Nestria.

In fact, eight of the forty scientists and researchers had heard the warnings and instructions from their manager, then again from Tom and Damon, and finally from the President of The United States and the Director General of the United Nations.

A few had outright refused to listen; two had heard the messages and briefly considered the demands, but ultimately had turned away and returned to their research or work.

Some believed “it could never happen,” while a few felt they would be able to take shelter and “ride out the storm,” if it came to that.

No matter how much Tom Swift tried to make them see reason, some looked at him as if they felt pity for him. Mutterings of “Poor, deluded, Tom,” and “Who’s he trying to fool?” They seemed to believe this was just a ruse to get them to leave Nestria so unfriendly forces could jump in and take everything over.

“Is there any way we can force them off?” Bud asked as he, Tom and a crew of thirteen others sitting in a position just a mile from the little planetoid in the *Sutter*, about the only ship capable of both holding station at that point as well as having the carrying capacity for the scientists and their larger equipment, notes, computers and samples.

Inside the large, conical storage area was one of Tom’s flying saucers; it was something that could quickly get to the surface to make the personnel evacuation.

“Jackson Rimmer as well as Senator Quintana tell us we cannot force them ourselves. Peter suggested we take a small force of Marines up here had march them into a saucer or two but that leaves us up for major lawsuits in the slim chance the Master does not follow through and something like what the colonists fear—namely Brungaria landing and taking over claiming it as abandoned salvage—happens in the end.”

The inventor hated being in this position. It was not just uncomfortable; it was heartbreaking to think these good people might perish should the threat be followed through on. All his computations told him as soon as the planetoid moved at greater than one-point-three times its orbital speed, the atmosphere would tear away and the vacuum of space would claim everyone left there.

It did not help to know they would barely suffer; death would be quick.

That did not help him in the least!

The two men sat staring ahead for twenty minutes before Tom ventured anything more.

“Maybe we can convince the ones who demand to stay behind they need to be in space suits so if Nestria begins to move they will not immediately die. Then, we try to match the speed it’s going and grab them off.”

“With the Attractatron?”

“Well-l-l-l... that’s a possibility. Not a great one unless they are all outside when and if anything happens.” He stopped as a thought came. “Probably won’t work for more than one or two, Bud. The time it takes to grab and bring back one person would be far too long. I doubt we’d have more than one or possibly two opportunities

unless they get flung into space.”

The men and women on board the *Sutter* fretted for two full days before anything happened.

Without warning the space saucer of the aliens lifted from the tarmac at Enterprises and shot into the sky.

The warning to *Sutter* came with only nine seconds before the saucer appeared to come to an abrupt halt between them and Nestria. Then, the unthinkable came.

With a visible shudder the little planetoid the Space Friends had placed into Earth orbit some thirteen years earlier, the small piece of unnaturally-rounded rock with its enhanced gravity courtesy of one of the gravity stones also put there by the aliens, started to move away from the Earth.

At first it was slow enough to give Tom time to react and to bring *Sutter* in close. But, as he was giving the orders to get the Attractatron pointed onto one of the five visible remaining occupants, Nestria became a blur, raced into the distance and disappeared within eleven seconds.

About that time the alien ship headed back to Enterprises.

When Tom—and everyone on the *Sutter*—came out of the state of shock they'd been overcome by, and with tears of both sadness and frustration at what had just taken place streaming down his cheeks, he set the controls to head back to the lower orbit where *they could use the saucer in the hold* to transfer them to the ground.

That night the inventor cried himself to sleep in the arms of his wife who could not think of anything to say that would not ring hollow in his ears.

When his soft snores told her he had finally fallen asleep two hours later, she sobbed over his pain for another hour.

CHAPTER 20 /

FAREWELL, ADIEU, AND BEGONE!

IT HAD NOT happened before where both Tom and his father wanted exactly the same thing to happen to their Space Friends, and that was they should just go away! What they wanted more than anything were for the little creatures to take their extremely ill-intentioned “Master” and get the heck off the Earth and back to their own solar system. Never to return!

