

TOM SWIFT and the Killing Moon

BY

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&
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Book four in the Lunar Saga that began with—

Tom Swift and His Space Battering Ram
Tom Swift and the Cometary Reclamation
Tom Swift and the Lunar Volcano

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Tom Swift and the Killing Moon

By Thomas Hudson and Leo L. Levesque

The lunar colony at Cordillera City has been saved, quite possibly along with the Earth, by the actions of Tom Swift. Now, with things settling down and the citizens of the Moon are finishing work on stage one of their one-of-a-kind lunar resort, Tom's former Chief of Security and, until recently, Director of the Cordillera City colony, Harlan Ames, has come back to Swift Enterprises. He is also acting part time head of security and executive advisor for the lunar colony from Earth, but is getting anxious to go back to the colony.

Taking his children and Lola (Grandma) Reyes, back to the Moon, now seems like an unnecessary risk. So much has happened since they were born. Their mother's death, the lunar quakes, the recent (hopefully the last) moon volcano and so much more.

But he can't sit around enjoying life with his twins when the first of a string of deaths occur back in the lunar colony. And, then another and another! All different and all of them *murder!*

Harlan feels he must first look into something he discovered in the former Masters' now destroyed fortress before heading back to help with the investigation.

Tom has his hands full trying to help the colony leaders make their somewhat wild dreams become a reality, overcoming any number of obstacles that might derail everyone's best efforts.

Harlan eventually heads back to investigate, but when Saclolo is nearly killed and everything points to an even more sinister plot, can he save himself, save the colony, and more importantly, save Tom Swift?

This book is dedicated to shaking a few things up every once in a while. This is a bit more of a Harlan Ames and Tom Swift mystery than it is a science fiction story —although both elements abound. It is definitely a Tom Swift story with inventions and all, but there is an underlying uncertainty in it. So, here is to uncertainty and mystery and all that! All we can say is the butler did NOT do it! You can check the last page if you don't believe us, but that might spoil the real ending.



In the dark haze all she could see was the man's eyes. They spoke of an intent to do her nothing short of pure evil! — **Chapter 16**

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Tom Swift and the Killing Moon

FOREWORD — Tom Hudson

Near the half way point in our previous dual-author novel—*Tom Swift and the Lunar Volcano*—I foolishly let myself believe we would tie up the entire Lunar Colony tale in those twenty chapters. HA! and double HA! (or Ha-ha!)

It soon became evident that we had far too much to cover in the third book of our trilogy. So, like the late and great Douglas Adams, we found ourselves planning the fourth book in the trilogy. Don't worry, THHGTTG fans, we are changing the designator to this being a "Saga." I will not fiddle with his little joke!

Careful readers will have noticed these books contain a lot more Harlan Ames than any previous Tom Swift book. Some might have wondered why not just do a couple *Harlan Ames, Master of Security and His Moon Adventures* books and be done with it? For me the answer is easy.

Harlan Ames has been an integral part of the life and works of Tom Swift since the second series debuted in 1954. I would have found it impossible to think of him without keeping physical ties to the young inventor and so *that* is what you have been getting from Leo and me. Two worlds, meshing and moving toward a shared goal.

Oh, and don't you dare think, "But, Tom. Shouldn't that have been 'from Leo and I?'"

NO! It would never be "me and Leo," nor "Leo and myself," or any of the other horrible abuses of the English language that make me cringe daily.

So, in conclusion, I love you people who are reading these stories and hope that we tie things up—at least for the time being—with this story, but maybe... just maybe leaving you wanting a little more at some future point in time.

In the mean time check out our other individual works listed in the back of this book.

Thomas Hudson

March 2017

Tom Swift and the Killing Moon

FOREWORD — Leo Levesque

What you intended to write and what you actually write are two entirely different things. Your characters and plot line seem to take on a life of their own. And maybe that is the way it should be. Art does imitate life. But when two authors unite to write a book together things can get out of hand. That is why there is a forth book to this trilogy. I know that Tom just mention this, but it's an inescapable fact.

Now murder is a hard thing to understand, especially why you would want to do it. It turn out that most of the time it's over very trivial things that have no lasting consequences and the price the murderer has to pay is not worth it. If the dead had a say about it they would totally agree.

Let us see what happens when trivial is blown way out of proportion.

Leo L. Levesque

March 2017

Precursor

The hollow-eyed man sat in darkness stroking the piece of paper that would help him solve everything. Each of his personal demons would disappear once he cashed in the ticket so he could travel to the forthcoming Cordillera Lunar Resort. He had so carefully plotted and planned, finally arranging to get one of the first twenty tickets through the spreading of liberal amounts of money... all that he had.

But, once on that ship everything would be fine. Everything that haunted him about the one man he hated more than anything else in the entire world—or, off of it—would be solved.

He let out a racking cough he could not control for more than a minute; the illness he had contracted from lack of sleep, bad nutrition and lack of hygiene had settled in his lungs. It didn't matter. It just didn't!

The means of exacting his revenge had been set in his mind months ago, once he had read about the forthcoming resort on the Moon.

He would kill the man who had been responsible for mercilessly hounding his beloved uncle until the man had lost his job, filed for bankruptcy, and finally died from a painful, and very public, heart attack.

For the death of his uncle, for the lost position that would have been his when he succeeded his uncle at the paper, he would *kill Tom Swift!*

Tom Swift and the Killing Moon

Chapter One: Satisfaction

The lunar surface was in near-darkness, constantly, and would remain so probably until the Sun finally went supernova and wiped the Earth and all the inner planets from existence.

That was fine. The Moon had long cooled and was dead so it had no feeling about its continued condition. Of course, it had recently suffered a distinct lack of cooling in a small location on the dark or back side, the side always facing away from its mother planet, the Earth.

It had not been a natural phenomena. It had been the result of a final act of revenge by a now dead woman who had started a nuclear fire under the surface in one the Moon's many veins of Helium3-rich ore. And, it was that same Helium3 that fueled the fire until a single man with a small drill had dug down into the fiery maelstrom and released the building pressure to such an extent that the entire burning and melting had been expelled high above the surface only to splash back in a slow motion display never before witnessed by man.

Now, four months—four *Earth* months—had passed and the heat from the nuclear fire is becoming a distant memory in the minds of the people who lived inside a crater about fourteen miles distant.

If the Moon had been sentient it would have noted that many things had been happening in the time since the newest volcano to grace its surface rose some three-hundred feet above the pockmarked plains.

That would have been fine... *if* the Moon were sentient, and *if* it actually cared about the machinations of man!

* * *

TOM SWIFT felt a sense of accomplishment like never before. Just sixteen weeks earlier he returned from the Moon and Cordillera City—the former slave colony of the now-deceased Masters. There, along with his best friend and brother-in-law, Bud Barclay, and a

vulcanologist by the name of Stefanie Brooks-Bodack, he had traced and conquered a burning nuclear fire under the lunar surface.

That act saved the colony of thousands of former slaves.

It also led to the discovery of financial and influence links with more than three dozen highly positioned government officials around the globe whose duplicity and willingness to take huge bribes had allowed the twin albino brother and sister to build a fortress in the Philippines, kidnap about ten-thousand people from various mountain and jungle villages and press them into slave labor, and to build a hidden colony on the dark side of the Moon.

Their evil intent was to set up the colony, crash a giant comet into the Earth and then freely pillage the planet for whatever they still needed or wanted.

Tom had been involved in the downfall of that plan which also saw the Emperor Shangri-La—as he and his sister had designated themselves—being killed by his own greed and stupidity.

His sister met her fate a year later, and Tom was once again involved in that episode. In fact, technically he had helped murder her.

Of course it had been in self-defense and in defense of the entire colony The Empress intended to destroy, but he had not pulled the trigger. It had been her other self that took control long enough to squeeze the trigger scrambling her brain but saving her unborn babies.

Now, with a free and safe life to look forward to, the colonists were starting on preparations to construct one of the most ambitious projects ever; they were going to build a vacation resort on the Moon!

As he sat in his chair in the large office he and his father shared at Swift Enterprises, Tom marveled at how quickly the end of the nuclear magma fire had come. It was a good thing and had happened in time to avoid substantial damage and deaths in the colony. Some people had perished when a particularly strong lunarquake had collapsed part of one of the oldest structures, but now that area was safe and rebuilding nearly complete.

A short rap on the door was followed by the entry of a petite woman dragging a tall man behind her.

Tom quickly rose and came around to greet them.

“Stefanie! Deke! Great to see you both.”

Stefanie, the aforementioned vulcanologist, jumped up into his arms and kissed him mightily on the lips. “Love ya, Tom. Help me

get rid of the beast here and we can run away!”

Tom disentangled himself, sliding her back to the floor and turned to the man. “Deke, can’t you do something with your wife? Every time I see her I feel like I have to check to see if Bashalli is around. Golly!”

Deke Bodack smiled and shook his head.

“Sorry, Tom. She’s been like that since I met her and I don’t think I can tame her. Heck. If having one kid and now another on the way hasn’t slowed her, I don’t think I can do anything about it.”

Tom felt a finger being poked into his midsection.

“I am down here, you know. Just because you can chat up over my head doesn’t mean my dwarfism has plugged my ears. But,” she said as they both looked down on her, “as long as I get at least a good hug when we got together I suppose I can do without the kissing.” She attempted to look contrite and only succeeded in looking like she had some other plan in mind.

Looking back up at Deke, Tom asked, “How’s the first full week of being Enterprises’ newest test pilot going?”

“It is a dream come true. When I got out of the service and went to work at that airport in Rhode Island, I thought my days of flying anything fancier than perhaps a twin engine Beechcraft or Piper were dead and gone. I mean, for heck’s sake, Bud already has me checking out on the SE-11 commuter jet and tells me I’ll be going up in your *Sky Queen* by the end of this week.”

Tom smiled. “Yep. That’s what I understand as well. Just wait until he drags you out to Fearing Island to fly a few runs up to the Outpost in Space or even the new space station. They’re nearly three-quarters complete with that one and starting in another three months we’ll be sending three or even four supply ships up daily.”

Deke’s head was practically spinning. Little had he realized what being a test pilot for the Swifts might entail.

“So, what can I do for you both?” Tom inquired. “Surely you didn’t come over just to have Stefanie get lipstick on me.”

“Well, while I think Steff hopes you see that as a bonus, I did have something I wanted to ask about.”

“Go ahead.”

“Fine,” Deke said but paused trying to collect his thoughts. He looked at his wife, then looked back at Tom. “Okay. I’m, I guess, a bit protective of the squirt here and especially now that she’s gonna give me another baby. She told me last night that the whole Moon adventure really put the travel and work bug back under her

bonnet—”

“More like stung me on my cute little butt,” she interrupted before closing her mouth and making a zipping motion across her lips. She left them and sat in one of the overstuffed leather chairs in the conference area of the office.

Deke shrugged. “Anyway, I was wondering if it would be pushing things too far, given my just hired status, if I were to ask if there is anything—not dangerous, mind—that she might do around here. Half days or something.”

Tom pointed to another of the conference chairs which Deke took. Tom sat opposite them.

“Swift Enterprises and the other entities like the Construction Company, the Citadel out in New Mexico, and the new Swift Motorcar Company are always growing and changing what they do. Of course, I would never suggest the Citadel, and not because of it being a nuclear facility. Heck, Their motto is ‘We’ve never met a rad we couldn’t contain.’ It’s the distance thing. So, I guess it comes down to what Stefanie is willing to do. I can’t offer Moon trips or deep dives into volcanoes.”

“The truth is, Tom, I had a little epiphany up there,” she admitted. “It happened that first time I climbed into your little Geotron and came face-to-blob with molten rock in that tunnel. Something inside me said I had more to lose than I realized. I thought it was the whole temporary split from Deke, and I sure wasn’t pregnant at that point. But I now believe I need something that keeps me around people, adults please, where I can converse freely and keep my mild active. That, more than anything physical or even adrenaline-pumping.”

Tom pressed a button on the omni-directional telephone on the table.

“Yes, Tom?” came the voice of the secretary who took care of both Tom and his famous father, Damon.

“Hi, Trent. Can you connect me with Lilian in Human Resources please?”

“Surely. One minute...” and a *click* told him they were on hold. A half minute later came another *click*. “She’s coming on line five.”

Thanking the man, Tom pressed the proper button. They waited fifteen-seconds before a light, slightly Scottish accent came on.

“Hello, Tom. I understand you’re wanting to talk to me. Is this a friendly call or do I have-ta put on my business tam?”

“Friendly *and* business, Lilian. You met Deke Bodack a couple weeks ago but I’m not certain you’ve met his lovely wife.”

“Ach-aye. The bonny, wee lass. Ooohhh. Is she there? I dinny mean offense by the wee remark if she is.”

“I’m here, and anyone with a voice that could melt butter onto toast and spread the honey as well can refer to me as being wee and bonny and all of that.” She giggled.

“Okay, but I’ll promise ya I’ll never refer to ya in front of others like I just did. So, Tom, now that I’m hoping to change the subject a bit, what cannie do for you?”

Tom explained that now the Bodacks were moving permanently to Shopton, Stefanie was looking for a part-time position.

“Do we have anything for a twenty-nine-year-old woman with a Doctorate in Vulcanology and two undergraduate degrees in Geology and Fluid Mechanics? Oh and I’d better tell you that for the next seven months she will be pregnant, so nothing too heavy or strenuous.”

“Well, now, only as long as she comes to see me so I can look into her glowing face, and she has to promise to bring in the little bairn once it come into this world. I have three things I’ve been trying to fill for more’n a month. Too highfalutin’ on the requirements side and too low on the pay side for most outside Shopton, I’m afraid. But, if you wanta hear them, here goes.”

She described the first, a positioning in the Scheduling department at the Construction Company, another handling materials procurement at the same facility, and one with the Swift Motorcar Company that would entail stress-testing various, random parts coming down the line.

“Tell me more about that third one, please,” Stefanie requested.

“I can do more’n that, lass. We can kill two birds with the one stone, as it were, if I can get you to come upstairs from Tom and Damon’s office to see me. I’ll give you the entire packet of details and get to see you in the bargain.”

“I’ll be there in three minutes!”

Tom disconnected the call after thanking Lilian.

Stefanie stood up to leave but Deke did not.

“Tom,” he began. “Please tell me that you are not just doing this to make me happy or to make Steff happy. Please tell me you’d do this for any employee or else I’m gonna feel guilty about it.”

Tom stood and laughed, holding out his hand. “Deke, we do this all the time for our employees. In fact, I’d say about fifteen percent of our employees are husband and wife or even parent and child combos. We’ve found that as long as they don’t work together, both

report being happier and it actually saves the company on health insurance costs and them on commute costs.”

“I’m heading out to Bud’s office again,” Deke said as Stefanie reached up to grab his face for a kiss. “Luck to ya, my lucky charm!”

When Tom looked a little shocked, she said to him, “Don’t even go there, Tom!” and left the office.

Deke blushed and said, “All I meant was she’s magically—”

“I can still hear you, goon! Don’t go there!” her voice came from just outside the door.

The inventor changed the subject. “Are you enjoying the new job, Deke? What I guess I’m getting at is there any part of the duties you didn’t expect? We do have the habit of using our pilots for everything from testing out single engine prop jobs to our largest transport jets to all our submersibles and space vehicles.”

Deke blanched. He gulped. “Uhhh, submersibles?” he asked.

Tom nodded. “Not so much straight submarines these days. We have a whole team responsible for those. I mean the seacopters and such. Flies like a fancy jet but can scoot around in the oceans of the world.” He looked hopefully at the pilot.

“Truthfully, after my little experience in the Geotron out in the deep Atlantic I’m a little skittish about water, Tom.”

Tom slapped his own forehead. “That’s right! I forgot. Well, we’ll play that by ear and *you* let us know when the timing is right. Until then, enjoy everything else we have that travels in or above the air.”

Tom made a quick call to Bud who, like Tom, had put the incident where Deke and Stefanie had been trapped in a deep trench in the middle of the ocean out of his mind. At the time, when they discovered the hatch was stuck from the vehicle having been partially crushed, Deke had used his forearm and height to batter up into it, finally loosening it enough so they could escape.

It had pulverized the forearm bones to the point where amputation seemed the only thing to do. However, Hank Sterling and Arv Hanson had saved the day—and his arm—when they used a 3D printer and special materials to make an absolutely accurate replacement that a bone specialist in Boston used to save Deke’s arm.

“Jetz!” Bud exclaimed. “Of course I’ll back off on anything in the water, Tom. How the heck could I forget that? Thanks for being on the ball.”

Tom chuckled. “It wasn’t me, Bud. Deke sort of paled and gulped like a beached trout when I mentioned the possibility.”

After they hung up Tom put in a call to Security. He asked for Phil Radnor, currently waiting to turn over his job as the number one man back to the former Chief.

“Hey, skipper. What’s new?”

“Well, Phil, I thought I’d check to see when exactly Harlan is going to retake the reigns over there.”

“A good question and one that deserves a good answer. Head on over and we can ask him together. He’s supposed to be coming in about eleven. Maybe an hour and a half from now.”

“I’ll be there then,” Tom promised.

He sat down to go through a short stack of correspondence. Most letters and all emails were screened by Munford Trent at their front desk, but a few each day deserved a read by the two men running the company.

Today’s batch contained six physical and nine electronic messages for him.

He was able to mark either “not interested” or “not something our company gets involved in” on all but one of the letters. For that one, he scribbled a short note suggesting that Enterprises might be able to assist in underwriting a science fair in a state that recently snipped that sort of funding from their education budgets. He asked them to contact the Swift Charities Foundation directly and provided a special code that would see their request didn’t get lost among the hundreds of others.

The emails were a mixed bag of begging letters and veiled hints that the sender was in possession of something Tom or his father would want to buy once they had a personal presentation. “If you can come out to Montana next Tuesday and get from Helena to my cabin up near Great Falls, I’ll give you a demonstration,” sort of thing.

Most of these were pre-screened, but three of them all using primarily the same wording mentioned that the sender was a good friend of “Buck Barkly, your very best friend as well.” Trent had notated them with:

“Is this a Security issue?”

His reply was, “Yes.”

One email caught his fancy. It was from a young man asking if it might be possible to get a flight to the Moon.

“I have heard about and read about your helping all those people up there and thought they might like to have someone from the Earth come tell them about us. My teacher says they are

humans just like us but I don't think she knows what she's going on about. Nobody I know would move up to the dark side of the Moon to live. They have to be some of your space friends we all read about a couple years ago. I can go almost any weekend."

It made Tom smile before it made him frown. How could any teacher, or parent for that matter, allow a teenager who supposedly was turning fifteen in a few weeks—plainly mentioned as if the kid wanted Tom to consider this might be a birthday present—believe anything other than the truth about the former slaves, now the colonists and free citizens of Cordillera City?

He set the letter to the side intending to answer it the following day.

A knock on the door was followed by Stefanie returning from her interview with Lilian in HR.

"I want to climb into her arms and let her talk to me for an hour with that amazing Edinburgh accent," she said as she came to his desk. She had a serious look on her face. "Got a minute for a friend?"

Tom smiled and pointed at the chair. "For you, of course. Just so long as you don't climb over my desk and try to kiss me." He grinned at her. The fact was he was both flattered at her affection along with having a little fear of her forwardness.

"Well, for starters it looks like I'm going to be the new tester girl at the car works. Then, I want to thank you again for giving Deke the job. His dignity took a pretty hard wallop what with losing the airport controller job in Rhode Iceland—my little jab at the cold-hearted way they let him go—plus the little separation thing we went through. He's back to his old self and I love him and love you like a kissing cousin for getting him back on his feet."

"From the very start of that volcanic rift thing Bud kept telling me that we needed to hire Deke and get him into our pilot stable. So, it's back on you for taking this Moon mission on and getting him out here so he could figure out that he wanted to work for us."

She actually blushed, a first for Tom to see.

"As my grandmother used to say, 'Pish-tosh.' I have no idea what that means and knowing the old gal it's probably fairly nasty, but I'm just glad things seem to be working out. The only ointment for this fly is that he has a powerful fear of water now. I'm not saying that to mess with his chances for long-term employment, but I'm worried that if you try to put him in anything going under the water and most things on top of it, he could ever so slightly freak out."

Stefanie looked apprehensive at how the inventor might take the

news. What she didn't expect was for Tom to break out in howls of laughter.

She climbed up on the chair and stepped onto his desk, walked across it slowly and deliberately and stood with her arms crossed under her breasts, staring down at him.

"Meaning?" she demanded. "And don't look up my dress!"

"Meaning," he said getting control of his laughter, "that Deke already admitted as much to me right after you left. I'll tell you what I told him. There is plenty for him to concentrate on without adding seagoing vessels or any sort of diving to his list."

Stefanie sat down right in the middle of his desk. As her dwarfism only affected the shins on both legs, she still sat towering above him. He looked up at her only now she was smiling.

"Tom Swift? If you weren't married and I wasn't so darned shy, I'd lean over and kiss you right now. But instead I'll just say thank you, from the very bottom of my heart. And, I promise to do you proud at the car company. In fact, I'm very much looking forward to some less stressful work, and something that doesn't involve climbing into that mini-Geotron of yours ever again."

Tom was grinning. "But, you have to admit it was fun while it lasted."

She nodded. "Yeah. And I've enjoyed as much of that sort of fun as my little body can stomach for a while. Speaking of my stomach, I haven't have breakfast. Want to join me for a little brunch at the cafeteria?"

Tom though a moment and realized what with Bashalli having left the house at seven for an early morning meeting, he had skipped eating as well.

"As long as you can get off my desk without tricking me into holding you and giving you another chance to smooch me, count me in. I only have to be back within the next eighty minutes. I'll even buy."

"That, my lovely," she said standing up and stepping down onto the chair and to the floor, "will be most satisfactory!"

Chapter Two: He's Back and Ready For Action

THE MEETING with Harlan went very well. He had now spent a few weeks on Earth with his twins and their “nanna,” Lola Reyes, mother of Saclolo back from the Moon. She made it abundantly clear that once he finished his duties at the colony and returned to the Earth she was not about to just let her surrogate grandchildren go without being under her care.

And so, there were four living in the Ames house.

If he had to admit the truth, Harlan was glad. Lola was a wonderful woman and the babies needed some tender, feminine care as well as what he could give them. Besides, he intended to go back to work full time and couldn't have them at Enterprises except as part of the infant and toddler care program, and that was located on the opposite side of the building cluster from Security.

Also, he knew that she still felt fear regarding having had to dive into a large refrigeration unit with the babies and a few others when the part of the dome they were in collapsed during a particularly violent lunarquake. He still heard her tossing and turning at night from down the hallway as her mind replayed the event in her sleep.

Tom reached Phil's soon-to-be *former* office a few minutes before Harlan did. There were handshakes and warm greeting between them.

“You sure you are ready to relinquish the reins, Phil? You've done a tremendous job, you know.”

“Ready, willing, able, anxious and nearly relieved. Don't get me wrong. Someday, if and when the big guy honestly retires, and since I will remain perpetually ten years his junior, I'll want this seat, but for now, I have been like a substitute teacher. Workable and the students are still learning things, but the chalkboard is not mine right now.”

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. It opened and Harlan walked in.

After more handshaking, Phil stepped from behind his desk and motioned toward it. “I hereby turn the control station back over to the man for whom it was built in the first place.”

Harlan made a “sit down” motion with his hands. “Not so fast, Phil. While I have been studying all the files you've opened up for me on the computers, I still need a few days to get back into the swing of things. Right now I feel like a man with frozen fingers being tossed a slippery grease cube. My brain knows how it ought

to grip it, but something just isn't working quite up to full capacity yet. You keep the desk for at least today, we'll swap with you going back to your office tomorrow and for the rest of the week but still managing things, and then we'll see how I'm doing come Monday."

Tom was smiling behind his hand at the interchange. It was sounding like old times in Harlan's office. He liked it.

With a shrug, Phil responded, "Okay, but I will expect you to buckle down and concentrate. I won't carry you forever, you know!"

Harlan's face split into a big smile. "Done!" he declared and reached out to shake his second-in-command's hand again.

Tom cleared his throat. "I don't want to break up the routine, but I have to say this is something I've been missing." He looked at Phil. "You, sir, have excelled at the position so do not sell yourself short. Harlan knows that as well. He told me how you would react when he took his, uhh, leave of absence and things have tracked just that way. But," and now he faced Harlan, "as much good as you have done with the Moon colony, and as great as Phil is, you have been missed. So, I'll leave you two to go over some of the stuff that you Security types go over and get into the process of turnover. Oh, and dad wants us all to have a late lunch in the big office. See you both around one!"

With that, he left the two men and headed out of the building, across the shared parking lot and up the back stairs of the Administration building.

"How are they going to get along on the change over?" Trent inquired as Tom passed by his desk.

"Well, if my grin doesn't say it, then I'll tell you that the two of them have the same old chemistry as before. It'll take Harlan a few days to get into the swing of things and wrap his head around a few new comings and goings on, but it's going to be a very good thing to have him back."

Trent smiled. "I knew it would be, but it's nice to have you say it, Tom. Your dad is on the phone with Jake Aturian at the Construction Company but didn't say to not let you in."

Five minutes later the phone rested again in its cradle and Damon was asking about the meeting. "Do I need to be aware of anything before we have lunch?"

Tom shook his head. "I don't think so. Other than I spaced on the meeting a little while ago and ate an early lunch with Stefanie Bodack. But, I'll go for the dessert! They appeared to be picking back up where things left off. Harlan's asked to be given until Monday before he officially takes over, and Phil seemed to have no trouble with that. I think he is just relieved to have Harlan

anywhere in the offices over there.”

Promptly at one, the two men from Security came into the office. Harlan was carrying a small wooden box under one arm. Before he even had a chance to place it on Mr. Swift’s desk they heard the rattling food cart of Chow Winkler.

“Chow’s in the office and the chow’s ‘bout ta be on the table, buckaroos!” he boomed. “By the by, Harlan, great ta see ya back in the saddle, so ta speak. Phil’s been mighty good in the position from what I hear, but he’s a real picky eater. I’m lookin’ forward to having someone in your office who’ll eat just about anything I put afore him.” He made a face at Phil.

“And, I have missed your panhandle grub, Chow. Oh, and it is very good to see you.”

They sat in the conference area, the box momentarily forgotten, and the western cook served them hot pot roast sandwiches, a tossed salad with three kinds of dressing, fresh fruit and a desert of coconut cream pie, one of Harlan’s old favorites.

As they were being served they discussed how difficult it had been for Harlan to leave the lunar colony.

“Surprisingly, after I got over the feeling of being a parent looking at the abyss of his several thousand children heading off to college in a foreign land, it was easy to let go. I had to realize—actually I had to be told by Saclolo and Magadia—that I wasn’t their daddy and the people up there weren’t actually mine. After that, and once those two proved to me they felt comfortable taking over, all that was left was to worry if I would fit back in down here.” He sighed.

Phil almost choked on a piece of melon.

“Fit! Fit? Geeze, Harlan, you don’t just *fit* here at Enterprises, I have never quite filled the space you left. It is all Harlan shaped and will be for years to come. Give me a break!”

As they ate Harlan filled Damon in on some things regarding the lunar security arrangements he felt ought to be on the table now that they were going to be hiring miners and rock quarry engineers. That the Cordillerans want to do their own interviewing and hiring but were open to people that Damon or Tom are willing to recommended.

“And,” Harlan sighed, “there’s the need for additional security. There is no real use of money in the domes, but that has to change with all the extra people coming up. And you all know that mining camps and other groups of laborers are notorious for gambling and other vices. The Cordillera people will have to adjust to money again. Most of them think they left that type of criminal behavior

back on Earth. I wish there was a way to keep these two groups of people separate. But there is just not enough room to do it.”

“Maybe they should rethink this resort venture and leave things the way they are.” Phil commented.

“That has been tossed round quite a bit, but they need more goods than they can produce from Earth and that takes money. The trade value of their Helium3 just is not enough by itself. They need a constant cash flow and it must come from Earth. The only true commodity they have is the Moon, so they must use what they have at hand and that includes the tourist trade. Plain and simple.”

“And in the mean time they will need to put up with some unpleasantness to get to their final goal of total independence. Is that it, Harlan?” Tom asked.

“Yes, it is.” He answered back sadly. “We just have to find a way to keep the Earth workers from ruining the Cordilleran’s lives.”

“Harlan, I’m only your not-so-brilliant second but I think you are over thinking it.” Everyone turned and looked at Phil to see if he was serious.

“Aren’t your answers sitting on the other side of this complex?” He pointed towards the auto manufacturing plant.

Tom’s mouth dropped open for a second and then he closed it when he started to rub his chin. The motion slowly came to a stop as he went farther into what Bud called “Inventorville” or his “LaLaLand.” Damon’s own eyes were slowly glazing also as he also considered the notion.

Before Harlan had a chance to react fully both men let out a small laugh and tried to talk over each other. Tom graciously bowed towards his father and let him talk first.

“Phil, that is a brilliant idea. We have been making two domes that Mars ordered but don’t need for about ten months. We can take them to the Moon and set them up near the construction site where the temporary workers will live and then keep the city off limits for most of the time. We make it part of their contract and they can rotate back to Earth every six weeks or so to blow off steam and spend their money.”

“Well, that would make security a lot easier all around.” Harlan joyfully responded with a wide grin. “Let me run this by Saclolo and Magadia. Then we’ll need an estimate on what those two fully equipped domes would cost.”

“We’ll just rent them to you at a reasonable rate and when you’re done with them we can send them off to Mars where they

were originally intended for and sell them to the colony as fully tested but slightly used.”

“Not renting to me, Damon, but to the city. That works for me, though. There is one more item we need to talk about.”

“I presume it is about that box you came with?” Mr. Swift asked with a smile.

“It is, but you need a little background on how I got it.” A grim look came over Harlan’s face as he pushed his entree plate out of the way and settled back into his chair. He looked at each of the others.

“You knew we had a fight with a small gang of thugs at the fortress and I passed it off as if they were looters, and you know what happened except for one detail of a second hidden room.”

“I am all ears.”

“When I got into that one room there was a rather nasty woman warrior and assassin waiting for me. I’m not sure why, or even if she was under some impression that those twins were coming back, but she was ready to kill me to protect or get what she wanted. Unfortunately for her, she spotted the place in the wall I’d just found. I opened it, under duress of course, and she practically shoved me to the ground in her haste to get her hands into the hidden hole.”

He visibly shuddered as he recounted the memory of the *swishing* sound of the sharp and heavy metal knives that dropped down slicing both of her hands off at the wrists. And at her disbelief as she pulled them out and blood spurted from them before she passed out and then died from the wounds.

“But for a moment of hesitation, she would have been fine. Whoever rigged that knew there are two sorts of people,” he said looking around at his dining companions. Fortunately he had waited until they were mostly finished because his story had put them off eating. “There are the ones who lose control and rush in and those, like the four or us, who take caution.”

Damon managed to find his voice. “What was in there that was worth dying for?”

“Well, that brings me to my reason why I want you to see what’s in the box. Why I have to go investigate this,” he slowly replied as he went to the desk to retrieve the box and place it on the table that Chow had hurriedly cleaned up. With the use of a pocket knife Harlan pried open the lid. A red velvet cloth bag that filled the box was revealed. He gingerly picked it up and loosened the golden ties holding the bag closed. Tilting the mouth of the bag into the box he

let its contents slide out.

Gold, blue, red and white colors flashed in the lights of the room. When Harlan moved the bag out of the way a fortune in uncut gems and small gold statuettes was revealed. Only the sound of a gasp escaping from Chow was heard. Everyone else was stunned into silence.

Mr. Swift spoke up. "This is part of the Master's plunder, I take it?"

"Afraid not, Damon." He replied as he passed around some of the gems for them to examine closely. "It's the box that tells the story. Inscribed on the inside of that lid is some very ancient Sanskrit writing. I have seen this before in a cave that the Empress showed me hidden deep in the high mountains of Tibet. For it to be in that fortress in the Philippines it means that the Masters had gone back to that mountain valley, to that very cave to get it. Presumably there must be more treasure. This could be the last of it, but somehow I doubt it. I never had the time to see that whole place, only the first two rooms. This must be the way the Masters helped finance their empire. If they ran out of cash from their illegal endeavors they just dipped into their mountain treasure trove. I am willing to bet that this box and its meager contents represents just some kind of petty cash reserve... a slush fund."

Harlan lifted up a hand full of the colorful gems and let the tumble back into the box and laughed. "You could buy a small country with the contents of this box, and in a way I guess they were doing just that." Everyone around the table had to agree with him that some of those ancient gems must have been used in building of their lunar slave colony.

"Does this mean that the old saddle does not get filled on Monday by you, Harlan?" Phil was watching him closely.

Harlan turned to him and then pointed his thumb to Mr. Swift.

"That is entirely up to the bossman here. If I need to buckle down and work for the next six months, so be it. It's not as if this is going to disappear in the night. That cave has existed for hundreds of years, a few more months won't mean a thing. Not unless someone in this room gets 'Gold fever' and an itchy palm." Harlan turned and looked pointedly at Chow. He knew the old cook had done prospecting in the Black Mountains in his younger years.

"Don't look at me, you old troublemaker, you. I got enough jangle in my pockets now-a days, and anyways, plus the wife wouldn't like it if I go gallivanting halfway around the world," he hooted back as he wiped his forehead of sweat with a large poke-a-dotted handkerchief.

“Even for a handful of stones like these?”

“As I hear tell right they’re kind of like blood stones and I want no part of ‘em. No siree Bob.”

“Then, old partner, I’ll gladly take you as one of my team members if you want to come?” the Security man offered with a laugh.

“Sure, I could use some new Yak recipes to try on all you kind folks.”

“Mr. Swift,” Phil spoke up, “please make that trip later than sooner, if you don’t mind. Yuck on the yak no matter how it’s made.”

Chow huffed and started to wheel his food cart out the room. “Some critters don’t know good grub when it’s placed before him. That’s all I got to say on the matter.” The door closed tight behind him.

Tom eyes were watering with laughter but he managed to say. “You better not order anything for a while from Chow if I were you, Phil. You just might end up with skunk road kill surprise on your plate.”

While everyone was trying to become serious again, Harlan scooped the gems back in the bag. He left out one gold statue.

“When you look closely at this statue you will notice that it has two faces and front body parts as if two people were standing back to back. What is important is the faces. One is happy, and the other is angry. These are possibly Devas, the good and Asuras, the bad. They are from a very early Vedic period of around five-hundred BCE or twenty-five hundred years ago. Hinduism was in its early stages of development in the Tibetan area. Where this box came from may answer a lot of questions about that era. Any archaeologist worth his salt would give everything he has to be in on a finding like that. And to think the Masters use this lost treasure only as money and wasted what historical value it may have.”

“If what you say is true, Harlan,” Tom spoke up, “then we need to send an expedition as soon as possible rather than later. Don’t you think?” Both old and young Swift knew the value of ancient archeological finds and how fast they seen to disappear in the wrong hands.

“Well, I’ll tell you what, Tom. If you want to send an expedition off I’ll gladly go with it. But, they must be willing to do as I say till I feel it is safe. Who knows what traps the Masters may have set farther in. Like I said I never got past the second room and that held horrors of it own that need very carefully investigation.

Maggie's father's body is in that room and it not a very pleasant sight, believe you me."

"If you are willing to let us handle this we will get back to you at the proper time." Damon told him. "I'll run this past Legal and see what is needed by way of permissions or licenses. I know a professor from Grandyke University that would be a great asset for us. He'll know what to do so we don't fall into the spider web of international government interference. Our good will standing with China, who want to claim that part of the world is... let us say lower than the Grand Canon at this moment. If they find out it's connected with the Masters in any way they be after us with everything they have. It may be another way to get the Cordillera City under their greedy little thumbs."

"There's one more thing," Harlan said as he put the box to the side. As part of the construction efforts I've volunteered to spend another few weeks up at the colony. Saclolo and Magadia have trained a small team of their brightest people to be their own Security department, but they really could use my help. If not for the construction, then they need to understand how to handle customers coming to the resort, especially when they misbehave or do things like trying to steal the bathrobes."

Damon nodded but was thinking how it ought to be made clear to the lunar governors that this was it. They had to start standing on their own two—or in this case, four—feet.

Chapter Three: Return to The Moon

DONNELL BASSETT was a young man with slightly more than a chip on his shoulder. Mental illness amplified thoughts about anyone or anything he felt might be against him and instantly became an enemy to be defeated at all costs. So it was natural that when working for the one local television station at a time when his uncle, Dan Perkins, Editor of the *Shopton Bulletin*, had been found guilty of libeling Tom Swift, his father Damon, and the entire Swift Enterprises organization, that Donnell got it in his mind everything was this way because Tom Swift hated his uncle. Like many people who fill their minds with hate, he refused to see that his uncle's downfall had been of the man's own making. No, he saw Tom Swift as his uncle's enemy. Even, in his darkest moments, as his uncle's executioner!

And, an enemy of his family was a mortal enemy of his.

The fact that Dan Perkins was genuinely guilty of the offenses, and had admitted to them in court as well as publicly and begun making reparations to the Swifts, bypassed the young man's notice.

And when Dan had a massive heart attack as he attempted to commit suicide in a fit of his own depression, Donnell saw that as murder, and who else to believe could be guilty of that than Tom Swift!

He attempted to hurt the Swifts through his morning television appearances, making false and wild reports of wrongdoings, subterfuge and even industrial espionage, but when that failed he disappeared.

Nobody in Shopton, or even most news services he attempted to "feed" his poisonous stories to, believed a word of his accusations. After three days the television station had to shut off the phone lines to the studio during his live broadcasts because of the non-stop stream of hate calls directed at the young man. Everyone in Shopton figured he had slunk away, tail between his legs, and was gone for good.

But, no. Donnell went into hiding where he plotted and planned dozens of methods for bringing about the downfall of his enemy.

The fact Tom was actively involved in the lunar colony did not escape his notice. In fact, the more he thought about it, the better it seemed for his chances of killing Tom Swift if he could arrange for them to both be there at the same time. *Anything could happen in the airless void of the Moon. Right?*

How to get there was the big question. Then there was the nasty

problem of timing to be there when Tom Swift was also visiting. But in Bassett's mind that would all be overcome in due time. He had nothing but time. Time to plan the first murder on the Moon. He would make it into the history books one way or another.

As life would have it a few weeks later it was officially announced that a limited number of bookings for the forthcoming lunar resort's Grand Opening Week would go on sale in ten day's time. He took out all his savings from a local bank forgetting the large annuity his grandfather left for him. It sat, untouched, in a bank in Colombia, South Carolina, accruing interest and never paying out its thirty-thousand dollars a year as it had been set. With five years of growth now sitting there, the sixty-two-thousand dollar ticket and accommodations price could be paid for in cash and Donnell would have had enough money to live comfortably, and in considerably better health, than he did.

That might have changed the outcome; it certainly would have been less harsh on Donnell's mind and body.

He arranged for a check in that amount to be sent to a General Delivery Post Office address in Albany, where he was living below the "RADAR" and promptly let it slip from his mind there was a considerable wealth to be claimed in the other account.

Bassett had the gall to buy the ticket using his uncle Dan's name and social security number. He had his uncle's last passport and he was sure he could find someone in the more shady part of town to replace the picture with his and tidy it up. The ten-month waiting was going to be a killer since he now believed he was literally broke with only ten dollars in his billfold and fifty cents in his pocket.

He started to eke out a living panhandling while living inside the ground floor apartment of an old abandoned building on the outskirts of Albany, and waited. The day he heard his name called out from the front door sent him scurrying out the back door and straight into the arms of some rather tough looking gentlemen. They grabbed him by the arms and carried him inside, placing him unceremoniously on the battered old couch in the front room.

One of the men opened the front door, made a motion, and a well-dressed man with a silver-handled cane in one hand came in. He looked around with disdain before coming over to stand before Bassett. He bowed slightly with a click of his heels.

"You, Mr. Bassett, need not know my name or why I want you to do what I have in mind. All you need to know is that you will be paid very handsomely for what I want you to accomplish. Curiously, it is also something you really want to happen right now. What can this be, you ask yourself? Why, it is to kill Tom Swift."

That got Bassett's attention right away and he settled down, no

longer looking like a rabbit that has been cornered by a pack of wolves that was searching for a magic door to freedom.

“How can this stranger know my innermost thoughts, you ask yourself? And, I give you an answer. Your broadcasts have been brought to my attention. They say much about your feeling toward your nemesis. When you have a few extra dollars you drink and do so very poorly. And, you talk. To anyone willing to listen and pay for another round. That stops today!”

Donnell looked at the man through slitted eyes, but a moment later he nodded.

“I know you bought a ticket to the grand opening of the proposed Cordillera Lunar Resort. My associates and I also know that you used your uncle’s name and identity papers to do it. And that you have no money to your name. Correct?” he asked with a knowing smile on his face. He knew the truth but his associates had been keeping watch on Donnell and even speaking to the few people the young man still associated with. He was, as far as they could discover, forever going on about having no money.

Bassett nodded his head, too afraid to say anything.

“Now how would you like to live on the Moon for the next six months instead of down here, having ample time to look for your opportunity to do what you desire most?”

Bassett’s eyes blazed for a moment with excitement then squinted as he looked for into the man’s face trying to see if he really meant it or not. It was impossible to know because he never could tell one oriental race from another. They all looked the same to him. Plus, he had never been a good reader of expressions. To him, angry, worried and in distress looked the same.

A briefcase appeared from behind this man, was opened and papers were taken out and handed to him along with an envelope.

“Do not try to look into this too far, Bassett. Accept the fact that a friend of mine with the necessary level of computer expertise has done all the right things and is giving you a second life. A life that you will have to learn about if you want to get to the Moon. We are giving you the means, it is up to you to do the follow up work to our satisfaction.”

