

The New Tom Swift Adventures

# Tom Swift and His Flight to the Pleiades

Researched and Novelized  
By Leo L. Levesque

Cover Art by Thud

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## Dedication:

Tom Swift is surrounded by family and friends who,  
for the most part, take the back seat.

But not this time!

I want to acknowledge Tom Hudson for his help in editing this book. I had so much story in my head rushing to get into the computer that I didn't have time to dot all the i's and cross each and every T. He caught a bunch of stuff, and for that I thank him.

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# Tom Swift and His Flight to the Pleiades

Or

How Tom Swift Finally  
Fulfills His Dreams

Researched and Novelized  
By Leo L. Levesque

A true accounting from several people  
that help influence Tom Swift's life.



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Portions of the first five chapters take place at different points in time. Rather than trying to add notes each time we go from "present" to "past" I have decided on a simple font change.

So, when the font is as you see everything from Chapter Six to the end of the book, you are in a "present" time frame.

But, when the font shifts to something that looks more like this, the action is taking place more than a dozen years earlier unless otherwise indicated.

If it confuses you, imagine how it perplexed my poor wife!

*Leo*

## Foreword: Revisited (50 Years From Today)

“And that about it, kid. You can figure out the rest, but I’ll tell you one thing, Cioe never made it to the hospital alive. He was dead when the ambulance came and picked him up and took him away. All in the past now and I hope it stays that way!”

For the last three nights Mr. A talked and talked. The orderly was amazed at the strength and vigor the old man seemed to gain as he told the story. Like he was reliving it himself and not just telling what he had heard and was told by the participants.

“That was utterly incredible, Mr. A, you still know how to tell ‘em.”

“Yes, he does,” a strange voice answered back from the now open door of the nursing home room. A tall, lean, old man with stock white hair stood there looking in. His sharp blue eyes twinkled with merriment and he had a bright smile on his lips. He walked in with firm steps and a straight back. His posture was years younger than what he looked. He stepped to the side of the bed, put his attaché case on the floor, and looked down at the older looking man.

Mr. A focused his eyes on him and a smile formed on his lips. “Tom, old man, it’s been a while! God, it’s good to see you. Sit down, Tom, sit. Kid, get another chair for my old friend here.”

The night orderly had already jumped to his feet. He didn’t know what to do with himself. The one and only Tom Swift Jr., here, right in front of him and he couldn’t think of a thing to say to him. He had so much he wanted to know about. His jaw felt like it was on the floor and he just couldn’t keep his mouth shut. When he tried, it just kept falling open.

“It’s alright, son, I won’t be here long. Bud, I hate to say it but they’re back, after all these years, they’re back.”

“Come on, Tom, you’re joshing me. You heard me telling the story to the kid here and now you’re pulling my leg because of it.”

“Sorry, Bud, I wish I were. They’re still beyond Pluto and the Oorts Cloud barrier but coming in fast.” Tom was watching his friends face to see if he was still able to understand the situation.

“How many of them, Tom?” a worried sound was in Bud’s voice.

“Only three,” was the solemn reply.

“Oh, that’s handle-able, Tom!”

“Wait till you see the multiple mass wave reading and see the gravity distortion they are causing, then you’ll think otherwise!” Bud squinted at Tom. He could tell that his friend was not happy with what he had received from his electronic deep space probes.

“That’s why I’m here, flyboy. I hate to say this, but I need you, Bud. There’s no one else that knows about them but you and this new friend of yours.” Tom looked up at the orderly and said, “You can be trusted, young man, can’t you?”

The orderly swallowed hard several times and finally answered, “Yes, sir, Mr. Swift. But...but you’re not talking to Bud Barclay, He disappeared years ago, I know that as a fact, this is Mr. Appleton.” He was still shaking in his boots.

Tom and Bud laughed. “I told you I could fool them, yep, I did!” And Bud did a thing no one did any more, he high-fived Tom.

“Kid,” Bud answered back, “I am Bud Barclay, pilot and best friend of this here Tom Swift!” he exclaimed with pride. “I got tired of people bothering me and decided to change my name and took up a pseudonym.”

The eyes of the orderly became wide and he could feel the blood slowly drain from his face. He stumbled and sat back down into the chair with a wallop. This was the man he sworn on his grandmothers grave to get revenge on and kill if he ever get the chance. Now he was in front of him and he just had to reach out and take his life! He shook even more. “No,” he thought, “first I want him to know what he’s done and why I’m killing him with my bare hands!”

Tom and Bud looked at each other and winked. Tom reached down, picked up his attaché case, opened it and put it at the end of the bed. He took out what looked like a pair of very large earphones with trailing wires and returned to the head of the bed. “You’re still willing to do this Bud? It’s been awhile since we talked about it and you have the right, God knows, to say no.” Tom stood there with the earphones in his hands.

Bud closed his eyes and a tear appeared in the corner of one of them. He used the back of his hand and wiped it away. “If Sandy was still here, I couldn’t leave her no matter how hard she would try to make me do this. Oh, Tom, why does it still hurt so much? It’s been years and it still feels like yesterday.”

“I know, pal, I know. Both of them, together, in one fell



swoop. They were both excellent pilots, Bud, and they died trying to help others. We still don't know what happened to them. No matter what the official government statement was at the time. We know for sure that it was not the crazies that did it. They had to have gone down at sea. Even if after all this time their plane is still missing." Tom took hold of Bud's hand and gave it a squeeze. "I miss them too, Buddy!"

"Sorry, Tom, I walked out on you back then. I know you were in just as much pain as I was, but I just couldn't stay. Everywhere I looked it reminded me of Sandy." Bud shook his head as if to clear away the bad memories.

"Right! Back to reality, genius boy, we have a job to finish and let's do it right this time. Either they accept us on our terms or their goose is cooked for a second time and no get out of jail free card. Right, Tom?" Bud gave his lifelong friend a hard look and knew from the expression on Tom's face that genocide was not in him.

"Bud, all life is sacred and ends all too soon. We both know that personally. But I promise you that I will not let Earth fall into their hands and if it's the only way to stop them, then I will!"

"God have mercy on their souls, Tom, if they have one. But I believe they are going to ether kill us off or die trying. Let's hope it's not a two-for." Bud reached out for the earphones and placed them on his head. "Will it hurt, Tom?"

"No, Bud, just like falling asleep and when you wake up you will be feeling younger and full of your old self!"

"Will we still be old or younger looking?" Bud asked as he started to throw the extra pillows off the bed and made himself comfortable lying down.

Patting the case, Tom told his friend, "This is only the first step and the whole process can't work miracles, Bud. We'll still be old but not as old, maybe... fifty or so. If there was someone to watch the process, in case of a glitch, it may turn out better. But right now there is no one else." And Tom turned his head and looked at the orderly.

"Whoa there!" he spoke up, "I don't know the half of what you two are talking about. But if you think you can get *that* Mr. Barclay out of here tonight, you're mistaken!"

"No, kid, I'm not staying here tonight, but a Mr. A is staying. I guess I'm doing a little of both. Do it, Tom. It's now or never!" Tom reached into the case and flipped one switch. A small hum sounded for a second and slowly the pitch changed and stopped.

Bud had closed his eyes, took a breath of air, exhaled it and died. It was that simple.

The orderly stood there for a second, mouth once more wide open. He looked at Tom who was calmly putting the earphones away and closing the case.

“You... you killed him!” choked out the orderly finally. He felt like he was just robbed. He pointed a finger first at Tom and then at Bud, lying in the bed unmoving.

“Young man, I did no such thing. I stopped over to visit my old friend and he happened to pass away while I was here. That’s all.” Tom pressed a button on a key fob he had removed from his pocket. Moments later another man, dressed like an orderly, wheeled in a gurney with a covered body on it. In seconds the transfer had been made and Bud’s body was wheeled out the door. “The autopsy will show that this man died of natural causes.” Tom informed the orderly.

“Now you have two choices, my son. You can stay here in case someone questions whether this body is really that of a Mister Budworth Barclay, or you can come with me and have the adventure of your life.”

The orderly gulped but said nothing.

“I do promise you one thing—before tomorrow night, Bud and I will be back in action again. We’re going to save humanity from the worst mistake of my life or die trying.” He smiled at the young man.

“So, call the night nurse so we can get this unpleasantness over with. After I give her my statement, I’m leaving. You have that much time to decide. Choose, three for one and one for all or the doldrums and lost opportunity for the rest of your life!”

## Chapter One: Awakening

“Sandy... Sandy, can you hear me now?” A far away whisper reached into Sandra Swift’s brain. It stirred a little of the gray matter that was her personal memory, and she considered for a while if she should answered the call or not. She knew the voice and it was from her best friend, Phyllis Newton.

“What do you want, Phil? I’m sleeping, don’t wake me!” she finally answered in a drowsy faraway voice.

“Yeah, Sandy, you were sleeping, but not the type of sleep you think! Think, girl, think!” Phyllis’ voice was both commanding and anguished over something.

“To sleep... To dream...” paraphrased Sandy with a sigh as she tried to focus on her surroundings.

“Phyl, why can’t I feel or see anything? Heck, leave me alone! I want to sleep!” slowly came back a response.

“Stay awake, Sandy, and that’s an order! You’ll be angry with me if I let you go back to sleep. If you do, you’ll miss everything. Try to remember why you went to sleep. It’s important that you do. Please, try to remember for yourself. We have almost no time left, but if I tell you why, you won’t believe me, so try! Call out to me when you remember and can talk rationally. Bye...”

\* \* \*

“What a silly girl!” Sandy thought to herself as she started to go back to sleep. “No time left? There’s plenty of time, oodles of time.” She laughed to herself. “What nonsense, No time to sleep, indeed!” Then it hit her, she had been asleep—no, *unconscious*, and it felt like a long, long time. “Why? What was I doing that made me so exhausted in the first place?” Her mind was in motion now and in typical Sandy fashion it zoomed off in ten different directions at once.

Orange dry rough skin, cold steel that numbed her body, clear blue sky, stabbing pain, aqua-green ocean waves, sharp long white pointed teeth, purple haze, fierce red eyes... “No! No! NO!” Sandy screamed into the darkness. And it was a darkness that surrounded her whole being, a darkness that carried no sound, no sensations, no feelings of any kind... no awareness—just total obliteration of senses.

To a normal person, that could have sent them over the edge, but for Sandy it helped focus her mind. Several weeks before she and Phyllis joined a group of volunteers to help Doctor Simpson out with some sensory deprivation experiments designed to find the limits on spacemen lost in the black void of space in a spacesuit or in an emergency escape pod.

To Doc Simpson's astonishment both the girls were the last two to succumb to the effects of sensory loss and for opposite reasons. Phyllis because of her orderly, methodical mind, and Sandy because she could make up and live in a make believe world of her own doing. Was she back in the sensory booth? No, this was a different, totally alien feelings. Someplace large, brilliant and harsh she now realized.