“Without getting too capture-the-dinosaur movie and all,” Tom mentioned over a quick lunch, “or doing something to cause a possible interplanetary incident, what are we going to do to control that beast?”

Damon had done everything from talking to reptile experts to even visiting the Enterprises’ Museum and spending time looking at this grandfather’s electric rifle.

The first time he spotted it a day earlier he had to laugh. When Tom had developed his handheld e-guns, it had been from the basic electrical design of the rifle. But, before returning it secretly to the sealed storage building, he had carefully cleaned and rewired the insides.

Damon chuckled on seeing the small tag attached to the trigger guard:

**CAUTION! THIS DEVICE, WHEN CHARGED, IS DEADLY.
DO NOT USE WITHOUT FIRST CONTACTING TOM SWIFT!**

Leave it to Tom to make that old relic work just so it can sit here on display, Damon told himself. It was then he spotted the box sitting behind the rifle’s butt, a handwritten label on that stated these were all of the old and non-working parts to the original rifle. Tom had cleaned them up, sealed them in a protective vacuumed film, and retained them for historical purposes.

Now, sitting in the office and with both men attempting to come up with some sort of solution to their dilemma, their thoughts were interrupted by Chow coming back in for their lunch plates and glasses.

“If’n ya don’t mind me sayin’ so, you two look ta be in a bit of a fix fer somethin’. Mind if I get all nosey an’ ask?”

The older Swift shook his head. “No, Chow. That’s perfectly okay. You know all about our space visitors and the rather intimidating dinosaur-like creature that came with them and the Nestria thing?”

“Shor do,” the westerner said looking more than a little bothered.

“Well, dad and I are trying to come up with a way to get that creature to leave, even if that means we never get to see the Space Friends ever again. We just don’t want to... well, we don’t want to injure or kill the thing just to get it out of here. Although, after what it did there have been cries for the creature’s destruction.”

Damon picked up the discussion. “Right. Unless it becomes actively violent—not just its near constant stream of threats—we can’t hurt or kill it for fear the Space Friends would be punished once they return home. And, they obviously cannot remain here because they could get cut off from their source of supplies.”

“Worse yet,” Tom added, “we cannot have that race of beings coming to wage war on this planet over our just protecting ourselves. Not a great place to be right now.”

Chow had taken a seat at the conference table. He pulled a small, battery-powered fan from his pocket and turned it on his face. With a grin, he explained, “Got my ten-galloner in the shop ta get a new inside band. I sweat the life out o’ one ‘bout every darned year. This cools me down when I don’t got the hat ta sue fer a fan.”

He sat with a pondering look on his face for about twenty seconds.

“Got it! Or, least I got one idea. You both seen that old dino classic, *The Valley of Gwangi*?” When neither of the men sitting with him admitted to having seen it, he shrugged.

“Anyhoo, the lead actor, fellow named Jimmy Franciscus, an’ a bunch o’ cowboys down in Mexico try ta capture an’ rid the area o’ a big, blue version o’ that ornery dinosaur our little friends sorta had ta bring here. Horses, lariats, lots ‘o other types o’ dinosaurs and battles with ever’thing from elephant ta man.”

Tom, who had a good imagination, was a bit stumped for what to think of all this description.

“Uhh, Chow? Where’s this heading?”

The cook grinned a little embarrassed now. “Wahl, I was thinkin’ I could get a bunch o’ cowpokes here with their ponies and we could do that with this critter. Not hurt it none, just ta get its attention afore we tell it ta git and stay gone.” He looked at his bosses expectantly.

Unexpectedly to the other two, Damon let out a good laugh. “That’s great, Chow. I wish we could do that because I’d like to see that lizard’s face register complete disbelief at its situation. The only fly in that ointment is just what the Space Friends do to keep control of it once they get it into their ship. And, believe me, I do not think

they would consider abandoning it here for fear of what would befall them back home.”

“Oh. Then I guess I got nuthin’. Sorry.”

Once the cook left, they talked a little more about some moderately extreme measures that might be taken. The only thing that sprang to mind now was Chow’s description of the cowboys and their lariats.