With that said he bowed once more and walked out the door with his associates right behind him. The door was shut with enough force to crack on of the door’s three small glass panes and things went very quiet.

Bassett sat on the couch for quite a while attempting to warm up from the incredible chill he’d suddenly felt, before he started to read the papers clutched in his hand.

His fake identification gave him a totally new life even having him attending Purdue University with, if not outright honors at least a distinguished academic record, and included a phony student record, notes from professors, and a full transcript of classes attended.

Donnell was now known, if you looked in the “right” places, as Peter Donald, a former undergraduate with a degree in Civil Engineering and an admirable but undistinguished 3.2 grade point average and a specialization in Construction Engineering.

Because the transcripts listed his age at entry into college as twenty-six, it matched his current thirty-one year age so nobody would question why he had no recent employment history to check.

At the end of the report was a note directing him to an obscure website requesting construction professionals who might like to volunteer for, “An exciting opportunity to put your talents and skills to use building the most unique resort in the most out of the way location possible.” The envelope held an even bigger surprise, five, one-hundred dollar bills. That would keep him in food for a while; if he was really thrifty and didn’t drink—or at least cut that back—it would last more than a month. Perhaps two.

He went to the nearby library where a computer was available for his use. He followed the simple “YES” link on the page he’d been provided to an online form and then, because he had some experience, he opened the background programming for the form and found where it was to be directed.

That led to another search and another, along with a few dead ends, but he persevered and eventually found the final link in the chain pointed right up into space, and the lunar colony.

He applied on line, attached a file he had stashed on a web server in case it was ever needed, and sent everything off. Now, the waiting began. He knew he was mentally prepared for the wait, but sitting alone day after day gave him a painful appreciation for his physical deterioration.

It took two weeks but he received an email reply telling him he had passed the first round of investigating applicants’ backgrounds.

The cursory check of his application came up with high marks from his schooling and a special note from one professor stating that he was “one of the more conscientious young engineers” he had ever had the pleasure of teaching.

He was provided an address to a local medical firm in the heart of Albany that would do the necessary physical. He could have it done anytime in the next five days. Failure to do so would automatically withdraw him from the list of potential workers.

That night someone knocked on the back door; when Bassett went to check on it he found an envelope pinned to the door.

The single sheet of paper told him to ask for a certain doctor at the medical firm the next day, the next day *only*, and he would pass with an A-1 medical rating.

It went without a hitch, and he never did see any doctors, only a very nervous clerk in a dingy back room. He had Bassett, now using the Peter Donald name, sign some already filled in forms... and that was it. With that done he was scheduled for an interview with the trio of Cordillera City construction managers who came down to hand-select a team of fifty people to help with the construction tasks.

He took a train down to New York City and arrived nervous and sweating slightly from a fever brought about by some sort of internal infection, but explained it as having spent the previous night studying all he could find on the colony. Donnell passed the interview and was given a date five weeks out when he would be transported to the Moon. He was thrilled and glad it had not been a waste of his time studying the sort of things they could expect someone with his listed education to be able to do.

Now, the constant use of drugs to keep him awake so he could study without interruption were also taking their toll. He had a chest infection and could treat that with other drugs so there would be nearly no symptoms. His stomach had developed an ulcer from not eating correctly and constantly drinking caffeinated and carbonated drinks and alcohol without any real food.

But, as with most of his other ills, drugs could only mask the problems.

Even the gaunt look on his face could be explained as from lack of sleep due to stress about leaving the Earth, and a bit of makeup could hide some of the worst appearance problems.

What could not be hidden, and he now lived in near maniacal fear of discovery, was the arrhythmia he had developed in his heart.

There were no drugs to hide that, and there was precious little time for him to do something to reverse the condition before it became chronic and would start the downward spiral to his death.

He didn't know that, or he might have had a chance to do something about it.

All he knew was his hatred of Tom Swift. A hatred that grew with each day of his own suffering, with each instance of the pain his behavior was inflicting in his own body.

And, he knew was that in five more weeks he would board a

flight that would take him to an offshore launch site close to the Swift's own Fearing Island where he could expect to be winched down to the sea floor in a rocket surrounded by a buoyant sleeve that would shoot it to the surface at such a speed that, on separation, would propel the rocket high into the air where it would only require a small amount of propellant to send the rocket straight up and toward the Moon.

Then, assuming he survived that high-stress event he would land three days later and start setting up for his attack on Tom Swift!

* * * * *

One of the last things Harlan wanted to do after only being back at Enterprises for a week was to take a jet trip out to Fearing Island, climb into a supply rocket and head back to the Moon.

It was also about the last thing his stomach wanted him to do as well and made its displeasure known in a series of lurching heaves that ended up with his carefully consumed breakfast of dry toast ending up in a sealed bag.

No matter what anyone did, or what he took before or during the trip, unless he slept through it, he got space sick.

Knowing about his affliction, Doc Simpson had even offered to give him something to knock him out for the duration of the trip, but Harlan refused. There were too many things to do, too many reports to read and too little time to do them in, so he chose to suffer.

And, he did.

By the time he arrived he was just coming to terms with how his stomach felt. It felt hungry from more than seventy hours of only receiving sweetened tea and about a dozen crackers.

He stepped from the elevator and was immediately hugged from two sides by Saclolo and Magadia Reyes. Once they stepped back and were profusely telling him how much they had missed him and how glad they were to see him, he smiled, nodded and, with his eyes rolling upwards in their sockets, slumped to the floor.

This was not the first time Harlan had reacted to space travel like this. It had become a running joke among the people closest to him who knew how he would react when he stepped out of a spaceship. That is if he made it that far. To the small hospital at the colony he went and a couple IVs were administered. One held simply fluids he desperately needed and the other was filled with a nutrient solution. In an hour he was back on his somewhat unsteady "feet" sitting in the shared office of the Cordillera administrators with a high-calorie energy bar and a cup of coffee in

his hands.

“Was this trip really necessary for you to make?” Magadia asked with concern for she really loved this man who had placed his life on the line for the city so many times in the past. “A video conference could possibly do what you are here for.”

“Mag, you may be right, but you know how I like to keep sticking my nose and fingers into things up here. Someday I might even stop getting sick, who knows.” He laughed. He stopped a moment later and launched into why he’d come.

“I like to talk with the three men who are going to pick out your final twenty man construction crew. They will send the first thirty up about five weeks from now and about two more weeks to send up the second part of the crew. Most of the first new inflatable housing dome is in the cargo rocket I came in with the rest arriving in a couple days. Your people will have about two weeks to connect the two halves, get it inflated and make it livable. A day later the second dome will be here.”

“Nice, Harlan. We have our people already grinding up and floating the foundation site at the base of the hotel mountain. Once that is done they’ll jump on the dome construction. We are going at it 24/7 and loving it.” Saclolo was proud of the hard work his people were willing to do to get this project off the ground. They all seemed to have taken it onto themselves and made it their dream too.

“It’s the security and safety issues that need to be in place for these non-resident construction people I’m worried about. With so many people rushing to get things done, if someone isn’t riding them every day they’ll forget how vital it is to adhere to the strictest possible standards and might start to cut corners. Here on the Moon that can’t be allowed. It is up to you two to make sure all safety protocols are followed and stuck to like instant glue for everyone, and especially for the new men coming up from Earth.”

Both Lunar managers nodded solemnly.

“They know their jobs but working in a vacuum and one-sixth gravity will be an additional challenge for them and one or two of them likely won’t make it. They are the ones that must be weeded out at all costs and as soon as possible, even if that is day one. It will take more than just your job site managers to find them.”

“We’ll have to train our security men to be our extra eyes both in the construction zone and in the locker room,” Magadia stated.

Harlan smiled at them both. “Extra vigilance must be a mandate in dealing with the lunar suits. You all know how the Moon dust gums up the joints and seals. I would like them checked and

cleaned or replaced every time a man goes out. I know that is excessive but one blowout might kill this project and... well it won't do the worker any good ether."

"Will you assist us in developing a set of safety standards?" Saclolo asked.

"And standards of behavior for the workers?" his wife added.

"Tom has given me the complete rundown and rigid safety rules he had to initiate while working on the new space station. For that project we had to use about one-hundred and fifty non-Swift people who needed constant reminders about responsibilities and dangers. Tom would like all of us to assemble our own thoughts and pick through the master list and take what we need for our, I mean your, standards. I see no need to reinvent the wheel when it has already been done and is now turning freely and without a single fatality or major injury."

A smile spread over Saclolo's face, and Magadia sat down and began typing on the computer keyboard that was on the desk. In a moment she turned the screen around so Harlan could see it. Boldly written along the top was:

**Modified Safety Rules and Regulation for the
Cordillera Lunar Resort Project**

**(To be read and signed by all resident and
non-resident {transient} workers)**

In less time than Harlan thought it would take, Tom's list was referenced, shuffled, added to and taken from. The original document of nearly fifty pages had been condensed to thirty-one with only a Table of Contents to be added, plus a direct message from the two Lunar managers.

He spent three hours with the three construction managers who had hand picked the first crew and would do the same for the rest of the migrant workers. They fully understood his suggestions to be nearly like orders and promised to spend extra time with candidates looking for a set of five signs Harlan felt would preclude them from being selected. Both knew of at least one man they now felt ought to be dismissed but could come up with no solid reason.

Their final task was to draw up the "rules" for keeping the workers and the general population separate.

The job was done and with a little bit of trepidation, Harlan took a couple of the pills Doc Simpson had provided and was back on his way to Earth and to his very much missed twins. He couldn't wait to hold them on his lap again and tell them all about the people who missed them on the Moon.

And, to tell their “grandmother,” Lola Reyes, just how well her son and daughter-in-law were handling things at the colony. He was very proud of them and knew she would be as well.

Yet he regretted that he had to go back. What was waiting for him was something he really did not want to face. He could back down and let others finish it by telling them all that he knew, but that was not his way. Someone had already died because of that box of gems. If it did come from that cave he felt it was his responsibility to see it never happened again. If the dead woman, Peu Nuit, had known of the gems, did that mean she also knew of the cave? Who else might know? Surly she could not be the only one.

The cave might be ransacked by now, it could still be full of greedy men stealing everything and not caring about the history they might destroy at the same time. Then again it might still be the way he and Maggie had left it. There were her father’s remains that still needed to be put in a grave. He might not deserve it, but it was the right thing to do. Harlan would make sure there was no marker or trace of a grave for the world to find. Dead he was and that was the way it would stay.

If the cave proved to be the treasure trove that he believed and it became known and open for the world to see no one would ever find a trace about him and what he did to his family. Especially how his two children turned out to be the first and hopefully only Emperor and Empress of the Moon. And, that the Empress had two children of her own that were still alive. It was not for his sake but for his children that he had to go and clean things up. Signs someone had lived there recently had to be eliminated. No traces of Maggie could be left to be found.

The world would find out eventually that they existed. Too many people in Cordillera City knew the truth... but because of what Harlan did for them they would keep his secret as long as he asked them to. It would leak out in time by accident just as all things do. He only hoped that time would be far enough into the future that it would be of no real importance any more. Time heals all wounds they say and he hoped that it was true.

* * * * *

Most of the money in his envelope had been stolen by someone who broke into his apartment while he was at the library, so one evening Donnell broke into a small “mom and pop” grocery store on the outskirts of town and stole about a hundred dollars along with a hand basket of canned foods, mostly corned beef hash and chili con carne. These, he knew, could be eaten straight from the

can... no heating necessary. They also contained high levels of protein, and the one thing Donnell knew was that he needed protein.

At least, he *believed* he needed it. Somewhere he'd surely read that. He was a little foggy from all the reading and getting so very little sleep these days. So much to learn, or at least know to use in conversation, and so little time.

Wasn't there something he'd read about how a person can live almost purely on protein as long as they had a little fat and some carbohydrates? If that didn't describe chili and the hash he didn't know what did. Meat and beans and meat and potatoes!

So, his vegetable and fruit deficit diet was also playing against him and the massive intake of red meat protein was slowly overwhelming his kidneys.

Plus, he would have been losing great amounts of weight except the salt in his main meals kept him heavy with water weight, and that same sodium was starting to take a toll on his heart.

Chapter Four: Unfinished Past

HARLAN AMES watched his two babies play with their unofficial Grandma—Lola Reyes—on the front lawn from the shade of the porch. It was late Saturday morning and almost time for their nap. For the last four months Harlan had made it a ritual to put them down in their cribs himself. He would then sit in a chair and watch them sleep until it was time to get them up for lunch. In five days that was all going to change. The expedition back to the Himalayan Mountains in the backwaters of Tibet was going to lift off from Enterprises.

Sir Randolf Moffat of the Royal Historical Society—an eminent authority on loan to Grandyke University to help set up a Sanskrit/Hindu display of their many gods in both wall paintings and in sculpture form—was contacted and readily volunteered to go as an adviser. Since he was well known to both the Government of China and respected by the Dalai Lama and the regional governor of Tibet, he was a *must have* for the expedition. With his name on the paperwork as lead archaeologist, it received approval from all necessary governmental agencies involved in record time.

There were three things that Harlan needed from the Swifts, and the first one was Tom's old *Sky Queen* and two pilots. Hopefully one of them could be Zimby Cox. He was a knowledgeable pilot with all of Swift's aircraft, was exceptionally fit for his thirty-nine year age, and a man who knew how to keep his mouth shut. This was important in that not all of what Harlan needed to do was to be known to everyone on the expedition but would not be able to accomplish it alone.

The second item was one of the three new repelatron cargo sleds currently destined for the Moon. Harlan wanted it instead of the two usual small aircraft that the *Sky Queen* usually took along in her hanger. The silent running and available cargo space the sled provided would be needed if he was to accomplish his private mission.

The third item on his list was one of Tom's very much sought after Electronic Retrosopes with accompanying 3-D recorder and telejector. The power requirements for this unit were so great that it took one of Tom's largest atomic batteries to run it. That battery had to have a liquid nitrogen cooling jacket on it to keep it running efficiently and that made it to big, heavy and complicated a setup to transport in a tunnel. So Harlan also needed to take two spools of zero-resistance electric connection wire. That gave him just over three thousand feet of wire to play with. After that length,

resistance became a factor and started to quickly add up and electrical power delivery went exponentially down. He hoped that would be more than enough wire; if it was not, the circumstances would dictate what he would have to do.

The day's rain felt more like dew than anything else. The accompanying early morning fog was a nuisance rather than a flight stopper. Weather RADAR showed the sky to be clear and that the sun would be shining above two-thousand feet. All the equipment and supplies were loaded on the day before, and the *Sky Queen* had been checked out to the last bolt and was in readiness.

The airplane had a crew of four men. Two pilots, a cook/flight attendant and a computer/electronic engineer to set up the equipment. Once on site, three crew members became equipment handlers for the engineer.

There were five people in the archaeologist group going with Harlan. He did not like the idea of such a large group, but he had no say in it. Sir Randolph J. Moffat—the third as it turned out—had his own people and he would not come without them. Harlan had to give in. That many people were going to make it harder for him and Zimby Cox to slip out and do what was necessary without being noticed. They would just have to adjust their plans somehow.

Punctual to the second, Sir Moffat III showed up on the tarmac in a large limousine with British plates. It must have been his own personal car, and Harlan wondered at the extra expense of shipping it with them to the states. The chauffeur stepped out from the driver seat and went to open the passenger door. He popped open a very large black umbrella as the passengers step out.

Harlan almost burst out laughing on see the man, especially as he stood by the driver. While the chauffeur was tall, thin, black, baldheaded and in his middle fifties, Moffat was short, extremely fat, sported a large handlebar mustache, and had gray and white ragged hair shooting out in all directions at once. He looked to be in his late seventies and could have been older but stepped away from the car with surprisingly sure steps.

Next, a young, average looking man, Tobey Isom as Harlan already knew, in jeans and a rugby sweater stepped out. He was followed by a freckle-faced, red haired woman, Tina O'Hare, who looked like she could take on the world. She was just under six feet tall, had broad shoulders, long muscular arms and large hands. You couldn't but notice her physique because she had on sneakers, running shorts and a sleeveless tank top, all black and tight-fitting.

Almost without notice the fifth person of the group came out of the front passenger seat. Of all of them he look the most normal in

his tan khaki pants and matching shirt. His name was Kent Clark and he hated it. His parents had thought it amusing but it had led to him being bullied and teased as a child. Even as an adult it was little better.

But his mild mannered personality hid a very competitive card sharp. He would take the very cloth off your back without caring that you'd be left naked and penniless.

Harlan had seen the dossier of all these people but their head shot pictures did not do them justice. Moffat's photo must have been thirty years old if not older. Shaking his head and wondering what kind of three ring circus the expedition was going to turn into, the Security man stepped forward and introduced himself and the crew of the waiting *Sky Queen*.

Zimby, in his usual playful candor, stepped up to the Amazonian woman and from his five-foot four-inch stature looked up into her face and quipped, "Now you're my kind of gal."

Without a moment's hesitation she swung a roundhouse punch into his jaw that sent him spiraling to the ground. She stepped over to where he was laying and hauled him back to his feet.

"Now that you know where we stand," she spoke to him in a sweet Irish brogue, "we can be friends or we can be enemies. Just don't poke fun at my size again, small fry."

"Friends, I hope," he replied while carefully rubbing his jaw. "I don't think I could stand up to a second punch like that."

She gave him a sly smile. "You barely *stood* up to that one."

Harlan and Sir Moffat had reached the two by then and neither knew what to do. It seemed the pair had come to their own truce over the matter, and they walked away from each other without another word.

"Sir Moffat..." But, Harlan was cut off.

"Not a bother, old man," he responded in a rich, loud voice. "Something like this happens every time we go out. She very sensitive about her size and after everyone sees how she reacts to any mention of it, they well enough leave her alone. Which, by the way, is what she truly wants."

"Then, no hard feelings?" He had to ask because there was no clue to be had in the man's expression.

"None. Now let's get this show on the road, shall we? We're running late as it is."

A half hour later the large triple-deck aircraft was on its way. When Harlan was making his security check two hours later, and seeing to it that all the passenger were comfortable he heard low laughter come from the cockpit. On opening the door he found Tina in the co-pilot's seat, headphones on and Zimby telling her some outlandish flying story. In total wonderment he silently closed the door and continued on his rounds.

Never would he have believed, even if someone told him, that one year later to the day the two would be married.

By the following daybreak the Swift jet was winging its way over the Indian Ocean heading for the capital city of Kathmandu in Nepal. It had swung down passing over Antarctica to make a mostly north run to Katmandu. The expedition had to submit to a good looking over to insure that no illegal contraband was on board. This would be repeated on the way back out, but that was something to be faced later.

It was thanks to Sir Moffat's high standing with the government—he had been instrumental in tracking down stolen antiquities some years earlier—that turned the stop into a short one of just a few hours instead of a few days. Paperwork was kept to a minimum beyond what had previously been supplied. The two pilot were taken into a small room and briefed by a rather ill-tempered man wearing a large gun on his belt telling them they were to hold to a strict flight plan that called for their next stop to be the Tibetan capital of Lhasa. This would force them to fly northeast, adding several hundred miles to their trip instead of going northwest directly toward the eastern edge of the Mgari Prefecture in Tibet's autonomous region. They were provided a chart with a predetermined route marked in a heavy red line. That was where a government official was to join the expedition so no misgiving would arise.

“You stay on that line and your jet remains in the air,” the man cautioned menacingly.

They agreed to be good pilots and not to chance anything, signed papers to that effect, and were allowed to rejoin the others.

The *Sky Queen* took off twenty-minutes later.

Harlan had been watching the long range global weather forecasts and saw that a storm front was going to wreck havoc for a few days in the Himalayan Mountains. Normally a plane like the *Queen* would have no trouble cruising over it. But, circumstances could be arranged for that not to happen. He deliberately had his pilots slow down their flight so they would be in position to take advantage of the storm.

Chris Wright was the other pilot, and Cox chose him with care after Harlan informed him of the extracurricular activities they were going to have to perform. The young man was smart, talented, and above all else loyal to the Swifts. He was especially loyal to Zimby who saw great potential in him and did everything he could to help develop it. For Zimby it was like training a son and for Chris it was like having a father figure that he'd never had as a teen.

"We're making a forward speed of just one-eighty," Cox reported to Harlan.

"Keep her steady at that speed until I tell you otherwise," was his response.

The *Sky Queen* had gained just enough altitude to make it over the first mountain range of the Himalayans when it reached the outer edge of the oncoming storm. The ship bucked once and started to shake, seemingly without end. Because of the approaching weather the passengers and other crew were already strapped in their seats in the lounge area. This was the safest place for them to be. They were only thrown about in their seats. Zimby and Chris were both in the cockpit handling the plane. They had immediately tightened their five-point harnesses at the first sign of turbulence.

Lightning flashes filled the sky around the ship. One of the bolts hit somewhere in the tail section. The plane's lights went out and alarms sounded. Back up lights turned on.

Harlan unfastened his harness while yelling at everyone to stay put. He fought his way forward mostly by staggering along clutching at door frames as he moved along. The cockpit door flew open just before he reached it and Zimby came bouncing out and slammed into Harlan. Both went to the deck.

"A little too much theatrics, Zimby," Harlan whispered as both men helped each other up.

"This is real," he told him back in a low voice. Then, another violent shake and an apparent drop in altitude brought actual fear to his face. "The main gyros are out," Zimby yelled out over the thunder that seemed to surround the entire jet. He was so loud that everyone could hear it. He tugged Harlan arm saying, "Come on." The pilot raced down the passageway.

"Stay put!" Harlan yelled back over his shoulder to Chris as he followed Zimby down the stairway to the second deck.

"Steady her up, Son." Zimby yelled into a throat mic transceiver that was connected to Chris's headset as the ship kept on bouncing. "If necessary, hit the elevator and get us ten thousand feet higher."

“Doing my best!” came a reply to his earpiece.

At the bottom of the ladder they did a one-hundred-eighty degree turn and headed forward. Harlan unlocked the maintenance door to a room located directly under the cockpit. It was the area that made up the most of the second floor nose of the plane and held all primary flight electronics. The door hit against sometime on the floor before it was fully open. They peered around it and saw the obstruction was part of the gyro assembly. The very one Harlan had helped tamper with earlier so that he could show a reason for the “force” landing he wanted to make. Somehow he had not fastened the drawer right and when the plane started to act up the very heavy equipment slid forward, the slide-out platform hit its stops at the end of the slide and the gyros keep going and smashed onto the floor.

“That’s ruined,” Harlan stated numbly.

“Then, hang on, we’re may be really going in!”

“Do something. This mission can’t fail because of something like this. We’ve got back-ups, for goodness sake!”

“Chris, hit those lifters!” Zimby yelled into his mic. This time no answer came over the radio. The plane instead nosed down, shuddered a moment and then headed sharply up. Both men were thrown about. They knew that Chris did not have enough experience handling the *Sky Queen* without the help of the gurostabilizers. The plane flew like the preverbal ton of bricks without them... in other words, not very well at all.

Sounds of screaming could be heard from the passengers in the lounge. The plane suddenly went level and it bounced hard. Once. Twice. Then it stopped moving all together.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Chris’s voice came over the ship-wide intercom. He sounded oddly calm. “We have landed and are safe... I hope. You may move about and tend to anyone that may have been hurt. Thank you. Can Zimby and Harlan let me know where they are?”

Harlan looked at Zimby who just shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. This was not part of the plan. At least not so dramatic of a landing. Getting back to their feet they made their way back down the hall and up the stairs only to be met by Chris coming down.

“Thank God the emergency avoidance system worked,” he gasped out in a horse whisper. “Those mountain tops came up way too fast for me to dodge. I was only half way through initiating the start sequence for the lifters when the plane went into a nosedive

and I had to fight the yoke all the way down. We're sitting nice and pretty on a fairly wide ridge near the top, so we have no avalanches to worry about. Just high winds. Oh, and the lightning that isn't showing signs of stopping any time soon."

"Sorry I wasn't in there to back you up," Zimby said, but Chris shook his head and patted the older man on the shoulder.

"Better chance you could do something in the equipment bay. The automatic radio distress signal is on," he continued, "but I doubt anyone will pick it up until this storm blows over. I'm only getting static coming in. That's my report, now what happened, Zimby? This wasn't what you told me to expect." He was looking kind of pale, but he was steady on his feet, which was good.

"Harlan?" Zimby asked instead of answering Chris.

"I may have... hell. I guess I blew it. I wanted us down on the other side of the mountain range for a few days, but this was not the way I had it intended. Close to what I had in mind but..." He stopped a second and thought over their situation, "But, we're down safe and sound and I'll have to make the best of it. So, guys, just follow my lead and maybe we can turn this into something we can work with."

"This better be good, Harlan," was all Zimby could reply. Chris kept his mouth shut. It was safer that way and the intelligent thing to do under the circumstances.

The three men found things under control in the lounge. Not only was Harlan's crew used to working under emergency conditions, so was Sir Randolph and his team. With no one real injuries except for bruises and muscle strains, most were standing around talking. Kent Clark was standing five feet away from Sir Randolph taking notes in an old-fashioned spiral notebook.

Harlan didn't give anyone time to ask questions. He rushed straight into what happened and what he was going to do about it.

"First off, everyone, we are not in danger of dying or even getting stuck here. Chris managed, quite admirably I must say, to get us down in a safe place. We are stuck here for a few days until we get a new gyrostabilizer unit." He told them about the damaged one. "Unfortunately it is so rare to have a total failure, the *Queen* doesn't carry a spare gyro unit. When this electric storm abates we'll put in a call for a new unit."

"You mean to tell me, Mr. Harlan," Sir Randolph spoke up, "that you don't have a spare unit on this oversized airship?"

"We carry lots of spare parts, sir," Harlan was hoping this was

not going to turn into a confrontation. “But we lost the whole setup, not just a part or two. We never imagined needing to build an entire unit from spares.”

“It sounds like sloppy workmanship and poor planning, if you ask me.” His voice was taking on an angry undertone. He started to stand up...

“For crying out loud,” Cox yelled. “Both of you are acting like school boys. It was my fault.” His shoulder slumped and his face dropped. He acted like he could not face them. “I did a quick inspection of the flight guidance system when I saw we were heading into bad weather. I must have mis-latched the drawer and the shaking of the ship caused it to let go.”

Harlan stepped closer to Zimby.

“Well that is just dandy,” grumbled Sir Randolph. “This is *not* what I expected from a so-called top notch organization that the Swifts are supposed to be known for.” He turned and started to walk down the aisle between the seats towards his room in the back of the plane. “Just let me know when we’re ready to start once more, until then just leave me alone and I’ll do the same to you.”

They watched him enter his room, stunned at the man’s attitude. With a great sigh, Tina got to her feet.

“He’s like this when a delay happens that he can’t control. He’ll be fine by tomorrow.” She sniffled then rushed off and, after knocking on his door, went in.

“Sorry,” Kent said as he stood up. “I’d best help with the old man.” He, too, disappeared.

“And now let the fun begin.” Toby laughed before he turned to Sir Randolph’s servant. “Eliud, you had better see to your master before he has Tina in tears. You know that’s coming next. Get the medicinal brandy out to help sooth his nerves while your at it.”

Without a word said, Eliud got out of his seat and headed for his room.

“Gentlemen,” Toby address the rest of the crew, “This is just the beginning. If anything else goes wrong he’ll start to push people around. And I mean that literally. He uses that fat, squat body like its Sherman tank or some such battering device. As stress comes along, his maturity level plummets. Just watch out when he gets to the stamping feet part. That’s when he regresses to being a four-year-old.” He gave them a small grin to say he was only partly kidding.

“How does he get a way with that kind of behavior? He’s supposed to be the honored professional!” Harlan asked. He was ready to end this expedition right now. What he had to do could wait if need be. “We don’t approve of alcohol on our aircraft, and not what is laughingly called ‘medicinal’. Make certain his doses are small and far between. If he staggers out here insulting us, we head home as soon as the gyro unit gets here. Understood?”

Toby had already reached into his jacket and pulled out a stainless steel flask. He slowly unscrewed the cap. “Want a swig?” Seeing the expression on the three men’s faces he took a swallow and put it away.

“Sorry to flaunt this, but I needed that bit of old Dutch courage if I’m going to tell you all the truth. Remember... you never heard this from me. The old gent is dying.” Toby looked for the surprise expression on everyone’s face and found it.

“It’s his ticker,” he explained. “Too much fatty foods and far too little moving around. Already had two by-pass surgeries—a double and a triple—and he needs still another one. His diet is ridiculous and he won’t take his medications. The doc told him he has no chance in hell to come out of this adventure alive. The old buffoon is on borrowed time but he wants to end it by being the man that found the lost Sanskrit Temple of Tibet.”

“How does he intend to get out of his agreed upon work for our expedition?”

“I honestly don’t believe he is worried about that. I think he intends to do what he can and what he wants and then up and die before we all leave Tibet!”

Chapter Five: “Let’s Hope They Lie in Peace”

“HE WAS on the trail of a certain Professor St. Phillips and his family who all disappeared in the Tibetan Mountains some time back, thirty or more years ago, but he ran out of money. The University job back in the States was a cash in hand deal. He took it out of desperation. Then you, Harlan, called and Randolph almost had a heart attack right then and there when told about it. He’s convinced that the cave you want explored is the lost temple. He’s betting his life on it. If he goes down in the history books, or not, he’s going to die in a few weeks, maybe a month or two at the longest.”

Harlan’s face turned as white as a sheet and he had to sit down. This news hit him hard, and it was too close to home. He was now more desperate than ever to clean up any traces of Professor St. Phillips and of the man’s dead children who were known to the world as the Masters and first Emperor and Empress of the Moon.

Toby looked at Harlan.

“Cheer up, bloke. If he dies on the trip, you can always hire us to finish the job. Both Tina and I have our masters’ degrees in Ancient Asian Archeology but there are no real jobs for world explorers any more. Either you’re affiliated with a museum or a university—and take your once a year, ‘Oh, look. I found a clay pot,’ expedition—or you are left out. Without Sir Randolph we are out of a job. That is why we hang on. It is how we survive. It’s that simple.”

“Never knew that being an archeologist was that tough,” Chris Wright said to no one in particular. “Zimby, I’m going back to the cockpit. The storm seems to be letting up. I’ll see if I can get a message through and that a rescue team is not desired as long as we can get a drone sent to us with a new control unit.”

“Let us know how you make out, Chris,” Zimby answered back and added, “You need to find out what type of drone is being used. They have altitude and distance limits and assuming we are going to have to meet it somewhere down the mountain; we need to plan for its capabilities. Harlan and I will be in the cargo hold readying the sled for that trip.”

“Right!”

“As for you, Toby, we’ll keep what you told us under our hat,” Harlan assured him. “As for any future job offering... that is going to be put on the back burner. Hopefully it won’t be brought to the front of the stove. I like to keep my ice cream in the food freezer not bodies.”

“I must agree that would be a waste of good ice cream. We’ll try to keep the old boy from overdoing things, and us walking out with the find of the century with Sir Randolph still on his feet would help make our transition out of academia a little easier.”

“Then keep you noses clean and we’ll have an understanding. Agree?” Harlan asked sternly. There were times to be lighthearted, and times when not to be, and he wasn’t certain Toby knew which was which.

“Agree. I’d best go and make an appearance with the others or I’ll be shunned.” Toby got up and walked down the isle to the back of the jet.

“Sir Randy’s stateroom is not that big and by now it must be getting very crowded. Hopefully nobody tells Tina she’s taking up too much room!” Zimby muttered to himself and laughed out loud. Harlan had a strange look on his face when Zimby looked back at him. He quickly explained why he was amused. “You know, like in a Marx Brother’s movie?”

“You all right?” he asked when Harlan didn’t even crack a smile. “I can set up the repelatron sled by myself if you want me to.”

“Are you kidding? Not after hearing that old man is on the right trail. We need to get this done. Pronto! Even if he doesn’t know how close he is to the truth. And, between us, I really don’t want him to hear too much. Let’s move.”

They were not prepared for what they found in the cargo hold. The jostling of the ship had caused some of the upper storage bins to snap open and supplies were scattered all over the place. Nothing looked really damaged from the quick inspection they performed, but it was going to slow things down. The sled and their jet were pinned under the worst of it.

The expedition supplies were being stored in the front section of the *Queen’s* hanger. The Kangaroo Kub mini-copter was not with them on this trip. It would not be useable. Harlan had plans for the one-man mini-jet so it had been packed. The lack of the Skeeter helicopter allowed room for the ten by twenty foot repelatron sled that would be their ground transportation when needed. What the Brits didn’t know—and Harlan had no intention of offering the information—was that it was capable of being outfitted for long distance flights.

An hour later most of the equipment was back in place and the jet and sled had been checked over by both men. The twin atomic batteries—different from Tom’s solar batteries—of the repelatron sled were fully fueled with enriched sodium and ready to go. They would be good for more than a hundred miles of flying before they

needed recharging. They were not, however, the sled's main power source on this trip. Satisfied with everything they headed back to the cockpit.

Chris sat at the infrequently used navigation station behind the copilot's seat and was just taking off his headphones. A terrain map of the Himalayan Mountains range sat on that table and he had what looked like several possible flight routes marked in blue laid out. He looked up when he heard the door open and saw the two men come in.

"Was just going to call you guys over the intercom. Enterprise has located a complete gyro replacement unit and can have it at the Kathmandu airport in about twenty-six hours. It could be faster but getting the paperwork to land is going to hold things up. They will arrange for the handling and launching of the drone and see that it gets off the ground. It's coming from The Forstner PA faculty in Sydney, Australia. I guess they're your distributor of Swift aircraft parts in that part of the world."

"You'd think they might have less of a paper hassle than if it were coming from the U.S." Zimby grumbled.

Chris shrugged. "Anyhow, they're sending it to us using a Coyote drone that can fly itself to any programmed GPS location. It has the capacity to carry the gyro and make it to about 6,000 feet altitude. But it will be a one way flight. You are going to have to haul it back with you or we get charged twenty-thousand dollars. Forstner is waiting to hear from us for delivery coordinates, and they'd like them ASAP."

Harlan bent over the chart and found the site of the lost temple valley. His finger traced a direct flight route from there to the best possible drone landing site that was marked on the chart. Then he put a finger on their location. He picked up a pair of dividers, set in accordance to the distance scale and measured out both routes.

"Chris, send them the coordinates for this landing zone." He tapped the chart. "And tell them we won't be able to get there for forty-eight hours. We ask they adjust their time schedule to that. If asked why, it's because of the unseasonable weather and possible snow after this front goes through. If we can't make it to the drone in that time frame tell them to leave it."

"I'll get right on it!"

Harlan looked at Zimby and motioned him to leave the cockpit. As they walked down the corridor he said, "I have to talk to Sir Randolph and his people, Zimby. Please pack us shelter and food for three days and get a couple changes of heavy weather clothes. Meet you at the sled in a half hour." He walked back to the cockpit.

“Chris, meet us aft in thirty minutes to help us get out of the hanger and close it back up after we’re gone. You’ll be in charge. Give us five days, max, then report us missing and limp this ship back to Kathmandu. You know nothing of our whereabouts after we leave. You’d best stick with that story no matter what. Other than that do everything the authorities tell you. Get your crew and the archaeologist back home safe and sound.”

Harlan took Chris by the shoulders and looked him in the eye. “Can you do as I ask?”

Chris choked out a silence yes.

“To the letter?”

“To the letter.” He managed to speak this time.

Harlan let Chris go, reached for the door and as he opened it said, “Time marches on and we have things to accomplish. Zimby picked a good man. Glad we have you aboard.”

Chris’s face broke out into the biggest smile as the door closed. He immediately reached for the radio and started to complete the drone arrangements.

Harlan’s impromptu meeting with Sir Randolph and the other archaeologists went over poorly with complaints about how long it was taking to proceed with the expedition. Mostly it was the lack of activity and being cooped up in the ship that bothered them. When Harlan reminded them that they just escaped a terrible crash and possible injury or death by the skin of their teeth, that helped soften their attitude. By the time Harlan left they were stating they hoped that he and Zimby returned as quickly as possible. And, safely.

Tina stepped forward and lightly stroked Zimby’s jaw where she had decked him. “Come back soon,” she told him. Her tone made him blush.

The repelatron sled was originally designed as a lightweight cargo hauler on the Moon and Mars with their lower gravities; the control cab was air-tight. Necessity made the cab two decks high with a one man size airlock and “warm” storage below the control cab. Both areas were ten feet wide by eight long and a total height of sixteen feet. That left twelve feet out of the twenty foot total length of the sled for outside cargo. The airlock deck was built right into the front frame assembly that also held the environmental systems, six repelatron lift units, their operational systems and batteries to power the sled. It was a very complex peace of machinery under the cargo deck.

But what made it workable and especial flyable was that almost

no metal of any kind was used in its construction. Hardened Durastress foam and carbon matrix tubing made up the frame and body molding that everything else was fastened to light but strong.

When fully loaded on Earth, there was not enough battery power to fly the sled for long distances. The Swift Senior size atomic power pod with its cooling system was lashed against the cab and jerry-rigged into the sled's power sources. This gave them just over a two thousand mile range. The course Harlan marked out was just over seven hundred and fifty miles. He could come back with about a half ton of cargo. He was hoping to dispose of most of what he found if possible. Returning with only the drone and gyro stabilizer would be the ideal situation.

Zimby had the twin hanger bay doors open and a cold wind was swirling about. You could not tell that it was three o'clock in the afternoon because the sky was dark and full of black, angry clouds. The lightning had stop, but not the wind. The wind was just as fierce as ever. This present storm was a prelude to the winter snow storms that were coming. The short summer that the Himalayan's enjoyed was about over. The inner mountain valleys were going to be inaccessible once more unless you were prepared to do it on foot.

And that, was not a safe thing to attempt.

Both men only had on thermal jackets against the cold. Once inside the cab they would not need them. Chris showed up with no jacket, typical for a guy his age. Zimby with a knowing smile on his face handed him an extra one that he took out of storage.

"You and Harlan need to help me get the sled out of here..."

"You sure you don't want to wait till three or four in the morning to leave?" Chris cut in. "You'll get there by daybreak instead of midnight."

"Can't afford to waste that much time." Harlan answered. "The Nepalese government is not going to like it that were not on course and on time. Emergency landings they especially don't like. That is why I'm having the gyro sent out to Kathmandu, then on to us. It should help our story and keep us on their good side. If that is even possible."

"As I was saying, young man," Zimby looked sternly at Chris, "there're crosswinds out there and I don't have the clearance I like to get this sled out of here." He was eyeing the few inches of space above the cab and the hanger's ceiling support rafters. "Once the front of the cab is clear of the hanger let me know and I drop it to the ground. From there I'll jockey the sled around so it's facing the wind and we can take off with some semblance of control until we

clear the mountain top.”

Harlan added, “Then button this ship up and wait for our return. Don’t try to contact us for at least two days. We’re going to be running silent for now. Blame the weather if you have to make an excuse for us to anybody. Got it, Chris?”

“Sure, just like you briefed me back at Enterprise.”

Everything almost went as planned and the sled slid out of the hanger leaving only a few scrape marks on the deck and a ding on the side of the cab’s roof when the wind suddenly gusted and slightly tilted the sled upwards on one side. Zimby grounded the sled right then and there. Luckily it was totally out of the hanger by then and hit only on the icy, rocky ground.

After that landing, Harlan went to the other side of the sled and shook Chris’s hand.

“This means a lot to me,” he told him. “It probably will make life easier for my kids later on.”

“No need to thank me. I just wish I had a father that wanted to look after me just like you are doing for your kids. Luck, Harlan.” He turned and waved goodbye to Zimby who was watching them from the cab before he climbed back aboard the jet. After the sled took to the skies the hanger doors slowly closed. Snow started to swirl around the plane and after a few hours the ground was covered, but the mighty ship would keep everyone inside safe and warm.

Three hundred miles is not far when you are traveling by air and don’t have to dodge all the obstacles that are in your way if you are on the ground. The sled could do over two hundred miles per hour if electrical power was not a concern. But in this case it was, so they flew the most economical route possible. Zimby had to vector the angle of flight by about twenty degrees but he could keep the sled itself angled so it continue to fly with the wind behind them. With no wings the sled did not get bounced around by the air turbulences caused by the mountaintops.

Not many people believed in the lost temple of the Guge Kingdom. There was no evidence of it except for verbal accounts. The ruins were said to cover an area of 200,000 square meters. The buildings follow the hill to its top in a rigid layout and an imposing manner. The 11-story castle was more than 300 meters high. It was home to houses, caves, pagodas, blockhouses, defense works and tunnels. The most of the stylish caves were seriously damaged even before the turn of the century. Few works of architecture remain

intact, but the Nagri-Guge's appearance is still imposing.

Only the Hindu monks that stayed to the bitter end told of the selling of the Toling monastery many treasures. The uncountable wealth of gold, gems, artwork and most important the Sanskrit tablets dating back to the founding of Hinduism were never found nor had they shown up elsewhere in the world. The monks swore, and many gave their very lives to prove it, that the treasures were all sold off to pay the soldiers who fought against the civil strife and foreign attacks through the last hundred years of the agonizingly slow fall of the kingdom, but the 700 year old kingdom had died and its monasteries fell into disrepair.

Harlan could not help but think of the history of the Guge Kingdom located in present Zanda County of western Tibet. They were heading fifty miles northwest of the now famous mountaintop site. By from what little the Empress told him when they were in the hidden cave in Tibet when he first tracked her down back on Earth he felt sure this was the lost temple. The writing in the lid of the hidden chest that was full of gold and gems in the Master's Philippine fortress sealed the deal.