"This darkness is real!" Sandy yelled to herself, "This is real and someone has done this to me. An enemy of dad's or Tom's?" she wondered. "Yes, that's it. Phyl and I are captives and daddy or Tom will save us!" Relief swept through her mind and she slipped back into obscurity for a time, but something still nagged at her. And for the first time she experienced a real dream.

\* \* \*

Sandy was watching the horizon of the ocean far below her, looking for land. It was calm with little aqua-green waves, a far cry from the violent, crashing hurricane swells of eight hours ago. They were forced to hunker down on St. Lucien Island for the duration of the storm, and were now continuing their flying vacation of the Caribbean heading for their last stop at George Town on the Grand Bahamas Island.

Sandy found herself rubbing her arms as the feelings of static electricity built-up overcame her. From the corner of her eye she could see Phyllis doing the same thing as she handled the controls.

"Dry air, I guess," Phyllis quipped as she caught Sandy looking at her.

"Dry air, no way. I think we both need a shower!" Sandy responded as she returned to looking for the island. "Phyl, what is that purple haze, or am I seeing things?" It was developing around them and getting more vivid as the static charge became stronger on their skin.

“To hell with the haze, Sandy,” Phyllis shot back as her arm muscles strained on the airplane’s flight yoke. “We’re gaining altitude and I’ve got the yoke pushed all the way forward. We should be in a nosedive right now. Can you see anything above us—below or anywhere?” Phyllis was trying everything she could think off to regain control of the plane. They continued to rise straight up into the sky, faster every second. She turned on the distress radio beacon but nothing happened. Actually the whole instrument panel died with a ‘*piiss*’ sound. Then the engine stopped and the propeller slowed to a halt.

Sandy was straining her neck trying to see above them from the side windows. “Oh crap,” escaped her lips as the green flying saucer came into view above and to the side of them. Phyllis let go of the yoke and reached into the back seat for the parachutes.

“Don’t bother, Phyl, the door won’t open. I’ve tried mine already, we’re stuck in here.”

“It’s a Dino’s space ship, isn’t it?” Phyl’s voice was low and a little shaky.

“You’ve seen it before when the Betrayer attacked us on the Moon anomaly mission—you know it is.” Sandy reached for Phyllis’ hand and grabbed it tight for reassurance.

“I thought they got their giant egg and were leaving in a few weeks and Tom was going to see them off?” She was starting to feel afraid.

“Yeah, that was the plan, but us going with them was not part of it. I don’t like this at all.”

By the time the airplane disappeared into the belly of the alien craft both girls felt their minds wandering in a stupor that they could not shake off.

\* \* \*

Their next recollections were a jumble of distorted memories. They were taken out of the plane, forced into a bed type contraption that beeped, gurgled, and whined. They could not move, and what they could see was dark and fuzzy. As they lay there they were pinched and probed; somehow it felt like they were losing all their clothes in the process. After what seemed like hours they were transferred to another area.

Then they were allowed to come fully to their senses, and they sat up on the cold metal platform that were made to hold a full size Dinosaur, and looked around. They found themselves in a large, gleaming room that held a dozen or so clear tubes filled with a light yellow fluid and a Dinosaur floating in each. They were slowly spinning around by the unseen movement of the liquid, half turning one way and then the other, never stopping. Multi colored lights flicked on and off in rapid secessions through the tubes bathing the occupants in glowing colors.

A skull cap with hundreds of small blinking lights fitted their heads and wires were attached all the way down their spine. Plastic tubes entered their bodies in every possible opening and surgically into several others. They looked dead.

Behind the cylinders were rows upon rows of electronic equipment.

The two naked girls sat shivering from the cold of the room. They looked at each other and instinctively looked for something to put on, but they could not even get off the bed, only sit there or lay down on it. They could not reach out to each other for the distance between them was too great. And they could not hear each other when they talked. So they sat there and waited in their own personal turmoil of thoughts.

After awhile two twelve foot tall, two hundred and fifty pound Dinosaurs came into the room, talking to each other in their clicks, whistle and roars. Their massive legs and feet slapping hard against the floor.

“Have the physical and cranial tests come back yet?”

Both girls heard it in English much to their astonishment. They both yelled out but they still could not hear each other, only what the Dino’s said.

“Yes, they have, Commander,” the other Dino replied. “We can use one of them as part of our Bio-Tronics computers with no noticeable interference. The other is not up to our standers of mental ability. We will just store the unusable one after we subdue their consciousness and use close to ninety percent of the other one’s intelligence. But their longevity is not certain, and may be a few years at most. What a shame, too. The usable one is extremely intelligent

and we can use her as part of the elite command protocols.”

“See that it is done. And as long as they survive for a year or two it will suffice for our needs. Place them in stasis and use their wetware as you see fit. Their personality is of no prime importance, if it gets erased it is no loss to us. We only need their physical form as a deterrent from future aggressions on the mammal’s part.”

The other Dinosaur bowed its head, “As you command.”

The ‘doctor’ was left alone with her two specimens, for that is all she thought of them. She pulled forward a work station and began the process of storing them, ignoring their pleas and screams as they were forced to stand, walk and stop in front of the rows of cylinders. Several empty raised discs were on the floor and they were made to step up and stand in the middle of the defined area.

A clear tube was lowered around them and a cold thick yellowish fluid started to fill the tank from the bottom of the discs. They could feel it oozing its way up their body.

In horror, Sandy and Phyllis could watch each other from the corner of their eye as the cylinders filled. Their bodies were no longer their own to command, but their minds were still theirs and panic filled it. As the fluid passed their mouth and then their nose they gasped and involuntary gulped in the liquid and their panic awareness slipped away from them to be replaced by a peaceful blackness. A blessing for what the Doctor did next to them was inhuman.

\* \* \*

“Phyllis, talk to me, please!” pleaded Sandy as she screamed herself awake. “I’m lonely and afraid. I now know were on the Dino asteroid ship, and in some kind of suspension tank. How long have they been medicating us?” she demanded in her mind. Receiving no answer she called out again, “Phil, are you there? Please be there!” and her inner voice sounded desperate.

“Sorry, Sandy, I had to change my mind speed. I needed to switch from computer speed to human mind speed so the Dinos can’t hear us. We’re part of their ‘Bio-Tronics’ computer system, Sandy. I know you don’t know what that is right now and it took me years to figure it out for myself, but

that is a plus, believe me.”

“What do you mean years? Didn’t they just kidnap us? Days, weeks maybe, not years, right?” There was a worried edge to her voice.

“Sorry, Sandy, it’s been years. Nearly fifty back home to be exact,” Phyl replied in a whisper that had a moaning sound in it.

“No... No!” she shouted back and didn’t talk again for a while. Sandy tried to reconcile what she remembered and what Phyllis just told her.

“Phyl, I’m sorry, I really am. I’m lonely in here. Are they all gone? Mom, dad, Tom and Bud?”

“I think so, Sandy. Maybe not Tom or Bud. But it has been fifty years, so what are they now... seventy?”

“So are we!” Sandy cried out in anguish. But then she remembered the suspension tank they were in.

“Why can’t I see or hear anything but your voice? We’re still in those cylinders, aren’t we?” Sandy really did not want to hear the answer that they were still trapped in the tubes.

“Listen, sis...”

Sandy now knew they were in it deep trouble. Phyl saved the *sis* thing for only when it was really bad. “We’re still in those cellular suspension tank, imbedded with a bunch of nanobots and life support systems—you don’t want to see what we look like right now, believe you me! We have surpassed their expectation of longevity and are still healthy, so that we don’t have to be replaced. This means that we’re in cold storage somewhere on the asteroid ship and not getting any older, at least not older very fast.”

“Why keep us alive? Why?” She still had a hard time believing all of it.

“Hostages. The Dinos are keeping us alive as a trump card to use against Tom if he’s still alive.”

“Didn’t they go off someplace far, far away, so why would Tom go looking for them? Didn’t he have a hold over them?”

“Yeah, sis, as long as Tom and the Prime Leader both lived. You must remember how awfully hurt she was after the fight on Mars. Really torn up inside and out. The Prime



Leader died just before they left the solar system and the deal she had with Tom expired along with her life. That's why we were taken as hostages. I only hope to God that Tom is not dead!"

"Phyl, why do you know this and I don't? And while we're at it, you sound different? Bossy or something like that!"

"Sorry, don't mean to be, but I am part of the executive Elite command computer systems. I'm running the whole elite systems." Pride sounded throughout her voice.

"What am I," shot back Sandy, "the toilet manager?" Sandy couldn't help but being mad.

"Well... not exactly. You're keeping the overflow and deleted files from being trashed. Only your disorderly mind can keep all that excess stuff in any type of disorderly order."

"Hey, *I'm* not the woman that keeps her bras and panties in descending color order in her drawers and her clothes in the same order in her closet!" That was one secret that Sandy promised never to let out. Even Phyllis knew that it was a little wacky, but she just couldn't help it. To the Dino's it was the plus that saved them.

"Well then, Miss Smarty-pants," answered Phyllis in a high flaunting voice, "that is why I'm in command and you're just a cheap file clerk, one step from being trashed yourself?"

"Why you... hey, this... this... Phyl, I feel sick, real sick! What's happening to me... to us?"

"Don't... know..... wait... for... me..."



## Chapter Two: The Future is now

Two old men and a younger one in his early twenties were riding the walkway from the infirmary where Bud Barclay's lifeless body had been taken to await reviving by Tom when he made it back from the nursing home a few hours later. They were now on the way to Tom Swift Jr.'s underground lab and office.

"Tom, have you been up there lately?" the elderly Bud asked as he pointed off to the far distant multi-color laser lights streaking off into space.

"Too many times, Bud. I find myself up there more and more as time passes. It seems that my whole life is up there now. Do you want to go up before we start the procedure? It may be our last chance!"

Bud looked at the Kid. "You can stay here and wait if you want, or you can come, but you may find this a little unpleasant!"

"Are you insane? Me stay here in the middle of Swift Enterprises." He pointed to the robots busily moving large crates and flatbeds of machinery around. "How the heck do I know that I won't land in one of those boxes and be packed off to who knows where? No thank you. Where you go, I go!" He stepped a little closer to them to emphasize his point.

Tom touched his temple with a finger and sub vocalized a command into his InterVoice link implant. A transport vehicle showed up a moment later. They all got in and Tom switched it over to manual and headed for the far gate of the now six mile square complex.

There was a slight breeze up on the rise that overlooked Lake Carlopa and the old eagle preserve. The five oak trees planted some fifty years ago were showing their age. The multi-tiered marmoreal placed between them was clean and new looking and would stay that way for centuries. Tom's nanobots were now being used for thousands of everyday applications from keeping buildings, roads, bridges and anything else that needed to look new and ageless.