“You do know I could make loop throwers that could be mounted on some of the large vehicles we have around here,” Tom stated. “At anybody’s best guess for density of that thing’s flesh I’d say it weighs in at about three thousand pounds. Maybe a little less. It couldn’t drag two of the trucks Security uses so four would be more than enough to control it.”

Damon had to think a moment, but he came up with an idea. “And, there is nearly no way it could cut those ropes, especially if they were made from woven Durastress!”

What had been a pipe dream rapidly was turning into a plan of action.

“We would need to give it some warning and let the decision be on its head,” the older man declared.

“Wouldn’t that give it time or a reason to attack?” Tom inquired.

“Not if it is a matter of getting it surrounded, giving the warning as an ultimatum, and following through in a flash if it moves to take any action.”

It had taken more than a month since the first landing to come to any conclusion regarding a question Damon had asked Tom prior to the arrival of the aliens. The inventor found Bud in his office out in hangar six and sat down.

“Got a question for you, Bud. What would you say if I told you I might head down to Fearing and try to come up with some sort of... device... something to use in a fight against that dinosaur?”

“Will they know?” the flyer asked. “I mean, does that box report back to them what you do with it and they either nod and say, ‘That’s fine’, or shake their bodies and go, ‘Oh, no, no, no!’ Because if it is the second ones, the friendly aliens might just pretend to not take any notice, but if old snarling lizard head gets wind, could that put us at a disadvantage?”

The inventor had to consider this for nearly two minutes before giving his friend a brief shake of his head.

“One thing I’d never thought about is shrouding that in a tomasite case. If it does tattle on me and broadcast anything out, tomasite ought to stop it. Or...” and now he scowled, “it may be the

box communicates through that secret rift in space and time like their regular communicator does. I don't know, Bud. I just don't know."

He seemed dejected for a few moments before he brightened.

"What?" Bud asked seeing the change of expression.

"I do believe we can test that, Bud. We need to build a box for one of the communication devices, put our friends' trans-dimensional box inside and try sending them a vague message."

It took the rest of that day and most of the following one for the box to be built and a simple digital recorder and control device to be created so everything could work inside the sealed container, but Tom and Bud headed for the sky in one of the small supersonic two-man jets Enterprises had been making and selling for a couple years.

"We're heading for an altitude of forty thousand, Bud," he said as they passed eighteen thousand. "When we get there I want you to press that small dongle button and yank the cord out of the box. There's a sealant that will adhere in a second closing out any possible leak, and the message goes out ten seconds after you press that button."

The flyer watched the altimeter and got ready as they neared the target altitude.

"Any time now, Bud."

Bud pressed the button firmly and then pulled the thin cable from the side of the tomasite box. He pressed hard on the top piece over the fast-closing hole and held it until Tom laughed and told him, "You may as well let that go. If my plan to seal things didn't work, a little extra pressure isn't going to help much. Nice try, though."

As the inventor sent the jet in a downward wide spiral and an eventual landing, Bud asked him about the message.

"Well, it says I want a meeting with Row and at least two of the others, just not their Master, over in your hangar in thirty minutes. It even gives them a one-minute sample in case they have trouble with short times. We'll see in..." and he checked his watch, "...about nineteen minutes."

After landing and a quick taxi to Hangar 6, the two men got out and walked inside.

Thirty minutes came and went as did forty minutes. Nobody appeared. A quick check outside showed them nobody was headed for the hangar.

Finally, Tom let out a *whoosh* of breath and smiled.

“I believe we have a success, flyboy. Let’s get the panels built to make a big box and get those down to Fearing as soon as possible!”

Two nights later the *Sky Queen* was silently towed over to the construction building housing the extrusion equipment for larger tomasite sheets. In all, six of them—interlocking with channels for the same sort of sealant Tom used in the small box—were loaded aboard along with a special liquid to release that sealant when needed.

There had been zero hint that any message was ever released so Tom was feeling very good about the prospects for success.

“Why is it going to be so wide?” Hank had asked.

Tom looked at the older man who was more than an employee; he was a close friend.

“The truth?” Hank nodded. “Okay, then I am going to be inside our box operating the manufacturing device and trying to come up with something I do not want the name or category spoken about out loud. But, it may help us defeat that monster and give us some peace. Plus, I can’t let Bash know I’m doing this or she’d have a fit!”