He could have not said a thing and destroyed the chest and let the cave stay unknown, but his sense of duty and doing the right thing would not let him. The world had the right to know of this lost temple and the Sanskrit writings that influenced so much of that part of the world then... and now. He just had to clean up a small area of the cave and dispose of an outdated emergency escape space ball which the Empress had used to come back to Earth. No one needed to know that part of the Masters' tortured life. It would serve no useful purpose.

"Harlan, wake up." Zimby called out as he slowed the sled and let it hover a thousand feet above a desolate valley. "We are at the GPS coordinates you set into the navigation computer. Do you want me to land. It's as dark as the dickens out there. Can't even see what's on the ground from up here and that mountain ridge in front of us is a little close for my liking."

The crescent Moon, the little that was going to be shining down later that night, was still behind those mountains. It was late evening and the flight had taken well over five hours.

Harlan shook his head to clear his thoughts. "Let's check for heat sources first using night vision, and if there are none we'll drop an infrared flare or two to light things up and find a nice cozy place to land." He placed a finger on the control touch screen that directed the infrared camera's pitch and rotation. The image from the camera appeared on the main viewing screen that angled up from of the control console. When the screen was not in use it was not a

sight hindrance to the craft's pilot.

Harlan knew where he was and where to look so the IR sweep did not take long. Everything down there was as cold as ice as he had hoped.

"I'm copying the mapping computer into the visual. If you will, Zimby, launch a couple of flares."

Zimby reached up over his head and flipped open two safety caps in which there were several of the requested items. He pulled the T-handle down in each one, arming the flairs. The STANDBY light in each unit turned green and Zimby pushed the handles back in. Two small 'pissshhhh' sounds were heard as they were launched into the night.

On the screen the darkness blossomed into fluorescent green shapes two-seconds later. In less turbulent and cold conditions, the flares created enough heat to keep their small parachutes full of hot air, allowing them to take over two minutes to reach the ground. Here, the flares plummeted and would hit the ground in twenty seconds.

Two buildings were clearly outlined with what looked like fences or walls and numerous smaller shapes with no clear details to be made out. Even the sharp, steep edge of the mountain could be seen not that far away.

"Between the buildings, Zimby." Harlan tapped the spot on the screen and a second later he could feel the sled shift position as it headed in for a silent landing in the bitter cold night.

The flares went out as the sled barely contacted the ground. Then, total darkness closed in.

"Are you ready to find the truth, Harlan?" Zimby asked as they zipped up their coats. "The other members of the family?"

"I am, and whoever we find, I really hope they all lie in peace."

Harlan's words sent a chill down Zimby's back that almost buckled his knees!

Chapter Six: “It Needs a Track!”

THE FIRST test of the former rail gun as the launch mechanism for the lunar orbit ride—the lunar end of a system that was once used to launch the cargo and slave ships bringing up supplies and people to build the colony for the Masters, and the empty ship back to Earth—had been well-planned and many calculations had been made, checked and double-checked.

It looked destined for failure from the very start.

Magadia had warned Saclolo that there would be problems. Even she could see that the speed necessary to move a vehicle large enough to carry up to a dozen paying passengers on a low-level around-the-Moon trip was going to need to start with such a shove that people would be subjected to great G-force strain, and possibly injured. Or killed.

“Nonsense, my loving wife,” he had tried to reassure her, but he had also seen the calculations.

Eighteen Gs to start with and then his hoped for trajectory carrying people just a mile of so above the lunar surface was going to have to be changed to an elliptical one with a low point of about one-hundred feet and a high point of about fifteen miles. The capsule or pod would not get to or maintain enough speed to a totally circular orbit at a single, low altitude. It would make the lunar circuit in under thirty minutes, far too fast for anyone to see much.

And then, there was going to be the “catch.” That end point in the trip where the capsule would be grabbed from the airless void and gently eased into the landing cradle.

Except that the vehicle would still be traveling at the high rate of speed necessary to keep it from being pulled down to the surface short of the end of the ride. And, with the Attractatron device salvaged from the defunct former asteroid protection vehicle—the one that broke down and was partly destroyed in trying to raise the now little-unused space elevator—only able to project its force beam about two miles, the deceleration was going to be as rough as the starting shot!

“Nonsense to you, Saclolo!” she said in a scolding voice. “You know pretty damn well that things are not going to work. Why do you not believe your own eyes? Call Tom Swift and tell him you are out of your league and need his help.”

He nodded, a bit sadly, and replied, “Yes. I know that I should, but I also believe we must be in charge of this. In charge of

everything. By that I mean we need to come up with a fix to this and then present it to Tom and his people down on the Earth. We might ask them, no... *pay* them for their services, but the solution needs to come from here!”

They looked at each other for a few moments before she nodded a single time, sighed a little, and turned away. He immediately knew she was not on his side over this issue.

He left their shared office a minute later explaining that he was going to the control tower for a quiet think on the matter.

The four people up in the tower stood up and gave him a sort of salute as he left the elevator.

“Sit, sit,” he told them. This was no military operation but he could not get the people under him to understand that all they needed to do was simply nod to acknowledge him.

“What may we do for you, Administrator?” the only woman in the group inquired.

“Ah, hello, Betsy,” he greeted her with a smile. “The fact is, I just needed to get away from the hustle and bustle down below and sit and think. Please, all of you go back to what you were doing. I shall just sit back here and contemplate what life brings my way.”

The four operators looked at each other with a small bit of concern in their eyes. There was a hint of indecision in his voice. This was very unlike the man they had come to respect and trust with their very lives.

“I see those looks passing between you. And, no, Saclolo is not going soft or crazy. Believe me. It is just that our lunar resort project has hit a few, shall I call them *snags*?”

“Is there anything we can assist you with?” one of the men asked. “Things are very quiet and we are not expecting any supply rockets from Earth during this shift. We have time...”

Saclolo thought about that a moment before answering. “Perhaps in a little while, but for now I think I just need to ponder my problems alone. However, I thank you all for your offer.” With that said, he allowed his body to settle completely into the high-backed chair he had taken at the rear of the circular room.

At one time it had been the favorite seat of the Empress who had thought of this control room as her private lair. He tried to put all thoughts of the despicable woman out of his mind. She was dead, buried and forever out of his hair.

As he thought over the situation he tried to picture the launch, flight and recovery process from beginning to end. As before he could “see” the rail gun—the series of powerful electromagnets

along a quarter mile launching track that could, if no lives were involved, send a thirty ton space ship racing off the end at more than fifteen thousand miles per hour. All that in the space of just one-thousand three-hundred feet.

That, of course, would turn any living being into a spreading puddle of ooze at the back end of the ship, and so what were termed “live launches” only accelerated the ship to about three thousand miles per hour. That was enough to break the gravity bonds of the Moon and to head for Earth using another of Tom Swift’s stolen technology to assist—the repelatron—but manned ships required six days to make the voyage where unmanned ones traveled the same distance in two. Still, such launches were rough on people.

The problem for him now was that the safe launch speed would shove his envisioned vehicle on a low trajectory that the mathematics said would see it skidding along—crashing for all intents and purposes—just one-fifth of the way around the Moon.

This was not a good thing.

Another issue was that the colony and the proposed launch location were not on the equator of the Moon. They were nearly thirty degrees to the north of that, so the landing spot would be near the old Apollo 14 site because the necessary orbit to make it back to the starting point could not be a straight line along their current latitude; it must go at such an angle that the full trip got the capsule back to the beginning.

It was nearly out of his range of understanding.

The more he thought the matter over, the more he was coming to the conclusion that his dream of this once-in-a-lifetime experience for people was going to be a non-starter.

About three hours after he arrived, the current four-person team was about to be relieved. Betsy came over to him and stood next to his chair.

“What is it people say? A problem shared is a problem halved? I have nothing but time now. In three minutes when I am off shift, and I have three whole days of leisure time. If I can only be a sounding board for you, Administrator, let me.”

He looked over and up into her face. She was smiling hopefully. All he knew about her was a little of her background and her name. He knew everybody’s name. He and Magadia made it a mandate between them to know everyone.

“Well,” he let out a short breath that sounded like a sigh, “if I recall, you were one of the unfortunates to be home visiting your family in the Philippines when the Emperor and Empress stole

your entire town. Right?”

She nodded, but corrected him on one point. “I now do not consider it to be a misfortune, Administrator. It is a privilege to live and work here. But, you are correct. I was home from college in Australia.”

“Ah, yes. And what, if you will remind me, was your area of study?”

“Officially? My undergraduate work was in Electromagnetic Propagation. Why?”

He smiled and stood. “Because, if I recall that means that you know a bit about what our rail gun does, possibly understand some of the properties of the Attractatron of Tom Swift’s invention, and might help me bridge a somewhat broad gap in my knowledge.”

She nodded and reached over to pull up a chair. In the lower gravity up in the control tower, it was easy to do with a single finger. She sat down and faced him.

Saclolo described the basic plan and the problems the engineers were coming up against. Following each major point he looked to see that she was absorbing the information. She was. After a half hour of explanation, he stopped for a moment.

“So, you see that my original plan was poorly thought out with no consideration for the physics of such an endeavor. The question now is, can you or anyone else help me overcome the major obstacle of either killing people outright or in a barely-controlled crash?”

Betsy laughed. It reminded him of his wife in their early courting days. He liked the sound.

“Let me see if I can summarize this, Administrator. Enough acceleration to make the ride work and people become smashed because they cannot overcome inertia quickly enough. Not enough speed and they don’t make it around our home planetoid unless you put them in a wildly ovate orbit that will end up too high for them to see anything.”

“In the proverbial nutshell, that is the issue.”

She nodded and her brows furrowed, nearly touching over the gap between her slightly almond-shaped eyes. They remained like that for more than a full minute before relaxing.

“Okay. Then you need a track.” She looked at him to see what his reaction might be. It was not a happy one.

“No. That ruins the entire effect. This is to feel and seem to be a free-floating experience. Otherwise, why not just build a twenty

mile or so circular railroad and send them out from our dark side area into the blinding light of the side facing the sun?” He saw her disappointment and tried to soften his rebuke. “I am sorry, Betsy. You are most probably correct and I know I am almost certainly incorrect. It is just so disappointing to me to have this... well... this *key* attraction falling apart before it gets off the ground.”

She stood up and patted him on the shoulder.

“It’s okay, Administrator. I take nothing personally when it comes to my uncompleted and un-mastered field of study. Perhaps someday I might arrange to finish my degree from up here.”

That night as he explained their conversation to Magadia, she remarked, “You know that she is probably correct, do you not? I am tired and am going to bed now. Just let me leave you with this little thought to ponder. Does the track need to be solid and visible?” She left him in their front room and went to the bedroom.

He sat up most of the night trying to put her words and everything else he knew into perspective. By four in the morning he fell asleep, physically and mentally exhausted.

Magadia awoke at six and came back into the front room. Seeing her husband asleep, she pulled a light blanket from a space under one end table and covered him gently. He didn’t stir.

She dressed and left twenty minutes later deciding to have breakfast in one of the cafeterias.

With a snort and a start, Saclolo woke up and shot into a sitting position around two hours later. He blinked several times and tried to catch his breath. He had just had a terrible nightmare.

First, there was a murder from a few days earlier and then there was the lunar orbiting ride. Somehow, in his mind, they combined where the invisible murderer kept taking people, one-at-a-time, from their residences and trundling them out to the rail gun. There, he shoved them inside the capsule, stood practically shaking with mocking laughter at their plight and obvious panic, with his hand on a large lever coming up from the floor.

As each victim passed into despair, he would laugh once again and pull the lever, sending the capsule shooting down the rail. Somehow, he was managing the speed correctly, but he had aimed the rail up to an angle so that the capsule would soar a hundred or so miles up, and as the person inside watched, it would arc over the top and begin a slow but deadly plunge down and down and down until it crashed into a small crater several hundred miles away.

Then, another capsule would just pop up from a hidden supply, ready for his next victim.

He had awakened at the point where his wife had been taken right from their bed while they both slept.

Saclolo blinked a few more times, took several breaths and called out for Magadia. When she did not answer he had a split second of panic before realizing that what he had seen was a dream. He got up and went to their bedroom. The bed on his side was unrumpled and hers was turned back, her nightgown resting at the foot of the bed as usual.

He picked up their phone and dialed the office. When she answered cheerfully, he practically wept with relief.

“How late did you stay awake, my husband?” she inquired.

“Truthfully, I do not know but a few hours past midnight.”

“Did it do you any good?”

He had to think about that question. Certainly before he had fallen into his nightmare sleep a thought had come to him. He tried to recall the extent of it.

“I believe that the young woman, Betsy, might have given me the start of an answer and your question put it into perspective. But, it is beyond me at this point. I believe I will come into the office in about one hour and call Tom Swift. You were correct. This is something I must admit requires his brain power to solve.”

“Good. I fail to understand your hesitance to call him on such things. I know you want to be as independent as you possibly can, but he has told us both, time and again, that he is willing to lend a hand or even some of his people for whatever we need. Take a shower and get into some clean clothes and go have food. Then, come in and make that call.”

It was good advice and he followed it. On arrival he went into the back room where the private radio equipment was located.

“Well, hello, Saclolo,” the young inventor greeted him over the video link once they were connected. Using an older technology than Tom’s Private Ear Radio, or PER, because that method could only transmit sound and data, it took three-seconds between each interaction, making things nearly comical as the person at the other end generally was reacting with their face to things spoken in the past.

“Hello, Tom. This call is one I was hesitant to make, but I fear that we need your help. Now, before you react to just those words, let me state that this regards our resort in general and my hope to create a ride around the Moon in particular.” He waited while Tom heard the last few words and responded.

Tom chuckled. “Yes, I was fairly certain we might be having this

conversation one day. Believe it or not, I have thought about all the physical and technical obstacles to that over the past several weeks. And, before I go on, I need to ask you what level of help you will accept from me. By that I mean if I can come up with something that works will you allow me to go ahead and build it for you or do you simply wish me to give you the necessary hints and leave it up to you?"

Saclolo had to think about the question a moment before responding. "I suppose that depends on whether what you can come up with is within our abilities or beyond them. If it is the former, then I would hope we can do as much up here as possible. But, I have been coming around to the conclusion, with help from two very intelligent women up here, that all this might be over my head. So, let us work together and see what might be done and then divide responsibilities as they are best suited to one or the other of us."

A few seconds later Tom's image nodded and smiled.

They talked about everything the lunar colony had available, what they were in a position to purchase, and especially what they could not hope to devise or even build without the help of Swift Enterprises or other Earth-based industrial companies.

Tom agreed with everything Saclolo said and soon was offering a couple suggestions.

"I agree with this young woman, Betsy I think you called her, in that you need to have some sort of track. But it does not need to be physical, or at least not physical in the sense that the capsules come into contact with it as if they were simply cars on a train or an amusement park ride. One concept would be to arrange a number of stations around the Moon to act as catch-and-toss points. They might even be disguised using Moon rocks."

He went on to explain how the initial launch could still take place using the tamed down rail gun and that would most likely get the capsules thirty or even forty miles out at a reasonable altitude over the surface. At that point, they would come into the influence of the first station that would grab onto the capsule as gently as possible to maintain the illusion of free flight, swing it up and over the station giving it additional speed and finally releasing it at a point where it could continue flying toward the next station.

"I believe, and this is subject to me actually performing a number of calculations before I can guarantee it, this ought to allow the stations to be set about every four hundred miles. That means we'll need to have about sixteen stations to cover the sixty-seven-hundred mile plus circumference. No, that isn't right. With your position above the equator and the angle around assuming you

pass south of the equator, that would increase by a thousand miles so add two or three additional station.”

Saclolo’s heart sank. He knew the cost of that many specialty stations capable of performing all the necessary tasks would be astronomical. He said so to Tom.

“Again, I need to run a bunch of computations before I can answer any real questions. And, depending on the altitude you can find acceptable for all the travel, or at least for the highest part of each arc, we could possibly manage with a couple fewer stations. If you decide to run it at just your current latitude, that reduces the station requirements by three or four stations. But, let me run numbers of a lot of things. Uhh, by the way, do you have designs for the actual capsules? I only ask because shape and composition will come into play. The heavier they are the farther they will travel. That sort of thing.”

“I do have a preliminary design to send you, Tom. It is one of my usual rough sketches that is more erased lines than it is design, but it is a starting point. Tell me if you need me to clean it up or find an artist up here to make it so you can actually tell what my intentions are.”

Tom laughed. “Will do. Send that down today or tomorrow and I’ll try to get back to you in two or three days. Don’t fear for your lunar ride, Saclolo. Between us I’m almost certain we can make it a reality!”

When he returned to the front office, Saclolo told Magadia all about the conversation. His voice spoke volumes to his wife.

Where he had been tentative and almost resigned to failure before the call, he came back with a renewed energy in his voice and she was certain he was actually standing a little taller.

He was a very prideful man and any time failure appeared to be on the horizon, Saclolo tended to emotionally sag a little. He never gave up; that wasn’t in his makeup. But, he did get moody and perhaps too prone to second-guessing himself.

As his wife and the woman who helped him gain control of the former slave colony and turn it into the viable and nearly self-sufficient city-state it had become, she knew that his inner strength would never let him give up on anything he felt strongly about.

It was one of many things she loved about him.

“Go find your new friend, Betsy, and tell her about your conversation with Tom Swift. After you mentioned her education, and while you were talking with the Earth, I looked her up. She is far too shy about ringing her own bell. Her studies for her undergraduate degree were in magnetics. Her Masters Degree was

in electromagnetism and its propagation. It was only her *Doctorate* she did not have the chance to complete.”

He was stunned. “She was close to a Doctorate degree?”

“She was home visiting before she was to turn in her thesis. It would have only been a matter of a few months before you would need to call her ‘Doctor Torres.’” Magadia smiled at her husband.

“Now, why do you suppose she did not mention that to me?” he asked quietly enough to himself, but loud enough for Magadia to hear.

“Possibly, because she is the type of woman who does not feel comfortable holding her education over other’s heads.”

“Well, whatever her reasons, can you see if it is possible to assist her in retrieving any computer files that might contain her thesis? Then, I would like to speak to someone at her university about reinstating her eligibility and—”

He stopped seeing the smile threatening to break around his wife’s lips.

“You’ve already started on that, haven’t you?”

She merely smiled and then got up and kissed him on the cheek.

He took her in his arms and looked deeply into her eyes.

“Do you understand how incredibly lucky I am to have you as my wife.”

She gave him an even better kiss without saying a word, but she was thinking, *You’d better believe it!*

Chapter Seven: Burying The Past

HARLAN AND ZIMBY shut the sled's systems down. It only took the two men a couple of minutes to put on their cold weather gear. The temperature gauge was indicating twenty degrees but the wind was making it colder... a lot colder. The bulky goggles their two IR projection lamps on the temples and the IR camera in the middle made keeping a hood on very cumbersome. They slipped on a skin-tight, black balaclava with built in throat mic and ear phones then the night vision mask.

Once outside Harlan pointed to the larger of the two stone buildings.

"That's the barn. It has a big front door and one smaller door in back. You don't want to head around to that one since it was used for mucking out the barn. Don't know if the gunk is frozen solid or not, but it is never pleasant. Check the inside out and gather anything that looks out of place."

"Out of place?" Zimby asked not knowing what he meant.

"Yeah, anything that's younger than your grandfather should be a good place to start. That's what the collection bag is for, Zimby. Use it."

"I should have stayed with the *Sky Queen*," he mumbled as he carefully moved off. Harlan smiled for the first time that night, and it put him somewhat at ease. He felt that he was now ready to do what had to be done.

The barn no longer had any doors on it. In fact it was stripped bare of anything that might have been useful. Even the rough wood once used to make the stalls was gone. He went quickly to the small stone hut and found Harlan standing in the middle of a similar stripped room.

"What do you think happened?" Zimby asked from the door opening. Harlan was slowly looking around, sweeping the walls and dirt floor with the IR head gear.

"Nomads or bandits, most likely. Took all they could and burnt whatever wood they found for heat or cooking. This place has been empty for a while by the looks of it. I don't even see rat tracks anymore." Harlan was shining the IR along the bottom of the walls and finding no rat or mouse droppings in the dirt.

"Well, this sure make things easier for us, Harlan. What next?"

"One last thing to look at." He turned and left the hut. The IR light lit up the ground before him as he walked. On the other side of the hut a stone outline of something could be seen. Harlan did not

like the looks of it. He paused before approaching it slowly.

“There was a wooden platform over that circular stone wall, now it’s gone,” he told Zimby when the other man joined him. “At the bottom of that well was a tunnel that goes into the mountain temple. This does not look good.”

The light showed that the ground around the well was blackened, and a few chunks of burnt wood could still be seen. Looking into the well Harlan could see the burnt remnants of the platform. Most of the pieces looked burnt and crumbly. Someone had set the whole thing on fire and pushed the wood into the well where it slowly smoldered and finally smothered itself out.

“Looks like we got some work to do, Harlan.” Zimby sighed. “I’ll go get a rope and a few other things so we can climb down. You think we’ll have much trouble getting down past the wood?”

“I hope not. If I can’t kick a path past the wood you’ll have to get another rope and toss one end of it down so you can haul some of it out. It will be dirty work and it may take some time to do it. We’ll see soon enough.”

Harlan and Zimby went back to the sled and gathered the equipment they were going to need. Three coils of rope, and a lightweight tripod with a pulley that could be placed over the well. This was one of the items Harlan brought in case the well no longer had a ladder in it. He never gave it a thought that the platform would be burnt and shoved into the hole. Also in their stack of equipment was a small reciprocating saw, a small sledgehammer and a couple high intensity floodlights with stands.

They no longer could work using the IR goggles. They found the place abandoned and just had to hope that it stayed that way while they were there.

The lights went up first. Zimby made a sling out of one end of a rope and proceeded to feed the other through the pulley before setting the tripod up with Harlan’s help. While he was doing that Harlan pounded a tie off stake into the ground. The work was hard, and after a few swings of the hammer the bar finally passed through the frozen ground into softer dirt. By the time the bar was set Zimby had a second rope knotted up and ready to use it to haul up the wood without the rope slipping through his fingers.

Harlan made quick work of slipping into the sling and letting Zimby lower him down.

The top layer of wood was mostly burnt through, but under it were large pieces of unburned timber that once formed the wooden ladder that was part of the well. In fact it was jammed so firmly into the wall of the well that Harlan had to take the portable saw to

it before Zimby could haul it out.

By the time they were finished they were both covered with soot from head to toe. The sun was up and they were more than just tired and hungry. They were discouraged as well. The tunnel was blocked. It looked like it had been dynamited.

“What you want to do?” Zimby asked while they walked slowly back to the sled to get into clean clothes, have something to eat and grab a few hours sleep.

“Try to dig in a little way. It looks blocked, but it might not be that bad. This rock is hard and unless they used something like C-4, and lots of it, it can’t be that big of a blockage.

“This sort of looks bad for what you want to do, Harlan.”

“It does, but I must keep on.”

“Then, we give it the old college try.”

Four hours later they were back at it again. After moving the first half dozen top rocks Harlan could see that the tunnel was still there, and that the cave-in covered just at tunnel’s mouth. In no time at all he had an opening large enough for them to crawl through.

Harlan wasted no time in crawling into the five-foot high, three-foot wide tunnel and waiting for Zimby to climb down and join him. With their high-power lights showing the way both men crouched and moved down the long cramped space until they reached the end and the ladder that was built into that well. It went up a ten-foot long shaft that was cut into the tunnel roof.

After taking a deep breath Harlan climbed the ladder and into the vaulted, mostly empty room above. The niches that were built into the two long walls still held remnants of parchments and stone tablets. Utmost care would be need in handling them if any of the writings were to be saved.

There was no opposite wall; it opened directly into a larger circular cavern. A wide table sat just a few feet into the larger area and several stools were around three sides of it. A large chair was at the far side and it held the remains of a man. He was still sitting upright and his skin had turned to dry, dark parchment. The dry, cold air of the cave had turned him into an unwrapped mummy.

“Gee, Harlan,” gasped out Zimby somewhat shocked as he came up the ladder, “you could have warned a guy first.”

“Sorry, wasn’t thinking. This is the real reason we are here.” He made a quick sweep with his light that just barely lit the far walls. They could see five openings from where they stood. Harlan turned back to the table he swept his hand toward the skeleton-like

mummy and said, “Meet Professor St. Phillips, father of the Emperor and Empress Shangri-La, AKA, the Masters.”

“Wow! Don’t this beat all?” Zimby was shaking his head in amazement. “So this is the old geezer responsible for making the twins such bad hombres. He doesn’t look so tough to me,” Zimby laughed, nervously.

“Looks are deceiving, my friend,” Harlan told him in a serious tone. “He was a mean, ornery, single-minded man and the only love he showed his children was the back of his hand. After his wife died in this cold lonely place the monks took over their upbringing and it was not much better.”

“Monks as in men who like hoods, chanting and praying all day?”

“These were not just ordinary monks, no sir; they were warrior monks and the most vicious killing machines of their day. They didn’t use just one type of martial arts but something from all of them. Hands, feet, elbows, even their heads could be used to kill someone. Their duty and lives were given to guarding the treasure of the Guge Kingdom from all enemies. They succeeded for hundreds of years until the twins killed all but one of them. He now is buried in the garden in front of the hut. The skills those last monks taught them is how the Masters survived at such a young age in the slums of Kathmandu and started to make a crime empire for themselves. Mind you, Zimby they were only about fourteen if not a little younger at that time.”

“That’s unbelievable, Harlan.”

“Unbelievable yes, but true never-the-less. Now is not the time to explain it all.” Harlan took off his heavy coat as he was talking and slipped off a thin backpack he had underneath. He placed it on the table and put his coat back on before he unfolded the pack. Laid out it was sixteen inches across and close to seven feet long. An airtight zipper ran down the middle of it which he undid and folded the material aside.

“Let’s try to get him into the sack with the least amount of damage, if possible. I do hate to pick up the pieces. If we pull the chair back some more we may be able to gently pick him up and just lay him down.”

Zimby didn’t know what to say, so he just did what Harlan told him to do. Without a fuss they were able to pick up the mummy and lay him down into the bag. Only the heavy shoes and all the foot bones stayed were they were on the floor. They were added to the bag a few second later before it was tightly zipped up. There were straps about every sixteen inches that could be tightened so the body would not slip around in the bag so the men pulled them

as tight as they dared and tied them off. The bag was starting to shape up like a true mummy more than ever.

“Not much left to him weight-wise,” Zimby commented. “Mighty decent of him to not fall apart on us though.” He was talking, trying to hide his uneasiness over the situation.

“Let’s see if you still think that when we finish taking him out of here,” Harlan replied with a grin.

Zimby opened his mouth to say something, but firmly closed it after he realized he had nothing to say. Instead, he stepped back from the table and started to move out into the dark unexplored cavern.

“Don’t bother, Zimby, we never went any father than this the first time I was here. If the Masters did rob this place in the past and left incriminating items behind, so be it. That will have to be a mystery for others to solve. I just want Maggie’s father away from here. He and his family disappearance should stay that way.”

“If that the way you want it, Harlan, it’s fine with me, but don’t most of the people on the Moon know who your twins’ mother was?”

“Yes they do, but the Cordillera people know that, as they have so painfully learned, the past is not what you live for. That the future is what you make of the present. My twins have nothing to do with what happened to them, so it will not be held it against them. I just wish more nations and cultures thought that way.”

“Harlan, I believe I can see why you think so much of those people up there. Maybe they could use a pilot of my caliber?”

“That they could especially with the new tourist ships coming on line. I just hope you think about it some more before you jump ship on the Swifts.”

“That will be taken up with Damon before I do anything. That’s for darned sure.” Zimby then snorted with a laugh. “Here I am making plans for the future over a dead body. It seems kind of ghoulish and disrespectful.”

“Believe me, Zimby, it’s not. You have a future and you are a good man. This one,” Harlan touched the bag with his fingers, “only thought of the past and seemed to hate the world he found himself in and his children. Hate and dominance that is what he passed onto them. Look at what it got them.”

Both men fell silent for a moment and without another word they grabbed hold of the built in hand straps at the ends of the bag and picked it up. It weighed no more than perhaps twenty-five pounds. They returned to the back of the vaulted room and put it

back down on the ground so one of them could go down the ladder. Again with no discussion, Harlan climbed down first.

Slowly, Zimby lowered the bag and Harlan received it. Once they were back together they discovered that carrying the bag between them was not an easy thing to do while bent over because of the low height of the tunnel. They made a few stops to exchange places and to give their arms and shoulder muscles a much needed change of positions finally reaching the well opening.

The sky was still dark—not from the bad weather but from the sun having gone down—and the well was in blackness. It took them by surprise. Neither thought they had been gone that long. Time had slipped away from them in that cold, black hole.

Back at the sled they left the body in the airlock, took off their heavy coats and pulled a couple MRE meals out of the storage bin and went up into the control cabin where it was warm.

They opened their packages and slipped out the meal tray. After pulling the heating tabs they set them aside to heat up for a few minutes.

“Now what?” Zimby asked as he settled into his pilot’s chair and tried to relax.

“I was going to look for the E-Vac ball the Empress came down in, but I’ve changed my mind.”

Zimby gave him a curious look.

“Well,” he hesitated for a moment, “after seeing how well this place got stripped I doubt if anything is left of the ball. If there is I’m sure by now there is no way of connecting it to anyone. Dozen of those things have been lost one way or another. It will just go down as one more of those uncountable space debris that constantly raining down to Earth now-a-days.”

“Do we head to the drone and pick up our gyro replacement then?”

“Can’t see why not, but let’s eat first and that will give us time to review what we did and think of what we did not.”

The smell of hot coffee reached both men and they eagerly attacked their meal. After his first bite Zimby asked, “Are we leaving the wood where it’s at or are we throwing it back in.”

“We need to cover our presence here so we have more work to do before we take off. It’s the cleaning of the tools that going to take us the longest.”

“Can’t we do that while waiting for the drone. I think we’ll have a couple hours to what after we get to it landing point.”

“You’re right. Doing it there might be better. Staying here longer than we need to could get us in trouble. Lets eat and clean up the well site and get out of here.”

While the atomic pod was not in use the enriched sodium slowly recharged the battery cells of the sled. By the time the sled made it back into the air the cells had more than three quarters of their electrical energy back. This gave Harlan the option of flying to the drone landing site at high altitude instead of staying close to the mountain side where there was a chance of been seen.

RADAR detection was not a problem because the sled had a spray coating of Tomasite to help stop solar radiation intruding on the occupants. As a secondary effect the coating also absorbed RADAR and microwaves.

Zimby set the autopilot, darkened the windows and for the next few hours both men got some much needed sleep.

The autopilot awoke them both just before they reached their destination. The first thing they did was go below and use the hide-away bathroom, if that is what you wanted to call the funnel and folding catch basin. Bathrooms in any of the smaller space vehicles still presented a problem for people and their needs, especially if privacy was called for.

They searched the mountain valley below them with binoculars before coming in for a landing nearest to the mountain wall. After the touch down they waited to see if anything was going to happen before getting out... nothing did. They were the only ones on the windswept mountainside.

Three hours later they heard the whine of the five drone’s props as it came into the small valley and landed a mere fifty feet away before it powered down. Only the small beacon light on the central module that flashed every two-seconds told of its presence.

It took both of them to lift the machine onto the bed of the sled and lashed it down near the atomic battery. They took out the gyro system first and put it were it could be safely locked up in the pilot’s cabin.

They finished cleaning up the equipment and stored it away. Harlan ask Zimby to help him lay the Professor on the ground and to give him a little time alone with him. Zimby did not question why. When Harlan went back in the sled he was empty handed.

“He still here?” Zimby had to ask.

“Yes he is. It’s best that you know no more.”

“What are you going to do with him, Harlan, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Not at all. I thinking of a nice deep watery grave in Davy Jones locker would do nicely.”

“And how are you going to pull that one off?” He laughed.

“That’s why the Kangaroo Kub is still with us. Once we get the expedition back to the caves and see what is what in that mountain, I’m going to depart in that jet on a recon flight, then I intend to lose our dear departed friend in the Indian Ocean. Somewhere very deep and out of the main shipping lanes.”

“Some plan,” Zimby commented. “Then you comeback and we all go home?”

“Sorry my friend but I’m going to leave you in charge after that. I have to get back to Cordillera and see to the opening of the lunar resort. I’m sure that not all of it is going to work out as planned and I want to be there just in case.”

“That fine with me, Harlan. Just remember that if I find any treasure it’s all mine.”

“You better reread your contract with us. Better to weep now than later.” He was smiling from ear to ear.

It was still deadly dark when they made contact with the *Sky Queen* as they circled and prepared to land. Spotlights were turned on and the hanger bay doors were opened. The sled, with a little coaching and shoving from Chris, slipped right into its berth without a hitch or a scratch on the paint.

When they stepped out of the sled both Harlan and Zimby were startled to see a rather ill-tempered male official wearing a large gun on his belt waiting for them with his beefy fists dug into his hips.

“And what did I tell you about staying on course before you left Kathmandu airport?” He was so angry that both of them just about understood what he said.

Seeing him took Harlan completely by surprise and his face showed it. He looked at Chris who shrugged and appeared to be miserable.

“Step back from that flying contraption so I can inspected it. If I find one item that don’t belong to you, both of you will never see the light of day again and Swift Enterprise will never get this flying behemoth back.”

Chapter Eight: Murder in The First

THE TRIP had not been an easy one at first. But the trip did give Donnell—now using the name Peter Donald—time to relax and heal from his illness, a luxury he could not afford back on Earth. The first day was the worst and he could blame it on space sickness. After that, with regular, balanced meals giving him some strength, he actually sat up and noticed his surrounding. By the end of the two and a half day trip he was thinking normally. At least as normal as Donnell could. And that saved him from being discovered right at the beginning. A twist of fate that caused needless deaths.

The construction crew ship landed, and they were all hustled to a small room full of chairs. The men were giddy and playful being the first time any of them were experiencing the low lunar gravity mixed with the smell and cramped-ness of the domes.

“Quiet down and listen up,” a man who finally walked in yelled over the voices of the men in the room. He was rough looking and had a sour look on his face. “I’m Joe and I was a U. S. Marine sergeant for half my life before I went into demolition work for a tunnel boring company. That’s all you need to know about me. Except that you won’t be told anything twice. You get it the first time around because the Moon won’t give you a second chance. You may think I’m kidding or that it’s too harsh a statement to be true and I wish it was.” He stopped and looked at the men that were staring at him with looks of dismay on their faces.

That was the effect that he wanted.

“I’ll put it another way. There’s nobody to check with to see if I’m wrong. Well, let me rephrase *that*. There’s nobody alive who can tell you otherwise.” For the first time he cracked a smile. “So listen hard and ask all your questions right from the start.”

There was a murmur from the team but nobody spoke out.

“Now, ladies, I’m going to introduce you to the most important piece of equipment you’ll ever own up here. Get on your feet and march single file out the door. Outside give me your name then turn right. Go to the next room and line up against the back wall. Don’t touch a thing you see. Move it along now!” Joe held up his clipboard, took a pen out of his pocket and waited for the names of the men he hoped to God would not screw up and kill themselves... or him.

“Don...ald Peter. I mean, Peter Donald.” He almost messed up his new name. Somewhere in the back of his mind he thought that he knew this man Joe. It was messing with his thinking. If Joe

knew him he was done for right then and there.

The hesitation caused Joe to look up from his clipboard and a frown formed on his face as he looked at Donnell. He stared until it made Donnell's eyes water and flood him with a feeling of impending doom. All he could do was repeat to himself, *I am Peter Donald. Donald, Donald, Donald.*

"You from Albany, New York by any chance?"

"Sorry, Joe. Never been there in my life." Peter tried to cut it short and started to walk out the door.

"Well, mister, you have a double back there. Now get with the rest of the men."

Donald took a deep breath and walked out. He could not help feel the sweat running down his back even though it moved agonizingly slowly in the reduced gravity. He hoped no one would notice his damp face and even more damp underarms and comment on it.

Joe walked in behind the final man and stood in front of the six rows of tables in the room. On each table sat four spacesuits.

"Gentlemen, as I call out your name you're to take your place behind the spacesuit I point to. Each of these suit were made specifically for you and no one else. We do have generic suits, but they won't stand up to the rigors of the work you are going to put these suits to. They are your lifeline, your best friends and your only true love in this desolate world that wants nothing but to kill you. It will try to do so in a number of ways. What I'll teach you today will keep you alive under most normal circumstances, but don't get complacent at your work because circumstances change daily, even minute by minute or one-second to another."

When Joe called Peter Donald he watched the man closely. Joe knew he was not wrong. Joe had an amazing memory for faces and places. That Peter Donald was not who he said he was. He would call up his records when this was done. Right now it could wait a few more hours.

Peter thought he'd worked hard learning his new background, but this unexpected man was something else altogether. This was something that had never been remotely covered by the Asian men who hired him back on Earth. He had the impression they had been on the Moon before. Maybe the fact that they had lived up here for the past couple years, working in space suits, had had a dimming affect on how much they remembered to tell him.

After two hours of learning just how to get into the suit and back out of it again, Joe gave them a break for a half hour. That was only

because a coffee cart had shown up and he had to stop. Joe stayed out of the men's way and listened to their small talk hoping to get a feel for how well the men were doing. Peter Donald got his coffee and sat back down. He joined in none of the talking. That did not sit well with Joe. He didn't like a loner in his work crew. Loners always led to trouble.

He walked over to stand in front of Peter. For the second time he tried to draw the newcomer out and was rebuffed with one word answers... or none at all.

Peter watched as Joe went back to his desk and wrote something down. Peter's paranoia was now rearing its ugly head. He was silently panicking and was now mentally fit to be tied.

The instruction started again. This time it was about basic suit maintenance. Simple things like checking pressure release valves, suit seals, electronic checklists and on and on. The men did so well Joe decided to let them take their first small walk out on the lunar surface. No farther than a few feet from the airlock. He knew that would put the spunk back into their now overworked minds.

Joe took them out five at a time. Peter was in the last group to go out. When his group turn came Joe had to leave them for a change of air tanks. He still had a half hour worth of air, but for taking out a new group of people that would be cutting it a little close. Peter was by the door when Joe asked for help to close off the air lines and remove the tanks. He usually did this himself and got his own replacement tank as each man had to learn to do it, but being in a hurry he asked Peter to help by getting a tank pack for him from the storage area.

Peter put the old tanks into the empty rack and started to take out a new one. He left the full tag on the tank as he was told to do when getting one for someone else. It was then that Peter's overactive mind slipped a little deeper into his paranoia.

Joe knows who I am. He will stop me from getting my revenge on Tom Swift. I must stop him.

That thought keep racing around in his mind. Then it came to him. Give him empty tanks. Jam the needle valve so he won't see it. When we get outside make sure he never makes it back before his air runs out. That will be the hard part and he could not think of how to do that. But, he knew enough, thanks to Joe, to jam the valve. Do the first part, he decided, let the second part take care of itself.

Peter was stunned by the raw beauty of the Moon, the brightness of the stars, the colors they shined with. It was something that he never saw or envisioned on Earth. He was

temporarily too enthralled to think about his plan to get rid of Joe. Then it happened. The condition was once known as rapture of the deeps, when a deep sea diver—for reasons unknown—went crazy. The man standing his left suddenly screamed. Before anyone could react he began to run toward the crater's edge. Not that he could climb over it if he even made it that far. Every step he took he lopsidedly jumped forward with his arms waving around and around as he tried to maintain his balance. For not knowing what he was doing he was getting farther and farther away.

“Stay! Don't do anything. I'll be back.” Those were the final words that Joe spoke to anyone. In what was not more the forty-seconds he was dead. When he reached the runaway man he took him by the arm and tried to stop him. But, as all crazed people tend to do, the man fought back. He grabbed for anything he could get. The air line was very easy to reach. With a pull one way and then another, the line came loose. The all-important valve remained attached to the helmet. Normally the valve would shut, the helmet would be seal and Joe would have five minutes of suit air at the very least. Peter had jammed the valve open and with the air line ripped out he lost his air in two-seconds and he died from air and suit pressure loss. Explosive decompression.

The whole incident went down in the books as a terrible accident. The man who caused it all was sent back to Earth and was never the same even after years of treatment. Only Peter Donald knew the whole truth. And it gave him a feeling that he never felt before. He now understood that he had the power of life and death in his hands. That Tom Swift was going to die, he had no doubt.

Donnell worked as many hours as the others, and still he worked four or five hours each night setting things up for the eventual attack that would rid him of his nemesis. The only thing working to his advantage was the lower gravity on the Moon. It was easier on his heart and so he managed to keep up with the grueling pace of six days working and three days off. Only, just barely.

His stint at the colony would be over in just six weeks and he could reapply for another “tour of duty” after two months time back on Earth, but most of the work he was involved in would be coming to an end about the time he would be eligible to return.

If everything went well, and so far it was going according to his plans, he would thank the people who hired him, explain that he wasn't really the sort of person who took to living on the airless lunar satellite, and would disappear with his sizable paycheck.

That money would not go into luxuries for him. It was going into the second part of his plan.

There would be no need for money once his duty was dispatched. He would be feted as a hero and his life would be filled with the luxuries he'd abstained from over the past year.

His duties at the colony were simple and repetitive. Inside the dormant cone of a nearby dead volcano, the site of the hotel, he was responsible for taking laser measurements twice each shift, marking on an electronic planner what materials needed to be cut out and removed, and then work with three others to use a modified atomic earth blaster—one with a very narrow and long nozzle that acted more like a rock slicer than a drill—to cut pyramid-shaped blocks out, lift them using a device he mistakenly called an “Attractortron,” onto a flatbed carrier which was then flown up and out for use as more building materials at a different site, and then they all repeated the process.