A nine foot high gray and white swirling marble obelisk topped with a bald headed eagle screeching in to catch its

prey with outstretched claws, billowing wings and spread out tail feathers, stood in the center of a low wall that had four name plates on it, two on each side of the eagle. Fifteen feet across from the first wall was another wall paralleling it. That wall had only two set of names. There was room for more.

The names of Mary and Thomas Swift were etched into the first plate with Sandra Swift on the next one. On the other side of the obelisk were three names, Phyllis Newton on the inner one and Helen and Ned Newton, her parents, on the outside plate. Across the way were Patricia and Boris Pichincha. Next to them was a plate that held the name, Thomas A. Swift, III. Four multi-color laser lights emitted from the four cornerstones of the marmoreal walls.

“Tom, I still think that the lasers are a bit too much!”

“So, you *have* stopped by and looked at it!” Tom exclaimed with a sly smile.

Bud bowed his balding head and sighed loudly, “A few times I stopped by, but never more than an hour or two. It never made me feel any better, so I never finished the trips and stopped by to see you. I’m just a rotten friend—ex-friend!” Bud spoke sadly.

“We’ll leave it at that... at least you came to see them. As for the lights... I know, Bud. It’s a direct contrast with what the preserve is all about and what these people put into it. But it was technology that made this whole thing possible and that shouldn’t be forgotten either.” Bud nodded his acceptance of it.

He knelt next to Sandra’s empty grave and a tear fell to the ground. He stayed there for a few minutes thinking of the past and of the future that never was. A sigh was heard as he tried to stand up and finally had to wave the orderly over to help him up. “Kid, don’t get old, it hurts too much, both body and soul.”

“I do have a name, you know!” the young man spat out at Bud.

“I know, Kid, but don’t get offensive. From my point of view you’re still a kid. So don’t think you’re going to change my mind on that one anytime soon. Tom, where is Bashalli? I see Tommy’s but not hers.

Following the disappearance of his sister and Phyllis, Tom had met and fallen in love with a young woman from Pakistan who had been raised for a dozen years in the U.S. Together they had a son but a tragic car accident had taken them both, leaving Tom injured and in a coma.

“Yeah, I guess you were already gone when they died in that crash. The Prandit family managed to pull a fast one and got Bash’s body while I was unconscious in the hospital and buried her back in the Prandit mausoleum in Pakistan. Dad was able to stop Tommy from being taken and he is here with the rest of the family. It really doesn’t matter because they’re both here...” he placed a hand over his heart, “and not in some box in the ground no matter where the box is!”

“Sorry Tom, I should have come back for the funeral, but I just couldn’t. I didn’t want to face you. At least you were smart enough to put your life back together and then some idiotic, drunk, truck driver took that away. It could have been me if I stayed, Tom—it could have been me.” Bud was looking at the ground and shaking his head. “That’s why I could not come. Believe me I wanted to! Tommy was only four, wasn’t he?”

Tom put his arm around his old friend’s shoulder. “That was a long time ago, Bud, don’t start digging it up now, it’s over with. Destiny had other plans for us and a family just wasn’t a part of it for either of us. Let’s get back to the lab before both of us fall apart up on this hilltop. If I’m going to die it will be out there,” he pointed up in the sky, “out among the stars, far away. That is going to be my final resting place. I just feel it in my old, tired bones.”

They looked at the graves, both the empty and full ones once more, and turned around to walk back down to the waiting transport vehicle.

The Kid followed slowly wondering more than ever what the heck he had gotten himself into, and was it worth his own life to kill that beat up old man, Bud Barclay.

Once more they headed for the underground lab Tom had not used for years. The big airplane hangar that was outside the lab was now part of the vast underground network of storage units for the worldwide distributing complex that the work robots maintained.

After Tom had passed several security measures he was allowed to unlock the heavily reinforced door and enter the old lab.

“Good evening, Mr. Swift and friends,” a disembodied voice greeted them as they walked in and lights were automatically being turned on. “Will you need the services of a robotech this evening in the lab?”

“No thanks, Albert,” Tom told the lab maintenance computer. “Please secure all entryways and follow protocol ‘*NewLife*’. It should last for at least forty-eight hours. Oh, do me one favor first and get several varieties of self-heating meals for breakfast, lunch and supper and then lock us down. Leave the meals on my desk in the inner chamber.”

“As you wish, Mr. Swift. Have a good night, gentlemen.”

By the time the three men made their way to Tom’s back office the meals were on the desk, and as soon as they were all in the room the door closed and locked itself. A small countdown timer appeared on the top right corner of the door and started to count down from 48:00:00.

The orderly looked around the twenty-by-twenty square room and at the several pieces of furniture in it. “Mr. Swift, we really are not locked in here for the next two days are we?” He had a scared look that told Tom if he could, he would have bolted out of the room.

“Just relax, Kid,” Bud reassured the young man, “Give Tom here a minute and you’ll be surprised at the rabbit he’ll pull out of his hat.” With a grin on his face Bud sat down on one of the chairs facing the desk. He started to rub his legs and groaned out loud. “You better hurry up with that door, Tom,” Bud grumbled, “before my legs kill me. I have not walked this much in years!”

Tom ignored Bud’s rumblings as he sat down at his desk and touched the computer icon on the highly polished surface. A 3-D projection of a keyboard and a flat screen appeared on the desk. Tom began to type away and did several strange things to the Kids way of thinking. He couldn’t see that Tom was answering questions and having his retinas and fingerprints taken by hidden laser scanners. At the same time the other two men were being scanned and their physicality was being recorded for future needs.

After a minute or two there was a 'click' sound behind Tom and part of the wall behind him receded a few inches and then moved to the left. A door-size corridor was revealed and Tom got up and started down the passageway without saying a word. Bud did the same and as he passed the opening he called out, "Don't forget the food or you'll be really hungry by the time we get out of here."

The Kid stood there as both men disappeared down the hallway. He shook his head '*no*' a few times and then suddenly grabbed the food packages and hurried down the passageway just in time to see Bud take a right hand turn in a four-way intersection.

By the time he reached the spot the three other corridors were empty except for the door at the end of each. If he had not seen Bud turn right he would have been lost. The office wall moving back into place made him jump with a start and in seconds he was beyond the right hand door. Tom and Bud were waiting for him.

The room he found himself in took his breath away. He had never seen such a collection of both science and medical equipment jammed into one space. It looked like a mad cross between an operating room, chemical lab, electronics shop and computer room. As they stood there numerous pieces of the equipment began to power up.

"Greetings, the area is being prepared for the regeneration sequences. How many chambers do I need to make ready?" The voice of Albert, the computer that was in Tom's outer lab, was here also.

"Just two, Albert.' Tom replied, "The young man is here to help monitor things. Do as he asks and follow his instructions as if they were mine. Bud and I will prepare ourselves. We'll be back in fifteen minutes. Make our friend comfortable while he waits for us. Please have one of the Robo-servants take the meals to the kitchen area and turn down one bedroom for his needs."

With that said Tom and Bud walked off into another room. As the orderly stood there staring at the receding men a small mechanical servant detached itself from an alcove and quickly reached for the boxes that he had forgotten he was holding. For a moment a tug of war pursued over the boxes

until the young man remembered what Tom had said to ‘Albert’.

With an audible huff the servant, now with the boxes in his possession, made its way to the small kitchenette and put them into a cabinet. Turning, the servant faced the Kid and asked, “Can I help you, sir?”

Taken by surprise he gasped, “Waaater, I need a glass of water!”

\* \* \*

While their bodies were being regenerated by an amazing mix of nanotechnology and DNA modification, they dreamed. Not ordinary dreams but dreams of the past. As their minds and bodies became younger their pasts came flashing back to reinsert themselves on neuro-pathways that were being regenerated so that they would not be lost. But as all dreams can turn into nightmares and the past that was being dredged up was full of emotional turmoil both men were having a hard time adjusting to it.

\* \* \*

The audio beep pattern in Tom ear told him that his secretary needed to talk to him. It was always something. Now at just a few weeks shy of his 40th birthday, he was running Swift Enterprises, and feeling more than a little overwhelmed. He was busy going over a government contract for improving the space elevator system at their hydrogen refinery plant in the upper atmosphere of Saturn. Sighing, he blinked twice and the contract disappeared off his eye contact. The paperless world had finally arrived.

“Yes, Miss Grant,” he sub-vocalized, “this had better be good!” He even threw in a chuckle to let her know that he did not mind the disturbance, that he knew that it must be important.

“There is a woman here. A Mrs. Sanchez, with her son and she says it’s about Bud Barclay. Do you know him, sir? Should I sent her away as a nuisance or do you want to see her?” Miss Grant was new in Tom’s office. He’d been going through secretaries about one every three months for the last year. Tom’s demands were high and no one yet could meet his expectations. He had been spoiled by his father’s girl Friday, Miss Trent.



Tom was stunned... no, shocked! No one had mentioned that name in years to him. Not that it was taboo, it was just a subject that people though they needed to tiptoe around. "Please send her in, Miss Grant, and notify security just in case. I assume they went through a total body scan at the gate before they were let in?" The risks that Tom faced in the world had accelerated tremendously since he became the 'space king' of the solar system.

"Security is still here, sir. I'll have him wait, just in case." Miss Grant let the smile she had kept on her face while she sub-vocalized dissolved as she looked at the middle thirty aged woman and preteen boy. "You may go in, Mrs. Sanchez."

"Thank you, señorita. Come Carlos, and behave for once. Mr. Swift is a very important man." Her voice was Texan with a hint of a Mexican background of someone that had to live in both worlds.

She took him by the hand and started to turn toward the door. It opened and a tall distinguish looking man stepped out.

"Él puede ser importante para estos gringos, mamá, pero para mí él sólo basura blanca rica." ("He can be important for these gringos, Mom, but for me he's only rich white trash.") He shot back to her in a ruff tone of voice in Spanish, and he pulled his hand out from hers.

"Carlos!" she replied in embarrassment at his behavior.

"Está bien la señora Sánchez," Tom told her in perfect Spanish, "oí peor. Pase por favor." (It's all right Mrs. Sanchez, I've heard worse. Please come in.)"

He stepped aside and gestured for her and Carlos to come into the room. Mrs. Sanchez stepped in slowly with her son at her heels. Tom watched as the tall, dark hair and light complexion of the woman and her son walked in. He could see why Bud Barclay would have been involved with her.

She was wearing a well-pressed and clean three-piece suit, and the boy was in jeans and a black tee-shirt. Tom closed the door and ushered them to the diminutive sitting area in one corner that had a small L-shaped couch and two easy chairs facing it with a coffee table in the middle of them.



## Chapter Three: Laredo, Texas

She sat on the edge of the couch and her son sat in the opposite corner and sulked. He now knew that the man before him could not be easily insulted.

“Mr. Swift, please forgive this intrusion,” she began in a low voice. Tom noticed that her English was perfect, but it did have a slight Texan accent mixed with a little Mexican in it. “But I’m at my wits end. I’ve promised myself that I was never going to do this, but times have changed and I must.” She looked down at the floor and a soft sob could be heard.