The big engineer nodded and placed a hand on Tom’s right shoulder giving it a friendly squeeze.

He offered to accompany the two men on the flight but Tom suggested he’d rather not endanger anyone else. “Besides, flyboy and I, along with one or two techs down there, can assemble this. Then, the release steps really only need one person to squirt the release agent in the gap and then suction it out. Bud,” and he grinned, “thanks!”

Tom let his friend spend the entire flight down going over all the steps in his mind. When they were taxiing up to the hangar closest to the base Administration building he asked if Bud had it all straight.

“Sure do. I have to, don’t I?”

“I’ll appreciate it if you can get me out at about the one-hour mark. I will have that breathing apparatus we brought with two hours of air, but the entire manufacturing process from start to completion should take about as long as making a communicator and they take me twenty-seven minutes. Ummm, thirty-six the first time what with finding the right item in the catalog.”

Fifty minutes after landing and taxiing to the entrance of the hangar, the tomasite box was complete other than the front panel.

To accommodate the opening top—it had not needed to open to disgorge a radio unit but *would* open if Tom climbed a ladder—the box was an extra seven feet tall.

Tom was donning his breathing gear with its small oxygen bottle and CO₂ scrubber as the tech came to announce things were ready.

Before he placed the mouthpiece in this mouth, Tom shook the other two men's hands and looked meaningfully into his brother-in-law's eyes.

"I know, skipper. Believe me, I know. Don't say anything."

With a curt nod Tom stepped forward and the other two lifted the front sheet up and shoved it into the grooves. It already had the sealant and was only waiting to meet with the other pieces before setting.

Tom placed his right hand against the area concealing the control pad. He next pulled out his translator from a pocket and readied it to watch the menu items and tell him when he got to the right one.

That came rather quickly. Only the radio units and something looking strangely like his breathing gear came to the screen before a pistol-looking device appeared. He lifted his finger from the slider control and studied the image. In the lower right corner of the screen a box popped up and alien hands began describing the item. The translator gave him the information in English.

"Nervous system disruption and paralyzing equipment. Contains lethal and non-lethal setting switch. Power charge applies for—" and the translator failed Tom but he believed it was for greater than a dozen firings. "Caution: do not utilize on—" another failure but he believed it was meant to indicate the Space Friends—"as it will provide deadly input."

That was it.

"Well," he said to nobody but himself, "here goes." He pressed the button he knew would confirm his desire to receive one of the units. The screen went to a series of small squares that built from right to left. Tom knew this was the progress bar. When it reached the left side they disappeared and a small slider door rolled up exposing the new weapon.

He contemplated whether one would be sufficient. A minute later he had the box build another unit. Both were slipped into his back pockets.

He was about to close things down—he had about nineteen minutes before Bud would begin the process of releasing him—when he had the machine construct a third.

By the time the front panel was being pried away, the inventor

had formed a plan of action in the forthcoming battle with the dinosaur.

It had been, once over and done with, easier than Tom might have ever thought.

He'd met with Row, more with the intent of seeing if the aliens had any inkling of what was to come than anything else, and had requested the Master be notified he wished to have a conference.

When the large and heavy reptile thumped down the ramp of the ship, Tom was waiting with one of the weapons tucked in the back of his pants. He had thoroughly checked it out—without ever firing it for fear it would make his intent known—and from the status light it was ready for use.

“You wish to beg for my mercy?” came the snarl, translated by Row.

“I wish to request that you and our friends leave this planet and leave our people alone. Forever! I do not wish to negotiate this point. It is a demand and is final.”

He hoped his voice did not betray his nerves at the moment.

The dino's head tilted back and something like a deep gurgle would be heard. It was likely to be that creature's laugh. “You have no power to say what I will do. I will have my way and you and this planet will be mine! What have you to say now?”

“Your kind did not give us Nestria; the former Masters who you killed did that. It wasn't your to take!”