Over and over.

Day after day.

Fifteen foot by fifteen foot by fifteen foot by fifteen foot pyramids of lunar stone at a time.

Eventually his team was told to take an extra day off.

“You’ve done so very well that the cavity you’ve been making for the hotel’s lower floors is now exactly the size we require and a day ahead of schedule. When you come back on duty we’ll have you men doing the smaller but deeper chamber that will house the pool, the larger general public gymnasium, the lower restaurant and staff quarters. Then it will be the perimeter cutouts for shops. Good job! For now, you have earned yourselves a good meal and the chance to take a hot shower over in the main dome. You leave in an hour and will be coming back six hours after that.”

Just why Donnell felt a sense of pride, a sense of purpose, he didn’t understand. He took the flatbed rover truck to the city and had his first non-rehydrated meal in weeks. After that he took a walk that lasted nearly the remaining time before he had to go back.

He returned to his simple quarters inside the large dome and took his first good sleep in at least seven months.

* * * * *

The first death had been one of opportunity and panic more than something carefully planned and executed. An old man, one of the colony’s oldest residents, was taking his late morning walk around the perimeter of the middle level of the second dome down inside the crater. It was exactly one-half-mile from his starting point to the same point coming around.

At ninety-two, had he been still living on Earth he might have believed a fifty-foot walk to be a rousing success. A degenerative disease in his joints had allowed far too much fluid build up making them nearly too stiff to use before he'd turned eighty. Philippine medicine in his small town was probably three decades behind what the rest of the world enjoyed so he had lived a painful and miserable existence.

Until he came to the Moon.

The combination of the lower gravity plus a scrupulously clean water supply had cleared his joints of the poisonous fluids within a month and he felt ten years younger. Twenty, perhaps.

By now he was able to make two full circuits of the outer corridor for a total walk of a full mile. Each and every day!

After each walk he would spend two hours working, volunteering to work, in the same fields he had been virtually a prisoner-worker in when the Masters ran things. His specialty was in harvesting potatoes at exactly their peak of nutritional goodness.

His method was mysterious but nearly faultless. He walked the rows of greens sniffing and tugging lightly on the stalks. He had attempted to explain this to Magadia once but could only shrug and tell her, "I just can smell when the potatoes are right and the stalks take on a different feel."

Whatever his method, tests of the potatoes he suggested be harvested within the next full day showed them to be nearly ten percent more nutritious than ones harvested based on a timing chart.

Today he had reached his start and endpoint on lap one and stopped a moment to take a small drink from a dispenser set into the wall. He finished his cup and was trying to decide if a second one might benefit him when he stopped and held his breath.

There was barely a sound other than the continuous circulation of the atmosphere they all breathed. But, there was something else only his sensitive nose picked out. Something that smelled of disease and even dead tissue.

A Security woman found his frail and crumpled body shoved into the alcove holding the water dispenser perhaps fifteen minutes later. The old man's neck had been broken along with his collarbone and four of his fingers on his right hand.

"He would not have put up a struggle on being hit the first time," the duty physician told Saclolo late that afternoon. "His attacker was vicious and swift. I doubt this man lived more than a minute after the first hit. I am truly sorry, Saclolo. I can see that you knew this man."

“I wish Harlan Ames could be here but he isn’t even in the United States,” Saclolo told the doctor. “I will investigate as best I can. Please keep the body in your cold storage so he might examine it himself. I had the entire area around where Mr. Perez was found dusted for fingerprints but came up with nothing. This is obviously a murder and not an accident. This is something we cannot tolerate!”

* * * * *

Donnell looked at his fingertips. They were starting to turn an unnatural color and the skin kept peeling off. He noticed the visible skin was smooth, without ridged or anything else that made up fingerprints. With a smug nod to himself he got ready to go back to work.

* * * * *

Doctor Greg Simpson had returned to the Earth and to Swift Enterprises a week before Harlan came down. The Simpson Space Medicine University he had set up at Cordillera City was a success. The first class completed their initial year in the two-year program and every single man and woman found it emotionally difficult to return home for the two-month break before classes would start again, and the next group of forty physicians from around the world would arrive. It was the experience of a lifetime and nobody wanted it to stop.

Once Class II got underway, and with an entire year of materials and research and experience to fall back on, they would try adding Class III four months later and another one four months following that.

The eventual hope was to push through three classes per year at three-month intervals and to do it in about a year and two-thirds with only a weeklong break between each eleven week semester plus a three-week “sanity” vacation for the staff.

Doc has been instrumental in getting Tom to set up the colony/city with his Repel-o-grav system of small repelatrions mounted to the ceilings and each individual wearing an undersuit that was specifically designed to be pushed upon creating near-Earth simulated gravity.

As such, he had been among the first to actively use the system each and every day, except for Sundays when he allowed the one-sixth gravity to provide more complete relaxation than he could get at home.

Now, back at his old desk in the Dispensary at Enterprises he was writing up notes on himself and his experiences. He knew he would go back on a teaching sabbatical at least once a year for one

or two months, and that was fine with Damon and Tom... just as long as he promised to come back.

He had been sorely missed even though his fill-in for his year of absence had been more than just fine, he had saved two lives! He had even begged for the chance to come back any time they needed his services.

“I have my private practice and my son has followed the old man by getting his medical degree and getting through residency before making it known he expected dad to hire him.” He had chuckled. “Sad to say he is turning out to be an even better caregiver than I ever was at his age! He has loved having the practice turned over to him and will gladly hold the door open for my departure when I announce my retirement *and* give me a little shove before locking the doors behind me.”

Doc felt happy that the needs of his friends and workmates was and would be well taken care of, but the truth is, he had missed the day-to-day dealing with the people at Enterprises—and sometimes the Construction Company—and even missed his occasional stitching / patching / setting / making boo-boos better on Tom when he inevitably was injured.

He sat back, hands clasped behind his head, and let out a contented sigh. It felt good to be back even though, the very next day, he had to embark on performing about fifty physicals on each senior staff member, including the two men at the top.

It'll be just like old times, he told himself.

Chapter Nine: Landing in Lhasa

Two hours later a rather disgusted and puzzled Chef Inspector from the Kathmandu's antiquities division stepped away from the sled. He had found nothing after poking into and practically tearing apart every storage bin, locker, nook and cranny the small ship had. He even opened every inspection hatch that accessed the electronic, lift drives and battery compartments.

Zimby had been waiting the whole time for the, "*I caught you*" scream from the inspector. None came. Harlan just innocently stood biding his time with an *I don't care* look on his face.

"I hope you are satisfied, Inspector. Do you really think that we, that is, that Swift Enterprises would do anything that was not above board? Or, contrary to your nation's requests?"

"But I was told..."

"Told by whom, if you don't mind me asking?" Harlan asked in a calm and level voice.

"I mean, ahhhh, we treat all potentially legitimate calls of smuggling as true until proven otherwise," he shot back angrily.

"Then I guess we are now free to make our repairs and continue on our journey?" Harlan did not give him time to reply before adding, "I do hope you have a way back to Kathmandu? I didn't see anything that look like transportation when we landed."

"You'll just have to take me back, Mr. Ames. This situation was not of my doing." Contempt dripped with every word.

"Well, you should have contacted the Tibetan government and let them handle this when we landed."

"You! You, sir, still landed in my country. I was not going to hand this over like it was nothing."

"Well, Inspector, it turns out that it *was* nothing! But, to show you that there are no hard feelings I'm willing to take you with us to Lhasa, after that it's your problem to get home."

"I demand that you take me back!" He was fuming.

"Demand all you want, but I'll make a deal with you." Harlan was having a hard time not laughing in his face.

"Oh!"

"Tell me who called you, how and when."

"I do not now who the informant was. My orders came from my

supervisor and I have no other information.”

“Well... that sounds like three strikes you’re out, to me.” Harlan then turned to Zimby.

“Have Chris help you get the new gyro in and checked all the associates systems out. I’ll take our guest to the lounge and make him comfortable.”

“But, I demand...” The inspector was slowly reaching for his gun as he spoke.

Harlan grabbed the Colonel’s hand just as it gripped the gun, yanked it sharply forward and ducked under his own arm; he twisted... hard. The gun went flying as a popping noise was heard. Harlan had dislocated the inspector’s elbow, if not outright breaking it. The man stumbled back yelling in pain. He dropped to his knees and held the twisted arm over his lap in an awkward position.

“You demand nothing.” Harlan told the whimpering inspector. “That was very foolish of you. I don’t know what you intended on doing with that gun.” Zimby nudged him and ejected magazine before handing the gun over. “Now you’ll just have to suffer until we get to Lhasa.”

He stepped over to the man’s side and pulled him up by his good arm causing a yelp of pain. The bad arm now hung at the Colonel’s side.

“If we had a brig I would toss you into it, but we don’t. So I’m taking you to the lounge and holding you there. If you’re smart just sit there and cause no more trouble. If you are pig-headed and stubborn, then I might toss you out once we get in the air.”

With a defeated look on his face he allowed Harlan to lead him from the hanger and up to the lounge.

“What’s the meaning of this?” demanded Moffat as he jumped to his feet dropping the map he had been looking at. “Why is Colonel Bumba hurt?” Moffat stepped forward to try to offer him help. “Tina, get the med kit and see what you can do,” he ordered next.

“Not so fast and step back, Sir Moffat. This man is being detained for the time being.”

“How dare you!” roared Moffat as he turned red face with anger on Harlan. “I’ve known this man for many a year and his credentials are without question.”

“That may be, but when a man draws a gun on me I don’t take it kindly. So, you need to sit down and keep out of my way before you make a mistake you’ll regret. We can easily head home right now

and never give you the chance you so desperately seek.” Harlan was not about to lose control over the expedition people. He turned to his right.

“Miss O’Hare, I take it you have some medical training?” he asked while still holding Colonel Bumba’s good arm.

“Yes, I do.” Tina replied calmly.

“Good. We have a medical station on the second deck and you can look at him there. As for the rest of you, I will talk to you all once we see to the Colonel here and not before.”

Harlan headed for the stairwell still with a tight grip on Colonel Bumba’s arm. Tina followed closely behind them.

Midway down the central passageway Harlan pushed open a door on the left side and the lights automatically turned on.

“Heavens, Mr. Ames, this is more like a complete medical faculty than a sick bay.” Tina was amazed at all the medical equipment in the room.

“Well, it is a combined medical and research lab all rolled into one,” he laughed. “That is what the *Sky Queen* was built for. I thought by now all of you would have explored the whole plane just out of sheer boredom.”

“Normally we would have, but Sir Moffat has all of us on a short leash right now, and we can’t leave his side for a minute.”

“Sorry for the inconvenience, but it could not be help.” Harlan led the Colonel to one of the curtained-off sections and pull the curtain open.

“Up on the gurney with you, Colonel, and Tina can help you take off your shirt. I’m going to get the ultra sound scanner and take a look at your elbow. Don’t try to get away. The door is locked and needs a code to open.”

Starting for the door, he turned back. “And, don’t think of trying to take Tina as a hostage. That will get you both gassed and one of you dumped out. Care to guess who that would be?” He left them without another word.

He came back a minute later rolling a cart before him. He pulled out an electrical lead and plugged it in a wall socket. The computer under the table started its wake up routine and ‘beeped’ a minute later. The monitor that took up over half of the table top showed a number of opinions from which to choose. Harlan selected ‘**Elbow/Right Arm**’. He then picked up the gun-like device from its holster and held the round end of the barrel below the injured man’s elbow. An image formed on the screen showing the bones

below the elbow as well as providing instructions on how to proceed with the imaging.

At the end of the examination the med-computer informed them that the elbow was not broken, but dislocated and that it had to be immobilized until a doctor could see the patient.

Tina was wondering why Harlan had her come since he seemed capable of handling the equipment, and she definitely was not. Harlan could tell she was puzzled.

“Since you have some medical training,” Harlan told her as he put the scammer away and got a roll of Ace bandage material and a sling out of the supply closet, “I wanted you to see this place in case it is needed later on. You never know what could happen when exploring old caves like we are going into. Everything is labeled and most of the medical equipment is self-starting as you saw and tells you what to do.”

He handed the stretch bandage over to her and nodded. “You wrap him up after I get that elbow back into place. He’s not going to like this one bit.”

Harlan positioned himself in front of the Colonel and placed one hand on his shoulder. It was only then the Colonel realized what was going to happen and started to pull away... but it was too late. Harlan grabbed the hand and pulled the arm out; the elbow snapped back into place. A sheer look of pain then relief crossed Bumba’s face as Harlan gently bent the arm across the man’s chest.

“Wrap him up for me, Tina. Take him back upstairs to the lounge when you’re done.” Harlan touched the Colonel on his bad shoulder as a reminder and told him, “Please don’t make trouble for the rest of the trip. I can bring out handcuffs and hold you down for the rest of this trip.” With that said Harlan left the room. He went down the hall to the electronics bay in the nose of the jet where he hoped to find Zimby and Chis hard at work.

No one was in the room. The slot for the gyro stabilizer was no longer empty. Several green ‘ready’ lights were shining brightly on the faceplate. He was satisfied with what he saw and went looking for the two men. He found them in the cockpit doing the preflight checklist. He buckled himself in to the navigator’s chair as he nodded his thanks to the two pilots then closed his eyes. It seemed like ages ago since he last done it and fell fast asleep. So deeply asleep that he did not even wake for the landing.

Harlan felt his arm being touched as words reached his slowly waking brain.

“It seems like we have a security issue, Harlan. You better take a

look.” Zimby was pointing to the security monitor, his voice was all business, cold and objective. Harlan eyes snapped wide open as he turned toward the overhead screen. Armed soldiers were pouring out of two half-track personal carriers and surrounding the plane. Weapons were in the ready. Two long black limousines and an airport authority vehicle pulled into the line of sight of the under the starboard wing camera. Three airport official stepped out of their car while two, distinguished looking gentlemen, one each, emerged from the limousines. Each car displayed two small flags flying off the front bumper. One carried a Tibetan flag and the other was from China and both displayed the "D" flag showing they were Diplomats.

A small smile formed on Harlan’s lips as he whispered, “The plots thickens.” Then louder, “Might as well go out and meet our visitors, guys. I’m sure it will be interesting. Chris, do me a favor and have the crew and our guests ready with passports for an inspection. Don’t let anyone out until I tell you.”

“Got it!”

“Get your passport, Zimby, and our authorization papers, then meet me outside. Let’s go.”

After opening the side hatch located just aft of the aircraft’s left wing and closest to the ground the automatic ramp slid out from under the hatch and formed a stairway. By the time Harlan reached the ground the ramp was surrounded by armed soldiers.

“Step back, step back!” shouted one of the airport officials in a loud voice in Lhasa Tibetan to the soldiers in front of him. He continued yelling until the soldiers moved aside and let him through.

“So sorry, for this outrageous display most welcome guests,” the short, bald headed man shouted in broken English just in case Harlan could not hear him from five feet away. “There has been a grave misunderstanding. These soldiers are not here for you. Forgive me, Sir.” The small man bowed before Harlan.

Harlan looked at the confused soldiers that were still standing by the sides of the ramp with guns still aimed at him. There was nobody visible who looked like he might be in charge of these men. Behind the bowed man were the other two officials, and they did look like clerks or lowly inspectors. Behind them were the two gentlemen from the limos and they seemed rather put off, glaring at each other.

“Please Mr...”

“Namdol,” The bald man told him quickly as he stood up

straight.

“Mr. Namdol, if there is no problem then have the soldiers dismissed and I’ll get my people down here to have their passports inspected and updated so we can be on our way. That sound all right to you?”

“Yes, yes that do fine, but you must see the gentlemen that have come. I will see to the soldiers and you can let the inspection begin. Yes?”

“Fine, let’s get this done. We are not here for our benefit, but to help rescue what could be a very important part of history of this nation and all the world.”

Mr. Namdol stepped aside and started to give orders in his own language. Smiling Harlan walked toward the two waiting dignitaries.

“Ambassadors, how may I help you today?” Harlan asked with a small bow from his waist, never taking his eyes off of the two men. He could tell by the cars that’s what they were.

Both men looked at each other not wishing to be the one that spoke first.

“This is getting us nowhere,” Harlan finally spoke up. “You,” he pointed his finger to the man on his right, “speak first or I’m out of here.”

“Very well, Mr. Ames.” He snapped to attention and gave a small bow. “I am Ambassador Qui of the Chinese government, and I’m not here to interfere with your expedition, but here to talk to Colonel Bumba. I’m told he is aboard your plane at this time.” It was not a question, but a statement.

“He is, Ambassador Qui. But, why do you want information from an ‘antiquities inspector’ for the Nepal government, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I do mind,” he snapped back sharply. “If you will bring him to me I will conduct my business and be on my way.” The Chinese Ambassador stepped several feet away and looked toward the people now exiting the plane.

“Don’t take it too hard, Mr. Ames,” the Tibetan ambassador told him in perfect English while offering his right hand American style. “I hear that your Swift Enterprises have been a thorn in the Chinese side for some time now.”

“We try to play nice with everyone, but some are harder to deal with than others.” Harlan’s eyes had a twinkle of merriment in them.

“Yes, our so called Over Lords do not like to lose. We are a prime

example of that and others also feel their over reach into their sovereignty, but that is a political matter that doesn't concern us today."

"What does concern *us*?"

"Today I'm just here to see that Ambassador Qui does not overstep into our business. You see Mr. Ames we have had Colonel Bumba on our watch list. He has been rather cozy with the Chinese government of late. We just do not know if it is on behalf of his government... or *not*. So we watch and listen when we can."

Harlan nodded. "I see, only not really, but I can't think of anything to do other than to stand aside for the moment."

"I would advise you to use caution with dealing with him. We heard he had to come to your rescue when your ship lost part of its guidance system due to bad weather. Is that not right, Mr. Ames?"

Harlan was watching Ambassador Qui from the corner of his eye and he saw him slowly move toward the plane. Colonel Bumba was now in a heated discussion with the clerk who was stamping passport visas. It appeared he had no official passport on him, only his work credentials from the Ministry.

"To say he came to our rescue is a massive overstatement. Nearly an outright lie. Our part came via a drone aircraft, not him. In fact, he came complete with loaded gun which is why you see his arm bandaged. He was about to be a very band man. I think you may yet need your soldiers after all, Ambassador. The Colonel seems to be in a bind. Should we see what is happening?"

"If I can keep him away from Ambassador Qui it might turn into a good thing for both of us. But we must finish our little talk before you leave us. Is that acceptable with you?"

"If you can lead him off in handcuffs I'll be more than happy to talk to you."

"Then let's see what we can do towards that end, my new friend."

"Friends I like, him, I do not. After you, Mr. Ambassador."

"Ti Ling, Mr. Ames," he told Harlan as he walked towards the two arguing men. The soldiers by now had pushed most of the people away and were enjoying the show. Where their commanding officer was, no one knew.

The first problem was that the clerk processing the passport was speaking Lhasa Tibetan and the Colonel was yelling Nepali. Neither one was giving in.

Ambassador Ling stepped between the two men and spoke in

English.

“What is the problem? I know that both of you can speak English. Use it or both of you are going to be taken away by the soldiers. I’m sure neither of you wish that.”

“But, sir, this man does not have his passport and insists that he does not need one because he’s on government business for the Antiquities Ministry of Nepal.” The clerk’s English was quite good. Colonel Bumba thrust his work credentials at the Ambassador with a huff.

“No need for that, Colonel Bumba. I know who you are.” The ambassador pointed to several soldiers and signaled for them to come closer.

“Take this man to the Customs office and hold him there under guard until I can come and straighten this out,” he told them in Tibetan. The soldiers looked at each other not knowing if they should obey.

“Now!” he commanded. “Since your commander did not see fit to come with you I am taking command as it is my right. The rest of you return to your station and tell your commander to go to the Customs office and wait for me. Tell him he is under my orders and that he will not question it if he knows what’s good for him.”

Harlan might not know what was being said, but he could tell that the Colonel was not happy and the attitude of the soldiers was changing. In fact he noticed that Ambassador Qui was now back in his car and waiting to see what happened next. As the assigned soldiers started to march Colonel Bumba away the black limousine drove off at rather a fast pace.

Ambassador Ling talked to the clerk for a moment more then started to walk back to his car. He waved Harlan over to him and they both got into the back of the limo.

“Now, Mr. Ames please tell me how you acquired the presence of the Colonel while we drive over to the main terminal and pick up the officer that is to go with your expedition. Don’t expect any trouble from him for Ti Saga is a first rate scholar and has spent his life trying to find and translate old Sanskrit scriptures looking for the origins of the Hindu epic poems. His title is mostly for show.

“Your people will be ready to leave by the time we come back. No other inspections will be necessary. I will detain the Colonel for a day or two then send him back home with a strongly worded reprimand. That is the best I can do for now.”

“That is more then enough, believe me, Ambassador Ling. Now sit back and you will hear the story of what has happened to us in the last few days.”

Chapter Ten: International Displeasure

THE FACT that China had attempted to sabotage their own deep space probes, delivered by the Lunar Colony in return for a great deal of operating capital and saved from self-destruction by some of the Cordillera City people, was no big secret. It was, however, a huge embarrassment for China.

When the Chinese space agency sent the activate signals and wholly expected to receive nothing, they were furious to discover a strong and powerful ASN, or All Systems Nominal, signal coming back hours later. To make matters worse, it continued to stream back, unflinching, for weeks.

The government had already drafted and prepared for sending a strong demand to the international community specifying a fast investigation and determination in their favor, and the turning over of the lunar colony to Chinese control to repay the debt. It had been registered as collateral against the success of both probes. So convinced they would not receive any signal, the Chinese officials had agreed, in the contracts, that the signals only had to be received for a period of two weeks.

On that first day the courier stood, satchel over her shoulder with the dispatches, waiting for the command from the government to go. It never came but that didn't stop one minor minister from sending her off to deliver the official complaints anyway.

The United Nations received the documents an hour later and contacted the managers of the colony. When they were informed that, "...some oversight or possible mischief on the part of the Chinese had been located and corrected," all for the "protection of Chinese assets" and that all was well with the probes, the U.N. sent a strongly-worded rebuke to the Chinese.

And when they tried to announce to the world that their probes had been tampered with—complete video and technical evidence had been provided by Saclolo and his people to support their contention that instead of harming they have saved the probes—that ended with the Chinese being publicly scolded for their part in this, and *that* sealed the fate of several high-ranking Chinese officials who had guaranteed success to Party officials. Or, in this case, failure that would have meant they would be within the terms of the delivery contract to demand full repayment.

That would have not just bankrupted the colony, it would have meant turning over the city-state to the Chinese who had their own uses in mind for the base.

Those, if the full truth were to be known, were somewhat similar

to those of the late Masters.

In short, the Chinese wanted to gain the Moon as their base from which to dominate the Earth.

That had failed, heads had, figuratively if not literally, rolled, and China had been put on notice by the United Nations that they were to either toe the line from that moment on and behave, or suffer the consequences.

Those would not be physical; China had far too many weapons, missiles and other mechanisms of war to be intimidated. No, they would face sanctions that could cripple their already fragile economy. Expansion in previous decades had been unchecked and uncontrolled.

They may have believed the world shopped at China, but they had been proved wrong in the previous five years. A more wise and worldly Western nations group realized they might have to pay a little more for certain goods, but it was only their purchasing power that kept the Chinese government in power and the nation from falling into “third world country” status.

Five Chinese “diplomats” who had come to the colony on a “good will tour,” but more likely an inspection of what they believed would soon be theirs, were hastily recalled with two of their number requesting amnesty at the colony. They feared they would be removed from their positions and that could include anything from simply being fired to “never being seen again.”

Saclolo arranged with authorities in the United States for these two to be taken into custody upon their arrival on Earth and to set in motion a thorough check of these two men.

As it turned out, one of them was honest in his desires and the other admitted, under questioning, that he had been ordered to remain at the colony to act as a spy for his government.

The first man, the honest one, was flown back to the colony while his compatriot was returned to China.

With only a small public notice that the man had decided “to retire to a small village in the western part of the vast country;” he was never heard from again.

* * * * *

Silently, the huge three-decker airplane flew above and overshadowed a small, obscure Tibetan valley in the desolate northwest mountain region of Zara. Those looking out the windows could see that the valley was more like a box canyon with three sides of steep, black granite walls. The fourth open side gently flowed downhill and then leveled out into a long, flat bottom land

with no rivers or streams running through it. It was a dry and treeless place even in summer, never mind when winter was upon it.

A few man-made stone walls formed small pastures for grazing animals long since departed. The only visible structures were a large stone barn and a smaller stone hut near it. The two buildings were only a few hundred feet away from the back mountain wall that was made up of loose large and small boulders for about two hundred feet or so up and then steep, solid rock above.

As the *Sky Queen* grew closer to the ground everyone turned to face the floor to ceiling projection that was being transmitted from the plane's nose-mounted video camera. The view zoomed in on the left side of the rubble and slowly swept right.

Harlan supplied a narrative to what they were seeing.

“From all local accounts there was a small monastery consisting of several buildings built against the canyon wall. The monks had lived there so many centuries that no one really knows for how long. There were a few families living with the monks and helped with their daily needs. According to the people in the surrounding area, and from the records keep in the Zara township some fifty miles southeast of here, pilgrimages were made several times a year to this lost valley. The pilgrims would bring food and other needed supplies in exchange for worship and hearing readings of the ancient Sanskrit the monks were in charge of. The tablets were kept in a small temple dug into the mountainside. Anyone could come and worship before the openly-displayed tablets. It was reported that there were only five of them, but they were old enough that only the monks were still able to read them.”

“Is that what you really want us to find, Mr. Ames?” Tina asked with a sour look on her face. “Where is the cave that is full of the treasure you so boldly boast about?”

Harlan look at her and then at Sir Moffat who nodded his head. Harlan had told Moffat far more details than he did anyone else. Now was the time for much of the truth, but not all of it.

Everyone watched Harlan open a leather bag he had on the floor near the wall. He pulled out a stone box and handed it to Sir Moffat. It was the first time the old Professor had actually seen it even though he was told by Harlan that it contained a treasure of unknown wealth.

Sir Moffat reverently pried the top off and handed it to Ti Saga who sat to his right. The man turned the stone lid over and noticed the Sanskrit writing chiseled into the underside. His eyes nearly popped out of his head since this was the first time he'd ever held a

new, unread script. This was his lifetime dream coming true.

In the mean time Sir Moffat was untying the string that sealed the velvet bag. He peeked in and let out a moan of disbelief. With trembling hands he poured the gems into the bottom of the box now sitting on his lap. He gasped for breath as he clutched his chest and his face slowly turned pale.

Harlan realized what he done and grabbed the box away before it fell to the floor. Tina, seated on his left, reacted by taking a small bottle out of her pocket she always kept on her person and forced one of the little white pills under Sir Moffat's tongue. "Deep breaths," she urged and he complied.

Everyone was stunned to silence by what just happened. Not that Sir Moffat had an episode, but by the sight of the hundreds of colorful gems laying in the box.

A smile replaced the look of pain on Sir Moffat's face. Tina was busy trying to take his pulse, but he was pushing her hands away.

"Stop fretting, my dear. I'm too ornery to die just yet especially when I am this close to fame and fortune." He spoke just above a whisper. Color was slowly returning to his face.

"Oxygen?" Harlan asked Tina before he ran to get the med cart.

"No need, Mr. Ames, I think you've done enough right now." She was upset at how Harlan had handled the presentation of the treasure box. Especially since he knew that Sir Moffat had a bad heart and was on the verge of death.

Meanwhile no one in the cockpit knew what was happening in the lounge. Harlan had told them to hover the plane while he gave his explanation of what they were going to find on the ground.

"I didn't think..." Harlan was taken aback by Tina's remark.

"And that we can clearly see," she hissed back in anger.

"Calm down, Tina," Sir Moffat told her. "I'm better now and it was not totally his fault." He took a few breaths, and then continued. "He was going to tell me much earlier but I requested him not to so we could all be surprised at the same time. Silly I know, but we are a team. I hoped this would light the fire under all of us to do the best work we have ever done." The little speech seemed to have won almost everybody over.

Tina sat back into her lounge chair and folded her arms showing she was still angry but would keep quiet.

"We can finish this later if you want, Sir Moffat," Harlan stated as he handed the box of gems to Ti Saga. "I'll tell the pilots to land

the plane first and then we can begin again.”

“You can do that while my colleagues take in what you have just shown us.” Sir Moffat added a small nod of agreement.

Harlan was happy to duck out even if it was just for a few minutes. Majestically the aircraft did a one hundred and sixty degree turn around in mid air before landing about three hundred feet from the back wall of the box canyon. Taking a deep breath Harlan returned to the lounge followed by Zimby and Chris. Everyone was patiently waiting for his return as if nothing had happened. Sir Moffat had the stone box sitting on his lap with the biggest smile ever.

“Once more I apologize and won’t do something like that again.” Harlan looked at each member of the expedition before starting where he left off.

“I found out about all this history only after I came into possession of this box and that only happened because of what occurred when I was kidnapped by the criminal masterminds known as the Masters, or better know as the Emperor and Empress Shangri-La. The infamous rulers of the lunar slave colony.”

Harlan waited a moment to see if there was a reaction, but only a fleeing look of shock cross some of their faces.

“The Masters had an Earth base in the Cordillera Mountains in the Philippine’s. Because of my experiences with them on the Moon I became quite familiar with their way of thinking. Especially when it came to hiding things. Once their mountain base was no longer an active crime scene I paid it a visit and found a few things that were overlooked.”

He was glossing over what really happened since it had no bearing on this expedition except for the box and its contents.

“I found this box in a hidden wall safe; the only other thing with it was a piece of paper with the coordinates to this valley.”

Kent Clark held up his hand to ask a question and Harlan nodded his way.

“Why do you believe this box of gems comes from this valley? The box may have come from somewhere else and the gems put into it.” It was a realistic question all things considered.

“The best reason I can give is that I know some of the family background of the Masters and that they started their criminal activities in Kathmandu, of all places. They were just teenagers at the time, thirteen or fourteen, and showed up with an uncanny aptitude for martial arts and handling people. But most of all they

had the ability to buy the best crimes out there. They paid for their services, at first, with gems just like we have here.

“I was a spook for the military and worked in intelligence for quite a few years and after finding all this information my gut feeling is this is where they got their gems. The note with the coordinates was in the Emperor’s handwriting and the box came from this region. How the Masters came in possession of this information I don’t know. All I can tell you is that this mountain has some, if not all the answers. You’ll have a good chance of finding the legendary temple and its five tablets. Anything else is beyond what we can possibly imagine.”

He concluded with, “That’s it folks. It will be dark in a few hours so I suggest you all take a quick look around to familiarize yourself with the layout and make plans for an early start tomorrow.”

Harlan led them down to the lower side hatch—picking up heavy winter coats from a storage locker along the way—opened it and watched each of the expedition members descend into the cold, windy air and fading sunlight.

* * * * *

Donnell Bassett’s health was deteriorating. In truth, everything he had done to disguise his actual condition was window dressing and never came close to attacking or addressing his actual health issue. His major health crisis? Donnell Bassett had contacted a simple yet subversive *Yersinia Pestis* from a rat bite some six months earlier. The fact that he had consumed a great deal of alcohol that evening, thinning his blood and allowing him to bleed profusely, meant that only a small amount of the bacterium entered his blood system. But, it was enough.

His body fought to keep it from taking hold, but the more he overtaxed his immune system, the more he tired his body and mind, the worse it became until it finally blossomed into what had killed upwards of two-hundred million people during the worst outbreaks of the *Black Death!*

Now, he was the figurative rat and his very presence could spell doom for the entire colony if he did not receive treatment. So far his symptoms were limited with three of his fingers turning black from the gangrene the disease was bringing on.

He had figured that he might be sent back to Earth if it was discovered he had any disease and so he worked to get assigned, even if for only a day, to the main colony domes.

His efforts were assisted when he “won” the right to a twenty-hour R&R in the domes as a reward for his entire work team being days ahead of schedule.

He managed to get a pair of flesh-colored medical examination gloves from the bag of one of the medical assistants who came to check team members from time to time. She had left her bag opened and unattended just long enough for him to make a grab and stuff them into his back pocket.

They were a tight fit being made for hands smaller than his own, but that helped keep them tight on his hands. A little tan paint from one of the shops at the resort covered the dark skin enough that if he kept his hands behind him, nobody ought to notice.

While the other seventeen men immediately headed for the cafeteria to eat a hot meal, and then to see if they might locate an equal number of young females who might wish to hear about their work, Donnell headed along a route he had memorized from an electronic record he'd found on line. It took him around the perimeter hallways of the main dome and down a side corridor to his right before he was standing in front of a room marked HOSPITAL/DISPENSARY in English and OSPITAL in Tagalog.

Luckily for him there were windows in both the swinging doors leading inside. Nobody was currently sitting at the front desk so he let himself in hoping against hope there was no silent alarm announcing his entry. He stood silently for two minutes until his heart slowed down and he felt confident nobody knew he was there.

To his left were three doors that looked more like apartment doors than those for examination rooms. To his right, and against a half wall, was a cabinet with glass doors. Behind them were hundreds of bottles and boxes of what must be medications.

As he was opening the first door a voice came from behind him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the woman demanded.

Donnell spun and without thinking hit her in the face. It broke her jaw and tore her skin along with ripping open his right hand. He couldn’t tell what was his blood and what was hers, but he could see she was an old woman, possibly even a patient, who was just curious.

There was nothing to do so he reached inside the cabinet, found several vials of penicillin and some disposable syringes, and shove them in his pockets before dashing from the room.

Donnell made it back to the worksite later that day after having injected himself twice with large doses of the drug. He could not know that he had managed to stave off the worst of the disease and would even mostly recover in the coming week. His fingers were beyond repair and would need to be removed after he explained

they had been crushed by a piece of excavated rock inside the old mountain. Afraid of being sent home he had not told anyone about them until it was too late.

Also too late to do anything about was the old woman. The broken jaw and other injuries, combined with old age and a very hard life, conspired against her and she died that first evening. It was a good thing as her death from injury kept the Black Death from taking hold in her frail body and being spread around where it would have probably killed many more.

Even if they had known about the close call in the city, it would have been of no consolation to her five family members who were also Cordillera City residents. Their grief was nearly inconsolable.

Back at the construction site, Donnell took advantage of a three-day break while they awaited some replacement parts for one of the digging machines. It let him get slightly better and shake off the bacterium to the point where it went partially dormant again.

* * * * *

The Chinese government attempted one final ploy to turn world opinion toward their way of thinking about the lunar colony situation. In the United Nations they presented a video they said plainly showed the Filipino engineers at the lunar colony in what they termed, “rampant tampering to destroy our satellites and the good will of the Chinese peoples.” They completely ignored the fact that the satellites were still working perfectly, months after launch.

What the delegates all saw was the carefully-staged scene, obviously—to many—it had been shot on a movie sound stage, where overacting Chinese teenagers were engaged in hitting various pieces of electronic equipment with hammers and then shouting with joy as they broke something all the while glancing at the camera and seemingly listening to directions on what they should be doing next.

The other U.N delegates laughed and shouted down the Chinese embarrassing them so much they marched out to a cheering crowd and remained away for nearly a week.

The video they forgot and left behind was impounded and put up on a video sharing site on the Internet for the rest of the world to laugh at.

When the delegation from China returned it was with an entirely new Ambassador, and he was a very nervous man.

Chapter Eleven: The Caves

BY THE time the team came back inside it was nearly dark. But, their time outside had been well spent; two important things were discovered.

First, the mountain face had not come down on its own. It had been dynamited from a least three different points. That is what caused so wide an avalanche from so little height.

Second, the old well had likely never been used for water. That under the burnt out timbers they found what looked like a partially collapsed tunnel entrance that ran straight horizontally toward and possibly under the mountain. Tobey looked like he had been the one who'd climbed down into the old well and stomped through the black soot-covered debris. His streaked face showed the exertion but his general health seemed to be fine for the time being.

On the other hand, Tina and Kent had bruised hands and knees to show for all their scurrying up, down and around the rock fall they'd chosen to explore.

Harlan was extremely pleased that he did not need to use subterfuge in helping them find things out. They were more than willing to get down and dirty to do their jobs.

Dinner was full of excited conversations but everyone was exhausted so they passed on dessert had all headed for their cabins.

Holding a large mug of steaming black coffee in his right hand, Harlan stepped out of the aircraft at sunrise and was greeted with the sight of seeing everyone already hard at work. The heavy timber tripod Chris fashioned from some of the more sturdy timbers was set over the well and the old wood was being hauled up. Zimby was untying the remnants and piling them to the side.

"Morning, Zimby, who's in the well?" Harlan asked with a smile.

"Lassie... Timmy... old Mister Crabtree? Nope, Tobey? That's it, Tobey." Zimby laughed. "I just couldn't talk him out of it."

"Did you even try?" He could see that Zimby was enjoying this turn of events, so he walked over to where Sir Moffat and the scholar, Ti Saga, were standing. Moffat's manservant was with them holding a collapsible chair in case it was needed by his employer, and was so bundled up that you could only see his black eyes staring through all the scarves wrapped around his head, neck and flowing down over his shoulders. It made Harlan chuckle as it

was perfectly sunny and nearly fifty degrees.

“Sir Moffat, I see that your people are hard at work. Where are the others?”

“Your technician... uhhh...?” Moffat’s eyes crinkled up as he tried to remember the tech’s name.

“James Dickerson,” Harlan cut in with his full name.

“Right... Mr. Dickerson has kindly unloaded the ground penetrating radar system. He and young Chris are setting up the sound wave inducers and echo receivers to map out what’s under the avalanche. Your man says he can run the collected data through the 3-D computer that’s part of the Electronic Retroscope and give us a fairly good transparent picture of what’s under that mess.” He swung his right arm around to indicate the avalanche. “He thinks they can penetrate about thirty meters before it become too jumbled and junky. That last one is his word not mine.”

“Okay. It’s clear!” Tobey’s words came booming out of the well opening. The four men moved to the side of the well and looked down the brightly lit shaft. Tobey’s dirty face and white teeth looked back up at them.

“There’s definitely is a tunnel down here. The opening is kind of small at first but there’s evidence that it has been used some time in the recent past. Can’t tell how long ago. Maybe months but my guess is quite a number of years. I was able to crawl in a way and it opens up to a slightly larger small tunnel that seems to run straight under the avalanche and into the mountain. Sir Moffat, I don’t mean to disrespect you, but there’s no way you are going to fit unless we had one of those things car mechanics crawl under cars with, and even then we’d have to haul you along with a winch.”

“You’re not hurting my feeling, lad,” he replied with a laugh. “I’ll just have to hope the others find a better way in that I *can* use.”

“Come on up,” Harlan called down, “and we’ll suit you up nice and proper to go into the unknown.”

While this was going on Jim Dickerson was directing Tina, Kent and Chris—who asked to help out—on the placement of the transmitters and receivers. Each of the three combination units worked at different ultrasonic frequency. Because of the kind of rock slide involved, a great deal of the face was covered with loose rubble that readily slid underfoot making moving around tricky. But, once the units were properly anchored into solid rock they did not have to be moved again. The center placement was the hardest to achieve because it had the loosest stones in it.

Kent and Tina finally had to climb over the top of the slide and

make their way along the mountain face using whatever hand and foot crevices they could find until they reached the center. They drilled a hole into the mountain itself and fitted the probe into it. Kent drove an eight-inch steel pin one foot to the side and clipped a carabiner to it. They attached a repelling rope to the clip and used the rope to worked their way down the slide. They would use the rope later to get back up to retrieve the transmitter when they were done with the mapping.

It took the three of them most of the morning to set up everything and hook it all into the monitoring and recording equipment. By then they had all heard that a tunnel did go into the mountain from the well and it was going to be explored. That news provided the urge for them to work harder at what they were doing. They knew that the tunnel could be a dead end in itself and that finding a way through the slide might be the only other way inside.

Wasting no time, Dickerson sent out single sonic wave burst from each of the transmitters to get his base line readout of the surround rocks. After that he sent a series of overlapping sonic waves from each device in different combinations. The echoes were recorded, and after lunch Jim fed all the data into the Retroscope's computer. Several hours later he produced a graphic montage of what was under the avalanche. It proved to be well worth the time and effort.

An hour after Tobey climbed back out of the well he was rested and rehydrated and ready to return and explore the tunnel. This time Harlan and Zimby were going with him. Sir Moffat and Ti Saga sat in the warm comfort of the combined radio and surveillance recording and monitor room on level three near the tail end of the plane and watched the live video feed coming in from each of the helmet cams the men were wearing.

All three videos were being recording so the others could see it later. A motorized set of small but powerful LED lights that were in sync with the movements of the helmet-mounted video cameras were attached to a combination shoulder harness and small backpack. The pack also contained the batteries, radio/video transmitter and computer synchronization computer. They each had a handheld super bright halogen flashlight attached to one side of their utility belts if required. The other side had a pouch with three miniature electronic repeater units they would place so communication signals would not be lost in the potential labyrinth of tunnels and caves.

Tobey went down into the well first and dug more of the debris out of the collapsed tunnel. Even when he was done digging the three men had to crawl on hands and knees the first eight yards

before standing up. Harlan being last in line left one of his repeater units at the start of the tunnel. The LED lights made the tunnel as bright as day in front of them, and they had no trouble getting to the end.

Even with their backpacks on, the hole in the ceiling was large enough to accommodate the men. When Tobey finally stood up in the vaulted room and played his lights along the mostly empty wall niches his heart started to beat faster and his spine began to tingle. He could sense that they were on the right track. That a tremendous find was waiting before them.