“Mom, you’re shaming me!” Carlos yelled out to her as he jumped to his feet and ran out the door, slamming it shut behind him. Mrs. Sanchez earnestly broke into tears, hiding her face in her hands. Before Tom could react to the situation the door opened again and a big, burly man pulled young Carlos into the room by the arm.

“Did someone lose this little ruffian?” he asked with a grin.

“Why thank you, Jim! I think we did.” Tom turned his attention back to Mrs. Sanchez and asked, “By the looks of things your son does not wish to be here. Why don’t we let Miss Grant take him on a tour of the place and maybe we can meet up with them at the cafeteria when we’re done talking?” She nodded her head ‘yes’ but did not look back up at Tom or her son. “Jim, would you mind being their driver and helping out Miss Grant?” He eyed Jim first and then the young secretary that was now standing by the open door.

Tom touched his temple with a finger so he could hear the InterVoice link open and he told it the names of the people he wanted to communicate with. “Sorry, I hate to saddle you both with this boy but I think it’s necessary. Do this for me and I’ll get you both an extra day off with pay!” A nod of acceptance came quickly from Jim and a slower one from Miss Grant.

“If he’s anything like my younger brother, Mr. Swift,” Miss Grant told him as she stepped back out of the room, “you better get two more guards and put him in handcuffs.”

A small smile formed on Tom's lips as Jim spoke to Carlos. "Come on, Kid. You heard the man; the tour first and some ice cream later if you don't try to run away and force me to chase you." Jim closed the door behind him and Tom could still hear him talking as they headed out. An uneasy quiet fell on the office as they sat there. It was broken only by a hiccup or two that was subsided with a drink of water.

"Now Mrs. Sanchez..."

"Ramona, please, Mr. Swift. For what I'm about to tell you can only be said between people who are friends. I know that you don't know me, Mr. Swift..."

"Tom, please," and he took her hand into his as he sat down beside her.

"Tom... for years I have watched and read about you and your wonderful company." Tom tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. "No... No, I'm not a stalker. It's just that we have a much deeper connection in Budworth Barclay!" She dared to look into his eyes when she said that. She noticed the winched of pain that passed over his face for a second.

"Yes, you mentioned that before, Ramona."

"I followed you in hopes of hearing about Bud. But he was never mentioned with you anymore. I don't even know if he's alive or dead." Ramona sighed.

"Oh, he's very much alive. I can vouch for that." Tom watched for Bud's cashed royalty checks statement every month and noted where it was sent.

"For the longest time I wanted to talk to him and tell him about Carlos..."

"Whoa! Carlos is Bud's son?" He was taken totally off guard.

"Yes, it's true, but Bud does not know he has a son. He left me before I could tell him I was pregnant." She looked at the floor again and a tear rolled down her cheek. Tom handed her a tissue out of a box on the table.

"Humm, let's me see." Tom closed his eye and ran down his key words for his memory retrieval technique. "Laredo, Texas, eleven or twelve years ago, definitely twelve, I do recall he was there for a time before he headed to Mexico and then South America. A year later he moved to Australia and

started a sheep ranch in the outback, which he ran for five years. That is probably why you couldn't find him. He was so far inland, that it took days to drive to his ranch. So how did you get involved with him and why are you here, now?"

"Tom, you've seen Carlos. He is more than I can handle right now. It's the gang he was starting to run with. You must know how it is. The drug bosses use kids to get drugs into the country, but now they've switched to American kids. They're all chipped and have free access to both sides of the border. The younger the kids, the better for their use."

Tom interrupted her and asked, "Isn't he older than what they like?"

"True, but Carlos is bilingual and can pass as both Mexican and American and they like that. They wanted him as a street leader. He's smart and well liked by the younger kids, so they want to use him. For years I was able to keep him safe and out of the gangs, but now easy money and the prestige on the street are more attractive to him than listening to his mother. So I packed us up and moved up here as far away as possible from Laredo." She sat back on the couch and hugged herself, relieved that that part was done with.

"I take it that it took all your money to do this?" She nodded her head 'yes'.

"You now want to find Bud and get money from him?" Tom really did not want to ask that question.

She flew to her feet and angrily looked down on Tom for a moment and then slowly sat back down and clasped her hands together on her lap. "I... I can't blame you for thinking that. I don't want to be paid off to leave Bud alone. I really just want what is best for my son!"

"Which is?" Tom asked.

"A job or if possible, a temporary place to stay until I get back on my feet, nothing else. I'm an excellent cook and bartender. My father had his own place for years and there is nothing that I can't do. I ran it for the last few years of his life, but when he died the owner of the property locked me out and I could not get any of my father's equipment out, so I lost everything."

"Couldn't you go to the authorities?"

She shook her head 'no'. "My father only had a verbal agreement with the property owner and I couldn't prove that the equipment was mine. That's why for the last two years I've been living in the most horrible section of town, worse than where I lived with my father. It was because of that that Carlos started to get into trouble."

"Why did you have to move there?" Tom asked next.

"We lived in an apartment above the restaurant and lounge. When I said we lost everything I mean everything, even our clothes! When I tried to get our personal possessions the landlord had already gotten rid of them or so he claimed. He would not let me in to check." She stopped talking and reached for the pitcher of water that was on the table with shaky hands. Tom reached it first and poured her a glass.

"If you don't mind me asking, Ramona, when did you eat last?" He noticed how frail she looked.

"Carlos had something this morning," she replied softly.

"No, not Carlos, you!" he asked again, firmly.

"Yesterday, I think," she whispered back.

Tom was stunned; he touched his temple and a minute later said out loud to her. "Chicken noodle soup, a roast beef sandwich and a cup of coffee alright with you?"

"No please, don't bother, I'm fine."

Tom looked at his watch, "Make that for two, Hans," Tom spoke out loud, "and if Chow is hanging around pestering you guys still tell him to come over right away, thanks."

He tapped his temple again. While we wait for the food why don't you tell me how you met Bud in the first place?" He sat back on the couch and crossed his legs and smiled at her. She was still a pretty woman but hard times were taking a toll on her.

\* \* \*

The Mexican style restaurant and lounge stood in the middle of the block in the Mexican section of Laredo, Texas. Not that much of it was not part Mexican in one way or another. The neighborhood, several blocks big, had been taken over by the poorer of the families of American/Mexican decent. Dislike and prejudice still had a hard hold in some areas of America and the border areas were one of

the hardest to live in. No matter where you looked someone had something against someone.

The man that strolled in that mid-afternoon was tall, had dark tanned skin and black wavy hair. His clothes were used but fit well and were clean. Only a smudge of grease on his face told of some type of trouble. There were only three patrons at the bar and they had been nursing their Tequila for the past hour and were trying to pick up the lounge owners daughter who was the waitress and cook of the establishment.

It was mostly harmless banter except for Paulie, the more or less ringleader of this group. He had been after the waitress for weeks now, ever since he moved into this part of town from who knows where, and started to make a name for himself. Not a good name, for he was a bully and a troublemaker. He prowled the street and alleyways at night looking for his next mark. So far he had never done anything in which the police took notice but for the people that lived in the neighborhood it was another story.

The handsome stranger stepped up to the bar and ordered a bottle of Shiner Bock, a local premium beer from the waitress and started a conversation with her. She was in her mid twenties and very, very attractive. She had long black hair, big dark eyes, a warm smile with natural red full lips, and was a definite eleven on the scale of one to ten. Within minutes they were laughing and having a good time talking.

Paulie, sneered at them from his corner of the bar and called out in a callous voice, "Ramona, get back here where you belong. That gringo is only looking for a free ride." He laughed and stepped toward the man and the waitress.

Reaching into his pocket he took out a hundred dollar bill, flashed it to his two amigos, and rudely tried to shove it down Ramona's loose fitting blouse. The woman grabbed for his hand and tried to stop him. "I knew it!" He roared and laughs, "She's going to be a frisky one!"

The stranger's hand shot out and latched onto Paulie's wrist and pulled it back and shoved it into the foul man's chest. The 'gringo' slipped off his stool he was sitting on and moved into Paulie's face and in a whisper warned, "I don't know who you are or what right you think you have for

touching this lady, but if I ever see you try it again, you won't like it!" and with that said he grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around and pushed him away. Paulie stumbled for a few feet but quickly regained his balance and turned around flashing an eight-inch stiletto he pulled out of his left boot. He threw it from one hand to the other trying to intimidate the stranger. A grim smile spread across the stranger's face as he took a few steps away from the bar and worked his shoulders and flexed his fingers.

"Please, stop," the waitress called out in horror. She turned to the other two men for help but they were already sneaking out of the place, willing to leave their friend to his own mischief. "Paulie, stop!" she pleaded to the swarthy man with the knife.

"Oh, gringo, you need a woman to plead for you?" he spat out in his rough raspy voice as he approached light-footed and with caution, never taking his eye off the strangers hands.

But before the stranger could make a move, an old hard voice spoke up from the back section of the lounge. "Put that thing away, Paulie," the voice demanded in a heavy Mexican accent. "I've got a twelve gauge pointed at your back. Now, get out and don't ever come back. Move it!"

Paulie didn't take his eye off the stranger, but started to slowly back up. After a few steps back he could see the old man with the shotgun in his hands. Flames of anger shot up in his eyes. "You'll regret this, old man, taking a gringo's side over your own."

"Paulie, I'll see you in hell first before I ever consider you my kind. You're the reason most people don't trust us. Get out and stay out!" The owner of the restaurant took a step forward and motioned with the gun. Paulie turned around and ran out the front door to peals of laughter behind him.

The restaurant owner unloaded the shotgun as he walked over to the man who was willing to defend his daughter's honor and extended his hand. "Luis Carlos Sanchez," he offered.

The stranger took the proffered hand in his firm grip. "Bud... Bud Barclay!" he declared with a smile while looking at the gorgeous Ramona.



## Chapter Four: All is Lost

Dusk had fallen and in the back alleyway it was dark and smelly. Discarded boxes and large trash containers lined the back walls in total disarray. Bud was cutting through it to get his now fixed motorcycle from the garage where he had left it after it had broken down in the Mexican ghetto. He was riding through looking for the Mexican/American border gate. He was just traveling and seeing the sights. In fact he had been at it for more than a year now.

He was a little light headed, but he was far from being considered drunk. The last several hours had been spent talking to the owner of the restaurant and especially with his fantastic daughter. They had even arranged for a place for him to stay the night and the garage mechanic was willing to store the old, gas guzzling Harley motorcycle for a day or two if he paid his bill in cash that night. He was also going to show Bud where it was to be stored, locked up, and why it would be safe.

“What the heck,” Bud thought to himself as he walked along in the dark alley. “This may be a nice little diversion from all my riding around. To stay for a day or two, humm... maybe a week or two would be nice, especially in the company of Ramona Sanchez. I’ve always heard that some of the most beautiful women are Mexican!”