Tom nodded. He then did something he hoped would work. He looked up and made a whistle noise. As he did this, the dinosaur's head also tilted up, presumably to see what the inventor was seeing. At that moment Tom pulled the weapon from the back of his belt and shot the dino in the throat.

He wasn't alone.

Bud stepped from the left side of the hangar and Damon Swift from the right. Together they also shot their weapons into the beast; Bud's shot was higher than Damon's with the flyer's hitting the creature in the jaw and the older inventor in the spine.

As Tom prepared to fire another shot, the dinosaur did a small spin and crumpled to the ground.

One final gurgling snarl was heard and Tom could have sworn it was the same as the previous "laugh."

Angie Jackson stepped from behind a nearby Security truck saying into her phone, “I hope you saw all that, Mr. President.”

The creature with the unpronounceable name had been wrapped in a Durastress and SpiderSilk dinosaur version of a straightjacket. Its claws had been coated with a hard foam and the legs restrained so it could do no slashing with them. It was inside the Space Friend's saucer and would only glower at anyone who tried to communicate with it.

The lead Space Friend, Row, tried to translate for them but the "Master" would not respond.

"I have tried to let it know we bear it no anger, only sadness it wanted to make life for you unpleasant, Tom Swift."

"Did you let it know we did attempt to give it fair warning about our methods? Didn't you tell us it refused to believe it could not do whatever it wished?"

"Yes."

At that finger-speak statement, the dino let out a small growl. To Tom it sounded like more than a sound of displeasure; it sounded a little like the language it had been speaking.

Rom looked at Tom, his eyes wide in surprise.

"It says to tell you that it underestimated how intelligent you are. It also says it would have enjoyed engaging you in personal combat. If you had won, it would have either perished or left. If it had surpassed you, it would have called for an invasion of this planet."

Tom felt a shudder of ice running through his body. In a trembling voice—that the translator fortunately ignored—he asked, "What about now?"

He waited while Row translated for the dinosaur.

A series of low mutterings came from deep within the dino's throat. Twice, its powerful and deadly teeth were bared but they disappeared a few seconds before the creature went silent.

"The Master says to tell you her race may be more familiar with victory, but they are not immune from defeat. You have defeated her, so—"

"*HER?*" Tom gasped.

Once the box in his hands translated that, Row made what accounted for a nod with his entire upper body.

The voice in Tom's head now stated, "All the masters in this race are females. They are the more vicious of the race and the males are only about half their size and extremely subservient. The males could never lead our race. We wouldn't let them!"

Tom ventured a final question. “Did the weapon we made with your box take her by total surprise? Did it surprise you?”

“She did not know.” Row tilted his head to the left, something akin to a slight grin appearing on his face, but he said nothing more.

That gave Tom all the information he needed.

When Damon heard that, he laughed.

“So, they do not resent being controlled by other races, or at least the strong ones, but allowed our attack to happen?” he asked his son when they met twenty minutes later.

“Row assures me it is a symbiotic relationship. The two other races in their solar system, both the former masters and these newer ones, provide them with food and technology and protection. In return they provide a friendly face to go out exploring. I suppose many races would see the dinos and attack them while I think we have to be truthful with ourselves, the Space Friends are small and harmless-looking and... cute.”

“And, Row and his people might have known about the weapons but never let on. Interesting. Perhaps they are still our friends.”

This conversation took place as the last of the preparations were completed and the saucer, looking rather small all things considered—especially when you knew there was space inside for the twenty of the smaller aliens and also the large dinosaur—lifted from the ground and headed into the darkening sky.

“Think they will ever come back or communicate with us, son?”

Tom shook his head. “No. Row told me his team is being sent to another system and a planet about thirty light years from here and will not return in my lifetime. So,” and he sighed, “we have the language translator, the magic box they left us to build wondrous things, and some pretty good memories.”

“And, their former Master’s space saucer with all its secrets. Plus the knowledge we have the ability to subdue at least one alien dinosaur!”

Tom smiled. “Yeah.” He turned his face back to look at the now invisible alien ship and gave it a quick salute before heading back to the office.

Within the hour it was verified the aliens had traveled far beyond Mars and entered their transitional space. At that time, and with hugs to all, Angie climbed up the stairs of the Air Force jet that had just landed and left to go back to Washington.