Zimby and Harlan held back and let Tobey set the pace of the exploration since he was the trained archaeologist. Plus, they did not want to appear to be familiar with their surroundings. He inspected the wall niches and left alone what he did find. The handling of the few broken or disintegrating items that were still there would be done by the others only after they were photograph in place and their condition documented. The large wooden table and seats in the next room/cavern drew his attention quickly. On seeing the massive chair at the head of the table and the smaller stools around it he knew that this area had once been more than simply a work place.

He saw instantly that there was nothing on the table or around it. He slowly turned around in place moving his shoulder lights around the cave. Three tunnel openings were barely visible across the distance of the cave. He could tell that one lead toward the mountain face and the other two went in but at angles. For the first time he spoke to the other two men.

“Harlan, what you think? Do we continue to explore together or divide and conquer?”

A grin formed on Harlan’s face as he replied, “I don’t think there are any wild tigers or bears or vicious pumas to fear. As for hidden monks ready to jump us on the next turn in the tunnel, that is not *likely* to happen, so I think it’s safe for us to go separate ways.”

“Anyhow,” Zimby added with a serious look on his face, “we have Sir Moffat and Ti Saga watching over us. Isn’t that right, gentlemen?”

Two-way communication was possible with the plane but so far neither group had spoken to each other. This time Sir Moffat did comment.

“I agree that separation at this time will help speed things up though there is no reason to rush things. Safety should be our top priority, both for your three and anything you locate, so do what you deem is paramount but prudent. We will watch all of you from

here and help monitor your safety. Keep leaving those communication repeaters in your wake.”

By now Harlan and Zimby were standing shoulder to shoulder with Tobey and together they lit up the cave. The floor was smooth and if there were not a thick layer of dark dust on it, it would have revealed an intricate motif of clouds with hints of faces and animals. This would be noticed later on. As would Harlan and Maggie’s previous footprints, but those would be dismissed by Sir Moffat as coming from this expedition.

The lights lit up hundreds of crystals set into the high vaulted ceiling. Every major constellation of the hemisphere could be seen along with hundreds of lesser stars. This drew remarks from the men standing there. It was a wonder to behold.

“To think,” Zimby stated, “they could see all that outside and yet they took the time to recreate it down here. I wonder why?”

Tobey, who was closely examining one area replied, “Not certain about that, but astronomers will find this interesting. There seems to be one additional star in Cassiopeia. Look!”

It was true. At the top of her throne with the six normal stars sat one additional small star too close to be associated with any other constellation.

Not certain what to make of it all, Harlan and Tobey moved on a few yards.

The archways of the three tunnels, carved from the solid rock to look like large blocks of stone, supported the opening. The rest of the walls were smooth and showed hints of faded artwork under more black and gray dust. In fact the whole cave was covered with that combination.

It was then Zimby remembered that parts of the table were dust free and couldn’t think of a way to cover for that fact. The same thought must have come to Harlan for he took Tobey by the arm and drew him across the cave to the farthest tunnel while talking to him. This left Zimby alone except for the all-seeing camera on his head. He took care of that by scratching the back of his head while accidentally pulling out the video feed wire from the head gear to the power pack causing it to blank out.

When Zimby’s monitor went black at the surveillance room in the plane Sir Moffat contacted him and told him about it.

“I’ll check it out immediately,” he responded with concern.

“Hey, guys,” he called out across the cave, “I’ll be with you in a minute. I lost my video feed and need a minute to check it out.”

“Let us know if you can fix it.” Harlan replied, “We’ll set up repeaters at the tunnel entrances while you work that out.” He continued to lead Tobey to the farthest tunnel and went to work. “We’re taking the middle and right tunnels.”

“Okay!” Zimby took his head gear and shoulder pack off and pulled a cloth from the pack and wiped off the table and left the cloth so it could be seen by the camera when it was turned back on. He talked to Sir Moffat and talked through an imaginary equipment check so nothing odd would be noticed.

With a snap of the video feed line back in place the running light on top of the camera blinked on and Sir Moffat and Ti Saga had “eyes” once again. All they could see was the out of focus cloth on the table near the lens.

Zimby picked up the head gear, held it out at arms length and smiled into the lens.

“Is it working?” he asked innocently, knowing it was.

“Good to see you again, Mr. Cox,” Ti Saga reported back.

“Thanks. I’ll join the others and get back to work.”

By now Tobey and Harlan were setting up their last repeaters just inside the tunnel entrances that they were taking into the mountain.

“I’ll take this middle one,” volunteered Harlan as Zimby joined them. “You two find your own mischief. We can meet back at the table when we’re done, or no more than one hour.” Harlan watched as the two men walked off doing a Rock / Paper/ Scissors game to determine which tunnel they each would search.

“Sir Moffat, this should be a short journey if this one goes where I think it’s going.”

“I do agree with your assessment, Harlan. The tracking computer has you only about thirty meters inside the mountain itself, not counting the depth of the avalanche.” Sir Moffat actually chuckled for a moment before continuing. “Your Swift employers certainly supply you with the fanciest tracking equipment I ever have seen, I dare say.” Sir Moffat was talking about a location plotting computer that was rendering the three men’s movements via their communicate transmitter onto a very localized geological terrain map. Their routes were added as they moved forward. At the moment the computer was showing the three of them had separated and gone in different directions perhaps fifty degrees off from each other.

The computer was also storing a copy of the video data and

when the tracking was played back people would be able to see both the map position along with the appropriate video. This computer was used extensively at Tom's Moon and Mars bases to keep track of their many explorations on the hostile surfaces of both.

With a final deep breath Harlan stepped into the tunnel while wondering what he would find. Would it be an archaeological wonder or a total bust.

* * * * *

Tom checked over the figures. He made a “tsk” sound and shook his head. The numbers had been run through the computer five times and eleven simulations using slightly different variables had been run—twice each—with the same basic results.

What Saclolo Reyes wanted to do up on the Moon was never going to happen. Or worse, it would happen once and that would put and end to it!

Without some sort of track system whatever amount of shove the stolen repelatron technology could be set to give would either be far too little or far too deadly.

There seemed to be no “sweet spot” for it.

Anything safe for humans would see the pods going out about forty miles before tumbling into the surface. Anything powerful enough to get the pod into a high elliptical orbit with enough momentum to make it around for a catch-and-land maneuver back at the resort would kill everyone inside instantly.

So, with a great deal of disappointment he decided to go home for the evening and to call Saclolo and Magadia the next morning.

As he drove home he shook his head and wished Harlan were back from his expedition and up there to soften the blow and to make the lunar Directors see this wasn't the end of things.

Bashalli greeted him with a hug and kiss before noticing his face.

“Oh, dear, Tom. What is it?”

He explained about the lunar ride and his attempts to make it all work. She listened, even to the parts she already knew from her various trips up there and his previous discussions. When he finally ran down she gave him another hug placing her face against his chest. Remaining there she began to talk.

“If it were up to me I would tell Mr. Reyes that his plans are just not practical as he envisions them. Stress how many times you have tried to make it work and the numbers do not lie. They say it is not

possible to throw people around the Moon. Period. Then, tell him you will help them find a way to make something else work.” She released him and stepped back.

“But, what? The idea was great and I can’t think of anything to come close to it for thrills and even a little heart-pumping adrenaline rush. What could even come close to it?”

She thought about it while she prepared dinner and even until dessert before she brought it up again.

“How about the flying saucers?”

Tom looked curious a moment before asking, “In what way?”

“Well,” she said stalling for time. She had hoped just the mention would send his mind into gear to come up with some rabbit-out-of-the-hat idea. “I suppose what I mean is that the saucers have or can have the entire surrounding walls covered with monitors showing what is outside, Correct?”

He shrugged. “In the ones that do not have the flip-open rear end. The first half dozen we built have three-sixty viewing capabilities that—” He stopped and Bashalli grinned as she recognized the look on her husband’s face. It spoke of him suddenly thinking he might have neglected to think of some aspect, and now it had been brought to his attention, his thoughts raced ahead on the problem.

Two minutes later he focused on her and smiled.

“It might work, but it might not. Physically, yes, but from a standpoint of their budget, maybe not. The saucers are pretty expensive even though they seem relatively simple. One of them, even a compact version outfitted with, oh, let’s say twenty seats that all have excellent views of the monitors around them might run in the neighborhood of twelve million dollars. Their total budget is well under that from what Saclolo has told me. As in super low.” He shrugged.

“Okay,” she said slowly, “but do the operating costs and the ability to run many different routes, perhaps hovering above historic landing sites, not mean people might go on several trips out paying for each one?”

Tom leaned over and kissed his wife on the tip of her nose.

“That, Bash, is something I need to talk to our Lunar Directors about!”

Chapter Twelve: The Find; The Return

THIRTY meters, or just over ninety-eight feet. One-hundred twelve steps at a man's normal pace. It was not far to travel, and Harlan covered the distance in no time at all. The dust was unusually thick in this tunnel, and that was more proof that it led to the outside at one time. The dust must have been caused by the avalanche. But he knew that just the rocks falling by themselves would not have caused this much dust. An explosion was required and it would have been very close, even at the open end of this tunnel.

A solid stone slab blocked the end of the tunnel, but it did not close it completely off. There was a two foot gap between the right side and the wall of the tunnel. When Harlan came closer he could see rock debris just past the slab on both sides. It was too round, too perfect a fit for the tunnel to be natural. So the slab must be the back of something, and something big by the looks of it.

For the second time Harlan spoke up.

“Sir Moffat, as you can see there is definite evidence that the avalanche is on the other side of this slab. We just have to hope that it has not filled the whole area back there. If it has then everything might be lost. I just want to prepare you for the possibility. I'm concerned for your well being. Will your heart take that kind of disappointment?”

“Do not be concerned about me, Mr. Ames. I have my pills with me and don't forget I have Ti Saga and my manservant here also. I will be crushed but plan to survive whatever we discover!”

On hearing that, Harlan stepped around the slab. His shoulder lights filled the large space with light and he let out a sigh of relief. The entrance to the outside world was indeed blocked. The twenty-five foot oval shaped opening was covered by large boulders that did not tightly fit together and appeared to only intrude into the cave by about seven feet sparing pretty much everything. There were large gaps between many of the stones and that must have been what let in all the dust from the landslide. If they could be removed it might restore the old entrance. From past experience he knew that once the tons of smaller surface rocks were removed by hand, the larger ones could be hauled out by the equipment they had on the jet.

When he turned and played the lights back on the front of the slab in the tunnel he saw with great relief that it was the back of a large carving. The carving was heavily masked by dust, but Harlan could make out it was of a split person, half masculine, half feminine and both obviously naked. The words *Deva* and *Devi*

came to mind. Names of ancient deities in Hinduism along with the mini statues that were in the box of gems.

Below the carving was a row of five stone tablets. Harlan could not make out the markings that covered the stones but knew it was like the Sanskrit in the cover of the gem box. They rested on an altar of white marble and the altar was set on a raised platform three steps up from the floor. The rest of the cave was plain, but its finish was smooth to the touch. This made the carving and tablets the all important focal point for the pilgrims that came to worship before their gods.

“Mr. Ames, it looks like you were right after all.” Sir Moffat voice was shaky and full of emotions. “You have indeed filled the dying wishes of an old man. I thank you from the bottom of my rather dicey heart.”

“That can be said for me as well,” Ti Saga added with a heavy accent that was just about understandable. He, too, was beyond ecstatic. This was a major turning point in his life. A life of mostly desk duties and rechecking someone else’s work. This time he would be one of the first making the discoveries, not the last.

“Then, gentlemen, I think my job here is about done. I can leave knowing that what secrets this place holds will be ferreted out by you professionals and the world will be given another piece of long lost history.”

“I hope you don’t mind that your name will be added to the history of this place as the one who led the way to its restoration. We thank you, Mr. Ames. I thank you.”

Communication at this point stopped and Harlan was left with his own thoughts. Thoughts of his long dead wife and the life that she lived in this place, and the personal suffering she and her brother went through from their domineering and cruel father... so many things the world will never know thanks to a few very good friends.

Zimby walked down the tunnel he had chosen and noticed the farther he went the rougher the walls became. Fifteen yards in, the floor started to incline. After that he came to a right hand turn. Another dozen feet and it turned right again. It was fortunate his lights brightly illuminated everything in front of him. The tunnel floor suddenly became steep, uneven stairs going upwards. He’d run out of communication repeaters by now so he walked back thirty feet to where he had a signal and reported in to Sir Moffat before he continued on his own.

The tunnel switched back and forth, now steadily rising... then it

simply ended. Zimby's legs were aching by then and he was glad he had to stop. He was standing on a small flat surface, and the space was very cold. Much colder than the rest of the tunnel. It was then he noticed the hand grips carved into the stone wall in front of him and the barely noticeable crack going around a two-foot-square stone. The rock was meant to be taken out he decided. Thinking, *Here goes*, he took hold of the grips and pulled. It came out of the wall easily and proved to be lighter than it looked.

Cold fresh air hit his face and the bright sunny sky filled the hole. Peeking out he could see the entire box cannon and everything in it. He was standing at a secret watch tower possibly two hundred feet high in the mountain. His radio crackled and he heard Sir Moffat voice.

"Astonishing, just astonished. At every turn this place has a secret to give up. Mr. Cox, you have done well. Please come down and join the others. Before you go set that rock back into place if you don't mind. There will be no good in advertising where you are to others."

Zimby laughed as he picked the stone up and fitted it in place. *As if I had to be told that.*

Tobey didn't need to go far before openings started to appear in the walls on both sides. The rooms they led into were small, about eight by eight or ten feet each. They were all empty, but marks on the floor and walls told that they had been used for some time. After several of these he began to worry this was all he would find.

The tunnel ended at a closed wooden door. It looked formidable with its iron bands holding the thick-looking wood together. All space around the door had been expertly fitted with trimmed wood. There was barely a hint of space between wood and rock. For some reason they all gave the impression of being thick like railroad ties. Taking the iron ring on one side with both hands he pulled on it. It didn't move. He placed a foot on the door frame and gave another pull. This time it moved several inches with its hinges giving a loud squeal in protest. He pushed and pulled the door a little to try to loosen things up. The next full pull opened it enough to slip inside.

The room or vault, as it must have been, was huge and mostly empty. Remains of large crates, wooden barrels and clay jars were littered mostly against the side walls. Tobey was disappointed in what he could see. It appeared that what treasure that might have once been here was now long gone.

He started to circle around the room the best he could looking into whatever he came upon, just to make sure that they were empty. Three-quarters of the way around he was sure there was

nothing to be found when he noticed that the wall he was just passing moved. A shiver ran up his spine, but he stepped closer and could see that it was a gray curtain, exactly the same color as the wall around it, covering a small doorway into another room.

His heart started to pound in his chest.

In his haste he tore the curtain from the doorway. His lights revealed a small room, but this one was filled with unopened crates, barrels and jars. Had he found the lost treasure? He hoped so. Even if it was not, these containers could hold a wealth of knowledge of a past way of life. That was treasure enough for him.

He started to go back to the others. He didn't even try to open anything. The simple act of *finding* was enough for him.

"I'm on my way back," he radioed out.

"Oh, by all means, Tobey. Please do come back to us. We will definitely mount another mission to see what your treasure trove might hold," Sir Moffat replied.

Tobey's head came above the edge of the well to a round of cheers. He never knew that such a small group of people could make so much noise. It was repeated, even louder, when Harlan appeared. Zimby received his fair share of hoots and hollers.

It had been a fruitful day but the sun was heading over the mountain and an extra chill came to the air. Harlan suggested they go back to the *Sky Queen*. Nobody contradicted him.

Within the hour Dickerson, the engineer, had input the sonic wave data into the Retroscope and was in the process of adding the tracking computer movements of the three tunnel explorers. Things were moving along at a fast pace. It was now dark and the entire team was in the lounge. A buffet was set up by their cook and everyone was in a celebratory mood. Lots of laughing and eating was going on. The rest of the equipment was to be unloaded in the morning and they had to tackle how they were going to get the Retroscope into the caves. They had located a lot of faded artwork on the walls of the tunnels under all the dust, and the scope could bring it all to life. They were going to be busy for quite a long time.

Harlan had a plan in mind to move the rock fall and he was going to broach it later after supper. First he wanted to see the 3-D play back of the sonic wave mapping.

A beep sounded in James Dickerson's ear announcing to him the Retroscope had finish compiling all the data. He touched his collar communication pin and subvocalized a command to the computer to transmit the visual data to the lounge projector and start playback in sixty-seconds. He took the handheld projector controller out of his pocket and got everyone's attention just in

time for the start of the visual.

“Lady and gentlemen,” he announced with a smile and a nod at Tina who returned it with a wave of her hand.

“We have worked our various computers to the maximum today. I loaded all that information into the 3-D Electronic Retroscope mainframe computer, and to tell you the truth the results are beyond my expectations. I know this because I have peeked at the compiling data from time to time as it built up.” He stopped to take a breath and pushed the play button.

The face of the mountain started to appear in the air before the front wall of the lounge. As it became more solid the wall disappeared from sight.

“Now you see it,” he laughed, “and now you almost don’t.” And it was true. The mountain faded away and a black outline of what was on the surface took its place. The visual seemed to expand and rush forward toward them.

“We are now going into the mountain itself and as you can see it looks all the same.” Every once in a while a white blotch appeared and was gone seconds later.

“Those white blotches are actually voids in the rock slide. Since we are looking at the mountain as a whole it is hard to see any detail, But when I did this...”

The scene changed and the rocks grew larger and became individualized and the forward motion slowed way down.

“If we had the time,” Dickerson told his audience, “we could see and count every stone and pebble in the avalanche. I won’t bore you with that. I only add it to give you an idea of the astonishing amount of data we collected today. *This* is what you want to see.” The scene changed back to the outline visuals with part of the ground in front of the mountain included. They could see the outline of the house, barn and well. Then, a red line started to creep from the well. When that happened the overall visual shank in size and moved over to the left, top. Three other individual visuals joined in and they were now watching four different 3-D mock-ups.

“If this gets to be too complicated or confusing we can switch to singular display mode. All conversations that don’t overlap will be heard. If overlapped, they will appear in printed form below the appropriate visual.”

For the next two hours no one spoke as they watched in awe what Zimby, Tobey and Harlan had done and found. Everyone could see the tunnels coming into existence and solidified in the outline visual. If someone took the time and looked into one of the tunnels they would see exactly what was there. That is *if* one of

their cameras videoed it.

When the end of the video came they all started to request repeated viewings of various parts of it. Dickerson begged off on saying, "By tomorrow," he explained, "everyone will be able to call it up on your computers and replay any part of it in your cabins or here in the lounge if the Telejector is not being used by someone else."

That put quiet the requests so Harlan stood up and took the floor.

"Sir Moffat, Ti Saga, and company, I have news to tell you," he called out over the buzz of several conversations. Everyone stopped and turned their attention to him.

"As pleasurable as this has been and personally satisfying, my job here is done. I received an urgent message late this afternoon to come back home. They seem to need me back at Cordillera City on the Moon. So my stay with you has come to an end." Several of the team stated their disbelief or disappointment. "There is one more important thing I wish to let you know. I have been racking my brain to figure out how to get the equipment you need into the cave and I have come up with a solution that *could* work. It's a little out of the box, as the saying goes, but what isn't these days."

This became the main topic at supper for most of them, and none of them could think of a way to do it without backbreaking work and equipment they did not have.

"Tom Swift added two specialized repelatron units to our cargo. They were to be used to shore up a tunnel or cave if it did not seem safe. Now, if you put them inside the cave with the tablets and focus them on the rock fall they should hold it from collapsing in when you do the second part. The unit's batteries should last for a few minutes if turned to full power. Remember these units are designed to be hooked up to a external power source. The batteries are for emergency use only to give people time to evacuate if the main power is cut off." The Swift men had no trouble understanding this. As for the others they just nodded as if they did.

"Zimby, this is were you come in. Take the *Queen* up and position her above the mountain and hold her there. Jim you take three of the jet's repelatron lifters offline and re-direct them. Narrow the repelatron beams as thin as you can and power them up as high as you can. When they reach max buildup, fire the beams between the mountainside and the back of the avalanche. That should shove a majority of the stones from the mountain. The repelatrons in the cave should have enough power to push most of the boulders out of the cave. Assuming it works, things will be

pried away from the rock wall and shoved up and away leaving the cliff side mostly clear. That should free it open and you can then fly the sled and the equipment right in.”

He looked at everyone to see what they thought of the idea. The archaeologists just stared back at him in wide eye amazement. The Swift crew started to clap and call out their approval.

The *Sky Queen* hovered a few yards above ten thousand feet. At five in the morning the sun was becoming visible but it was low in the eastern sky. On the ground it was still dark. Harlan was giving the Cub one last external check. Zimby was helping him. A pair of extra fuel tanks had been attached to the wing tips giving the little jet triple her normal range.

“I hate to ask you, Harlan, but what happened to the professor we so nicely took from the mountain. I thought for sure that Colonel Bumba was going to find him.”

Harlan pulled him close and with a smile on his face took Zimby with him to the sled. There they climb on to the flatbed and walked to the atomic power generator. Taking out a power screwdriver he started to unbolt the faceplate that covered the reactor unit. It was plastered with all kinds of warnings to not to open because of radiation exposure.

“I knew that he would never look in here. Below the reactor there is a space meant to hold additional shielding. It is not needed in normal use. So I took out the foam and put the professor in there. The few extra rads he might get will not cause him any health problems so that I could still drop him in the ocean somewhere deep and lonely.”

The hatch was pulled off and Harlan pulled out the well-folded body bag. There was not much left to the skeleton after Harlan pounded it to pieces so it could fit.

“After all that work in getting him into that bag and carrying him out in one piece you did *that* to him?” Zimby asked, a little perturbed at what they went through.”

Harlan shrugged and gave him a small grin. “That, my friend, or jail. Which did you want?”

“Hand over the hammer, *my* friend, and I’ll take a few whacks for good measure.” Zimby proceeded to button up the hatch. When he was done he joined Harlan under the small jet and helped close up the belly hatch with the body bag inside the auto release compartment normally meant to carry a work bag of tools.

“Thanks for all the help on this Zimby. I owe Chris and you big

time.”

“All in a day’s work at Enterprises, Harlan. I guess I’ll see you when I see you. It looks like I’ll be grounded around these parts for a few months. Maybe Tom will want his toy back and someone else will come and relieve me with one of the heavy hauling Fat Boys that are being tested by our own Mr. Barclay. Can’t wait to get my hand on one of those babies.”

“I’ll see what I can do when I get back home. Now let me warm up the Kub and you can open the hanger door for me. Happy hunting, Zim.”

“Happy landing, Harlan. Come back from the Moon soon.” They clasped arms and nodded. Zimby walked to the hanger control room with his thumb held up in the air over his head.

The small jet shot out the rear of the *Queen* and headed almost due south. In less than two hours it was over the southern Asian coastline and turning for home. With no officially filed flight plan, Harlan had counted on the tomasite of the fuselage to avoid RADAR contact and any pursuing military jets. Noting had swept him and he was alone in the sky.

Bombs away... Harlan thought as he released the body bag from the under belly storage bay. “Hope Davy Jones doesn’t mind the company.” He circled around the plummeting bundle until it hit the ocean and sank out of view. Sitting back on the form-fitting seat, he checked his direction and headed for his first refueling stop at an Air Force base in Thailand on the way back to the United States.

* * * * *

Harlan, again, sat watching his children play with their Grandma Lola on the front lawn of their home in Shopton. For late September the weather was incredibly warm and a soft breeze was wafting across the tall grass he realized he needed to mow. That could come later. Right now was to be devoted to the three sitting in the middle of the lawn blowing dandelions apart and giggling as the little umbrella-shaped bits flew away.

He wanted them to feel the sun on their skin and the fresh air in their faces. It could be some time before they came back; the journey back to Cordillera City was set for the following day.

For better or for worse they were going back to the Moon for up to four months of administration duties. Or, more likely to finish the job of getting the local security forces completely trained and able to take on all aspects of their duties, including investigating crimes.

Not that there were many, but occasionally someone stole

something or an old family score was settled through the use of a fist or a broken bottle or club resulting in injuries.

There were occasional deaths but nearly all in recent months had been from illness or age. It was unfortunate that the Masters had stolen complete villages including the too young and far too old. Most of the young could be kept safe as long as parents and older brothers and sisters worked hard. But, the old people had been subjected to the same rigors as others and not fared very well. A population with an average age of 42 had now dropped to an average of 37 with fewer and fewer citizens over the age of 70.

It was odd. Medically the lower gravity ought to prolong people's bodies and their lives, but it was not working out like that.

Doc Simpson, who had lived in the colony for a year, had once worked with a statistician and came to the conclusion that in about three years—as lower birth rates kept the infant population from skewing the overall figures—the average age would be just 54 and would remain stable at that level unless an accident or disease changed things.

Possibly it was due to the hard lives the people had lived even before they were taken from their homes and villages in the Philippines. Also possible was that the people of that nation generally lived about ten years shorter lives than most of the industrialized world.

Chapter Thirteen: Backtrack on The Track

TOM SAT at his desk in the underground office. No message regarding anything untoward happening on the Moon had come in so he was ignorant of what Harlan would soon be facing. On the screen in front of him was the basic design for what Bud was calling the “*Saclolo’s Catch and Release Lunar Fishing Pole Fun and Adventure Ride.*”

“That’s too long even for one of your pun names, flyboy.”

“Okay. How about *The Whips?*”

“Explain, please,” Tom requested.

“Well, they are like those Roller Derby ladies. The ones who grab onto the skater trying to score and they whip them around and past everyone.”

“Hmmm. You do realize that every so often those skaters end up flailing around and falling on their rumps or tumbling over the railing in the curves? We can’t have that happen up on the Moon. Sorry, but that’s also a no go.”

Bud went away to try to think about it, but he already had another name in mind. He knew it didn’t do to give Tom too many choices at one time. So, he would sit on his *LunarLoop* idea for a while longer.

Tom’s design that had originally called for a fairly large number of stations sitting on the surface had already been reduced and those stations were to be mostly buried so the illusion of free travel would not be diminished. But now he had a notion that even this was not going to be the final solution.

Saclolo had inquired many weeks earlier about placing several satellites in low orbits that would grab hold of and carry the ride capsules around with them.

Tom had to disappoint him when his calculations showed that the mass necessary so the fully loaded capsule didn’t yank a satellite from orbit would need to be along the lines of fifty tons.

Even at that, each satellite would most likely need to be repositioned about once every three days and that meant they needed to be fully powered and perhaps manned.

That was not going to be the solution, either.

He toyed with the idea of going back to having a track. Even it that meant a track that defined the course but that used hundreds of small repelatrons to hold the “car” high overhead. With a sigh he worked out how many repelatrons would be needed and how far down into the lunar surface they would need to be anchored to

withstand the pressures, the torque that would be stressing them, and how much power each would require.

* * * * *

This time with Grandma Lola and the twins going back to the Moon with him, Harlan could not afford to be sick. He made up his mind and the night before lift-off he went to see a close friend and colleague of Doc Simpson. The man used hypnotism as part of his therapeutic treatment of his patients. Harlan truly believed it could never work on him, that he was too strong minded and stubborn. However, he had to try something!

An hour after he entered, he walked out of the man's private home office still not certain of what actually happened. He felt no different, but the psychologist told him, "Wait and see."

Harlan did his usual ritual to prepared for the space flight. Nothing to eat by mid-day the day before. Only water to drink after that and absolutely no coffee or other caffeine. Still, he was always sick. He refused to take the sleeping pills Doc Simpson prescribed, generally stating, "What if something goes wrong with the lift-off? How would I ever get out?"

He was not in control in any way during space flight, and that worried him. He had to be ready, and so sick was acceptable over having no control at all.

Doc thought he was being silly. Damon and Tom thought he was being silly, and Bud said he was thinking, "too doomsday."

Even Lola thought he was being silly.

He shifted nervously in his reclined seat, teeth clenched and eyes squeezed shut. As the pilot, Art Wiltessa, announced the thirty-second countdown, he risked a look over at the two special pods his twins lay in. They were swaddled so their arms and legs could not flail around and get damaged. He smiled and looked on their other side at Lola.

She was sitting there, knitting something, listening to some sort of rock and roll music he could barely hear coming from her earpieces.

"Three... two... one... and here we go!"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly as the pressure built up over his body. He concentrated, as he always did, on steady breathing. In. Out. In. Out.

Five minutes into the flight he realized that he was not sick. Not the slightest. Two hours later he was having a grand time with the twins in free-fall as they waited for the right orbital position to accelerate into lunar trajectory. For the first time in his life he enjoyed space and its unique opportunities. This was probably the

last time he was going to be using a Swift cargo rocket to get to the Moon or back to Earth. He wondered what the saucers Tom was building for the lunar city would be like. Artificial Gravity for one thing!

Jack Aturian, the manager of the Swift Construction Company, was doing the final series of tests on these new flying saucer-shaped space ships especially designed for the lunar resort. The six repelatron powered ships could make the whole trip in less than four hours. Because of the newness of the design the ships were currently only doing one test round trip a day. The only exception to this flight plan was to come on the opening day of the resort. Then, there would be two flights each two hours to bring in the first two hundred paying customers. It was decided to be the best way to start so the place would not look and be empty for days on end. By the end of the first week a steady flow of vacationers would be going back-and-forth with no noticeable loss of occupancy. It would also be a manageable number of guests for the opening week giving everyone a chance to get into the swing of things.

The Swift rocket landed at the recently completed spaceport, and the few passengers were able to disembark in a shirtsleeve environment through the cargo hatch. Doc Simpson, after just a month back at Enterprises, had come up a few days before Harlan and the twins. When Harlan approached him with firm steps and color on his face he knew at last that something had worked. He just didn't know what it was.

Lola fussed over the twins until they were settled into one of the hospital's VIP suites in the care of another woman she was very good friends with. She went off to see her son, Saclolo, and his lovely wife, Magadia. She announced to Harlan she would stay with her old friends in the residential domes, and remain there overnight, and catch up with the goings on of her friends and the most important thing of all, local gossip.

As soon as she was gone Doc had Kambal sitting on his lap. The baby boy wasted no time in reaching up to touch Doc's face and the newly grown beard. He had never seen one before and it intrigued him. When his finger felt the soft hair he pulled it for all his worth.

"Ouch, you little rascal. Don't pull your Uncle Doc's beard. It won't come off."

Kambal didn't know what to do. The voice of the man holding him sounded angry, but he didn't act it. That confused the boy and his face screwed up as if he was about to cry. Doc knew what was coming, so he lifted him high in the air and brought him back down onto his knees. He did a few times and Kambal put on a happy face.

"I'm glad to see his vision is still good," Doc commented as he moved the boy around and the child's eyes followed him. "That will

be a plus for him. Now hand over little Kaloob so I can get a good look at her.”

The exchange was made and Doc, under the pretense of playing, examined the girl.

“Just what I expected, Harlan. I was hoping that her condition was the same, or possibly better, than it looked when you left here to go back to Earth, and nothing has changed for the worse. And, that is good news.” Kaloob was a true albinoid with no pigments whatsoever to color her eyes, skin and hair. At least both the babies did have hair. Hers was white as can be and his a very light brown, both somewhat thin and wispy all around. They did not share the alopecia hair disorder their mother and uncle had.

“What is this about Doc. Before we came up you said it was ‘now or never.’ What does that mean?”

“It means, Harlan, that Uncle Doc is going to try to free them from this crippling gene defect. Kambal has a very good chance of a total recovery. Kaloob will at least get some color pigments in her skin and possibly some in her eyes. That will keep her from going blind as she gets older and give her some protection from the Sun. I can’t promise more than that at this time.”

“Greg, if this is possible it’s wonderful. It’s a new lease on life, especially for Kaloob. For my girl not to steadily lose her sight is a going to be a possible miracle in itself.”

“I thought you might feel that way. So beginning about a month after the resort opens they are going to start a one of a kind treatment. We must administer it up here on the Moon where the U.S. or world health codes are still not enforced because we are a free city/country/sovereignty with no established UN affiliations. And, until they are through the entire thing, we just won’t discuss it anywhere someone else might overhear us. I think that also goes for Lola, even though I know you trust her.”

“I’m not absolutely certain I am liking the sound of this.” Harlan was tensing up and Kaloob’s stopped smiling feeling the difference in her father. “Lola loves these kids and wouldn’t do anything to hurt them.”

“Harlan, no amount of love can prevent the women of this city from their gossip. I’ve heard some of the most disgusting, private and even downright nasty gossip going on between these women. It becomes almost a mania to outdo the others with what you say. ‘Well, my husband had blood in his pee last night,’ ‘Oh, yes? Well my cousin’s daughter wet the bed last night as she’s twenty-three!’ And, the list goes on and on.”

Harlan had to laugh. He knew the good doctor was correct and had put it all in perspective.

“Fine, Greg, I do trust you. It’s that they mean so much to me. They are all I have left of Maggie.”

“That is why we need to do this.” For the next hour he described the process and what would be good signs and what might not be so good. Greg wanted his friend to understand the risks as well as the benefits.

“I needed to see them and check them in lunar gravity but I will also want to examine them back at Enterprises a couple weeks before we come back and do the procedures. Just to be sure their circulatory systems are working at full capacity in both locations.”

In the end, all Harlan could ask was, “Are you sure this will work? Have you tested it on anyone?”

“That’s the hard part, Harlan. We have no one with their gene defect to test anything on. So I did what I could. After a few lab mice tests where I was able to get some results in skin pigment but not their eyes, I turned to a human experiment. I took fluid from several of the births we had and neutralized it the best I could. Then I grew some of my own pigment genes and added them to the virus.”

“And...” Harlan was sure he knew where this was going, but had to ask.

“Then, and late at night after a lot of soul searching, I injected myself. That, by the way, was eleven weeks ago, before I went back to Enterprises.”

“I don’t see any difference in your skin color, Greg.” Harlan was looking at his hands and face.

“The result is why I now have a beard on my face. As I didn’t have my own embryonic fluid, the treatment was a little off the mark. It caused a small reaction I didn’t count on. I now have a small bushy tail sticking out of my coccyx.”

Harlan’s eyes went wide and he was about to ask to see it when Greg laughed. “Actually, it is a little something that happened to part of my face.”

Harlan look his face over and even pushed the beard around and but couldn’t see anything different.

“You won’t see it now, but if I blush, which I still do on occasions such as when I hear some of the ladies’ gossip, my lower cheeks now turn purple. A beautiful but unnatural eggplant purple.”

Harlan didn’t know if Greg was pulling his leg again or not. He couldn’t see any purple of any shade.

“Really?”

“God’s honest truth this time.”

“Can you get over that?”

“I’m sure I can, but for now I’m too busy and it’s a good reminder that medicine and I have our limits.”

“You’re a strange man, Greg, but I’m still glad to have you for a friend. Will your treatments add color to their eyes as well? I mean, given it didn’t do anything in the mice.”

“No, the initial treatment won’t. The eyes have to be treated differently. It’s a little more complex. We are going to do this one step at a time.”

“So, I guess we all wait. If we’ve gone back down I’ll have them up here in a flash as soon as you tell us you are ready.”

By now the steady talking had put both children to sleep. The men laid them down in Lola’s room. Doc had other things to do, so he left after setting up a time for him and Harlan to have dinner.

Harlan had a lot of new information to think about. A quick call to Lola’s behind-the-ear phone, that all the Cordilleran’s now used, had her back to the apartment in ten minutes.

“Sorry to take you away from your gossip, Lola,” he said with a smile.

She pushed him playfully in the chest and chuckled. “It wasn’t much of anything today. I won hands down. Didn’t even have to bring out the big guns! So, you go do what you need to do. I’ll be here the rest of the day and tonight.”

Harlan was free to report to Cordillera Security and start his own investigations into the old man’s murder.

* * * * *

Tom was looking over some sketches he’d made the day before showing six possible routes for the toss-and-grab lunar ride. He was coming back to the opinion it had to be on a track for rider safety and consistency of the experience. However, there were drawbacks. Each time he picked a sketch up and considered the amount of construction necessary to erect a track, most routes ending up over a hundred miles in length, he would quickly put it down shaking his head.

Obviously there had to be a better way and one that would not take years or bankrupt the lunar city.

Bud dropped by part way through his review and suggested something the inventor had not considered.

“How about extruding the track like you did for the bullet train across the U.S. and the underwater version across the Atlantic? I can’t believe the airless void of space would be any more difficult

than two miles under the ocean! Maybe make it a monorail, fairly narrow and low profile, then block the riders from seeing it using some sort of Tom Swift image magic.”

After the pilot left, Tom sat in contemplation. Would that be possible? The foam product was self-expanding into the appropriate molds and could be laid at a rate of several miles a day. All it needed to cure was ultraviolet light, and the airless Moon could provide that in heaps. With a small chuckle he realized it might cure the track too quickly and that he could require a slight delaying additive to give the track-laying equipment a few seconds to move on so things didn't harden right up to the exit point of the extrusion dies.

The following hour was spent completing an inventory of the other items needed for such an endeavor. Obviously, anchors would be needed for attaching the rail—he began liking the flyer's idea of this as a monorail-type project—to the surface securely enough to keep the track from moving even when a pod passed at high speeds in a curve. His computations said these would be necessary each sixty-three feet, but he marked them down for sixty-foot intervals for added stability.

He cringed a little when he hit the equal key and saw the track for the shortest run of one-hundred miles needed eight thousand, eight hundred anchors!

When he went back to the shared office from the lab down the hall, he brought the subject up with his father.

“So,” Damon said stroking his chin, “what do those anchors cost us?”

“About three-hundred ninety dollars apiece,” Tom replied.

“Ah, so multiplied by your total number and I think, if my tired old brain is doing math still, we're speaking of a raw cost in the neighborhood of three-point-four million dollars, give or take a few hundred thousand?”

Sheepishly, Tom nodded.

“Okay, so what about the track costs?”

“A single rail system with stabilization outriggers, and I believe they will be necessary every thirty feet in the straightaways and each ten feet in the curves, would entail a raw materials cost of nearly six-point-three million dollars. Not including the extrusion equipment at about another million.”

Damon Swift shook his head. “Those are just our costs. You do understand we can't just keep giving stuff away, so even if we plan on a ten percent contingency and a fifteen percent markup, that means Saclolo and the colonists up there are in for a bill of around

twelve and three quarter million dollars.” He looked at Tom who nodded, sadly. “I’m thinking it is time to look at another way.”

“But,” the younger inventor began, “we’ve gone through all the pitfalls of their toss it out and hope to catch it coming back around approach. I did a little digging and found that while they probably can get some insurance for the colony, they could never get coverage for that sort of ride. Most say they could cover a track-based ride, but I know it would never be as exciting as soaring above the surface, which is what they really want.” He looked sad.

“Do we know what they do have by way of funding for this?”

Tom shook his head, but stated, “I do know Saclolo wants to spend about a million on the three or four ride pods but hoped to make due with the old rail gun launcher, tamed down of course, and the recovered Attractatron and the two salvageable repelatrions from the mule that crashed up there. So, at a guess I’d say he hopes to get by without any other costs than the pods.”

“Do you believe we ought to see what Harlan thinks our Moon friends may do when the realities of the costliness of their dreams might mean in actuality?”

Tom shook his head. “Not necessary. I’d spoken with Harlan before he went back up and he said he thinks Saclolo will be emotionally crushed and the entire project may possible suffer from him then losing interest.”

“Sort of a ‘my way or no way’ situation?”

“No, Dad, I think it is more of such a high emotional investment in his dreams that his spirit could be crushed if this ride falls through. They are all very proud people up there. I’d really like to find a way to make this work for them.”

When Tom went back to his desk he reviewed a number of sketches and some notes he had in the computer. Before heading home for the evening he made a few more pages of notes and came to a conclusion that he was going to need some help in all this. He might understand the technical side of things, but there was a lot more to the ride that mechanical, electronic and electrical things.

Chapter Fourteen: Another One Goes Home

THE TRUTH about the most recent Western occupants of the Tibetan site came perilously close to being revealed when Tobey found a small leather bound notebook that had dropped at one time under the large table in the first cavern.

Before he had the chance to open it and see that the very first page contained Professor St. Phillips' name and the date he began using it Zimby stepped out from one of the back tunnels. On seeing the notebook and realizing what it might contain, he called out, "Oh, hey, Tobey. Thanks for finding that."

Tobey already had his right thumb inside the cover and had been about to carefully flip it open, but he stopped.

"Oh. This yours?" When Zimby said it looked like one he had misplaced a day earlier, the man held it out to him. "Never did like anyone looking at my notes so I'll honor yours. Looked a bit on the old and ragged side. Had it long?"

Zimby could see he had an honest curiosity about the book that could be just dirty or might be thirty or more years old.

"I got that as a sophomore in high school to take down name of girls I wanted to date. I even once had pictures I'd taken with my cell phone glued next to their names. By the time I filled the thing I was in college and was about to toss it when a friend said she could refill the thing with fresh pages and keep the cover. It was pretty expensive what with being leather and all, so I let her give it a try. I can barely tell the difference. Thanks, by the way."

He tucked the notebook into his backpack and headed for the rear wall again. Stepping into the left-most tunnel and getting into the deep shadows, he leaned his back against the wall and let out a sigh. *That*, he thought, *was close and could have queered Harlan's whole mission.* Zimby wondered if he ought to let the man know what had happened, or to just let that particular sleeping dog lie.

He opted to keep it to himself.

Fortunately Tobey never found the incident important enough to mention to anyone else so the matter was done and over.

That night, as the others finished their meals, Sir Randolf excused himself and got up. "Not feeling particularly top shelf tonight," he told them all. "I think I'll take a bit of medicine and get a good night's kip."

Tina looked nervously at his departing form and got up. "I'd better see what is going on. His blood pressure was all over the map

today and he's already had three of his little pills." She looked at Zimby and shrugged with an apologetic look on her face. "Back soon," she mouthed.