The rattling sound of a piece of metal being kicked across the passage woke him from his reverie. Looking toward the sound he saw a person standing in the shadows. Quickly looking to the other side of the alley there was another person stepping into the light. Spinning around he saw two more walking toward him from behind the dumpster by the back door.

The first person he saw stepped out into the weak light that came from the front of the alley. It was Paulie and he was slapping a tire iron into his gloved covered fist. Murder was written all over his face.

Before Bud could even react he was grabbed from behind by the two people in the back of the passage. Struggle as he might, Bud could not break their hold. The other man stepped forward and with a sweep of his leg

knocked Bud off his feet and onto his knees and tangled his fingers into Bud's hair, forcing his face up to look into Paulie's wide smiling face.

Paulie was still tapping the iron into his palm and slowly looking Bud over. Without warning, he whacked Bud in his upper legs and his right arm for good measure, and Bud gave out a curse. His reward for yelling was a ball shoved in his mouth and a rag tied over it to keep it in place.

"This won't do," Paulie told his friends as he threw away the tire iron. I want to feel his bones crunch under my fist!" He stared into Bud face looking for signs of pleading. "What do you say now, gringo?" he asked roughly ripping the rag and ball from Bud's mouth.

Bud spat into his face and hissed, "Bring it on, tough boy, and make it good. For you'll never get another chance." And he clenched his teeth and never uttered another sound.

"Oh, don't worry, gringo, my happy face will be the last one you'll ever see." Paulie balled up his fist and punched both of Bud's eyes. He then walloped his fist into Bud stomach and then his chest. Paulie slowly worked his way up to Bud's face again. If he lived, no woman would want to look at it again.

"BABOOM!" echoed through the alleyway. The buckshot blast from the two cartridges hit the wall above the heads of Paulie's gang. The sound of the gun being reloaded was the heard next. Bud's unconscious body slid out of the hands of his capturers and sprawled onto the ground.

Mr. Sanchez pointed the reloaded gun at the four men and jumped forward and yelled, "Vamoose, get the hell out of here!" and he let one more shot off into the ground next to them. Before the sound stopped ringing the four men were gone and replaced by the sounds of distant police sirens.

Ramona ran to Bud's crumpled body and fell to her knees at his side and gently torched his face. "Papa, help me, we must get him out of here before the police show up. We can't let them get involved in this!" she pleaded.

Sighing, he ran the best he could back into the restaurant and came out with an old blanket and another

man who worked as the dish and pot washer. They managed to get Bud onto the blanket and half dragged and half carried him to the back door of the restaurant, up the back stairs and into Ramona's room, placing his limp body on her bed.

"Child," her father warned, "I don't like this a bit. This gringo Bud may be the end of us. We can't afford trouble with the street. You know if the cops come down on the neighborhood and it's either them or us, it's us who will take the rap." Their footing with the community was a fragile one. The fact that he was an ex-policeman was a hard thing for many to overcome.

That he had been shot and crippled while on duty trying to save some of the neighborhood's children caught in the cross fire between two warring gangs that wanted this section of town as their territory, was the only reason he and his daughter were tolerated. The years had dimmed memories of the deed, but being an ex-cop never was forgotten. Now, if they were hiding a Mexican that would have been another story. But helping and hiding a gringo from one of their own...

\* \* \*

Bud felt like he was on fire at first, next he was cold and shivering and could not stop. Finally something warm and soft was placed at his side. Later, much later, he tried to move his legs but he couldn't. He then tried his arms and only one would move, and he could not see. And the pain, the pain was everywhere. He moaned and then felt something press against his lips and was told to swallow; he couldn't, and it was forced down anyway.

Somehow he was feeling the warmth of a person against his side; at least it felt like a person to him. He tried to see but couldn't. He tried to move but still couldn't. He then tried to talk and all that came out was a croaking sound. The warmth left his side and a moment later he felt a cold glass against his lips. He greedily gulped at it and a soothing voice told him to slow down. There was plenty of water and he could have more in a minute or two.

The next time he regained consciousness he felt weak but alive. He still could not see but it wasn't total

blackness, more a gray with some kind of shadowy motion. The pain was still there but just a nagging sensation that refused to go away. Soft hands touched his shoulders as the person tried to sit him up.

Bud tried to reach for his face and the eye bandages and the soft hand touched his and pushed it down to his side. “No, not yet Bud, tomorrow,” a lovely, slightly accented voice told him. He remembered hearing that voice before, but where, he wondered. His thoughts were still fragmented.

By now Bud thought he was in a hospital and somehow he had been in an accident... with his bike? No... Then a man’s laughing, brutal face flashed before his mind’s eye and pain swiped through his body and made him shiver. The alley, the start of the beating, then blackness... somehow he had survived when he shouldn’t have.

“Where am I?” he finally asked in a faint voice, as he could still feel the ‘nurse’ sitting beside him.

“Welcome back, Bud. I glad to see that you made it,” the voice answered back with merriment. “For a while there I didn’t know if you would. I know, I know, lots of questions. But for right now why don’t you make me happy and take some of this broth. After you’ve had some of it I’ll answer all your questions.”

“Ramona,” he thought, finally placing the name. “But why is she feeding me?” Bud let it go as the first spoonful of broth filled his mouth, it was heavenly. But the talk never happened. He fell back to sleep before he had finished the bowl.

He was feeling cold again and somehow he knew that it was in the middle of the night. But his legs and arm felt free and he could move them a little. A soft voice hushed him as he tried to speak, and slowly she got under the covers with him and cradle him into her arms. He remembered the warmth and scent of her body and now knew it was Ramona that had kept him warm before. It felt so good being in her arms. He went back to sleep with the touch of her lips on his shoulders.

When he woke, he could feel that the bandages on his eyes were gone. At first his vision was blurry but after a few blinks he could see clearly. He could feel Ramona still

next to him and when he turned his head to look at her she lifted her head and rested it in her hand that was propped up by her elbow. She was still the loveliest woman he had seen in quite awhile.

As he turned his body over to face her, the sheet was pulled partially off and her full shapely breasts were exposed. Bud's eyes went wide at the sight of them and Ramona giggled and pulled herself against him. Bud reacted as all men have reacted to such an open invitation throughout the centuries.

\* \* \*

At that point of the story Tom's office door swung open and a food cart pushed by an old, slightly overweight, bald headed man in cowboy boots, blue jeans, and the most outlandish shirt covered with rhinestones and colored sequins.

"How-dee folks," the man greeted them in a heavy Texan accent while pushing the food cart to where they were sitting.

"Thanks, Chow, for coming. I really appreciate it." Tom stood up and helped transfer the food from the cart to the small table. When done he introduced Chow Winkler, his mostly-retired personal chef, to Ramona.

Tom waved Chow to the last easy chair. "Ramona, if you don't mind, I would like Chow to sit in on the rest of your story. You see, Chow has been keeping a secret from me for years and I think now is the time for it to come out in the open." Tom was watching the old trail cook and Chow's eyes squinted into little beads and a frown crossed his face. Ramona looked from one to the other not knowing what to expect.

"Please, Miss Sanchez, we'll eat first and then you may continue your story." Tom looked at Chow directly. "This will give Chow here some time to remember his past sins of omission." Tom chuckled.

Chow sat there with a puckered brow, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. Tom took pity on him and after swallowing his first bite of sandwich he remarked to him, "Laredo, Texas, twelve years ago."

The blood drained out of the old man's face. His rough, dark skin turned white. "Whoa there, partner," Tom told his

old friend when he saw Chow's reaction, "calm yourself. I've known for years that you saw Bud back then in Laredo and something happened between you two. What, I don't know, but I'm sure that it had a drastic effect on this lady's life and she deserves to know the whole truth after all this time."

"Tom... I had to, you see..." Chow stumbled over his words and Tom held out his hand to stop him.

"Later, Chow, later. Let's finish eating first and then Ramona can continue her story and you can add yours and I'm sure that will tie up all the loose ends. Not that it will help much with this present situation, but it could take a tremendous weight off of someone's shoulders." Tom nodded toward Ramona.

The rest of the meal was eaten quickly and in silence. Once the coffee was poured, Ramona started where she had left off.

\* \* \*

After that night, Ramona and Bud were continuously by each other's side. For the first week Ramona helped Bud get back onto his feet. After he was able to move around for more than just a few steps and stand for more than a minute or two he was down in the lounge's kitchen helping her or tending bar when it was slow. By the third week of his recovery he was passably speaking "restaurant" Spanish, but at times he still made blunders that made everyone who heard them laugh.

He made friends with a few of the locals and joked and was pleasant to all the customers. But a slight tension always existed about Paulie. The man still was out prowling the street and back alleyways, but he stayed out of the lounge and away from them.

Bud did hear once or twice that he was still a marked man and that he was living on borrowed time. That piece of gossip he just shrugged off, and acted like he didn't care. But it did worry him for Ramona's sake.

On the night celebrating their fourth month of being together Bud took Ramona to the Three Amigo's Cantina by the waterfront. They had a wonderful dinner and the wandering minstrels played for them a Spanish love song that thrilled Ramona to tears.

As they were heading out the door after their pleasant meal Bud heard his name called out by a voice that he instantly recognized. He stopped and turned toward the Texan drawl. Chow Winkler was standing there with the owner of the cantina and his wife.

Bud excused himself to Ramona and left her by the door and was back a few minutes later in a changed mood. He was no longer smiling and when they finally did get a cab to go home Bud did not talk about the man that called out to him. He was strangely silent and Ramona was frightened.

When they got home Bud was restless and did not want to go to bed. Instead he told Ramona that he had to go out and not to wait up for him. She wanted to plead with him not to go or at least tell her what was going on, but she kept silent afraid of making matters worse. She somehow knew that this was something out of his past that he never wanted to talk about. As the door closed behind Bud, Ramona bit her lip and cried herself into a fitful sleep. She knew that no good was to come from this chance meeting.

Just before dawn Bud was back and silently got into bed and pulled her into his arms and, for the next hour, he held her like she was the only person that mattered. Eventually he fell asleep and loosened his grip on her.

When she woke a few hours later Bud was gone. Ramona bit the back of her hand so hard that blood flowed freely trying not to cry out in pain for she knew that she would never see him again. She had something important to tell him and now he would never know it.

When she finally got the courage to sit up in bed and swung her legs out onto the floor, she found a note on the small side table:

*Ramona, sorry, I must leave. Thank you for all  
that you have done for me. It's best this way,  
Bud.*

Five minutes later her father came looking for her. He found her sitting on the edge of the bed, note still in her hand, crying.





## Chapter Five: Dreams Do End

She stopped talking and Tom handed her his handkerchief.

“Sorry, after all these years you’d think that I would be over it.” Ramona finally sat back into her chair, drained of emotions.

Tom waited for her to gather herself together. He was sitting at the edge of his chair looking at Chow who had a forlorn look on his face. He was wringing his hands together as if he did not know what to do with them.