* * * * *

Tom sat back in his favorite easy chair looking around his living room. Over near the doorway to the dining room Bart, Mary and even little Anne were sitting, quietly playing with some alphabet blocks. The boy had taken it upon himself to help teach Anne the alphabet and even at just sixteen months, she could pat her hand onto many of the blocks when he told her to show him a particular letter.

Mary was giving the little girl hugs and kisses when she did it correctly.

Bashalli came out of the kitchen to tell him to get ready for dinner, but she saw his look of serenity and chose not to interrupt it.

But, he noticed her and patted the arm of the chair. She came over, sat on it and slid into his lap with her arms around his neck.

“What are you thinking about,” she asked in a whisper.

Looking into her eyes he said, “You. Oh, and the kids, and how happy I am to have us in a world that is mostly free from tyranny and some outside evil race who control our lives. And, I was thinking about what sort of things I might do to make this an even better world in the future.”

Bashalli repositioned herself. If the truth be told, her recent diet and exercise program to drop the last of her baby weight had worked almost too well, at least in her backside. Now, she found she had a bit too little “padding” back there and Tom’s knee was pressing in on her making it slightly uncomfortable.

He waited for her to find a more comfortable spot.

“Do you have any idea about what you want to do? I mean, with so very few things you have done for this planet and the people of various nations, and even this family, there must be millions of possibilities,” she said teasingly. In fact she was exceptionally proud of, and a bit in awe of, his achievements.

“I guess I want to do something to relieve the planet of something that pollutes. Just not certain what that will be.”

What the inventor could not know at that moment was he would soon be involved in a project to create an absolutely impossible form of power generation, one that potentially could give the planet almost unlimited power, or become *very deadly!*

<•>—< End of Story >—<•>

This has been book 30 in the ***New TOM SWIFT Invention Series.***

Read them all, and then read them again:

- {1} TOM SWIFT and His EvirOzone Revivicator
- {2} TOM SWIFT and His QuieTurbine SkyLiner
- {3} TOM SWIFT and the Transcontinental BulleTrain
- {4} TOM SWIFT and His Oceanic SubLimator
- {5} TOM SWIFT and His Cyclonic Eradicator
- {6} TOM SWIFT: Galactic Ambassador
- {7} TOM SWIFT and the Paradox Planet
- {8} TOM SWIFT and the Galaxy Ghosts
- {9} TOM SWIFT and His Martian TerraVironment
- {10} TOM SWIFT and His Tectonic Interrupter
- {11} TOM SWIFT and the AntiInferno Suppressor
- {12} TOM SWIFT and the High Space L-Evator
- {13} TOM SWIFT and the IntraEarth Invaders
- {14} TOM SWIFT and the Coupe of Invisibility
- {15} TOM SWIFT and the Yesterday Machine
- {16} TOM SWIFT and the Reconstructed Planet
- {17} TOM SWIFT and His NanoSurgery Brigade
- {18} TOM SWIFT and His ThermoIon Jetpack
- {19} TOM SWIFT and the Atlantean HydroWay
- {20} TOM SWIFT and the Electricity Vampires
- {21} TOM SWIFT and the Solar Chaser
- {22} TOM SWIFT and His SeaSpace HydroFarm
- {23} TOM SWIFT and the Martian Moon Re-placement
- {24} TOM SWIFT and the Venusian InvulnoSuit
- {25} TOM SWIFT and the HoverCity
- {26} TOM SWIFT and the SubNeptunian Circumnavigation
- {27} TOM SWIFT and the Marianas AquaNoids
- {28} TOM SWIFT and the Starless Planet
- {29} TOM SWIFT and His HyperSonic SpacePlane
- {30} TOM SWIFT and His Space Friends Return
- {31} TOM SWIFT and His Antimatter PowerGrid
- {32} TOM SWIFT and the Chaos Planet
- {33} TOM SWIFT and... an idea will come to me... any time now... *

* Remember, the original Tom Swift series ran 40 books and the Tom Jr. stories numbered 33. I really want to either tie that (TS Jr) or beat it!