Kent Clark snorted and looked at Tobey. "Liquid medicine or pill, do you think?"

"Shut up, Clark. The man is both a legend and a pain, but he is also very ill. I for one will not begrudge him any last pleasures by way of the grape or grain." Tobey got up and headed for his own cabin.

Kent looked at Zimby, Chris and Eliud, who had remained behind rather than attending to Sir Randolph. "Guess I make a bollux of that comment. So, it is off to bed for me before I stick the other foot in and an early start in the tablets room. Night."

The servant sat down and sighed, speaking for the first time in about four days. "I wish Sir Randolph had not come on this expedition," he said in an Oxford English accent. "His condition is deteriorating and there is little Tina and her bag of pills can do for him. Last evening he confided in me—and I beg this remain out in this room and between we gentlemen—he believes he has a matter of only a few days. A week at most. Please do not repeat that and also please see what all can be recovered and preserved so he might pass in the comfortable knowledge that he succeeded. I beg you make haste and offer my manual labors to assist."

"Eliud? You seem to be a well-educated man. Too much so to be a mere servant. Is there a story there?"

The black man sighed. "Even in a slightly enlightened nation like England the Black man is not thought to be the equal. I have a doctorate in Mesopotamian Art and History and yet could not secure employment at any institution. I have no family and little material needs, but I do crave being part of expeditions such as this. You will have noticed that he never speaks down to me. I have a suspicion he knows of my education but no words have passed between us on the subject in over twenty years. And so," he stood, "with that I shall retire but will say that if I never see another sunrise I shall go happily in the knowledge that I have witnessed more and more important history than just about any man or woman in the entire world. Good evening, gents."

Zimby looked at Chris who was smiling.

"Did you see that coming," the older pilot asked.

Chris nodded. "Nobody else seems like they want to talk to him, but Walter, that's his given name by the way, and I have had many conversations these past two weeks. He is a most interesting man once you get him to open up. Good night, Zimby."

Zimby nodded then smiled as Chris passed Tina on her way back out.

“He’s just exhausted. Mentally more than physically. But enough about him.” She gave him an encouraging smile as she sat on the soft facing him. “I want to know more about the man I leveled way back before I discovered I like him very, very much!”

* * * * *

The body of the murdered old man, Bayani Perez, had been kept in cold storage during the investigation by the Cordilleran security team, but Harlan wanted to look into things for himself.

“Bayani means... what? Brave?” he asked Magadia who had volunteered to help him.

“It means, or meant—” there was a small catch in her voice, “—hero. But, he was more than that, as you know.”

Harlan did know and vowed to get to the bottom of what happened to this fine man. With the restart of the new term at Doc’s medical university he knew where he might enlist a lot of assistance.

Doc heartily agreed and suggested Harlan teach a full student body class on elementary forensic investigation.

“It’ll ring true with about half of them and shock the others into looking beyond tongue depressors and syringes,” he stated.

While he was unsure if it would be proper to bring the actual body with him, Magadia assured him that Mr. Perez was not a religious man and that after the investigation he would be returned to the Philippines for burial along side his late wife.

After introducing himself the following afternoon, he launched into why he was addressing everyone, teaching staff included.

“You will have heard that a few weeks ago one of the colonist was found, presumably murdered. His name, and I feel it is important you never forget a patient or even a cadaver has or had names and are real people, was Bayani Perez. He was the oldest of the citizens here and was sort of known as the Potato Whisperer. He had an uncanny sense of smell and could tell within moments the exact best picking time for just about any in-ground vegetable.”

He went on to describe the man’s final hours as best anyone could piece together from his routine.

Harlan also launched into how forensics could help, and not just the type as shown—inexpertly—on police television programs, but from medical professionals such as themselves.

“Some of you possibly watch those shows and their representation of a physician or coroner or even medical forensics experts and wonder who lets that stuff on the air. I know I do, and

Doctor Simpson, the head of this school, agrees with me. Oversimplified or vastly overstated conclusions based on cursory looks at the outside of a dead body. Proclamations of ‘I know how this man died,’ while still in the field without a full body exam.

“In the case of Mr. Perez we have a body with a badly broken neck and signs that he died shortly after whatever it was, hit him one inch below his left ear. Question?”

A woman in her thirties stood. “Inspector Ames? I was wondering what the lividity told.” She sat back down.

Harlan looked at her and then at the class. “Who here knows the sixteen stages of lividity and what each represent by way of timing?” He waited. “Nobody? Okay, I happen to know them so without a side trip down that path, let me say Mr. Perez’s neck showed signs of stage two lividity meaning the impact point was visible and only very slight bruising was beginning. Impact was a surface red mark and bruising was starting about six millimeters below the skin surface. That means he died within how long of the hit?”

A young man in the last row stood. “Sixty to seventy seconds?”

Harlan nodded, but asked, “Knowledge or guess?”

“A little of both. I saw something in an old British murder mystery where the mortician found the clue to a gentleman’s death the police missed. He mentioned moderately deep bruising in the early stages as the man died.”

“Good for you for paying attention. So, I shall leave it for your instructors—” and he glanced at the faculty who were taking notes. “—to give you everything else. It isn’t space medicine as such, and it possibly is absolutely wrong in this lessened gravity. I am hoping some of you can help me figure that out. It could be, and I hope to hell not, that he didn’t die quickly, and he suffered.”

One instructor raised his hand. “Perhaps we can offer extra credits to someone or a small team who can give us all a better idea of how lunar gravity affects injury lividity leading to death. That certainly falls into the category of Space Medicine.”

He nodded then looked to the side of the lecture area and a door opened letting Magadia wheel in a covered body.

“Yes, this is our victim. I would like you to come down in groups of ten, spend two or three minutes at most examining him, and then let the next group in. After we finish that he needs to go back into the refrigerator. Please come down by rows, and by the way... his name translated into ‘hero.’ Please treat him accordingly.”

By the time his two-hour class was finished, Harlan had gathered written opinions from everyone, teachers included. Before

he released them he scanned through the response cards.

Most agreed it had been a violent hit to the neck, likely with the edge of a hand rather than with a heavy object, and the man had perished in under a minute. One doctor's card said she believed he had died almost instantly. He pocketed five cards that varied from most others and set the others on the lectern.

"I want to thank you all. I will be in touch with some of you over the next several days and hope you can make yourselves available."

* * * * *

Magadia's and Harlan's ear phones went off at the same time and concurrent with the lights going out before emergency lights could come back on, and after Doc had left them and Lola having coffee in the Directors' office about fifteen minutes earlier to attend to an emergency appendectomy.

For Harlan it was to let him know that it was not a security breach. There had been a transformer explosion at the base of the space tower, and rescue crews and medical personal were responding. He was needed ASAP outside, however.

For Magadia it was to help unlock and open the auto-close emergency doors so people could move about the domes they were stuck in. The double tier interconnecting dome corridors stayed closed and off limit so repair crews would not be hindered by people getting in the way.

Doc, currently making an incision, had one of the nurses poke her finger in his ear and was told that medical personal were reporting in to the outside ambulance depot and would be attending to the an unknown number of hurt men caught in an external explosion. When he said he was wrist deep inside a young woman's gut he was told things were covered and that at the moment he was not needed and could stay with his patient until power was restored to the domes.

Already an announcement of why the power had failed was being broadcast throughout the domes over the emergency public address system that had its own limited power backup.

Harlan, who stopped by the infirmary to see if Doc needed his help knocked on the operating cubicle's glass wall to get Doc's attention. He either could not stop or was afraid to stop with the procedure. He was soon pulling the needle out of the patient's IV port and putting the syringe down.

Doc turned and came to the window, and in sign language said for the time being he was trapped inside by the power outage. He could not open the door and break the air pressure seal. "Just enough power for my equipment," he signed. Harlan nodded his understanding and left a moment later.

He knew that the good doctor would not have left the operating table unless there was a drastic need. This power outage did not fall into that category even though some people believed they needed him to respond immediately. The fact he had not been called out was a good sign, or so Harlan hoped.

As he walked back down the corridor he bumped into Lola.

Lola could tell by the look on his face that he was needed elsewhere. She knew what she had to say.

“Go, my son, the city needs you. I am going to the apartment and will watch over the twins.” Harlan smiled and turned from her but before he could walk away she asked, “Is Doctor Simpson staying?”

“Yes,” was his simple answer.

“Then go and do what you have to. I’ll stay, my son.” He touched her arm as he fell in step with Magadia who had just rounded the nearest intersection in a hurry.

Harlan had his master override card out before they reached the first locked door in the dome. Magadia had hers out also. This door gave access to the centralized elevator system for people and supplies. Specific destination elevators let out to the various tunnels and domes.

“Harlan, I’m going to the dome’s maintenance and control center. This dome is supposed to be on its own power feed from the Helium 3 reactors. It should not be affected with the other domes. I need to find out why it was?”

“I’m taking off. Let me know what you find out. I need to get to the space tower and see what caused this. By the time I get there Saclolo should have it under control.”

They went their separate ways... Magadia to the lowest level of the dome and Harlan to the beltway going to the manufacturing dome’s hub. From there he made his way up to the top level of that dome that rose above the lunar surface. That level of the dome was divided into several independent and heavily sealed sections so there could not be a total blow-out of the top level.

He grabbed a spacesuit and then took the last remaining *Straddler*. The repelatron lunar cycle was fairly beat up but still operational. It had hauled a succession of three-man construction crews to and from the resort mountain continuously for over a year. It was in the shop for a complete tear down and rebuild. The shop supervisor told Harlan, “Not to worry; the extra five miles won’t kill it. I hope.” He laughed as he rapped Harlan’s space helmet and twirled his finger in the air and pointed toward the airlock to let him know that they were ready to pass him through the inner and outer bay doors.

Harlan had no trouble finding the direction he needed to fly. Even in the semi-darkness of that part of the Moon he could not help but see the twenty-mile space tower even though its many blinking red lights were not working. With no atmosphere to blur things, everything stood out in sharp contrast. The blaze of work lights at the base of the tower where the accident must have occurred was like looking into the sun on Earth. Harlan's faceplate darkened when he looked directly at them. He could see over a dozen suited men, work trucks, a flat bed with crane and two, ten wheel, semi-tractor trailer size ambulances.

Medical ambulances on the Moon had to carry so much extra equipment it was impossible for them to be anything but big. The accordion pullout airlock that came out the trailer's back doors were what helped make the vehicles that size and not larger by ten to twelve feet. The airlock's deployment meant that someone in the spacesuits was hurt badly enough they had to be carried in, and that took a two man team. If they could walk then the two man side airlock would be used. A non-walking accident usually was life threatening and involved suit decompression of some type.

The power station dome recently built at the base of the tower was a shambles. It was never meant to contain an explosion, but to protect the transformers, the electrical rectifiers and electronics from micro meteorites and the frigid lunar temperatures.

Harlan headed there switching his suit radio to the emergency frequency the rescue crew was using and reported he was about to land.

"Ames, glad you made it out, but you are not needed here. Report to the ambulances instead." Harlan could not recognize the voice or tell which man had respond to his arrival. He turned and landed the *Straddler* where he was instructed to go.

"Harlan," a suited man waved to him as he stepped out of the side airlock of the first ambulance. "In here. Doctor Malcom is waiting inside for you."

"What the hell?" Harlan mumbled to himself as he loped over to the airlock forgetting that his radio was live.

"Sorry," the man replied, "once inside you'll see why."

Harlan had his helmet off by the time the inner airlock door opened and was working on taking off his gloves. Doctor Malcom was waiting for him.

"It's Saclolo Reyes; he was trapped under the heavy door of the building when it exploded up and out. It hit him in the right leg. The damage is fairly bad, but he'll live. It is the other two men who were inside who did not."

"Other two. My God. How many were out there?" Harlan was

horrified at hearing this.

“On the ground, only those three.”

“On the ground?” He knew there had to be more by that.

“Two men were up in the top of the tower and were electrocuted. Their suits saved them, but the power surge fried their suits and everything went dead inside. Rescue got to them just as they were running out of breathable air. They’re fine and in the other ambulance.” They had not moved from the airlock while this talk took place.

A door swung out and Saclolo stepped gingerly into the corridor, supported by a leg brace and a crutch. “Hello, Harlan, he said. “I guess I won’t be going dancing with Magadia tonight.”

His sad smile told Harlan he was hiding a hurt much greater than the one in his own leg.

Chapter Fifteen: Back on Track, Again

WHENEVER TOM spent more time contemplating the round-the-Moon ride for the colony, he kept coming up with more and more refinements and then changing things as other ways of doing things became evident to him. He had used and tossed more sheets of paper into the recycle bin on this project than even on one of his spaceships.

Harlan finally reported in about the deaths and the explosion, and the inventor was even more driven to make things a success for the stricken Saclolo.

Of the nine things he had thought to do, including Saclolo's original plan of a single flinging and rough catch, the one item that came and went with regularity was the notion of a track. If he had to be completely honest, even he would be disappointed if the system were nothing other than a huge roller coaster or, worse, merely a fast train ride.

Enterprises had, at his request, brought in a Psychologist specializing in the human reaction to thrill rides. The woman, Ariel Winston, had been shocked when told about where the ride would be and she was speechless when he answered her question on how long the ride would be.

“Well, if you mean time wise, that is why I have asked to work with you. If you want to know the distance?” She nodded, cautiously. “That is fairly easy. Six thousand, give or take a few hundred.”

“Feet, yards, meters?”

When he stated that was in *miles* she had stood up, politely nodded at him as she picked up her briefcase, and said, “Well, thank you for getting me all the way over here from Boston on what is obviously some sort of jest.”

He asked her to please sit and explained the location and the basic idea behind the lunar resort.

It had required a video conference with the one of the engineers in Cordillera City and a second call to give her a video tour of the area where the resort was being built before she decided this was a very serious request of her specific talents.

“Have you considered how difficult it will be to use a physical track?” she inquired.

“Yes. First, from the standpoint of actual construction and then how hard it would be on those riding. Even at twice bullet train

speeds, about all we might manage, the trip would take over fourteen hours. They want it to feel worth the cost—and don't ask as I have no idea about that—but they don't want people to get bored."

* * * * *

"Has Magadia been told?" the one-time lunar director asked.

"No," the doctor replied. "We just never had time. One of the two deceased men actually came in alive. His heart stopped twice. We got it going the first time but he was too far gone the second time."

"How do I tell Magadia?" Saclolo moaned. "She's going to tear me a new one for not informing her right away about this. That man was her second cousin."

"That's why I called for Harlan. We couldn't have her come out here while we are working on you or on her cousin, and we can't move the ambulance while doing surgery. It's best that she meets us at hospital when we are done."

"She going to start wondering why she's not hearing from him," Harlan stated looking at his friend and Saclolo's head bobbed up and down in agreement. "She knows he was out here." Then he caught on. "You got me out here to run interference. Is that it?"

"If you can."

"*If I can?* Do I have any choice?"

The doctor just looked at his clenched hands. He couldn't answer him.

"How much longer until you get underway?"

"I'll have to go ask. I don't know. We are performing some smaller surgeries on the men who were electrocuted. Perhaps an hour, maybe more before we can move."

"Then, Doctor, I have no choice. I have to go get her. There's no way I'm going to be responsible if she happens to hear about Saclolo without getting all the story. Get a sedative ready and give it to her as soon as she walks in. She's going to be hell on wheels."

* * * * *

In the end the Psychologist had submitted a report. It called for the ride to be no greater than sixty minutes and preferably under forty. That meant a speed over ground of about sixty-four hundred miles per hour in a full orbit scenario.

Her conclusions were on multiple levels but boiled down to a couple things.

- 1) If the ride was to be meaningful to people—meaning that they would be able to see a variety of things from an appropriate altitude and at a slow enough rate to make an impression, a top speed of under one-hundred-thirty miles per hour was mandatory at an altitude of no higher than three miles and no lower than one hundred feet.
- 2) Unless the intent was to overload the senses, the ride would actually need to last no longer than twenty-five minutes. The faster it traveled, the shorter the time until passengers experienced sensory overload.

Tom and Damon Swift discussed the implications at some length and came up with about the only solution possible.

The ride would never be able to circumnavigate the entire Moon.

Further, when Tom looked at the most detailed map of the lunar surface available, he could tell that the starting position of a looped ride—his number one solution—would mean the first two minutes and final two would be over the dark landscape reducing the available “impression” time to just over twenty minutes.

With Saclolo recuperating from his injury, his discussion with the lunar directors would need to be face-to-face as he knew the cold impersonality of a radio or even a video call would only serve to add to the frustration both were feeling.

With the opening day coming up on five months in the future, Tom and Bud took the *Challenger* to the lunar colony. Because the freight schedule had a supply rocket landing just five hours behind them, Tom opted to touch down on the plain above the crater rim, about five hundred feet back from the edge where the observation/control tower sat. He and Bud took the two-man *Straddler* they had brought up and flew from the porch outside the ship’s hangar over the edge and down to the large airlock below the tower.

“Welcome, Tom and Bud,” Magadia greeted them with a sad smile as they took off their helmets. “My husband is in extremely bad pain right now, and as usual we are all left with too many details to keep track of and it is up to me to meet with you. I, uhh,” she said cautiously seeing Tom’s face, “I believe this is something he will not be happy with, but as the co-leader of the colony I can handle this. I think.”

“We ought to discuss this in your office,” Tom told her. She nodded and led the way.

Once seated and with the local substitute for tea—an Earth crop called rooibos, a reddish brewed beverage originally from South Africa but that had been growing in the southern part of the Philippines for the past several decades—Tom got quickly to the

point.

He explained the report and gave her a memory chip with all the details along with several potential adaptations for the thrill ride so dear to her husband's heart.

Without looking at anything she sat there seemingly, well, serene if the inventor's eyes could be believed.

"You do not seem very shocked or dismayed about this," he said.

"No. In truth even Saclolo has come to the conclusion that the ride is both impractical from a customer and logistical point of view, and would be a budget breaker." Her face now looked sad but resigned. "And, I must tell you, Tom, and you as well, Bud, that our financial numbers do not look good if we factor in that ride of my husband's. Also, the two murders we have had recently and the explosion a day ago cannot be kept secret from the city or from the Earth for much longer. I fear that once the public is informed of them, our advanced reservations list is going to shorten in a very serious manner."

Bud leaned forward, setting his empty cup on the desk. "Mrs. Reyes? If I may, and please, Tom, forgive me for overstepping any boundaries, but I've actually given this ride some thought. I believe it can be done and done within your budget. If you'd like to hear—" He stopped and looked at them both, expectantly.

"You have the floor, flyboy," Tom said.

When their host smiled at him, Bud began. "Okay. For starters, I love roller coasters, but my wife does not. In fact, Sandy refuses to go on them with me. I've ended up riding with complete strangers before. So, I sort of think this ride can't be too violent, but again it can't be a sedate little tour of the lunar surface."

He looked from Tom to Magadia. Both looked eager to hear his ideas.

"Fine. So, given that, and also the results of the report Tom got, I was thinking about a loop system. Even a double loop with everything actively under control."

He described a system that would only require a single Attractatron that could be mounted at the peak of the mountain. It would be on a powerful and deeply anchored swivel that allowed it to aim down to pick up the ride capsule from a platform that would be mounted on the back side of the mountain and accessible from inside the deep cavern.

"People would get into the capsule and it would be sealed up, picked up, or better yet shoved out to start using the old rail gun for a touch of immediate excitement, and then the Attractatron would

start pushing it out and toward the light side of the Moon. It would need to start out a hundred feet or so up and by the time it got out into the light would be about three miles up. Now, it could either travel in a wide circle or even, and help me if I've got the wrong idea, skipper, but the Attractatron could even be programmed to move it in a wiggly sort of weaving pattern and even take it up and down a bit."

He saw his friend smiling.

"Bud? That is genius!" Tom complimented him. Turning to Magadia, he added, "In fact that is better than I had in mind. The only change I would make is to have another Attractatron station about forty miles out that could take a hand off from the mountain one and take the capsule even farther out. Maybe by as much as a couple hundred miles."

"And, how fast would the capsule travel?" she asked.

Holding up a finger indicating he needed a moment, Tom computed in his head and finally answered, "It ought to be able to go up to a hundred miles per hour. Uh, make that one-hundred and sixty kilometers per hour."

"That would be wonderful for viewing," she told them. "But, what was this about a double loop?"

Tom nodded to Bud to answer the question. "Oh, that. Well, I was thinking about that second Attractatron out on the bright side, but now that I think about it, why not have a second version of the ride? You know, one that goes out and south and one that goes out and north? Something like that?"

By the time the young men left the Moon, Tom had spent several hours at the computers in the *Challenger* and came up with a design and a cost estimate for the different possibilities. Magadia was nearly in tears with relief over what she told them was, "...the salvation of Saclolo's dream!"

Saclolo was still in an extreme amount of pain and had been since the first pain drugs had worn off. They received no update on him before departing.

On the way back to Earth Tom congratulated his friend on his ideas. Bud was about to say that it wasn't much of anything but a thought hit him.

"That's really about what you were going to suggest, wasn't it, Tom?"

Tom shook his head. "A variation, in a way, but more of a pick up the capsule and swing it up into a high arc, then once it comes up and over allow it to get to within about a mile-and-a-half of the

surface—about all the lunar curvature would allow at that distance—and then bring it back the same way. Your way is so much more interesting for the riders. It would allow for some of the ride to be close to the surface and more, well, adrenaline-pumping. It might even be something they would want to take advantage of more than one time, especially with your double loop version.”

Before they reached the Outpost in Space, where Tom needed to stop to inspect a new area of the Solar Battery factory, Magadia contacted them.

“I have glanced at the report you left and showed Saclolo and our construction engineers your ideas. We accept! The only thing I would like to know is would it be possible for one loop, let us say the one taking riders to the south, to be as your plans call for having one Attractatron at the mountain and one farther out to extend the ride, and then the other route having two more Attractatrons to make that route even longer? I think Saclolo would want to give people the choice.”

She admitted he had once voiced hopes to allow the longer route to loop over the landing site of the Apollo 11 mission, the closest landing point to the colony.

The only change Tom could suggest was that one loop head nearly straight out to go above that historic site while the other loop head north to send the ride over the Mare Humorum, one of the original possible landing sites and an area with some of the flattest terrain on the bright side of the Moon.

The colony co-leader loved the idea.

She asked Tom if it might be possible to have a third “run” to swing into the bright side and then in a wide circle over the dark side.

“Well, it is possible, but the only way to allow anyone to see anything as they pass over it in the dark part of the ride when it is turned away from the sun is a technology I cannot let anyone outside of Swift Enterprises use. It’s company and even U.S. Governmentally top secret. I hope you understand.”

“Ah, I do. It was just a thought. I will, as I am certain our guests will, be quite satisfied with the dual possibilities. So, I shall have the purchase order drawn up if your sales people can provide the specific costs and breakdowns. I want to get started on this as soon as we can.”

* * * * *

Stefanie Bodack was having a ball at the Swift MotorCar Company. Her duties as “Stress Test Manager” kept her busy throughout the thirty hours her doctor allowed her to work during

the week. And, that was perfectly fine with her. Or, it was fine until she was five months along and had the first problems.

She doubled over in great pain and could not speak for a minute as she sought to catch the breath that had been knocked from her lungs.

Once she could speak and tell someone of her distress she was rushed down and through the connecting tunnel between the car factory and Enterprises and straight to the Dispensary where Doc Simpson—also back on the Moon working with his medical school and seeing to the health needs of the colonists—checked her over.

“Well, the good news is that you and the baby are doing well. The bad news is that because of your diminutive size, and the fact this is going to be a full-size baby, things are getting so cramped in there that gravity is becoming somewhat of an enemy to you both. I believe your recent episode was the baby shoving its feet up against your diaphragm and keeping you from inhaling. The trouble is, there is only one sure thing for it and that is complete bed rest.”

She shook her head. “Do you realize just how crazy I will be by the end of the first week of that?” Poor Deke will leave me for sure!” A tear cascaded down her right cheek and her lower lip quivered.

Doc left her for a few hours while he researched anything that might help matters. Certainly there were a few drugs but they generally were hard on the growing baby often leading to health issues once born.

He brightened on finding a short article by an experimental Obstetrician who reported on a patient who he kept supported in a water tank for the final three months. She had a special suit built providing both buoyancy as well as room, an environmental circulation system to keep her lungs and skin supplied with clean slightly oxygen-rich air, and a diet that kept her at an appropriate weight for both her and the baby.

When Doc visited his patient late that afternoon she was being held and comforted by her husband.

“Hi, Deke,” the medico greeted the very tall man. “I’ll dispense with any explanation as I’m sure Stefanie will have already told you what lies in the future.”

“Yeah,” he responded, glumly.

“I feel like a kick boxer’s practice dummy,” she complained. “Plus, I feel like I’m being forever pulled down. Help me, Doc!”

“What you have is like a two bedroom house trying to contain a family of five. And, it’s a heavy family with floors that nearly cannot support them.” He looked into her eyes. “Care to take the advice of

a man who has only been on the business end of a delivery eight or nine times?”

Stefanie nodded and replied, “I trust you with my life, my baby’s life and even that of the giant I married. I’ll just bet this is all his fault!”

They both grinned knowing she was only blowing off a little steam.

“Actually, there is no formula for baby size. Your dwarfism notwithstanding, short parents give birth to tall children, dwarves give birth, as you well know, to non-dwarfish kids, and basketball players give birth to kids barely at the low end of normal height. What I am going to suggest is a sort of vacation for you. To a place where gravity, or a lot less of it, will be your friend. That, plus some special exercises I’m going to tell you to do even if you don’t do the first thing.”

He told them about the support tank and suggested that Enterprises could easily provide that for her. “It can be set up in your house rather than here,” he told them.

She snorted. “Gee, Doc. You might just as well send me up to the Moon. Talk about putting me in a friendly quarantine!”

Doc was about to respond when he stopped and thought her statement over.

“Would you want to move up to the lunar colony for the duration of the pregnancy?” he asked.

Her face scrunched up and she scowled. But, she asked, “Are you saying that as a kid, or are you serious?”

“Serious. It’s Earth’s gravity that is weighing the baby down inside you. The one-sixth gravity up there would actually be less than a support tank and you would have the ability to move around freely. Give it a think. My guess is that Damon and Tom can find a way to get Deke up there as frequently as possible so you won’t be apart too much. Well, as I say, give it some thought and talk amongst yourselves. See you tomorrow!”

Her head swiveled to face Deke. “What’s going through that brain of yours up in the stratosphere, tall boy?”

He broke out in a smile. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but both Tom and Bud think I am good enough to try a little rocket riding. As in, I’m supposed to fly second seat on a supply rocket heading Moonward day after tomorrow. Of course, if you want me to stay here, I can get out of it.”

Stefanie shook her head. “Nope! You fly up there and if you have the time, try to arrange an apartment for us. See if they can use

some sort of little fire-headed Napoleon strutting around the offices and I'll gladly offer my services."

Doc laughed at the vision of her doing just that.

"Uhhh," she said now biting her lower lip as she turned to Doc, "would this need to be all the way until this next load is delivered?"

Greg Simpson counted on his fingers. "You are five months along right now. I'd say two of the remaining four should do it, although once you get back you might need to either do bed rest or use a mobility scooter to get around. Obviously it would be counterproductive for you to stand all day long, five days a week."

"As long as I get a special card that says I don't have to stop when I run over someone's toes, I'm all for that!"

And so, one week later Stefanie Brooks-Bodack and her burden of love climbed into a small jet and flew down to Fearing Island. There, her husband assisted in getting her into a special padded couch that would absorb a lot of the acceleration forces. She kissed him quite passionately before allowing him to climb up to the cockpit and get them ready for launch.

This rocket was one of the all-repelatron supply rockets so he could regulate a lot of the power to the drive, but the limited amount of available electricity from the ship's power pod meant he could not go too slow. At one point he called back to tell her the pilot needed to ramp up the speed to fully escape gravity.

"Ramp away!" she called back and gritted her teeth. All in all it wasn't nearly as bad as she thought it might be.

By the same time the next day, Stefanie was sitting on the sofa in their new apartment at the lunar colony enjoying the greatly decreased downward pull lunar gravity offered. It was one of the guest quarters and had both a bedroom and a small kitchen off the main front room. Better still, the apartment was just around the corner from the small hospital at the colony so if there were any medical needs, those would be just a few yards away.

Already she could feel the internal pressures had eased and she took her first good nap in several months.

Chapter Sixteen: Homegrown Bad Guy

A GREAT number of Construction Company people volunteered to see that the components for the lunar ride could be completed on schedule and at the lowest possible cost. It was with a great sense of pride that Damon authorized an additional, paid, shift for anyone wishing overtime to work on that project.

“You know you’re a big softie,” his wife, Anne, chided him at dinner that evening.

It made him smile. “Sure, but the important thing to remember is that I am also humble and lovable!”

She got up from the table, picked up their dishes and leaned over to whisper in his ear, “And, for that you ought to get a nice reward tonight, but you’ll have to accept a rain check. Bashi, Sandy and I are going to see that new romantic comedy downtown. In fact I have to leave in three minutes, so you get to do the dishes.” She handed him the stack and headed for the stairs.

The following morning he took stock of what he had agreed to, what Tom already had in production, and then made a short list of things he believed might have been overlooked.

Thankfully, it was very short with just three items, all having to do with the actual hotel and resort facilities. These were:

- 1 - Water reclamation and recycling: trucked or piped to colony?
- 2 - Final placement of the lunar ride take-off and landing points
- 3 - Recent health scare

Looking at item one he decided it might be best to call up the most complete set of plans that had been sent down. It took a few minutes to locate the key to the very complex and multi-layered document, but he found what he had been seeking.

With a chuckle he made a note to speak with the lunar folks. They were certainly collecting every drop of used liquid, and running it all into a very large tank, but there was nothing indicating any exit point.

The second one was something he recalled to which even Tom had never been given a complete answer. He made a small note to bring it to his son’s attention and let him pester those above—literally—him about it.

It was the third one that bothered him, and bothered him greatly. It came about because of the report of at least one case of someone with the plague.

Evidently one of the for-hire workers had brought up the bacteria and had come down with the first symptoms of the gangrene that killed so many. The medical team had isolated him for three days and pumped him full of medications and then reported that he seemed to be “over it.”

Damon wasn’t certain what that exactly meant and he didn’t like not knowing.

He made a call to Communications and was soon speaking with Doctor Malcom at Cordillera City.

* * * * *

Donnell knew he had avoided what might have been the most costly mistake in his life. The construction manager, already stinging from the dressing down he’d received over allowing the team to have a little “blow off steam” time over in the dome city was out for someone’s hide. He called for a “U.S. Marine-style full inspection of everybody, and all your equipment. Ten minutes!”

This man, the replacement for Joe, had nearly zero sense of humor and seemed to grow about five inches taller when he was angry. Already standing at over six-feet six-inches, the effect was to make him terrifying.

Donnell lined up in his place—lucky thirteenth down the front row—tool and equipment bag at his feet and space suit over his shoulder.

The manager who only once told them his name, and Donnell forgot it soon after, began barking at the first man over scuffed areas on the knees and elbows of his suit.

Men two through eleven fared a little better but the man to Donnell’s left was not only shouted at, he was grabbed, pulled out of line and turned around to face the rest of them.

“This man’s suit is about one good elbow bend from ripping open and making him our next victim. Look at this man’s face because the next time it might be black, bloated and bloodless from decompression!”

Shoving the man back into the line the manager turned to Donnell and looked him up and down. When his eyes lit on Donnell’s hands they shot back up.

“What the... what are those sissy gloves doing on your hands? You too delicate for this sort of work? Well?” With that he grabbed Donnell’s hands and pulled the tight gloves off. Because his hands were so ravaged by the gangrene the pain made Donnell faint.

He woke up in the hospital with at least three IVs running from above him into his arms and, as he tried to take a mental inventory

of his body, he believed one might be inserted in his upper leg near his groin.

A doctor he didn't recognize came over.

"Ah. Awake," he said in a slightly foreign accent. Donnell couldn't tell where from. Just like Asians all looking to same to him, all foreign accents sounded the same. German, French, Italian and even Australian. He just could not tell one from another.

"What happened," he asked.

The doctor shrugged. "You passed out and were brought here. Why do you have gangrene in your fingers? No, do not answer that because I shall tell you. You have it no longer because we had to remove three of them they were so badly damaged. Middle and ring on your right hand and the pinkie on the left in case you are curious. You will live and we will outfit you with a prosthetic pair of replacements, but now I must tell you the even worse news. You, sir, have been suffering from the black death. The scourge of Europe all those many years ago. Somehow, you contracted the plague!"

When the doctor pressed him for how it might have occurred, all Donnell could recall was being bitten by a rat in Albany a week before his trip up. "But, that was months ago. I thought plague killed everyone and in a few days."

The doctor laughed. "No. Not all. Many, and not you. Not now. We have taken your blood to try to find out why it took so long to get this far, but the result is that you will not die although had you come forward with your hands as recently as two weeks ago we would not be having this conversation, and you would still have your fingers."

All Donnell could think was how this was going to hurt his chances of killing Tom Swift, and also how his plan to claim that the bad fingers were from an accident—something that could be worth a lot of insurance money—now the truth was known, that was never going to become a reality. Not that reality and Donnell were on very good terms as of late.

* * * * *

Three times each and every day Stefanie took a long walk around the corridors of the main dome of the colony. She had studied the plans and found that one circuit of the outer halls on each of the three top levels, include a walk around the perimeter of the farming level, was exactly one-point-five miles.

One of the women from the city came to sit with her young child while she walked.

So, her three walks gave her a four-and-a half mile cumulative walk, or about the equivalent exertion of a one mile walk on Earth.

She figured in the nearly nine weeks since coming up she must have walked about the distance from Los Angeles almost to San Jose, California. *Although*, she pondered, *that would be more scenic than this!*

The movement not only kept her in good health but it relieved one of the worst symptoms of her pregnancy; the baby was a little on the large side and tended to dislike its cramped conditions so it made this displeasure known by kicking, but nowhere near as much or as angrily as back on Earth.

The gentle rocking of her walks seemed to lull the baby and it left her insides alone for hours at a time.

Today, or rather tonight, with Deke on a run back from the Earth but not due until the following afternoon, she had taken a late afternoon nap, so her final walk had been delayed until about 10:00 p.m.

It was dead quiet as she walked along the level two corridor. She halted at one of the many airlock doors and waited for it to cycle. As it did she turned her head to the left. A noise seemed to have come from behind her, but there was nobody in sight.

Stefanie shrugged and walked through the opening doors allowing them to shut with a little hiss as the seals inflated again making them air tight once more.

When she reached the next airlock the previous one was already around the ever-present curve. She waited for the sensor to detect her but first heard the sounds of the last doors hissing back open.

Suddenly, the main lights went out and the corridor was plunged into darkness.

She let out a little *eeep!* and tapped the override button on the door.

Nothing happened!

Never having been a woman given to panic, she found it startling that her spine tingled and she felt a sudden chill rush up and down her body. Maybe it was a mother's reaction and meant to help her safeguard the baby.

It was then she heard the footsteps. Slow and as if someone were trying not to be heard.

All corridors and rooms within the colony featured emergency lights, but at night the hallways were turned down. And so it was she could barely see anything around her other than the nearby

doors. Everything seemed to be in some sort of haze, it was becoming a little difficult to breathe, and she realized that there must be some sort of air leak causing the moisture in the air to condense.

She spun around as the footsteps came closer. An upright shape was moving toward her.

In the dark haze all she could see was the man's eyes. They spoke of an intent to do her nothing short of pure evil!

* * * * *

“Mr. Swift. I'm not sure what to say. The man came with the group of construction engineers, did yeoman's work along with his team and only when he had a day off, and unfortunately, despite my strong suggestions, the construction manager decided to reward the entire team with a twenty-hour pass to the domes. That's when the man was discovered to be ill.”

Damon groaned. “Can't they get it through their heads up there that not everybody is to be treated as a friend? Hell! There's no telling what sort of other things went on or what other germs might have been *shared* that will come back to haunt them. Damn them and damn that sick man.”

The doctor didn't say anything for a moment to give Damon time to calm down. Then, he said, “The construction boss has been reprimanded and the practice stopped. The team has only two more weeks before they depart and none of them will be allowed as far as the crater. As for the man and the plague, we did have eleven other cases and managed to get ahead of them immediately. No deaths, just some pretty sick older people.” He paused again and Damon was about to ask what else when the physician added, “I tell a lie. We did have a death. An old woman in the hospital wing was beaten and the drugs cabinet ransacked. The local security people think it must have been some kid or kids out to see if they could find something to get them high, got caught by her, and it got out of hand.”

He could hear the long breath Damon let out through his nose. It spoke volumes about the man's anger.

“Okay. Keep on things up there and inoculate everyone if you have to. Also, get that man's name to me, to Harlan and to the entire damn medical community. I want him pulled aside and... no. Forget that. It's cat out of the bag already time. Either you or someone else there go out and examine him again. Pump him full of more anti-virals if you think it prudent. Send him back down if he is anything but totally cooperative. I'll talk to you soon.”

* * * * *

Without warning the lights came on and the door behind her shot open.

Stefanie didn't hesitate. She stepped though, hit the emergency close button and then ran down to the next airlock.

She knew the act of hitting **EMERGENCY** would lock the previous doors and only once Security came down to investigate things would they, or the previous ones, open. Hopefully, she thought as she headed for an elevator, whoever that was dressed up like some sort of samurai warrior would be caught.

As soon as she locked her apartment door she called Security.

"What is the nature of your call?"

She explained.

"Well, we have nothing on our board. Are you certain that you saw someone, Mrs. Bodack? After all, it is late at night and you are... well, pregnant."

Stefanie counted to ten under her breath before launching into the pleasantly phony-sounding woman.

"Listen! I'm a damn genius and an employee of Swift Enterprises. The Swifts do not, let me repeat that in case you have temporarily gone deaf," she raised her voice, "Damon and Tom Swift do not hire people who *see things*! Now, I don't give a damn what your precious board does or does not show you, get a detail down to corridor... uhh. I'm pretty certain it is Dome A, Level Two and section Nine. I locked the doors. If they are open it can only be because someone let the creep who was stalking me out. Got that?"

"Well, Mrs. Bodack, I can appreciate how you might think you saw—"

That was all she got out before Stefanie screamed a very harsh expletive into the receiver and slammed the phone down.

Next, she called Saclolo and Magadia's private number. He answered.

Once she explained what she had seen, and the lack of assistance she had received, he elevated the call to become an outright Security Alert Level Two. Only an attack or a breach in the dome constituted a higher level.

He did ask her for a description. "Could this have been one of the construction people brought up for the resort?"

"I don't think so," she told him. "He was Asian, or his eyes looked like that, and I can't recall anybody other than Caucasians and Blacks coming up for the big build. Right?"

He mumbled his agreement to that and hung up. Hearing about

her near attack had shaken him. Was this another example of the ongoing influence of the dead Empress? The thought made him shudder. It also made him angry.

By the next morning three things had happened.

First, a guard team had been posted outside the apartment door during the night. When she opened it in the morning and found the armed two-man detail she offered them coffee and some toast.

They declined the toast by accepted the hot beverages.

Second, a check by a qualified technician showed that the main feed to the Security board operated by the woman she had spoken to—yelled at—had an unexpected override cable in a switch room next door. There was no way any signal would have reached the board.

Stefanie made a note to find the woman and although not apologize, at least explain how she allowed her anger to get the best of her.

Third, the body of a man—clad in a head-to-foot black silk robe, loose pants and cowl, carrying a sword that had been handmade from several scraps of metal, but showing the marks of having been constructed using equipment available in several of the shops in the colony—had been found. He had suffocated due to the depressurization he created when he had stabbed his sword into a control box in an effort to disable the door in front of Stefanie.

While that had worked, it had led to his demise.

Stefanie needn't have bothered trying to find the Security operator; she found Stefanie. With tears spilling down her cheeks she apologized for not believing the petite woman when she called.

“If I had, I would have sounded the alarm and they might have found that man before he died.”

It took two cups of strong tea laced with some local alcohol product, made illegally from vegetable peelings in one or more of the agricultural processing facilities but easily available, to calm her down.

After she left, Stefanie sat thinking about the experience.

Had the man specifically set out to harm her, or was she a target of opportunity. With the man's death it was probable that nobody would ever know.

When Deke landed that afternoon, she was waiting at the bottom of the elevator for him. After launching herself into his arms—getting fairly high up his body courtesy of the lunar gravity—and smothering him with kisses, she allowed him to set her down

and took his hand. They walked to their apartment and she explained what had happened.

“Can you manage Earth gravity, babe?” he asked, very concerned for her health but equally worried about her continued welfare if this was not an isolated and random attempted attack.

She nodded.

“The past couple months up here have given the kid a chance to float without too much down pressure on my inner works. And, during that time I’ve been practicing some special exercises to strengthen all my girlie muscles. So, yes. I might need to spend a lot of time in bed, but I would rather be down there where I feel I belong. You aren’t angry with me, are you? Besides, I want both our children to be safe.”

She searched his face for any indication he might be angry or disappointed with her. There was none.

Eleven days later, and with only a brief goodbye to Magadia and Saclolo, she ascended in the elevator with her husband, strapped into a special acceleration couch Tom had shipped up that would support her in a fluid-filled cushion, and counted down the seconds until takeoff.

Deke used slightly less power than he might have normally and it meant the trip home took an additional nine hours, but after landing and seeing Doc Simpson, Stefanie was pronounced fit and the baby in good condition.

The three of them, plus one to come, headed home.

* * * * *

In his anger over the health scare Damon had completely forgotten to address the water recycling situation with Saclolo and Magadia. The morning after his conversation with the doctor he did put in a radio call.