Tom cleared his throat, “Chow, I think you can now tell both of us why Bud left that day can’t you?”

“Now Tom, I can’t, don’t ya know? I promised him that I’d ‘a never tell!” Chow slumped into his chair even more.

Tom reached out and touched the old cowpoke’s arm. “I can understand your reluctance, Chow. But this lady’s life has been hell because of that night and she deserves the truth.”

“Ahhh, Tom...” he began to plead, but Tom cut him short.

“Partner, we’ve always been truthful with each other and I would never ask you to break a promise, but this time you must! You see, Miss Sanchez is the mother of Bud’s only son, Carlos. He twelve and right now he’s out with Miss Grant, my secretary and a security guard looking the place over.”

Chow’s jaw dropped and in a low, haunted voice he said, “What till I get my hand on that prairie dog!” Chow was flabbergasted. Looking up at Ramona he added, “That pup skedaddled on you and left you in the family way? Just wait, I tell you! Promises or no promises, that’s a horse of a different color!” he spat out as he straightened his shoulders and then leaned forward in his chair placing his arms on his knees and knitting his fingers together.

“Gee, Miss Sanchez, I really hate to tell you this, and Tom I know he was your best friend and all, but I think he might have killed a man that night!” Tom and Ramona both were shocked and amazed.

Then Ramona began to laugh, and this time Tom and Chow stared at *her*. After a moment she stopped. “How the hell did Bud think he killed Paulie? They found Paulie’s body floating in the canal a few days after Bud left me and a street punk was picked up for the killing a day or two later. If I

remember it right they even found the gun in a trash bin behind the *Three Amigo's Cantina* by the... say, wait a minute, that's where Bud saw a man and, and... ”

“That right, miss, I was that man,” Chow admitted. Ramona sank back into the couch whispering, “No, not Bud. He just wouldn't kill a man, I can't believe it!”

“Chow, tell us what you know, and leave out nothing. You should have told me about this years ago!” Tom was angry at his lifelong friend that he thought of as a second father.

“Gee, Tom, that 'a why I didn't. I knowed that you be angry and go lookin' for him and that'd caused a lot more trouble.” He hopelessly looked at Tom.

Tom took a deep breath and let it out between his teeth in a hiss. “Talk, Chow,” was all he said.

\* \* \*

As Chow opened the back door of the Three Amigo's Cantina he heard a car backfiring, or at least that's what he thought it was. He said goodbye to this friends once more and stepped out and closed the door behind him. It was a little past four a.m. in the morning and Bud had left a few minutes before in good spirits. They had talked for almost two hours. Bud and Chow were the best of friends no matter how much Bud used to play tricks on the older cook.

Chow understood why Bud had to leave Swift Enterprises and he told him so before he left on that Harley of his. They talked of old times, what Chow was doing now and most important what Bud was doing.

Bud reluctantly told him of the last several months of his stay in Laredo and of Ramona. Chow got a feeling that Bud was leaving out his true feelings for the woman, but that was alright. As long as he was finally finding himself again the rest would come later. Bud got a promise from the former range cook to keep silent about this meeting. He was feeling bad about how he left Tom at Enterprises and still could not face up to him. Chow just could not convince him that Tom understood and would welcome back his old friend.

But what befell Chow as he looked down the alley was etched into his memory forever. There twenty feet in front of him was Bud, stooped over a body, a gun in his hand. When Bud looked up, blood was running from a cut lip, his

eyes were wide open and his face pale looking. He stood up, dropped the gun and stepped back from the body and the spreading puddle of blood.

Chow ran to the stricken man on the ground and felt for a pulse and found none. He stood up and reached for Bud's shoulders and clasped them in his strong hands. "Bud, what happened? Why'd you shoot him? God! I gotta call the police."

In a hard cold voice, Bud pleaded, "Chow, I didn't do it. Please believe me."

Chow looked down at the body and then back at him, "What happened, then? You better tell me the truth, partner!"

"I came out of the door and closed it," he stammered at first. "Paulie was there arguing with this ragged looking kid—no, late teens or early twenties—Paulie turned to look at who was coming out and the kid just shot him in the chest, point blank, and he dropped to the ground dead."

Bud took a ragged breath to collect himself. "I froze for a second and in that time the kid threw the gun at me and ran off. I stupidly caught it just as it hit my face." Bud licked the blood from his lips and touched it gingerly with a finger, "then I went over to see if I could help Paulie. You came out as I was finishing checking for his pulse just like you did," he finished.

"I've got to call the cops, Bud. You explain it to them and they'll find the killer, I'm sure." Chow was feeling hopelessly over his head.

"Chow, they won't believe me. My fingerprints are on the gun, I have a split lip, and everyone around here knows that Paulie and I have bad blood between us. I'm sure the cops know it too!"

Chow had never seen Bud so wild and shook up.

"You've got to help me, you've got to!" Bud reached into his pocket and took out a handkerchief and reached down for the gun and started to wipe it clean. "Chow, you've got to forget that this happened. Please leave, I'll fix this up and disappear from town." Chow was dumfounded. He knew this was wrong, but he also knew that Bud could not have done this and with the past history between the two men the cops might just throw

away the keys and lock Bud up without giving him a chance to prove his innocence.

“Bud, what are you going to do?” he finally dared to ask. Bud stopped wiping the gun and looked back at Chow.

“Thanks Chow, but the less you know the better. Please, just leave. I’ll never be able to repay you for this.” Bud then walked over to one of the trash containers and tossed the gun into it.

“Bud, is that wise?”

“Chow, look at all that blood, there’s no way of hiding that, so I might as well leave the gun. Maybe the cops can trace it to the real killer. As long as they don’t find any of my prints on it I’ll be all right. Now go before someone sees you here. I’ll be all right. Go, please!” he begged.

\* \* \*

“And that’s it; I left and never saw Bud again. A few days later I read in the newspaper that Paulie Hernando’s killer was found and he turned out to be a street pusher with a long rap sheet and I prayed to God that Bud did not frame the kid. That’s why I said he *might* have killed someone!”

They sat there in silence for a time and then Chow spoke up again. “Miss Sanchez, I guess I should have checked up on that pup back then, but I didn’t. I sure am sorry for that and I wish I could make up for it now. I know it’s a little too late, but I feel that I let everyone down, especially you!” His eyes were downcast and his voice was full of emotions.

“Well, Chow if that’s the way you feel,” Tom told him, “I know how you can be of assistance after all.”

Chow’s head popped up, “What you need, son?”

“If it’s not too much to ask, is that second floor tenement of yours still empty and for rent?”

“It sure is boss, and the little lady and her son can have it for as long as she needs it.” A small smile broke out on his face.

“And...” Tom added, “you know people. Can you find her a cook or a bartender’s job?” He looked at Ramona, “You don’t mind either of those jobs or do you want something new. We have job training here at Enterprises and I’m sure we can find one for you.”

“Oh no, Tom, a restaurant job of either type would be fine.

I really don't want charity. And I don't want people to think that you're paying for Bud's past. I know that things like this can't be kept secret for long. So a job away from here is best."

"Tom, leave this up to me," Chow spoke as he stood up and started to pick up the lunch dishes and put them back on the cart. "I'll see to the needs of Miss Sanchez and her son, boss. I'll just mosey along and take this young lady with me and make things right."

\* \* \*

For Bud, his dreams were more a rehash of Swift Space history and personal blunders that he had made as he sank deeper and deeper into alcohol. Space was what he loved most after Sandy Swift. It all started to spiral downhill for him with the disappearance of the plane that Sandra Swift and Phyllis Newton were piloting during a small three-day vacation in the Gulf.

They were never found, but a small group of *Earth-First Activist* claimed responsibility for abducting them and threatened their lives if Tom did not shut down his whole space operations because they claimed that he was "killing Mother Earth and all her children."

The group was found in a hidey-hole in the Rockies and the round-up of the faction was bungled by the government rescue team and all were killed in the explosion and fire.

Several female bodies were found and never identified. The government claimed two of them were Sandy and Phyllis. What the Swifts received from the recovery group was two boxes of ashes and not one bit of charred bones that should have been there. There was no way that that fire destroyed all the bones. The government claimed that the remains were found in a cell that was also used to store gasoline and propane tanks and that accounted for the total disintegration of the bones.

Tom and his group of forensic experts ran their own identification test and were satisfied that the two boxes contained a mixture of human and animal ashes and that the bodies were never in the fire at the mountain compound. The chemical analyses showed evidence that a crematorium fire of natural gas was used to render the bodies into ashes. But why the substitution was made by the government was

never solved.

This started the distrust of both the industrial and government complexes of the world. The climax came a year later when a rival southeastern Asian conglomerate tried to take over one of the Swift's space elevators at the Singapore free trade complex and ended in the total capture of the Asian mercenary forces by Gary Bradley's selected emergency response force.

Bud was to head the space mission and retake the space station that was in lockdown. But when he was finally found in a biker's bar totally wasted it was too late for him to help out. This was the first public display of his hard-handed drinking while off duty... but not his last.

Tom then decided that he had to do everything in his power to keep Swift Space free from unscrupulous rivals and government hands. He no longer had time to invent and go exploring the solar system or go farther out to the stars. No one could defeat the tamper-free systems that Tom and his father had put into place to protect their space properties. Many people had tried and failed.

Their only accomplishment was to drive Swift Enterprises deeper and deeper into outer space. The Swift Construction Company was now located in the asteroid belt way beyond Mars and untouchable by most rivals.

While building the first orbital Swift Star Station Bud had his own personal downfall from grace. While Tom struggled with two women that vied for his attention and love, Bud in the same time period had several near misses and small crashes while piloting cargo rockets from the asteroid belt to the space station. It all came to a near tragic end when Tom was almost killed. Bud was piloting a construction space wagon in an impromptu rescue mission with another person into an unfinished section of the space city, hit a bulkhead to a "live" area and decompressed it.

It was only because Bud and Bashalli Prandit managed to achieve the rescue of Tom from a murderous woman that he was only restricted to desk duty at Swift Star Station from then on and not grounded outright and fired.

Tom married Bashalli two months later and when his new bride came home from their honeymoon pregnant, Bud decided it was time to move on.

## Chapter Six: Ghost in the System

Phyllis was struggling with the two realities she found herself in. She was part of the Commander's elite computer system, in protocol she was the pinnacle of the top echelon computer groups that were linked up with intelligent beings. Every computer system, either biological and/or electronic, on the asteroid ship had to report through her. She was the final word unless the commander said otherwise.

Her own command word used by the asteroid Commander was 'ELITE', and she felt that way when she gave conscious consideration to her position onboard the ship. It took her years to realize that she should not have known that she was part of the ship's system and that she still had her own personal identity tucked away into a small part of her brain. Something that stayed separate, whole and mostly asleep. It was her dreams that made her aware that she was still a real person locked inside her mind and not an AI, Artificial Intelligence, computer.

Normally, when a Dino's brain was implanted with synapse-adhering electronic relays in the suspension tank, the entire mind taken over and the individual personality is destroyed. An artificial overlay start up memory was installed and only the being's reason and judgment abilities remained.

The synapses were supercharged to handle an increase in speed of over two hundred percent so the brain could interact and respond with the solid state computers at a meaningful time frame and this led to the eventual burn out of the brain cells and death of the Dino's body.

But the human brain is structured into three individual parts instead of two as in the Dinosaurs. And it is more malleable in that it has the ability to relearn things in different sections of the brain, to recover from damage and to acclimate to new situations.

It was also the way the Dinos had hot-wired the two woman's unfamiliar brains that made a difference. They followed the same basic procedure that they used on themselves, and that led to numerous connections that normally never existed between the bottom portion of the

cerebrum's temporal lobe and the upper cerebellum.

When the ship's computer programs started to overrun their cerebrum the girl's individualities were able to transfer down into the more primitive portion of the brain where it was kept undamaged and whole. The primitive part of the cerebellum was no longer a needed part of the brain because the Dino's nanobots took over the full control of movements, balance and muscle tone that the cerebellum previously maintained.

It took time, years, before Phyllis learned to move around the inner parts of the ship's computer systems without setting off glitches all over the place. As long as she kept her thoughts slow, at human speed, they were not detected. The ultra fast microbursts of computer information just zipped passed the slow, slow movement of Phyllis's thoughts.

It took her hours of slowly poking around the subsystems to find out why she and Sandy started to fight with each other. The source turned out to be an old left over protection sub-routine from when the Dino's were not permanently tied into the computer systems. This sub-routine was used to keep the different Dino's from contacting each other and wasting valuable computer time with unrelated talk.

As the system evolved and became more complex the solution of permanent connections was established and the 'no contact' programs became obsolete and finally forgotten in the uncountable numbers of computer code lines.

Sandy and Phyllis's contact with each other was the first in over two hundred years. Phyllis was glad that that particular program was never upgraded to *body and brain death* of the participant like so many other computer interface breaches were.

Once she found the reason why it happened she was able to overwrite it from her elite command position. Phyllis had to slip back into her second reality to be able to talk to Sandy again where they now hid/resided in the primitive part of their minds that the Dinos did not possess and had not taken the time to analyze when the two women had been imposed into the BioTronics computer network.

It was because of the high demand on Phyllis to analyze,



correlate and prioritize facts that brought her hidden personality out into the open once more. More and more of her individuality was instinctively called upon by her own higher functional mind as her brain had to multi-task bigger and more complex solutions.

Luckily, the speed difference between her two mindsets kept her safe until she learned to control it voluntarily. Then again, the Dinosaurs never considered the possibility of any remaining personality or memories being the cause of any unwanted electronic signals.

“Sandy, we can talk now. Do you forgive me?” Phyllis asked in a low sad voice.

“Trash management?” came Sandy’s reply with a light laugh in her tone. “Is that all I’m good for? A nineteen year old trash lady, yuck!”

“Actually, Sandy, you’re not nineteen anymore. Neither of us are. More like sixty-five in a thirty-five year old body.”

“Frig; I’m a wasted trash can!” Sandy began to cry. Phyllis just let her weep. She did not know what to say. She had years to adjust to the fact that her mind and body was no longer in sync with the reality around her.

When the sobbing subsided, Phyllis tried to ease Sandy’s misgivings by talking about her current merits.

“Trash bin storage in a computer system was the hardest concept for them to understand. To the Dinos there is no junk, it is either needed or not, with zero in between. You don’t know how much clutter there was that was slowing down their computers. Until you came along and they realized, with my help, that your free style memory storage was what they needed to store their unwanted files and free up so much computer space that they pulled you out of deep freeze and started to use your mind’s ability.”

“And, I should be grateful?” Sandy mentally sniffled.

“If they hadn’t we would not be talking right now and you would have died years ago. It was only because of your usefulness that the nanobots were allowed to maintain your body after they reached their new home planet and decommission the asteroid ship.”

“If they decommissioned the ship why are we still alive?” Sandy wondered.

“Maybe decommission is not the right word. They stopped using the ship for travel but the life and science departments were too important to abandon and waste. To rebuild it all on the planet would have been impossible during the first twenty or thirty years.”

“Phyl, I hate to say this, but if you do not have a way to get us out of this mess we’re in I would rather be dead!” Phyllis could hear her certainty of this in her mind.

“Sis, that is why I waited until now to finish waking you up. It is time to get moving and try to save the world.”

“What world? The Dino’s world? Why should we?”

“Not their world, silly girl, our world!”

“Earth? But it’s light years away?” Sandy was certain of that. Then, with growing uncertainty she added, “Isn’t it?”

“No, not any more. We’re about to come out of interstellar space and enter back under old Sol’s influence. When we do the Space/Time drive bubble will pop and in three or four days after that we will be making our attack run on Earth.”

“Do something, Phyl!” cried out Sandy. “You said you’re the top computer! Stop them!”

“Sandy, it’s not that simple,” Phyllis replied calmly, trying to urge Sandy to mentally relax. “Listen, if I stop the ship right now they’ll just disconnect me and put one of their own in my place. We have to be more devious than that. I have it all worked out! Timing is the key and the secrecy of our existence outside of the suspension tanks is a must.”

“Don’t you worry, I won’t tell anyone, but are you going to let me in on your grand plan?” Sandy was now thinking that she was going to be as useful as teats on a bull, especially if they were her full size ones.

“Sandy, you are the one that has to get us out. The Dino’s won’t miss you at all if you drop out of the computer systems. Most of it is self-run and I’ll be able to redirect anything that is label directly for you. It would be weeks before then noticed. As for me it’s not that easy, but once you’re free of the tank it will be up to you to get us both out.”

“I don’t know what—”

“Look, I have the whole thing worked out and if you will just relax I’ll download it to your higher brain so when you revive outside of the tank it will be part of your everyday memory. You’ll know all that I planed out, all possible escape routes, and the assault campaign that the Dinos are going to use to attack Earth.”

“You think I can pull this off? Just grab Phyllis and run?”

“Well...” Phyllis hesitated for a moment. “It will be up to you to see that I stay connected to the Bio-Tronics computers as long as possible so I can head off trouble until the last second...”

“Stop right there, sister. Question time. For one, how am I going to get us out if you’re still in the tube? Two, if you’re with me why you can’t lead us out of here? And three, how do two naked women stop an attack by how many Dino’s... fifty, five hundred, five thousand?”

“See, that’s why you get to lead us out—you’re already thinking of several things at once, and that will keep us ahead of the foe, if nothing else does,” Phyllis reassured her.

“Thanks for the vote of conference, Phyllis Elizabeth Susanne Newton, but you’d better answer my three questions before I tell you of a few more I have!”

“Okay. One, I’ll be out of the tube. But I’ll still need to be hooked up to the systems by a remote head gear that the Dino’s used to use a few hundred years ago. Two, I’ll be sensory deprived as I am now. So you will be leading a deaf, blind and dumb girl around.”

“And, naked,” Sandy reminded her.

“Uhh, yeaah. There is that. Three, there are only fifteen Dino’s on this asteroid.”

“What the—! How do you try to take over a world with fifteen Dinos?” Sandy was flabbergasted.

“Actually, there are twenty five Dinos all told—fifteen here on this ship and five others on each of the other two asteroids.

“Other two? What other two? Pretty soon you be telling

me that we'll have to get to the other two asteroids to stop them once we're done here on this one!"

There was silence for a few seconds, and then, "Gee, I was afraid you would think of that! But you're right. If nothing else stops those two ships then we must!"

Sandy started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Phyllis asked in bewilderment.

"And to think we left our super girl uniforms at home. Hell, we left all our clothes at home! I don't even think that Bruce Willis ever saved the day buck naked!"

"Well there's a first time for everything, you know." Phyllis retorted. "Just be thankful nobody we know will see us."

"And what will we use for spacesuits, or do we go space hopping naked too?"

"Well... if we have to, we can stand up to five or so minutes that way before our nanobots can no longer sustain our bodies."

"But don't the Dinos go out without suits, if I remember right?"

"Yes, they do, but their hide is specially treated with armor hard nanos and they have built in oxygen purifiers in their lungs and their other organs are fortified for space as well. We had none of this as original equipment, so we are limited to how much damage our bodies can withstand."

"No suits and no nano body armor. Is there suntan lotion at least in this deal? I don't want to burn my ample front and curvy bottom you know."

"That the last thing to worry about. You can explain how come we have no tan lines... For crying out loud, Sandy, you've got me doing it too! Keep quiet and relax, I have information to download into your mind and I have to get our little army together."

"Now she tells me we have an army! I sure do hope there are no men in it!" Sandy laughed as she relaxed her conscious mind so it could be imprinted with Phyllis's master plan.

## Chapter Seven: Time for a Change

The orderly sat motionless at the control monitoring station watching both Tom and Bud. The number of IV tubing going into them was amazing even if he never saw the tube in their GI track, the three spaced out taps in their spines and the small bundle of wires and fluid lines entering the base of their skulls.

As he watched he found himself drifting off to sleep. He fought it but his head nodded and he fell into a fitful slumber. He dreamed of Bud on the table but it wasn't Bud at the same time. His face kept changing from a squared jaw, dark haired man to one with a more rounded face, with brown hair and a dirty dark complexion.

He too had IV's in his arms and an oxygen line in his nose, but his forehead and top of his head were heavily bandaged. Blood soaked the dressing and the flow would not cease. A bullet had entered the man's skull at an angle from the middle of the forehead and exited just above the left ear tearing way the skull and taking a lot of brain matter with it. How he was still alive was beyond the doctor's understanding.

A middle-aged woman held the hand of a seven-year-old boy as they entered the dimly lit hospital room. "Ramon, don't be afraid." His grandmother softly told him.

The boy looked up into her eyes and asked between sobs. "Is papa going to live, Grandma?" She could feel him trembling.

"No, my child, he is not. God is calling him and he shall be with your mother before long." She was having a hard time holding back her own tears for her rapidly dying son.

"Why, Grandma?" he pleaded.

"It was his time, Ramon. We cannot control when a person dies, because that is up to God."

"God wants people to die this way?" he asked as he shook his head and fell silent for a moment. "If this is God's way then I don't want to believe in him!" He sobbed once more and pulled his hand from his Grandma's and ran the final few

feet to his father's bed and leapt up to try to hug him. But it was too late. His father had quietly died as his own mother and son had stood there talking.

\* \* \*

“Attention, please! Attention, please. Computer DNA sequencing no longer in effect on patient number two, Bud Barclay. DNA restructuring has failed. Need to reboot structure ladder from an earlier donation date than one being used. The DNA is too corrupted to withstand adoption. Please pick another saved DNA vial from the remaining stored samples at hand.”