“So, you see, according to the plans—and I am going to be only too happy to be told my copies are old and you’ve taken care of this—your fluids collection tank at the hotel is set up to collect everything, using gravity from what I can determine.”

“Yes, that is correct,” Saclolo said, sounding cautious as if he expected to be scolded about something. “Gravity and periodic suction.”

“Then what?” was Damon’s only question.

“Uhh, it is then recycled and purified and returned to the fresh water system. I am not sure I know—”

“Saclolo!” Magadia’s voice interrupted sounding dismayed.

“Can’t you see it? I can. Mr. Swift can. Where is the exit pipe? *Where does it get purified?*”

There was a full minute of silence as the Filipino man studied the plans. His copy was a fifteen sheet blueprint. When he finally located the right layer he let out a moan.

“Yes. I thought so,” Damon said hearing the moan coming from the speaker. “I do see a way to get the liquids outside through an access tunnel; that would be your number 175-AA3-B. However, you are on your own from that point. I’d suggest either digging a deep trench and hope for a no-freeze situation, or better still, daily or twice-daily tanker trucks.”

They talked about ways to keep a pipeline from freezing and the only thing Damon could recommend was to either wrap the exit pipe with a spiral return pipe and send back the clean water in a heated state, or to set them side-by-side and wrap them both in an electrical heating cable.

“The one I’m thinking of comes from a company down here called Brighton Plumbing Corp. out of Bangor, Maine. I’m not sure what sort of cost will be involved but I do know it works on one-hundred-twenty volts and uses about as much power as a one-hundred watt bulb per each thousand feet. That would be, before you ask, an LED bulb, so about thirteen watts.”

The lunar co-directors thanked him several times for saving them from the embarrassment of discovering the omission too late.

After the connection was broken Magadia turned to her husband and grabbed his head by both ears.

“You, Mr. ‘I know what I’m doing,’ need to stop and take a very good look at everything. I know you have your pet projects, but we just can’t, *can’t*, CAN’T keep having Tom and Damon Swift saving your butt on these things! Got me?”

Saclolo knew she was telling him this out of love and a little frustration, not from anger, so he nodded and leaned in to give her a kiss.

She pushed him away and walked from the room saying over her shoulder, “None of that until you look at everything one more time.”

Chapter Seventeen: Whirling Danger

THE DEAD man who had tried to attack Stefanie was eventually identified as a former slave and possibly one of the several hundred who had worked more for the status and comforts provided by the Masters than for the good or their fellow countrymen. He had been on a watch list for months but kept a very low profile.

On contacting several of his coworkers it was discovered that he harbored hopes of a return of the deceased brother and sister and his former position as an overseer of the food processing unit where he had frequently forced himself on several of the younger unmarried women.

Nobody had liked him with two particularly calling out his bad attitude and suggesting that it would have been only a matter of time before he did something stupid like this.

Or, that someone got so tired of him they did something drastic.

Everyone thought that whoever had done the man in, ought to be awarded some sort of medal.

When word was sent to Harlan, he read the message from Saclolo three times before he set the paper down. Could this have been the source of the two murders? With the death of José Ocampo, was his only remaining lunar task over?

It was with greatly mixed feeling that he stood up, bent his neck to both sides to relieve the tension, and headed home for a beer and hugs from his children and Lola.

The older woman knew something was up and she quietly asked him what it might be.

“You had a great many ties with the people up here, Lola. Did you ever hear of a man named José Ocampo?”

He was startled when she spat toward the floor of the kitchen and said a very bad word in her native Tagalog. As she bent to wipe up her spittle, she apologized.

“And, yes. That man’s name is both legend and hated. If you recall the case of that young girl who was molested and then killed herself from the shame she felt about six months ago, that was him! Nobody could identify that monster, but we all knew he did it. I hope someone has caught up to him and wrung his neck!”

He told her about the attack and how he had brought about his own death.

All she would say at the end was, “Good! I hope it was very painful for him. Now, what do you want for dinner?”

Harlan spent several hours with three of the Space Medicine doctors who had not simply agreed with his initial thoughts on the old man's death. They were talking about Bayani Perez, the murdered man.

"Tell me again why you believe he died immediately or at least very quickly," he requested from the single woman in the group.

She took a deep breath, looked at her companions with whom she disagreed, and started. "Mr. Perez exhibited all the symptoms of someone struck an almost inhuman blow against the left side of his neck. I received, that is we received, permission for a partial autopsy from the lunar directors and when we opened his neck we found the jugular trunk had been ruptured behind the jawbone along with multiple smashed major nodes like the jugulodigastric node, several of the internal jugular chain nodes up and down the trunk and most of the small blood vessels closer to the surface. My belief is that the rupture of that main artery plus the immediate release into his brain of toxins that would have been in all those nodes would have meant brain tissue shutdown or death occurred within one or two seconds."

The other two didn't look convinced, so Harlan asked her why she thought that.

"Well, by themselves it might have only meant a slower death of maybe one or two minutes. But, the accompanying snapping of the neck and the terrible tearing and breaking of the brain tissues on that side of the brain would have been much quicker killers."

"Give me alternatives," he asked the other two.

"We can't," said one, a Dr. Carl Menzies, the oldest of the three who was more a cardiac surgeon. "What Amanda says sounds possible, but there are no cases of someone on Earth getting hit by a hand and to the throat and it leading to instant death."

"Do you three agree it was a hand and not something like a metal rod?"

They nodded.

"Did you take into account the victim's age?"

Amanda had but the other two admitted they had not. They looked at each other and then back at Harlan.

"Oh, god," the older man said. "I never considered that. Amanda must be correct."

"Okay. Let's say we have the weapon, a hand, and the strike-to-death thing figured out. How hard would someone have to chop

into this man's neck to do that kind of damage?"

The younger man, Dr. Brian Peebles, looked at his notes. "I'd say the person first had to be a full foot taller than the victim from the angle of the strike and the fact, assumed, the killer had to strike at the maximum effective angle. The strike zone would put the killer's hand somewhere along the lines of five inches, wrist to top of palm and that, according to some research I did, says the killer ought to be about six-feet and four or five inches and probably two-hundred eighty and two-ninety pounds."

It was good information but it was also discouraging. To his knowledge, only about eleven residents, all men, would be that tall and that hefty.

Three of them were in their sixties and seventies and probably not strong enough to do the killing. Two were teenagers and he really hated to think there was anyone in their teens who was ready to kill an old and treasured man, or striking anyone using that much force. One was on the Cordillera City Security force, and the others were all on the construction gang working the forthcoming lunar resort project.

After thanking the three he suggested they continue thinking about the case but not to the detriment of their normal studies.

"I do want you three to know that I think you've done some marvelous investigating here. I know space medicine intrigues you, but you may have what it takes to be an investigative physician."

Once they left he called up his records on all citizens of the colony sorted by height and then weight. He made notes to bring in the six who might fall into the suspect category.

* * * * *

Donnell was proud of the weapon he had been able to put together. The piece of metal bar he'd stolen from the recycle pile to which he'd mounted a molded duplicate of his own right hand was a wonder. Gloved in a heavy rubber cover, it had only a little give and when swung properly it hit just like a hand, *his* hand he giggled to himself, but with the sort of force that could and would never be associate with a man who barely stood over five-foot-eleven and had never weighed more than one-sixty.

If that didn't put the locals off the trail, and maybe, just maybe onto someone like that mean-spitired giant construction manager, he didn't know what would.

His only hope was to have one more opportunity to visit the domed city before being shipped home, and that Tom Swift would be there on one of his recently-frequent visits.

It was only a matter of time. It wasn't exactly something he had in huge quantities, but his planned contingency and return visit, in another disguise entirely, was a solid alternative!

* * * * *

Harlan called in each of the possibilities one-at-a-time and interviewed them. Of the first five, all had ironclad alibis for the entire time during which the crimes were committed.

And, while one man had been in the hospital at the time of the old woman's death, he had been in a medically induced coma having taken a bad fall and had some brain swelling. There was absolutely no way he might have injured anyone.

That left the final man in the group, the construction manager himself.

"Why did you call me in, Mr. Ames," the construction manager, Arturo Ramirez, asked. "I got my reaming the other week over giving those idiots a day off."

"It wasn't the day off that was bothersome. It was allowing them free reign inside the domes. And, we had not one but two deaths that happened within or shortly after that period of time. Nothing, by the way, we can pin on any of your team, but the timing is very suspicious."

Ramirez openly stared at Harlan. He was confused and it showed.

"So, the reason you are here is our forensic investigation has shown that our most likely candidate for being a murderer is a tall man, pretty heavy, between twenty and forty, and very strong." He looked at the man who fit all of those considerations.

Ramirez swore. He looked incredulously at Harlan and swore again.

"You think I could do something like that? Me?"

Harlan shook his head. "Actually, no. I know for a fact that you drove your team over and then returned to the camp to complete some work. You were there for nineteen of their twenty hour release. You did not and could not have done it. Besides, from everything I hear about you, you are a gentle giant. I wish we could pin everything on one person, but we have at least two bag guys, One of them is dead. You heard about Ocampo?"

"Yeah," Artura said looking disgusted. "Tried to trap some little girl. Deserves to be dead!"

"She wasn't a little girl; she was a full grown woman who happens to be extra petite. You've seen her up here before. Stefanie

Brooks-Bodack? The lady who helped us with the underground fire?”

“Damn. That’s who he tried to kill? The *medyo* vocano lady? Why, I’d kill that *anak sa labas* myself if he were still alive.”

Harlan looked at him. “Really, Arturo?”

Ramerez looked sheepishly at him. “Naw. Not the way I do things, Mr. Ames. I guess everybody knows that, including you. So, tell me what I can do for you.”

* * * * *

Bud walked into the large lab and spotted Tom bent over something. He was about to close the door quietly behind him when, without warning, whatever it was made a brief buzzing noise and shot into the air. It startled him so much he fell back against the door frame and exclaimed, “Watch out, Tom!”

The object came straight back down and the inventor turned to greet his visitor. He had a smile on his face.

“Nothing to be worried about, flyboy. Just a new kind of drone I’m building for observation here around Enterprises and even for up at the lunar colony.” He picked up the object as Bud ambled over to the workbench. He held it out. “See, it’s just a variation on all those little camera drones people were going crazy over a few years back.”

He held the object out and Bud took it. Looking more like a figure-8 with a tube sitting sideways between the circles, it was about nine-inches long, perhaps four-inches wide and no thicker than three-quarters of an inch at the tube.

“Neat! How the heck does it fly? Oh, wait. Now that I look closely it has almost invisible rotors. Right?”

Tom smile and nodded. “That’s right. One inside each end that rotate at about twenty-thousand RPMs at top speed.”

Bud’s face scrunched into a look of puzzlement. “O-kaaaaayyyy,” he said, slowly, “but there aren’t any motors visible. What turns the blades?”

“Look really close, Bud. Here, use this magnifying glass. What do you see? Don’t look for the obvious.”

Now he had a way to get a good close view, Bud grinned. “Ahh, yes. The blades meet in the middle but they also go into a little groove in the outer rim. So, I’m going out on a limb, but my guess is they turn by being driven by something inside the rim. Am I close?”

“Absolutely spot on, Bud. A single motor in the central body running a pair of small transmissions giving each blade three basic

speeds lets the thing tilt forward, backward or go level. For other maneuvers, the two rotor housings can tilt about fifteen degrees around the end of the tube. Everything runs slower or faster depending on how much power is run into the electric motor, so this can do everything from a near silent hover—a least near silent at twenty feet away—to flying forward or back at its top speed of about forty miles an hour!”

“Jetz! This little thing?” the flyer asked incredulously. He hefted the lightweight drone. “Probably not for very long, though.”

“There you would be incorrect. I’m using a variation of the flexible battery I made for Danny Weatherall and that medical sensor jacket he designed.”

The battery was truly flexible and could be molded around a person’s body to provide tight contact so the embedded medical devices would function properly. It had been based on a layer cake Bashalli once made and consisted of alternating micro-thin layers of insulator materials, and electrical generating materials. It held a surprising amount of power per square inch over a long period of time and could be totally recharged quickly.

“Okay,” Bud said, “but where is the battery? Inside the tube?”

“No, Bud, it *is* the tube and the outer rim. I need all the interior space for the electronics. I even need most of the outer rim for some of that. What’s not packed with circuits is battery.”

Bud peered at the drone again. “Oh. So I’m seeing some little holes with what look like tiny LED lights all around the edge. Lighting for the camera I’m supposing is also in that tube?”

Tom shook his head. “No, the camera has its own high-intensity light system working at an invisible to humans range. The camera can see things up to a mile away, zoom in both physically by flying there and by computer zoom, and the images are automatically stabilized and corrected so what we see at the control end looks like daylight. Those fourteen holes have special emitter/receivers that also send out flashes of a different spectrum light. They flash every second and wait to see if there is a reflection on anything within about five miles. It’s the drone’s avoidance and navigation system.”

“Like RADAR?”

“A little, but not with radio waves. Just invisible light. The tiny computer inside is set to avoid anything it detects coming toward it, or that it is approaching, and it starts avoidance maneuvers.”

Bud set the drone down on the workbench. Standing back from it, he crossed his arms over his chest before bringing his right hand up to cup his jaw. “I see.”

“I’m sensing that there is also an, ‘I don’t actually see, Tom,’ in

there. Am I right?”

Bud nodded. “Maybe just a little. The thing is cute but I’m trying to decide on the why of it. Why so small especially for use around here?”

“Oh, that one is easy, Bud. The *why* is that Harlan has requested a way to keep watch on the overall grounds of Enterprises, the Construction Company, and also out at the Citadel and on Fearing Island. Something that can silently track an intruder. There have been too many instances over the years where someone managed to sneak onto the grounds, do bad things, and escape. The worst have been when we’ve been gassed unconscious. These drones will be an added set of eyes in the skies to watch for whoever is sneaking around when they shouldn’t be. They will almost invisibly patrol inside and even outside our company walls by up to four miles.”

“You said something about up on the Moon? Same things?”

“Sort of. Up there at the new resort they want some way to help anticipate the needs of customers. A series of mounted cameras might be used, but Saclolo and Magadia figure they’d need about a hundred stationary ones where we can cover the same area using just five drones. With drones, one person can keep track of things. With installed cameras it would take about ten or maybe more operators to do the same.”

Bud, ever the pilot, suddenly thought of something. “How do they turn?”

“Sorry?”

“The drones,” he explained. “How do they turn? I see the pitch of the blades are set for opposite spin so that overcomes any rotor-induced torque spin, and I get the tilt for forward or back, but how will these turn around or go around corners?”

“Oh. Well, the two things I haven’t added, yet, are the side propellers,” Tom told his friend. “At each end of the tube will be a small micro-motor with a three-blade prop of only about a half-inch in diameter. They can be made to spin forward and backward and provide that level of directional control. So, along with the ability for the two ends to rotate a little away from each other, the small props will give turning control at slower speeds.”

Bud slapped Tom on the shoulder. “I knew you’d have thought of everything! I’ll look for Santa to bring me one for Christmas.”

They talked about the drones a few more minutes before Bud had to leave, but before he went out the door he asked, “How long will they stay in the air?”

Giving him a head shake, Tom admitted he didn’t know that, yet.

“But, I’m hoping to borrow some air space in your hangar and let a pair of these fly around to check their auto-navigation and avoidance and see how long they fly on a charge. I’m hoping for at least four hours. I’ll have them ready day after tomorrow once Arv finished the cases and small parts.”

“Then, let me know. I’d like to be there to watch the little infinity snoops flying in formation.” He turned to leave.

“Hold on there, Bud. The *what?*”

Grinning, Bud replied, “Infinity Snoops. They’re kind of shaped like the infinity symbol and then can snoop around.” He looked hopefully at Tom.

“How about Infinity Drones, Bud? I sort of hate to have the word ‘snoop’ in the name even if that is what they are doing. We can shorten it to IDs.”

Bud walked back to Tom and offered his hand, shaking the inventor’s. “Deal! And, I still want one for Christmas.”

When the day of testing came, Tom drove up in his own car with Arv and five of the drones. Each one weighed only about a third of a pound so Tom picked up two and Arv brought in the other three.

Bud wandered out of his office as they set the drones on the concrete floor. “I see a slight increase in the numbers,” he said. “Is that so you can really give them the avoidance test?”

“Yep. The skipper asked for three and I had some extra time so...” Arv swept a hand toward the waiting machines.

Two minutes later Tom and Arv tapped small switches on the tops of each drone and stood back. One by one, they lifted from the floor and raced off toward the far end of the hangar. As the men watched, the first one made a heavy bank and came back toward them. Each of the others did the same at one-second intervals, and Tom decided to stop the test a minute later.

“If we don’t space them out we’ll never know if they can avoid each other,” he explained. This next time he started one of them every twenty-seconds. Now, as they flew around, the last one to go up had to make a maneuver to keep from being hit by the much faster first drone.

It was a success, and they passed within five feet, but were never in danger of colliding.

Then and without any warning, drone three cut its run to the far end short, coming around right into the path of the next one. Drone four tried to avoid it but the errant drone rose directly into its path and there was a sharp crack as they collided and fell to the ground.

Bud, who had been watching in another direction was right under them when they dropped and he was hit in the head by one fast-spinning propellers.

A small patch of his scalp was nearly cut from his head and he fell to the ground, blood running down his neck.

Chapter Eighteen: Confrontation

IN DISMAY, Tom ran for a first aid kit on the wall and soon had a heavy compress over Bud's wound and was wrapping his head in a moderately tight elastic bandage to hold it in place.

"Let's get you over to Doc and get that stitched up," he told the wounded man. Turning to Arv he said, "Use the bypass control and set them down. I'll need to look at all of them in my underground lab once I get flyboy here put back together."

Doc took one look and shook his head. "If I didn't know better I'd say you ran your head under a miniature lawn mower, Bud. Don't worry, though. More than half of what got cut is still attached and I can stitch it back together. You won't lose the scalp but you are going to need to not wash it for seven days and not run a brush or comb over that area for at least two weeks!"

Seventeen tiny stitches later and the only sign was a small U-shaped area where he had to shave some of the hairs away. It was about a quarter inch wide and the stitches in it almost looked like hairs from any distance.

"I want you to notice that I put in the smallest possible stitches, Barclay. You tell that wife of yours how I was very nice about that. She read me the riot act the last time I sewed something back on and it left you with a scar."

"She's the only one that sees it other than in the showers at the gym. Maybe I'll take up wearing a hat for a month and just avoid a discussion all together. Actually, thanks, Doc. Will it start to hurt after the novocaine wears off?"

Doc looked right at him, saying, "I never used any pain killer, Bud. With the skin traumatized like it was I figured you'd never feel a thing. The nerves will come back in a few hours or a day and then you'll feel a little twinge, but not very much. I can give you a dropper bottle of a local anesthetic if you need it."

As he and Tom were leaving, the inventor suggested that Bud take Sandy out to lunch. "You can explain it to her, but don't tell her I was responsible," Tom joked. "Then, go home for the day."

Down in the lab Arv was waiting for Tom's return. He was holding one of the wrecked drones in his lap.

"I figured it out, skipper. One of the sensors was only working at about half power and then it blew out. The computer didn't compensate and so the 'stop and wait' function kicked in, but it got confused and headed higher and that caused the smack up. Or, down."

“Do we double up on sensors or do I change the program to allow for a certain number of inputs to be missing?”

“Truthfully?” Tom nodded. “The state of the art for these sensors is about at its smallest, but the quality isn’t as good as similar ones—three times the size—were two years ago. If there’s an easy way to let the computer make a decision based on an incomplete ring of sensors, I’d go for that and save the weight and electricity. Speaking of which, I left one of the drones still flying out there and called Hank over to watch it for us. He hasn’t called me so I need to believe it is still running,” he glanced at his watch, “an hour and forty-six minutes later.”

The two headed back to Bud’s hangar and arrived at the two hour mark. Tom brought it down and connected the battery to a tester.

“Eighty-nine percent power still there,” he told the other two. “That means these could run up to twenty hours. Probably a few less when they are actively sending back images. We’ll do more tests but I think we’ll plan on them giving sixteen hours maximum flight patrol duration and then have them fly to a nearby charger station.

“Where are you going to want to put those?” Hank asked.

Tom made a ‘follow me,’ motion and walked out of the hangar. He pointed to a light pole about fifty feet to their right. “Those. I’ll put one or two drone charging pads on some of the over two thousand of those inside the grounds. I believe I will also put small metal strips on the landing skids and magnetize the chargers when something touches down. That ought to hold things in our normal winds.”

“Anything worse and you could always call them into some place like the Barn or onto rooftop mini-hangars,” Arv suggested.

When Tom got back to his office he placed a call to Saclolo on the Moon. “Is that husband of yours back at full speed, Magadia.”

“Hello, Tom,” the pleasant voice of Magadia greeted him. “Yes. Sac is meeting with his electro-magnetic advisor over at the mountain. They are working out the final details for retuning our rail gun. Can I help you?”

Tom explained about the status of the drones and how he envisioned recharging to go.

“I will send up the plans as soon as they are completed, but I wanted to warn you and your good husband that there is a need to reserve probably six locations for charging perches somewhere around the inside perimeter of the open area. Something along the lines of one foot by two feet and placed where curious hands can’t

get to them.”

“I’ll pass along the word and we will be on the lookout for those designs. Anything else?”

“No. Oh, wait. Yes. How is Harlan doing?”

She sighed. “He obviously is a torn man, Tom. He so wants the normalcy of being down there with you but feels a guilty debt to the people here. Frankly, I love the man but would prefer it if he was not here in any official capacity. Our murders came and have gone and nothing bad has happened for five weeks.”

“I see. Well, I’ll try to do something about that even though he has more than a month left on his commitment to you.”

She snorted. “It wasn’t a commitment. It was more of a voluntary term of work. If you need him, recall him and Sac and I will do out best to make certain he understands it is the right time for him to no longer be involved up here.”

The inventor told her he intended to be up in about a week to start the installation of the Lunar Loops ride equipment. She and Saclolo had liked Bud’s suggestion and adopted it quickly.

“He will be so pleased to hear that, Tom. And I have to say thank you from my heart. If you weren’t married to that beautiful Bashalli I’d give you such a thank you kiss...” She laughed.

Tom, turning bright red, said goodbye and disconnected the call.

Four days later Saclolo called Tom to say he was feeling much better. They discussed Tom’s latest plans for the lunar loop ride. Saclolo was nearly satisfied with everything he heard but decided to not mention a couple small reservations.

“I’d also like to tell you, and hope that if anyone should ask if the Moon is safe or not, that our explosion was a freak accident,” he told the inventor.

“How so?”

“Well, you see one of the men up at the top of the elevator tower did something rather stupid, lost his footing and stepped hard on a downlink cable. That broke the connection, the power station at the bottom had conflicting information, for whatever reason, and things overloaded.”

“Ahhh. I see. And, you are satisfied with that explanation? How about Harlan? And, is that what you have told the families of the two men who died?” Tom hated to sound harsh but it all sounded of cover-up to him.

There were many seconds of silence before Saclolo spoke.

No. It is incomplete, far too convenient and unsatisfactory. And, also no one has Harlan and I discussed this. I know he would dismiss it in seconds and tell me he will get to the bottom of things. I have to tell you, Tom, that I am so tired right now. Tired of the struggles with the Masters, tired of coming to grips with what must be accomplished to make a slave colony into a free nation. Tired of the daily struggle to survive on an airless planetoid. Tired of surprises. And,” he sighed, “I am tired of not having this build behind us.”

Now, it was Tom’s turn to be quiet while he thought over the situation.

Finally, he said, “I truly believe that you must get this one answered. Isn’t it better to take a small hit now rather than have everyone desert you feeling they have been lied to if the truth comes out later?”

The Lunar Co-Director’s voice went very quiet. “Tom, please help me!” he was nearly pleading. “I do not know how to face my people, I don’t know how to face my wife, and I certainly do not know how to tell Harlan I want to drag him back into all this. Not after the big deal I made of, ‘We can handle anything,’ with him.”

Tom had to stifle a laugh. He’d been in similar situations, but his father had always told him something he now related to Saclolo.

“If you are only a leader by accident, then speaking out can ruin your reputation. However, if you are a leader by your choice, and that you feel you are the one man—along with your wife, obviously—who is supposed to lead, then lead. Just be certain to lead by both example and by giving them the truth. You want it and they can accept nothing short of it.”

Saclolo chuckled. “Harlan is always going on about you, but he knows what he talks about. You are very good. All right, Tom. The truth. We had a bit of sabotage and the two men inside that building were the ones doing it.”

Tom felt his face muscles tighten and his stomach clench.

“They were from our hired construction team. When they had nearly finished their duties we found a need for a couple of master electricians, and these two were it. We brought them to the domes, fed them well, and asked for their help. But, someone got to them. Someone we have been trying to ferret out for a year. One of the Empress’ minions who has stayed in hiding. Now, you are about to ask me how I know this. I will tell you.

“These two men who had not yet been paid for their months of service were found with about one-hundred-thousand U.S. dollars in their pockets. They could not have brought it with them and they

would have left here three days from today with the money and their dirty work finished. Our engineers believe they were placing special timed circuits into the electrical processing and distribution building that would have gone off in four weeks, about the time we would be bringing up inspectors from the insurance companies and also a group of travel industry experts we hope to have tell the world how wonderful our resort will be.”

Tom was speechless. If this was true, and he had no reason to doubt it, it was possibly the start of a campaign of terror against the forthcoming resort!

After thanking the lunar man Tom severed the call and made a new one.

“Harlan? Tom. I don’t want to tattle but I’ve just been on the radio with Saclolo, and he is telling me the explosion is sabotage. What have you heard?”

He didn’t expect his Security man to laugh, but that is what Harlan did.

“Tom, I have to tell you that I was about ten minutes from calling you about just this. And, yes, the two men who were killed in the explosion were tampering with the circuitry when an unexpected surge came down from the top of the solar farm. One clumsy man stepped on a cable and foiled the bad guys.”

“All except the man who put them up to it, though.”

“Yes, that. But I have a way to find out who did it. Saclolo and Magadia have never known about it but I have a list of people up here my... or rather their security folks keep a close eye on. And, they tell me there is one very prime candidate for the man behind the money. His name is Danilo Cruz, but goes by the nickname of Big Guy. He is very rich, and has been known to pay for rides up and down to Earth where he is, or was, but probably is, a bit of a gangster in the Filipino crime scene in New York.”

“Okay, so is he up there now, and how do you pin this on him?”

“He is, but he is due to fly down day after tomorrow on a supply rocket run. The how is I plan to send down someone else to follow him and get me solid information of what he does. Then, as soon as he comes back I arrest him.”

* * * * *

Donnell Bassett was a nearly defeated man. His grand plan to kill his nemesis had not come to pass. He hadn’t even been within a mile of Tom on any of the inventor’s trips up. What he considered to be his practice runs had, indeed, been successful in that people had died.

Even his unintended murders had worked out. Nobody suspected him other than for his bringing up the plague, and all that got him were a trio of amputated fingers, a lot of pain, and more injections in two weeks than he'd had the rest of his life!

And, every time a needle went in he thought to himself, *That could be the knife that kills you, Swift!*

But, the work he and the other men—the all but two who survived—had been hired to accomplish was finished.

* * * * *

Cruz left the lunar port the next day in the company of a very large man he had explained was a long lost cousin when the man came up with him three weeks earlier. As he entered the elevator an unseen camera got a close up of his face and another one got a detailed set of shots of the silver-handled cane he carried.

Earlier, when the man's attention had been on a pretty Filipina girl wearing an almost inappropriately short skirt, another of Harlan's people managed to get a cotton swab of the handle. It proved to contain sweat, dirt, epithelial cells of the man, and dried human blood.

It was not *his* blood!

* * * * *

Harlan decided to remain on the Moon. There were just too many things to try to get a handle on. Murder, plague, personal attacks... he knew it was a short list but it seemed miles long at times.

To make matters worse, or at least more tense, Saclolo was becoming a little stand-offish.

"We can do this, Harlan. You ought to go home, take your kids and my mother, and enjoy life. Come back on opening day and we'll have a drink together. Now, I have to run." And, off the man went.

Now, as Harlan walked around the second level of the main dome looking at everything that could be seen, and a few things he knew to be there that went unnoticed by everyone, his brain was running in overdrive.

The Security team had people and cameras watching at least nineteen people inside the dome city. And, with the recent departure of two others on the To Be Watched list, his agent team in New York was busy keeping tabs on one very rich criminal and one very dull-witted man acting as his body guard.

With everything going according to plan, and no further deaths or any real mysteries, he was completely unable to relax. It was too

quiet. Too serene.

Almost as if something was being carefully orchestrated that would make the previous weeks and months look like the work of children at play.

His “cop sense” was thrumming every nerve in his body. At night he could barely get to sleep he was so worried about his twins. More than once he had the thought they and Lola ought to leave the Moon, but then—and unless he also departed—they would be at the mercy of anyone down on the big, blue planet below with some sort of revenge in mind.

A noise to his right made his heart race until he saw it was only one of the local women coming into the main dome from the agricultural one immediately to the north.

He silently chuckled. At least that gave him an idea where he was inside the dome.

His TeleVoc *beeped* in his brain. Nobody other than Harlan, and Doc Simpson, wore one and there were only repeaters in three of the main domes. It announced, *Damon Swift*.

Tapping the hidden pin under his collar he answered. “Yes, Damon. Something important?”

“Hello, Harlan. And, not especially, but Phil Radnor is sitting here with a surveillance report that hit his desk from down in New York City. Do you know anything about this? I wasn’t aware we were paying any investigators down there nor do we have an active presence.”

Harlan explained about Danilo Cruz then said that all costs were being paid by Cordillera City.

“In the parlance of the street, he is one bad dude, Damon. Add words like ‘extremely,’ and ‘supremely’ to that. We believe he is one of the Master’s old minions and someone involved in our deaths up here.”

Damon thought this information over. “Oh. Does it affect you or the twins?”

“Not as such but his sort do not like or appreciate me and what sort of law and order I’ve brought to this city.”

“I see. In that case let me read this report:

Subject Cruz seen entering disused warehouse building near docks in Red Hook. Two others. One giant, obviously hired help, and one very scared man. All Orientals. Three entered and two came out. Looked inside and found old and new blood but no body. Advise.

“That is the total of it, Harlan. Now that I’ve read it I would say you need to be extra cautious. Also, if this man and his giant come back up, I want them detained until the police in the City give the okay to release him.”

In spite of the tenseness of the situation, Harlan chuckled.

“Already on my to-do list, Damon. Ask Phil to stand by. As soon as you and I wrap up I’ll page him.”

“Unless you have something else, like a request to bring your family down and give them protection—” there was more than a hint of order rather than inquiry in the inventor’s voice, “—then I believe we can sign off.”

A moment later Phil’s right hand went up to his collar and he nodded to Damon before walking from the office. It was obvious he was in deep conversation before the door closed.

Damon made a phone call to Chief Slater in Shopton and read him the cryptic report.

“Can you, in Harlan’s absence, call the police in Manhattan and also in the borough of Brooklyn and tell them about this possible murder? I’m sending you an electronic copy of the message in about five seconds.”

“If it were anyone but you or Tom, Damon, I’d ask if you were crazy. But, I know better so the answer is yes. And, I see the page just starting to come out from the printer. Thanks!”

Damon sat down behind his desk, fingers steepled in front of his mouth. This was a lot to contemplate. He hoped Harlan had a good grip on the situation. If he needed help it was going to take at least two hours to get it to him.

But, he said to himself, he knew the job was dangerous when he took it!

Chapter Nineteen: Building the Loops

“HOW ABOUT I fly the route and drop markers along the way?” Bud offered. “I can take Saclolo along and we can devise the most interesting routes for this Lunar Loops ride. Well?”

Tom smiled, politely, but shook his head. “Sorry, flyboy, but what might look good from high in the air, as it were, can run into all sorts of problems when you try to build it. The problems even tend to snowball all out of proportion.”

Bud really wanted to be of some help but he knew Tom would always have a good reason for these things. Sometimes, however, he had to request that information.

“So... help educate me on that, please.”

“Okay. Let’s sit down and I’ll try.” They took seats at one of the tables in the cafeteria at Enterprises. Tom pulled his tablet computer from the shoulder bag he pretty much constantly carried it in and laid it on the table.

“Here. This is a composite photo of the Moon in the general vicinity of where the southern loop is supposed to go. We’ll ignore the dark side for now and concentrate on the Earth-facing side. So, we enter the light about here...” and he tapped a spot on the screen. A red dot appeared there. “Go ahead and zoom in and then trace a route over the next, oh maybe twenty miles with your finger.” He slid the tablet over to the flyer. “Your choice of the best route.”

Bud spent almost ten minutes checking, tracing and erasing only to move the route more than five times before he slid the device back to Tom.

“There. If I were able to sail over that I think this would be my choice.”

Tom glanced at it and nodded. “Good. So, now let’s put your route lines in memory and erase them for the time being.” He did that and returned the view to the Moon photo. “Now, let me take that exact starting point but this time we go down to ground level and see what we are up against All I am interested in is the waypoint where we will place one of the interim Attractatrons. Okay? Fine.”

As Bud watched Tom brought up an arc of green at the distance where the station would be placed. He moved along that line erasing many points where construction would be anything from difficult to impossible, and several more places where the charts indicated a weak surface structure with gas pockets under the surface. He zoomed back out and found the approximate point

where the ride capsule would make its wide swing around for the return journey and placed a dot on the first arc that would allow it all to function correctly.

“Now, I’ll let the computer tell us where that will take us.”

He tapped a few points and brought up a command line. Seconds later the tablet had devised the best possible route based on where the interim station could be constructed.

When he brought Bud’s route line up the flyer let out a groan of dismay.

“Jetz!” he said. “My route is off by miles. How did that happen?”

Tom patted his forearm. “It’s okay, Bud. You didn’t have all the facts available. And, that is why it will be nice to have you and even Saclolo fly out and around the areas and come up with some potential beauty points, but the computer is going to be the one to tell us what is possible.”

“Now I see. But, suppose we spot something that really, really needs to be included in the grand tour? Then what?” He looked honestly concerned.

Tom laughed. “Then, we come up with a program for the Attractatrons to vary the route left and right a bit. Nothing that will shake up the passengers, but if the ideal path ends up a couple miles from the very best view they could get, the capsule will most likely be allowed to travel out or in to get to those points.”

“Sort of like a fisherman with his rod and reel, huh? If the fish needs to move around, he can let a little line out or pull a little in and play the fish.”

Tom thought a moment and smiled. “Yes. It is something like that. Good analogy, Bud.”

It was a very accurate analogy. The Attractatron that would grab onto the individual ride capsule would work with the launch acceleration and shoot the passengers out on whatever route best suited things up to the hand-off point. At that time the capsule needed to be within about two miles of the device placement in order to make a smooth transfer from one Attractatron to the next. That one would swing the capsule around in a wide arc, also moving it closer and farther out to accommodate the best visuals—and to add a little movement excitement to the ride—before handing it off to either the original unit in the case of the shorter route, or to the third Attractatron in the case of the longer loop.

“The wonderful thing about this plan, is,” he explained to the flyer, “at some time in the future we can add one or more new loops.”

Bud scowled a little. “Don’t you mean Saclolo and his people can add more loops? What I mean is this is their show isn’t it? We’re just the manufacturing and brain trust for them.”

Tom looked a little sheepish. “You’re right, Bud. Absolutely correct. I was getting ahead of things. So, for now we build the equipment for their first two loops and then let them come back in the future and ask what else is possible. Happy?”

Bud gave one emphatic nod. “Yep! So, now that we are all firmly put in our place, tell me about the capsule.”

“Well, according to their designs it will look a lot like the body of one of our SE-11 Commuter jets without the wing above and the tail at the back. Lots of clear tomasite around side-by-side seats. Everybody gets to be next to a window. The only differences I foresee is in the materials and size. Where he wanted to make this large enough to handle thirty people at a time, that was back when it would be traveling around the entire Moon and be gone for more than an hour.”

“So, with these shorter loops, they get more people out and around?”

Tom shook his head. “I hope to convince them all to make these ten- or twelve-person capsules. There’s no pilot so all seats are paying ones. My calculations show that each loop can handle three capsules at a time during the busy periods, but probably just two on each. That still gets them twenty-four people per hour on the long loop and thirty-six on the short one. Truthfully, with their maximum capacity at the hotel of about five hundred, they would need to assume every guest is going to ride at least once a day to keep that rate up.”

Bud smiled. “They live in hope, skipper.”

Tom smiled. “Yes, they well might. But that Psychologist we hired believes that only about sixty percent will ever want to take the ride, and at that perhaps only seventy to ninety a day. That can be accomplished in six to nine runs or within no more than five hours. The system can handle that with one diode tied behind its back!”

When they got to the Moon two days later, Saclolo was almost back to complete health. He jumped at the chance to go out with the two younger men and survey the routes.

Each of them took a two-man *Straddler* and they headed first to the launch point.

“I’ve had the rail gun disassembled and shortened to just three-

hundred feet. As you can see it is resting on some new pylons and the loading end is just down there poking out from the back side of the mountains. We had to dig a new tunnel from the common area, but by keeping it inside until the pod gets ejected, we've been told to expect at least fifteen percent more people to ride than if they have to go outside to climb in."

The set up looked sturdy and nearly complete. They spiraled down so Tom could look at the launching area. It was built like a very large airlock. Inside the guests could embark in their shirtsleeves rather than wearing a pressure suit. Once in, the air would be evacuated, the outer clear doors would open and the pod would be moved forward to engage the magnets of the rail gun system.

"Looks very nice, Saclolo," Tom complimented him.

"Thank you. And, you might not be able to see it yet but the end of the tracks can be curved slightly to be good for both the south and north runs."

They headed out across the plains and as they went, Tom had Saclolo drop small beacons to the surface to show where he preferred to have first the southern route and then by backtracking, the northern route.

Tom believed at least eighty percent of his points of interest were possible, but knew the computers would tell the absolute tale.

An hour after returning the Cordillera City Tom had the answers and he and Bud headed for the Administration offices.

"I'd love to have a giant plotter to give you a larger look, but we'll have to do with what I have in my tablet," he explained as they crowded around the device.

He took them on a virtual tour of both routes showing them where Saclolo wanted the pods to travel and where they would not.

"Generally, those aren't because of placement of the Attractatrons but because to make that sort of course change at the speeds the pods will travel would be too jarring or sharp. Sorry, Saclolo, but the Psychologist we involved in this says about the last thing you want to do is turn this into a whip right, whip left roller coaster sort of ride.

When he looked slightly disappointed, Magadia poked him in the upper arm.

"And, if you ever want to get me out on that thing it damn well better never shake, rattle or roll me around."

He grinned at her and asked Tom, "Can the speed be changed? I mean, can we offer tame versions of the ride and then faster ones

for those who like that sort of thing?”

Tom shook his head, but said, “Yes. And the reason I shook no is because we’ve done something you have not, and that is talk to insurance experts. You’ve found coverage for the resort but not the rides. Not yet. I will leave you with the name of one company who will cover the rides as long as they fall into the heading of ‘approachable by most.’ That means nothing faster than one-hundred-fifty miles per hour and nothing that shoves people from side to side inside those pods.”

Saclolo shrugged. “Guess we live with that until people complain it is too tame, then we see what might be done.”

Bud spoke up. “You still have the zip line ride that is plenty hair-raising for the thrill seekers. But, Tom also did some research and it turns out that at big resorts with lines or even bungee jumps, only about one in eighteen guests take advantage of it.”

With the actual Attractatron equipment completed and waiting at the Construction Company, all Tom had to do was have the anchor points checked for suitability and then to get them shipped up and installed.

Each one would have its own power pod that would be triply adequate for the lunar resort needs even if the ride routes were each run fifteen times a day. All that was required was a six hour down and recharge break at night. This would be assured by a lockout that would not allow any group to depart after a certain time, about midnight each evening.

The pod components had been shipped up weeks earlier and the Cordilleran technical construction team—also responsible for everything electrical and electronic at the resort—put them together under the watchful eye of Hank Sterling. He did none of the work and only was there as an advisor to see the work was completed exactly as it needed to be.

It was.

At Opening Day minus fifteen days, everything was coming together and only small details and finishing touches remained.

* * * * *

Harlan was waiting for the load of “Guinea Pigs” coming up from the Earth. He wanted to talk to the captain of the ship. Right now it was dropping down to land at Gate One at the base of the mountain that held the Lunar Resort. He hoped that no one ever told these visitors that what the resort personal were calling them.

It was one week before the official opening of the resort and

someone in the Cordillera administration office (she was not to be named) thought it would be a good idea to have a test run with people coming up from Earth.

A drawing from a list of willing Swift employees and relatives of people that lived and worked on the Moon was held and fifty lucky winners were selected along with five alternates who would only be notified if one of the others could not make the trip. Each winner could take one other person with him or her, but only adults could go this time. Breakfast and dinner for each of the five days / four night they would be at the resort was included. Guests would be on their own, and also paying for, their lunches at any of the five cafés and eateries. Ditto, souvenirs and the various attractions.

The idea was to have the resort people working their jobs and getting the potential kinks out with a friendly audience. The so-called guinea pigs were being put up in the lower, less expensive rooms of the hotel. All the shops and restaurant were open for them to buy things to take home or use while there. It was a bargain, and a win for everybody involved.

Harlan didn't stand around waiting for the fifty-four happy people to disembark from the LunaSaucer space ship number 1. The second saucer was coming six hours later with another fifty-one passengers.

Instead he headed for the cargo bay connection tube and boarded the ship that way.

The ship's control station was in the center of the saucer. Three slightly recessed control panels and seats faced towards the center on the deck. Passengers sat in a two tier ring arrangement around the center command module in overstuffed, reclining lounge chairs like you would find in the best of First Class sections of jetliners. The 360-degree wraparound visual screens were elevated just above the pilots so everybody could see what was happening outside the ship in front, behind and all around them. Under the passenger level was the cargo hold, a Helium3 reactor and a small crew area. The repelatron drives were located around the perimeter where the two inverted saucers met. Ship's guidance and RADAR sat in the twin domes above and below the saucer halves.

"Zimby Cox!" Harlan called out as he rushed toward the command station, "where the heck are you?"

A head popped out from under the control panel space where the pilot's legs normally fit and looked around.

"Harlan!" he yelled back as he got off his knees and stood up. He put the pen that he had dropped back into his pocket. He climbed the two steps up to floor level. "I expected to see you, of course, but not this soon, my man." He held out his hand for Harlan to take.

“Working hard and fast, Zimby. I’ve been in the thick of it ever since I came back. Nothing but sickness and murder all around me. Can’t even identify the murderer either. We thought we had him, but it turned out to be a dead end. That, my friend, is not what I wanted to talk to you about. Got a place we can talk?”

“Sure, the ship has a room with a cot and chair in it in case someone gets sick and we have to isolate them. It has a folding door and no one will be using it. Let’s go there.

Zimby lead the way to the rear of the circular cabin, pressed a button and they headed down a set of stairs that appeared under three newly retracted seats.

“A little cramped down here, but it should do, Harlan.” He sat on the edge of the cot and let Harlan have the chair.

“I’ll make this quick. I was surprised to see your name as pilot on this trip. Is everything going well in Tibet?”

Zimby laughed. “Sure... no problems there, and all about to button up in a couple days. Believe it or not, Damon and Anne Swift flew over in the resupply ship and visited for a couple of days. They were flabbergasted by what they saw. He was well pleased with the outcome. And what was uncovered and made viewable with the Retroscope was well worth the cost of sending it there. The art that was recoverable just from the cave walls is fantastic. Sir Randy and Ti Saga say it will take scholars decades to decipher it all. And the Sanskrit tablets they’ve been able to enhance the writing on are going to change a lot of history about the founding of Buddhism. And, in case you are interested, the old boy is still alive. Not doing well, but he insists he is going to make the official announcement himself if it’s the last thing he does.”

They both knew it might well be his final action.

“That’s good, but what I’m concerned about is did they find anything about the Masters?”

“Not a thing, Harlan. They came to the conclusion that that box and the gems have nothing to do with each other. That the box did indeed come from the cave but the Masters had nothing to do with it. They believe the empty box had been sold off at some point and it was just something they must have picked up and happened to use to store the gems. End of story as far as they are concerned.”

“End indeed, my friend. I’m glad it’s over with. But, there was another story starting as far as I could tell.” When Zimby looked unsure what that meant, he said, “You and a certain tall and rather pretty female archeologist? Tina?”

Zimby blushed. “Uhhh, yeah. Well, we sort of did hit it off and we sort of did spend a lot of quiet time together. I don’t know about

you, Harlan, but it's kind of spooky to be grabbed and kissed while standing right in front of a cave painting of some ancient god who's staring down at you with an all-knowing grin on his round face."

Harlan laughed. "Okay, I sense you'd rather not go into that right now. So, how did you get here?"

"Damon took Chris and me back with them in the *Sky Queen*. He left the other jet there with the two pilots that flew them out. They were only going to be there another two weeks before they go home and sort through everything. I was going to take some time off but when this mission appeared on the flight board, I signed right up for it. Wanted to see what this type of flights are going to be like."

"Have you come to a decision?"

"Yeah, in about ten or twenty years I might just be ready to settle down to this kind of tame job. Right now I like the change of scenery I get working for the Swifts and with people like you."

"Glad to hear it. And back on a previous subject, if I might ask how are things with Tina O'Hare looking in the future?" Harlan had a twinkle in his eye.

His friend blushed again. "Fine. Do you want to know the truth?"

"Always."

"Tina also came back with us and will be on the next ship up. I thought we needed some time together away from the digs and Sir Randolf and the others. To see if we can be together in a more social setting and have some truly alone time as well. With Sir Randy around, her private time was almost nonexistent."

"Good for you... and her. I hear that they have some super Moon diamond rings for sale. I can get you one really cheap." Harlan was all smiles.

"I'll keep that in mind, but I don't think so on this trip."

"Well enough. I have to go, Zimby. Thanks for the information and enjoy your vacation."

"If you need me, Harlan I'll be here for two weeks. Don't be afraid to call."

Harlan nodded as he got up from the chair. "Say Hello to Tina for me, and we'll try to get together and go to the *Top of the Moon* restaurant some night."

"Count on it."

Chapter Twenty: Grand Hotel

AS SEEN from the observation tower at Cordillera City, the nearly complete lunar resort looked entirely out of place, like Oz in the middle of an unexpected poppy field. With the area between them in near darkness only the pool of light that illuminated the crater of their colony and the lights of the hotel set into the mountainside could be easily seen.

There was now an ongoing debate over what to call the hotel.

Many wanted an entirely unique name to coincide with the uniqueness of the having a high class resort up on the Moon in the first place.

But, the name that was gaining momentum, even among the most bitter of the residents, was Hotel Shangri La.

In truth, it was an acknowledgement of the former Masters and the name they had taken when the slave colony they had set up, but it also was a slap in the faces of the dead brother and sister by turning their vision of a base for their megalomaniacal operations into a peaceful and forever free commercial endeavor.

Saclolo was on the side promoting the Shangri La name while Magadia was vacillating between that and Hotel Freedom.

No matter what the eventual name—and Sandy Swift down on the Earth who was doing volunteer work creating various marketing materials needed a decision within a day at most—it was going to be one of the most grand of grand hotels ever built.

It was even more impressive than Saclolo ever envisioned when he first set forth a basic design using a stub of a pencil and an old piece of paper.

Beginning about fifty feet above the flat and pockmarked surface of the back side of the Moon, it rose fifteen stories to a point about sixty percent of the way to the peak of the mountain. Like Earth hotels, the higher up you went, with a corresponding more impressive view, the larger the rooms and the more expensive they would be.

Every room on the outside of the mountain featured floor to ceiling triple pane windows made on Earth from clear tomasite. They would withstand even a direct hit from anything up to about six inches across.

But, that would never happen. It could never happen.

Patrolling it an arc of nearly one-hundred-sixty degrees were a trio of Tom's little mules, his Space Battering Rams. These were

tasked with grabbing onto and flinging away anything coming in from space. And that meant on a daily basis they picked up about five pieces of space debris that might come within five miles of impacting around the hotel and the colony.

Inside the mountain were other hotel rooms with less impressive, and less costly accommodations. The lowest five floors featured two rings of rooms inside, the next five had a single interior ring of rooms and the top four were suites only.

It was the top level that had no hotel rooms. Instead, it was a large, circular entertainment ring that slowly rotated around allowing anyone standing by a view window to see a 360° view of the lunar surface every one-hundred minutes.

Within the ring were three restaurants, a dance club, and a private, by invitation and appointment, exercise facility offering both Lunar gravity and Earth gravity rooms.

Of course, anyone wanting to utilize the higher gravity area would wear a neck-to-ankle unitard suit similar to those Tom and his crews used in space. Featuring an interwoven mesh of a special metal alloy, it interacted with a network of tiny repelatron emitters set in the ceiling. Those were tuned to only repel that alloy so the effect was a gently push down all over the wearer's body that gave the illusion of stronger gravity.

The top of the mountain that had been bored into when the Masters tried to turn it into a water storage tank—a failure that had them abandoning it—had already been sealed tight about fifty feet above the uppermost level's floor.

A hydroponics setup was even now producing oxygen to go along with the other gases that were being produced by a process of breaking down some special lunar rocks using heat and electricity. It would have enough atmosphere to support the growth of some very special trees that were being imported from high in the Himalayas.

Saclolo had a very serious discussion with Harlan Ames over those trees.

They were native to the area where the Security man had located the injured former Empress Shangri La. The last thing Saclolo wanted to do was insult Harlan or to bring up bad memories. But, the man had surprised him by laughing and saying he thought it was an excellent idea.

So, excess heat created by the hotel and resort would be pumped down into exchangers in the huge open area so its temperature would remain at about sixty-eight degrees at all times making it comfortable for most people to walk around in just their normal

clothes.

A series of shops positioned around the lowest level perimeter would hold everything from concessions for foods and drinks to curios and moonstones, a type of crystal that had been formed by the tremendous heat of the nuclear fire that had once raged under them. That incredible heat had turned certain metals in the lunar soil into shiny globules that were being dug up, smoothed out and polished into a new type of gem never before seen.

They would fetch high prices from people looking for something to commemorate their unique vacation with something even more rare than flawless diamonds.

And the range of things soon to be available to visitors didn't end there.

Saclolo, with a great deal of help from some of the Engineers at Enterprises, had devised a way to create the zip line he wanted. Anyone with enough nerve would be able to take the three mile trip in just a spacesuit that would see them flying at the end of a tether, around several corners and even up and down over the lunar landscape, giving an even greater feeling of free flight than any similar attraction on Earth.

A perfectly balanced harness with 360-degree waist ring allowing the more daring riders to spin as they sailed over the surface was attached behind and above them.

At no time would they be in any danger, but the illusion was sufficient to raise the heart rate of all but the most seasoned thrill seekers. Without exception, their test guests all wanted a second go at each ride.

* * * * *

Peter/Donnell was back in Albany, New York. His work finished, he and his team had been given small bonuses for their hard work and flown back to Florida. From there it was up to each man to find their own way home.

He had to get back into the old apartment building he used to live in. He'd left something there and believed he might need to do a little breaking and entering to retrieve it.

When he reached the apartment and stood in front of it he realized that it was still empty. He was so startled by this that the suitcase he was carrying slipped from his hand. He was surprised that no one had taken the place over. His pockets were full with the money he had made while on the Moon so he was careful to look around himself for potential attackers. There were none so he relaxed.

What troubled him the most was that he had failed to kill Tom Swift. He had hoped he might accomplish it on the work trip, but he had his back-up plan! The old ticket he bought so long ago before he went to the Moon was hiding under the linoleum floor in the kitchen closet.

He was going to need it to go back to finish what he'd started. The only fly in the ointment was not going back as a savior of the city from the ever-smiling and self-righteous scoundrel that he *knew* Tom Swift was. At least he no longer had to live as poor as a church mouse. He had his return ticket, money in his pocket and only a few weeks to wait. He was going to enjoy himself like he never had. The best of the best was going to be his for the next few weeks. Getting back to the Moon and seeing Tom Swift dead was as far as he thought ahead. Like the kid he perpetually was, he wasn't thinking beyond that point.

He boldly walked into the kitchen and was about to kneel down in front of the doorless closet when the sunlight from outside the back kitchen door was cut off. As Bassett spun around he was knocked off his feet and hit his head on the dirty floor.

He must have passed out for a few moments because when he noticed his surrounding again he was sitting on the old ratty living room couch. He was being held upright by a meaty hand dug into his shoulder from behind him. A well-dressed man was standing, looking down at him while leaning on his silver-handled black cane. He was not a happy man. His black, slanted eyes looked like mere pinpricks in his harsh face. His lips were white from him pressing them so hard together. It made him look even more angry.

Donnell thought he recognized this man from months earlier but could not be certain.

"You have failed us!" he hissed. His voice was not perfect in its intonation of the English words. "We paid out good money and have received nothing in return."

Bassett slowly recognized the man. That made the situation even worse. Donnell knew he couldn't wiggle his way out of this.

"Where I come from the penalty for failure is death."

"If it's about the money I have lots I can give you." Bassett reached into his pocket and pulled out the roll of cash he had. He held it up to the man to take. He was willing to lose that instead of his life. Money in his pocket would do him no good if he was dead and dumped on some garbage heap.

The man stood straight up and, with a sweep of his cane, he hit the cash out of Bassett's hand, sending it into the far wall. Bassett yelled in pain; he now had a cracked finger or two. The man behind

him shoved a handkerchief into his mouth and clamped his jaw upward to shut him up. For the most part it worked. Whimpering could still be heard.

The man threw an envelope at him.

“This is what you came for and the only reason you are not dead. The money you have forfeited and it is a cheap price for your life. This time do not fail. If you do you won’t get off the Moon alive. I will personally see to it.”

Donnell felt his bladder let go and they could all smell the results. The other men sneered in disgust.

“Don’t try to leave this apartment. There is canned food enough for you to live on until you leave... if you do not waste it. Now let my man look at your fingers. The least we can do it fix them so you can go back and kill the man we all want dead.”

Donnell newest ordeal was about over, and the rest of his life about to begin.

All of Donnell’s work and suffering were about to pay off. He now had absolutely no money left other than a couple crumpled singles he had stolen from a tip jar at a coffee shop, but he had his golden ticket!

The following day he would board a luxury jetliner for a trip down to the Cape Canaveral launch site in Florida. The golden ticket holders were to go up with the test group, Harlan’s guinea pigs—and would get to stay over through the official opening day. The training and launch site was the original concept that the two lunar Co-Directors had for getting people to want to come visit the Cordillera City. It was just an upgrade on the space theme park that had been around for years. Most of the activities were based around the old-style astronaut training from back in the late nineteen-nineties. Gyroscopic rides, flight command simulators, a kind of spacesuit that was in reality an underwater suit to simulate zero-ges on Earth in an Olympic size swimming pool.

Then there was the interactive roller coaster rides mixed in with Tom Swift’s 3-D telejector of actual moon topography. The intent was to build interest for going to the Moon. This was a cheap alternative for the average family to enjoy and at the same time drew in the people that could afford the real trip to the Moon with a snippet of what to expect.

It also was now being used as a one-day training course for those about to depart.

The real launches of the Cordillera flying saucer spaceships each

day were now planned to be part of the day's highlights. Especially when the space ship took off from its nearby launch site and flew a curved course really slowly over the theme park before heading out into space.

Donnell made it though the training even though it was suspicious to a few that he seemed to already be familiar with much of what they were telling him. But, the next morning came and his saucer was filled with other eager, paying customers. Five minutes later they were in the air and heading toward space.

Now, he could sit back and relax for three hours as he and the other "lucky" people who also managed to secure the very limited tickets headed for what they all must think was the dream vacation of a life time.

For Donnell, it was to be the culmination of a dream of revenge.

Nearly every hour he went to the lavatory to check his disguise. Neither his own, late mother nor his late uncle would have recognized him, but what was of paramount importance was that nobody on the Moon recognized him. After all it had only been a few weeks since he had been working there.

As he admired the person in the mirror all he could see was dark brown eyes rather than his soft blue ones, a strong chin that normally was divided by a deep cleft he had injected silicone caulking into and then had to use his thumbs to painfully even out the distribution of it, and the pockmark on his nose was no longer there but filled with mortician's body putty.

As the guests took the elevator to the main floor and walked into the colony, he had a momentary freeze on discovering every guest was personally greeted by Saclolo and Magadia Reyes and Harlan Ames.

Quick words of welcome were passed to each arrival and then they were taken in small groups to the staging area for the start of the festivities.

As soon as he was able to slip away into a side passage, Donnell was no longer part of the guest group. He was definitely on his own now and hoped he had everything right.

And, he hoped this horrible stomach sickness would go away so he could enjoy his victory.

He made his way to an old storage closet and was pleased to see his makeshift weapon was still hidden in the back, wrapped in a plastic tarp.

* * * * *

Donnell's mysterious Asian man arrived back at the lunar colony

two hours later. He'd had many things to attend to since speaking last with his would-be assassin. One of those "things" was a man who no longer would make any trouble for him as that man was no longer among the living.

When he arrived and the elevator disgorged the fifteen people traveling back with him, four very large men, each wearing a CSG (Cordillera Security Group) badge on their belts took him by the arms and dragged him into a side room.

The man tried to kick them, bite them and even swing his silver-handled cane at two of them. It was quickly taken away and shoved into a large evidence bag.

While that was being taken to the Security office for testing, the other three men kept Danilo Cruz in the chair he had been unceremoniously shoved onto and handcuffed to.

"Makikita mo ang lahat ng magdusa masakit na pagkamatay ng kabalbalan na ito!" he shouted at his captors.

"Naw," said the smallest of the three with a small laugh. He was Samoan by birth but had married a Filipino woman. That had been eleven years earlier and he understood the Tagalog language. He'd heard threats from her that outdid this gray-haired man's. "We ain't gonna suffer no horrible death over this. Now... *you* might. That depends on what Harlan Ames finds on that cane handle. Like, more blood than what we took before you went Earthward." He chuckled seeing the alarmed look on Cruz's face.

The other two men joined in. One of them poked Cruz in the shoulder. "You gonna find this funny, but I know you helped or else ordered my brother killed up here when you was working for that Empress. Now," and he leaned in very close to Cruz's face, "I'll get justice. Just hope and pray they don't let you go 'cause you won't see midnight if they do!"

Cruz was panicking now, He'd tried threats and switched to promises of riches and power and any number of things these men did not want or need. All three had been wronged by him and his minions. All they wanted was the sort of revenge that came with tribal justice and punishment.

Harlan and the fourth of the large men walked into the room.

The Security man had a huge smile on his face.

Cruz saw the smile and threw up.

* * * * *

Saclolo, Magadia, Harlan and Doc made a grand tour of the hotel and facilities at the resort. Everywhere they turned things gleamed in the perfectly aimed lighting. Crisp linens had been

added to anything that would be covered by fabric from tables in the dining rooms to the curtains and beds in even the least expensive of the rooms.

A special allotment of water had been authorized to fill the pool on the lowest floor of the hotel. Not a huge pool by any standards, it had to be built in a special room with sloped floors to return any water that was splashed out by over-eager swimmers. The lower gravity made it nearly impossible to keep all the water inside. Once people had a taste of swimming in the low gravity, they were hooked!

At the end of their four hours Doc made a statement they all agreed on.

“This is going to knock people’s socks off. If it isn’t an immediate hit, I may go door to door down on Earth drumming up business for you!”

* * * * *

Within two days the five other men who worked for Cruz were located—four in Cordilerra City and one back in New York—rounded up and set for trials.

With all his money impounded, there was nothing to pay for defence lawyers either on the Moon or the Earth.

Public defenders were unknown in the colony so Cruz and those unfortunates had to defend themselves. His goons turned on their former boss as quickly as possible and even without promises of any sort of immunity or protections. They had seen far too many television programs and assumed they were “singing for a deal.”

The man in New York did the court system a favor by finding a way to hang himself in the middle of the night.

The others were not so fortunate.

The four goons were returned to the Earth to be sent to maximum security prisons all across the Philippines. None of them were renown for being pleasant places to spend the remainder of your life in.

The most unfortunate of them was Danilo Cruz. For his many, many crimes he was to be returned to one of the Philippine’s towns where he had savagely beaten and attacked more than a hundred of the citizens while rounding them up for the Masters.

Most of those attacked had survived and were anxious to give him more than a small taste of his own medicine. In fact, they would give him exactly what he had given each of them. In all it would be more than one-hundred savage beatings. It would all begin with the eleven young girls he had horribly molested. They

were to be given thin, sharp sticks to jab into him wherever they wished.

The gamblers among the people of the village were taking bets on how many jabbings or beatings he might survive.

The odds were heavily in favor of, "Very few."

Chapter Twenty-One: Opening Day Festivities

DONNELL was very ill. Every joint ached. His entire body shivered and he retched almost constantly even though his stomach had long-ago emptied.

He was entering a near death euphoria and there was nothing to do but wait for it to envelop him. Death would come as both a release as well as a damning condemnation of his attempts to extract revenge against his enemy. Tom Swift had eluded him. No matter what he tried, he was foiled at every turn. It was almost as if the young inventor had a secret way to spy on his every move.

Even more now than before, he blamed the inventor for the state he was in. His reasoning was on very shaky ground: if Tom Swift didn't *need* to be killed, Donnell Bassett would not be hurting so much!

What Donnell had never taken into account was the deadly combination of his total ineptness along with his inability to plan ahead. Every move he had made earlier and since returning to the Moon had been spur of the moment and knee jerk reactions.

Even his one plan-ahead triumph turned to failure.

When he had gone back to pick up his steel bar and false hand weapon, it was gone. Someone had found it and taken it. He knew it would now be in the hands of Security and probably that Ames man he also truly hated.

His immaturity had never allowed him to develop thinking skills beyond that of a petulant thirteen year old. It was one of the reasons his late uncle, Dan Perkins, had finally refused to have anything to do with the boy. That had been a bitter pill for Donnell to swallow, but he just knew that if he could do something to impress his uncle the man he once worshipped would come running back and congratulate him.

He'd managed to steal a spacesuit and get outside to gather up a few things he knew he needed, and joined a finishing details team as they headed into the resort. There, he slipped behind a four-sided shape—one of the many pyramid blocks he had helped cut out—and waited for the team to disappear down a passageway. Then, he headed for the spot he knew was to be his point of victory. By the time he got there he could barely breathe and his legs ached so much they threatened to give out about every third step.

Now, his vision had dimmed and all he could see were lights and vague shapes in front of his face. Not that it did him any good. He

was hiding in the spot from where he would finally kill Tom Swift. He had hidden under the first of the excursion loop passenger pods that would be launched filled with dignitaries like the colony managers and *Tom Swift!*

There were far too many sensors around the pod providing every sort of feedback for him to do anything to attach his deadly tether to the underside at present. It would come later, just before launch, and halt the rapidly-accelerating pod a mere hundred feet along the launch track forcing everyone inside to be thrown forward with such a harsh inertial force they would be crushed by the pressures.

Sure, others would die but his enemy would be chief among them.

As he snuggled down to wait for the right moment, Donnell began to hallucinate again that he would be hailed back on Earth as a hero, and that Tom Swift's own company would be forced by a special Presidential decree to bring his uncle back from the dead.

* * * * *

Tom and Bud flew a group of dignitaries up from the Earth to the Moon in the *Challenger* about six days after the "golden ticket" and test guests arrived. Two of the saucers flew in formation with them and they left Earth orbit over a five-minute period. In all, ninety-seven people were on board the ships for the reduced-speed, five-hour trip. They included the extended Swift family, eleven others from Enterprises, three U.S. Senators—including Peter Quintana—a six-person delegation from the United Nations, and deputy leaders with family members from thirty-nine free world nations including England, Germany, India, Japan and Canada.

People such as the President of the United States and Britain's Prime Minister were considered to be too much of a risk and so they had to satisfy themselves by being part of the worldwide teleconference showing all the opening festivities.

Nothing was going to upstage the sort of ceremonies seen at events such as the Olympic Games, but the ceremony was due to take about one hour followed by a complete tour of the facilities—provided by both Sandy Swift-Barclay and Bashalli Swift.

Even virtual rides in the various attractions were to be televised.

With no incoming or departing rocket traffic, Tom set the *Challenger* down on the expanse of the landing platform sitting above the domes inside the crater. It required four elevator trips down—with the accompanying complaints that so-and-so deserved to go down first and that others should have to wait.

Tom arbitrated this to nobody's delight, but all abided his decision.

"As the Captain of this ship, and since none of you had the foresight to put these matters into a solid and agreeable plan before, or are willing to set aside petty jealousies at such a time as this, here is what is going to happen. I will call out names at random from this alphabetical listing. Twenty names in each group. Here goes..."

* * * * *

Something similar happened when the Earthmen saw the seating arrangement charts for the presentation hall inside Cordillera City and the 360-degree rotating restaurant at the resort for that evening.

Tom stepped forward and gave the assembled men and women a stern look and was about to say something, but Saclolo stepped forward, brushing past him.

"Honored guests," he called out, "I realize that on your home planet there are certain... well, standards of positioning given to people of certain ranks. And, when I am on the Earth I honor your standards by going along with it."

He waited for the few translators who had come along to do their work before continuing.

"So," he said favoring them with a white, toothy smile, "please do us the same honor while you are on our home soil. The arrangements are not arbitrary, but neither are they changeable at this point. Thank you, so very kindly, for your cooperation!"

As he passed the bemused guests and approached one slightly amused inventor, he muttered, "And, that is how to tell bratty children they need to start behaving."

An hour later, Sandy gave the signal. She was acting as the director for the broadcast back to the Earth and all timing would be taken from her.

A deep-timbered announcer's voice—a former radio announcer in the Philippines—rumbled through the speakers in the large arena in Dome Two where the basic ceremony would begin.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, people of the Earth and the free city-state of Cordillera City, Luna, and anyone else listening in, let me welcome you to the Cordillera City Resort's grand opening ceremonies and dedication. And now, I present Mr. Saclolo Reyes and Mrs. Magadia Reyes, co-Directors of the colony."

A round of applause came spontaneously although Sandy's finger hovered over a recording of enthusiastic clapping to be sent

out with the visuals in case the local audience failed her.

Magadia had already said she was not about to be a public speaker, so Saclolo stepped forward and adjusted the microphone. “Thank you. When the now free citizens of this colony were kidnapped, enslaved and transported to the Moon to build a fortress and base of operations for the pair calling themselves The Masters, we all believed our days were numbered. For some, that was a terrible truth. For those who are here today, it was taken as a challenge.”

More applause came and he quickly motioned it to silence.

“As with any civilization we are made up of people from various walks of life and with varying degrees of education. But, like any new colony, we have had to learn and adapt rapidly in order to survive. Along with that, we have had to find ways to buy or barter for what we ourselves cannot provide. Today, we dedicate one such aspect of this colony. It is one we know is special and will provide the most unique experience for each and every person coming here to be with us.”

He described many of the resort’s facilities, needing to pause as intrigued murmurs interrupted him frequently. The two attractions receiving the loudest applause and cheers were the Lunar Zip Line and what was officially being called the Lunar Loops.

Bud smirked at that announcement. That name had been his thought all along.

Twenty minutes later Saclolo ended with:

“But, now let me do more than tell you about what we have created. I mean, what we along with the diligent assistance of the people working for and with Tom Swift and his father Damon at Swift Enterprises have built. Now, let’s all go see what this place is really about!”

The colony’s three long trucks had been adapted to act as people movers. Fully enclosed now with comfortable seating and large windows at each seat, they could carry thirty-four people at a time.

In spite of her hesitation to speak to the full crowd, Magadia acted as guide for the first vehicle with Sandy taking number two and Bashalli the final one. Each woman kept up a well-rehearsed speech about what the passengers were seeing as they drove the fourteen miles across the dimly lit surface.

There was some light as a reflector array had recently been added to the very top of the space elevator tower along with the solar panel farm. It not only picked up direct sunlight from its position high above the surface, it also softened and spread it out. Now, on the surface it could be perpetually like the light about

fifteen minutes after sundown on Earth.

The dignitaries who had never been off the surface of their own planet—with the exception of Senator Quintana and one of the members of the House of Representatives who had been an astronaut at one point—were stunned into near silence by what they were witnessing.

Their guides fielded every question with practiced ease and nodded occasionally to the other three women sitting nearby who would take over these duties once the resort began receiving regular customers.

Tom, Bud, Saclolo and a few others took *Straddlers* over and made it to the resort in six minutes instead of the forty minutes the vehicles would take. By the time everyone arrived, there was not only senior staff for the city and the resort to greet them, but the rest of the ceremonies and tour were set to start.

The grand tour of the hotel and resort took thirty minutes before everyone was ushered into an auditorium for a presentation and virtual 3D ride-along on each of the attractions. That, with the exception of the Lunar Loops which would be a live-only ride for anyone wanting to go, was one of the most fully immersive experiences for everyone there.

The lower gravity, 3D glasses and special seats that tilted and rumbled to provide additional sensory experiences gave them all the feeling they were actually on each of the attractions.

These had been planned to be only temporary, but many of the participants suggested they be retained as a permanent part of the resort for those too timid to venture outside in a spacesuit.

One woman screamed as they “rode” along on the zip line. This made most of the others giggle and outright laugh. They had been tense as it was and her cry broke that. Rather than take away from the experience it added to it.

Saclolo made a note to see about possibly adding that scream to the soundtrack for future groups of visitors.

The first meal any of them would eat on the Moon was served an hour later, and all thoughts of bickering about choice seating had disappeared. Things were just too awe-inspiring for anyone to bother with who outranked whom back on the Earth.

Chow Winkler was working in the main kitchen, but it was not on his own recipes. Everything served was a fancy version of the foods the people over in the domed city ate. He added a few choice herbs and spices, but knew his job was to ensure the smooth running of the kitchen and all the chefs.

He moved from station to station making small suggestions that would speed things up and make processes smooth.

Everyone in the kitchen appreciated his non-dictatorial approach so that as the final dessert plate went out the doors, they gave him a subdued but heartfelt round of applause by clicking wooden cooking utensils together. It brought tears to the old ranch cook's eyes.

As everyone was cleaning up and setting things in order for the next meal service, he personally shook each of their hands and had a few kind words for their hard work.

Charles "Chow" Winkler would, from that day forward, always be welcome in their kitchens.

* * * * *

He woke to find the pod above his hiding place shaking as the first people climbed aboard and were seated. By pressing his helmet against the bottom of the pod he could nearly hear the recorded voice welcoming the passengers to their "home for the next half hour's tour of the lunar surface."

He knew Tom Swift would be in the pod because an announcement had been made an hour earlier. A lot of hoopla was being made of him taking the first trip in what was being called The Greatest Ride Off Earth.

As he moved his stiff neck around and got his eyes focused on the small panel next to the launch track, Donnell saw the red light turn to orange and finally to green.

It was time. He pulled the heavy braided line from his pack and snapped one end to the ring under the track he had located weeks earlier. The other end was more a problem, but there was a small place where the pod's undercarriage had a fin that fit inside a slotted rail. It had several holes drilled through it and he used the D-ring on the line's other end to attach it.

He tried to place his helmet on the hull, but his maneuvers to attach his "line of death" left him too far away. Using what strength he still possessed, the man shifted position and touched the hull in time he hear the start of the five-second countdown. He dropped down, satisfied that his enemy would soon be dead and he would get to go back to Earth the hero.

The locks released above him and the pod started moving out.

What Donnell Bassett did not realize was that the original idea of a fast electromagnetic launch had been abandoned months earlier. Now, the rail gun launcher would only shove the pod a few thousand feet out at which point the Attractatron near the horizon

would grab it.

The other thing he didn't notice was that his foot had become entangled in the line.

The pod jumped forward and he was yanked harshly up and out of his hiding spot.

Or, at least his right leg and most of the lower half of his spacesuit were. They would be discovered a few days later.

His decompressed and very deceased body was to be found two minutes later when the technicians came out to set up for the second launch.

By the time that launch came forty minutes later, the remains of Donnell Bassett had been quietly and invisibly removed, bagged and placed in cold storage awaiting both an autopsy as well as transport back to the Earth.

Nobody other than a few technicians and Saclolo Reyes ever knew of the incident in that first hour.

It was decided that only Harlan Ames would be told, and *he* could decide if Tom ever found out the truth.

* * * * *

The lines for both the Loops and the Zip Line rides were filled with men and women who normally presented themselves as staid and steady politicians and captains of industry, but today they were like children barely able to keep still until their turn arrived.

It mattered not to a single one of them they were freely mingling with the lucky ticket purchasers, most of whom they would normally think of as "average people. What was paramount in their minds was they were having an incredible amount of fun.

Most attendees took both rides that late afternoon with a few taking the zip line more than once.

Peter Quintana took Tom and Damon aside just before dinner was announced to tell them he was going to "...make damn sure that every one of the stuffed shirts and tight knickers brigade in the Senate and House of Representatives get their keisters up here in the first few months."

It was the same reaction from most of the guests.

Tom couldn't keep track of all the compliments, some of them from foreign dignitaries wondering if the Swifts might be able to build them something as exciting. His answer was universally, "We would be most happy to see what your own designers can come up with and will be pleased to offer our own expertise."

The only time he went on a tangent was when a woman from France asked about setting up a similar resort on Venus.

“It will be, after all,” she told him in a refined, Parisian accent, “an even more colorful place in which to walk and enjoy the scenery.”

He tried to convince her of the rather hostile environment on the second planet, but she had already consumed several glasses of a very good wine—imported from the Earth, but not from France—and was unable to grasp the concept of sulphuric acid air and incinerator hot temperatures.

Damon cornered Tom as they were entering the dining room.

“I believe that you need to go spend some time with your darling wife. She is with Bud and Sandy, but the look on her face says it is you she’d rather be with.”

He moved about fifty feet and caught her hand as she turned to go to the reserved Swift table.

“Sorry, Bash. I’ve been pressed into politicking this place. I promise no more tonight. And, I hear you and my sister were the hits of the drive over.”

Her face broke into a wide smile. “Oh, Tom, it was wonderful. Everyone was so in awe of what they were seeing and what we were telling them, many forgot they could ask us questions, and when they did, I had the answers!” She giggled and squeezed his hand.

They sat and enjoyed their meal together barely taking their eyes from each other. Once the dinner was over, a small combo playing—Tom was amused to see—a combination of standard instruments along with one of the electronic circular harps he’d designed for a music competition several years earlier. He looked at her and held out his right hand.

They made their way to the floor and spent the next thirty minutes experiencing the ease and joys of dancing in one-sixth gravity.

* * * * *

Tom faced the Reyes. Both had huge smiles on their faces.

“You do know that you have done something even I had doubts could every happen. Right?”

They nodded, and if anything their smiles became broader. They grasped each other’s hand tightly.

“It could not have happened without you, Tom,” Magadia said, solemnly.

“Well, it was your vision that started this all. I just helped where

I could. I'm glad everything worked out and that you appear to have a forthcoming hit on your hands. I hear via a little birdie that you have been fielding non-stop reservation requests once the people up here managed to get calls through back to their home countries. Something along the lines of five or six month's worth already? In only two days?"

Magadia nodded, her smile coming back.

"Well, I'm glad for you and everyone here and hope that once things slow down a little I can bring my wife back for a few days and just be one of the guests. Let me know when reservation space frees up a bit."

Saclolo now shook his head. "First, Tom, we will always reserve a room or two for special visitors. Sort of a Presidential suite arrangement. You name the time and, unless the actual President is coming up, it is yours. Second, I really doubt that whatever we have to offer here is anything close to the thrills you face daily. After all, you're Tom Swift!"

"Hmmm. I recall that while up here I have been nearly killed by a power-hungry woman, had to face down a nuclear fire and build a volcano, and temporarily had to give up my favorite doctor and Security man to you. I've had more than my share of excitement here, but I *would* like to try that zip line of yours... some day."

Saclolo told him he hoped Tom and Bashalli would come back soon and could expect front-of-the-line privileges.

"Just as long as the other excitement is over, I will be back!"

"Yes," Magadia replied taking a sly glance at Bashalli, "I know you will be, and your wonderful wife already has your room booked. We will see you in three weeks!"

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“Another Helping Of Regolith, My Dear?”

The lunar saga, such as it is, has concluded, but that doesn't mean there can't or won't be a stand-alone follow up at some point. Or, even a fifth book in the Saga, We did, after all, leave out some of the conclusions to a few story lines.

Only time (and sales figures) will tell us if there is any desire on the part of our *wonderful* readers for such a volume.

If we do something beyond this, we promise to at least try to maybe not stretch the story out over four books and more than 325,000 words. The operative word is “try.”

Even we agree that is a lot of reading to do in a single sitting.

Not that we avoid that sort of thing; it is just something we do for fun when not writing for you, but we do understand that even at a reading rate of 400 words per minute that means more than 13.5 hours of uninterrupted reading.

Think of it as binge watching on paper. If you'd watch an entire season of **24**, then why not all four volumes?

IN THE MEAN TIME...

Leo is working on a Harlan Ames story in the genre of hard boiled detective novels of the 1930s and 1940s. It is a stand alone story and will be happening in the future from this Lunar Saga. Look for:

HARLAN AMES: THE MAN ON THE MOON

on **Amazon.com** in paper and Kindle editions sometime mid-2017

If You Liked What You've Read:

Both authors distribute their books on Amazon in quality paperbound editions as well as Kindle books.

Look for Leo's works under his own name, and Tom's works under his name, Victor Appleton II, T. Edward Fox, and even Clarence Young IV.

Tom Hudson also has a private bookstore with his on-demand publisher, Lulu, with digest-sized paperbound and some selected hardbound editions available.

Check out the following web page or see the next several pages for complete lists of these authors' works available on Amazon (in many local countries their Amazons as well as the .com one).



Tom Hudson's Bookstore

[www.lulu.com/spotlight/
tedwardfoxatyahoodotcom](http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/tedwardfoxatyahoodotcom)

...and check out BarnsAndNoble.com for
Nook versions of Tom's books

Versions of all four books in this saga may be found at those sites:

Tom Swift and His Space Battering Ram

Tom Swift and the Cometary Reclamation

Tom Swift and the Lunar Volcano

Tom Swift and the Killing Moon

Leo Levesque's Books:

In his Thomasina Swift series, Leo has created five stories looking at an alternate world of the young inventor and collected them in two books:

Book 1: *Thomasina Swift: Girl Inventor*

with the stories: *Thomasina Swift: Forever More*, *Thomasina Swift and the Arc Jet*, and *Thomasina Swift and Her Flying Generators*

Book 2: *Thomasina Swift and the Multi-Universe*

with the stories: *Thomasina Swift and Her Space Launch Platform*, and *Thomasina Swift and Her Space Repair Station*

He has also written a trio of novels in the future of the “known” Tom Swift universe... with more to come:

- *Tom Swift and His Luna-Tronic Excavator*
- *Tom Swift and His Flight to the Pleiades*
- *Tom Swift and the TransLocation Matrix*

Two Tom Swift short novellas collected in the volume:

- *A Pair of Tom Swift's Shorts* — which includes: *Tom Swift and Lost Gold Mine*, and *Tom Swift and the Three Requests*

And, his solo book, the intriguing start of a multipart series about a young girl, Lola, who is caught between two heritages, two worlds and several dimensions:

- *Monkey On My Back*

This will be followed by - Monkey On My Mind, and Monkey in My Heart

Finally, Leo has three books for young readers featuring animals starring as the main characters.

- *Gillanda the Goldfish Goes Globetrotting*
- *Rusty the Rambunctious Raccoon*
- *Sammy the Seagull and the Stormy Sky*

Thomas Hudson's Books:

THE TOM SWIFT INVENTION SERIES (2009-2016)—

- 01 *Tom Swift and His EnvirOzone Revivicator*
- 02 *Tom Swift and His QuieTurbine SkyLiner*
- 03 *Tom Swift and the Transcontinental BulleTrain*
- 04 *Tom Swift and His Oceanic SubLinator*
- 05 *Tom Swift and His Cyclonic Eradicator*
- 06 *Tom Swift: Galactic Ambassador*
- 07 *Tom Swift and the Paradox Planet*
- 08 *Tom Swift and the Galaxy Ghosts*
- 09 *Tom Swift and His Martian TerraVironment*
- 10 *Tom Swift and His Tectonic Interrupter*
- 11 *Tom Swift and the AntInferno 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 Thermo-Ion Jetpack*
- 19 *Tom Swift and the Atlantean HydroWay*

PLUS in 2017-2018:

- 20 *Tom Swift and the Electrical Vampires*
- 21 *Tom Swift and the Solar Chaser*
- 22 *Tom Swift and His Deep Sea HydroFarm*

Collections of novellas, many dealing with some of the individual characters in the novels and/or the lesser known inventions coming from the mind of Tom Swift include:

- *Enterprising Characters*
- *Swift-ly With Style*
- *The Spirit of Enterprises*
- *Enterprises Extras*
- *Tom Swift's Pocket Book of Inventions*
- *Tom Swift's Another Pocket—More Inventions*
- *A Newer Pocketbook of Swift Inventions*
- *Tom Swift's A Fourth Pocket of Inventions*
- *Tom's 5th Symphony of Swift Inventions*
- *Ten Tom's: A Collection of Invention Shorts*
- *The Operator's Guide to the Fat Man Diving Suit*

In addition to the teen/adult Tom Swift stories he also has a book of stories about young Tom Swift as a pre-teen as he begins to find his way into the world of inventions:

- *The Young Tom Swift Stories*

The Anne Swift: Microbial Detective series. Each book contains a trio of novellas about Tom Swift's mother's secret FBI work. There are three collections in this series plus a biographical novel about how it all began as Anne grows from a young teen and into her twenties.

The Damon Swift Inventions Stories series contains four trilogies starring the father of Tom Swift as he develops strange and unique devices for a variety of customers including the Australian Navy. A fifth collection is in the works, and a full-length novel, *Damon Swift and the CosmoSoar* was released in late 2016.

... and, check out and download this little freebie, a short story—just 600 words—written for a contest back in 2011:

- *Tom Swift and the Frictionless Elf*

<http://tomswiffanfiction.thehudsons.com/TS-Yahoo/TS-Elf.pdf>

Mr. Hudson has also written several strange novellas that are available as Kindle Books. Neither are serious and were only written to amuse the author. He decided to share them. **Do not** expect life-changing literature for \$.99 (US) each:

- *The Fiendish Bucket List of Dr. Fu Manchu*
- *Up On The Housetop, Click, Click, Bang! (A Drew Nance mystery)*
- *The MassiveMart Murder Mystery (A Drew Nance mystery)*

And a collection of odds and ends (also a 99¢ Kindle book):

- *Don't Write Fan Fiction Until You Grow Up, and other short stories too short to sell individually*

Finally (for now) and on a dare, he wrote a strange story about a young girl with both a physical and emotional difference to 99.99999% of people out there. It is an adult autobiography/biography and features her life story starting when she was a teen.

This is NOT a Tom Swift story in any way, shape or form!!!

- *The Life of BI: Complete*