The young man snapped awake and rubbed the sweat from his brow. Reading the computer screen he felt a sense of tribulation and at the same time relief that he may yet not have to kill this man. That it would be taken out of his hands once and for all.

This crisis had affected only Bud and not Tom. The computer had halted both regenerations for the time being. He understood what the computer wanted, but his choices were very limited. He had only two dates to choose from—age ‘*twenty-one*’ and age ‘*thirty-five*’.

The age ‘*sixty-five*’ sample had not been obtained from a reliable source. Tom had warned the orderly that this might happen before they started the procedure. And that there may have been too many free radicals and open ended sequences for a positive regeneration even as limited as what Tom wanted it to be. This was one of the reasons that he sought after another person to be with them in the first place. Bud's hard drinking and other free style living was going to cause problems.

“Well, Mr. Swift,” the man reflected to himself as he stared at the two bodies in their separate regeneration chambers in the glass enclosed room just beyond the manual control units where he sat. “You're going to come out of this a little bit younger than what you wanted because of your good old friend. Be sure to thank him before I end his miserable life!”

His eyes flashed with hatred at Bud because even as he lay there under glass with several different color IV tubes running into both of his arms and legs, the oxygen nose tube, and a

side by side mouth lines that ran into his body, he still caused problems for others by just laying there.

“Younger may be better for my purposes,” mused the orderly to himself trying to fortify his resolve. “There’ll be a lot more time that he will not enjoy and I’ll have to make sure he realize it as I kill him!” A sinister smile appeared on the man’s face as he lifted his hand and pretended to strangle his own reflection with its slightly square jaw and dark hair on the glass partition wishing it was Bud.

The orderly told Albert which of the other two selections to use and to modify Tom’s regenerative age to match Bud’s.

“Do you want me to hold Mr. Swift’s restructuring until Mr. Barclay’s reaches the same level of progress?” Albert inquired as a robotic unit drew the new DNA samples for Bud out of cold storage and started to thaw out the vial.

“Will it harm Mr. Swift in any way?” he worriedly asked the computer.

“No, at this time in the procedure it is safe, but later on it would not be advisable.” The machine sounded indifferent at the outcome.

“Can you keep Mr. Swift unconscious after the process is finished so that both of them are revived at the same time?”

“That can be done. Then you want to continue Mr. Swift’s treatment as of now and keep him unaware until Mr. Barclay has completed his regeneration?”

“Yes, please do so. And if you don’t need me right now I think I’ll go to bed and leave this in your capable hands. Wake me if you have any more difficulties.”

\* \* \*

The over eager orderly watched the clock run down to a triple set of double zeros on the office door and it immediately reset itself for another ten hours.

“Hey! Albert, the office door reset itself, what gives?” His feet dropped down to the floor from the desk top as he was preparing to get up and go outside the door for a quick look around. He was tired of the same four rooms and breathing the same used air. He wanted sunshine and a breeze on his face.

“Until the two regenerations are concluded no one may leave.” Albert informed him.

“Override that and let me out!” he shouted. “That’s an order! No stupid machine is going to hold me down here!”

“That order is contrary to my prime directive.” Albert fell silent and no matter how much yelling, cursing and flinging of things that the orderly did he was still not released from the lab’s hideaway.

Finally he stopped throwing things and picked up the one remaining good chair that he had not broken against the glass partition, put it in front of the control panel once more and sat down to brood the rest of time away. By the time Tom and Bud started the revival procedure the lab’s maintenance robots had the rooms back in full running order.

\* \* \*

The now placid young man was standing between the two regeneration units looking down at both Tom and Bud. Their physical appearance was remarkably changed and younger. Their skin was pink, healthy and well muscled again. As he wondered what else Tom’s regeneration science could do the plastic shield covering Tom rotated a full one hundred and eighty degrees along the long side of the medical platform that he was laying on.

A moment later Tom took a deep breath and let it out. He worked his jaw, wrinkled up his face and shrugged his shoulders a few times to loosen up stiff muscles. He then blinked his eyes and a smile formed on his lips as he recognized the Kid.

A bottle of water with a straw popped up out of a slot at the head of the platform. “Please help Mr. Swift with a few sips of water.” Albert instructed the human assistant. “He should be fully functional in a few minutes.”

By the time Tom was sitting up and holding the bottle for himself the orderly could hear Bud’s shield sliding open. With a sigh he turned to start to help Bud as he had Tom.

“I see that the first batch of DNA did not take on Bud.” Tom spoke up for the first time as Bud finally sat up facing him, and the young man stepped back to the foot of the tables. Bud’s face turned to a quirky smile as he looked at



Tom.

“Tom,” Bud whispered to his friend in awe, “I think you took a wrong turn someplace as well because you look at least forty years younger.”

“Then, my friend, don’t look in a mirror because so do you.” Tom remarked.

After taking a deep breath the youngster spoke to Tom. “Sorry, Mr. Swift, but the first try did not work and I had to select another. I thought it best to keep both of you at the same apparent age. That is what you wanted, is it not?”

“You did just fine, Kid. We’ll just have to get use to it, that’s all,” Tom answered as he slid off of the platform and stood on his new, younger legs that, for the first time in years, were not riddled with aches and pain.

\* \* \*

The three men sat in Tom’s top floor office in the Swift’s only remaining human occupied building. It was the tallest structure at Swift Enterprises, and yet it only had four floors. The décor was subdued with only an old-fashioned work desk, which had seen its better years, along the back wall, while opposite was a front glass wall overlooking Swift Enterprises. The glass was opaque to the outside world even though it was crystal clear from where they sat in matching armchairs. They sat in the small sitting area in the corner with a small table between them.

Tom had spent over an hour detailing what he knew of the Dinos, beginning with the days when everyone considered them to be the Swift’s “Space Friends,” and what they evidently were currently up to. He also told them why he knew that they were coming back as an enemy and not as friends anymore. When he went to see them off on their trip to the stars they sent him a container for him to pick up just inside the asteroid belt. It was a clear block of plastic with the body of the Prime Leader in it. Tom knew that their peace agreement was over.

“Albert, please secure for us a space transport elevator and have it on the roof of this building in an hour’s time. Also please have a small selection of breakfast items delivered... Coffee, juice and some type of sandwiches would be nice.”

Tom spoke to no particular area in the room, but the orderly was looking around for the telltale cameras.

“Right away, sir.” The computer voice replied out of thin air all around them. “The breakfast will be here in five minutes and the transport is already on its way.”

“After all this rigmarole you’re just going to sit and have breakfast?” the orderly burst out as Tom and Bud relaxed into the easy chairs facing the outside windows. “It’s been days for crying out loud. Where the hell are those asteroids now? Ain’t you even going to warn anyone here on Earth? For all I can see you’re doing nothing but waste time.” He was almost shouting at them by this point.

Bud stood up and placed a hand on the young man’s shoulder. The orderly angrily slapped it away. “Don’t you dare do that again, Barclay! You hear me?” The younger man glared at Bud from inches away.

“What got you so high and mighty, Kid?” Bud retorted holding back his own anger. “If you think that Tom has not been busy for the last ten hours that *YOU* had him on hold, you’ve got another think coming!”

At that moment a bell dinged and their breakfast popped up from the center of the coffee table. “Gentlemen,” Tom spoke up, “I suggest that we eat and I’ll explain what has been happening for the last few days.” Tom beckoned to the orderly to sit down.

Tom reached for a hot cup of coffee, closing his eyes as he sipped it, then muttered “Ahh, that tastes good.” Looking at them he added, “Enjoy this, my friends, for I don’t know when we’ll get to sit down and have the pleasure of another cup like this one.” He then picked up one of the breakfast sandwiches and bit into it. Bud joined him and a few minutes later the Kid did likewise, but he did not enjoy it.

“Albert informed me on what took place concerning Bud’s regeneration after mine was completed while he put me on standby...”

“That Albert lied to me!” murmured the Kid to himself.

“It may seem that way,” Tom returned, “but Albert is my ‘Boy Friday’ and he follows my instruction first and foremost. What I had to do next after I was supposed to be

revived I could do in the regeneration chamber using the InterVoice link. So I let my body be sedated as you ordered and kept my mind conscious so I could oversee what had to be done. That happens to be taking place out in outer space. Well... most of it is.” Tom explained.

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’re the one that wanted me to come along and yet you’re not including me. So what gives, *Tom*?” He sternly looked at the older man.

“For now let’s say that things are on a predetermined track and until we get to *Swift Star Station* and take command there. There is little we can do here except inform the military authorities on Earth what is going on.”

“I suppose you intend to do that while we just sit here!” the orderly bitterly spat out at him.

“I have the ball rolling and equipment, ships and men are moving into defensive position to protect Earth and all our other bases out in space. I shall be speaking before the World Military Advisory Board in Geneva, Switzerland after we leave here. So finish up men, we’ve got places to go and people to see. And I warn you they are not going to be happy campers!”



## Chapter Eight: Risking it All

“By order of the Joint Chiefs of Military Operations please be silent!” shouted the rather short, fat, immaculately dressed man in his white uniform and chest full of medals as he pounded the desk in front of him with his mallet. “Let Tom Swift finish talking first and then we can decide if he’s to go to jail or be shot at sunset! Captain of the Guard, have your men stand ready to remove anyone that interrupts these proceedings from now on. Use what every force you deem necessary.”

“As you wish, Mr. Secretary,” the Captain of the Guard replied as he saluted him. He turned around and marched over to his detachment of men and barked out orders that started to move the guards around the room. The accompanying humming sound of energy weapons being readied could also be heard.

“You may continue, Mr. Swift, but remember that you’re in our court and not in your high and mighty Swift Enterprises!”

“That sir, I am keenly aware of and I would not be here if I did not have Earth’s interest above yours.” Tom stood there in front of the world’s top military men and without missing a beat told them straight out that they were on the verge of an interstellar invasion and that he, Tom Swift, was the cause of it.

The old stone walled castle had stood by the Rhone River for over three hundred years and many battles had been fought over it and it would still be standing after Tom Swift left its premises. It was the men inside who would never be the same.

Some would be frightened to uselessness, some would be angry and do all the wrong things, and the rest would rush off to protect their countries in case Tom Swift failed to do as he promised and was unable to save the world.

But they all feared and hated Tom foremost because he would never bend to their wishes and give in to their demands. They feared his science and Tom feared what their militaries would do with it. A more perfect stalemate could

not have been formed in the best of World Class Chess matches. Was Tom forfeiting the game or was he taking it to a new and higher level of play was the question on most of the military men's minds... and could they match it?

"Thank you, Mr. Secretary. At this time Swift Space Inc. is mobilizing all its transport ships and robotic probes to set up a defense line to protect Earth. We are also taking most of our space elevators out of service and will be using them as space catapults. In conjunction with them we are set to utilize all our solar power generators to energize our largest zap lasers. We should be able to stop anything coming our way."

The military men still looked skeptical so Tom added, "As our last resort we have available several planetoids that we are in the process of outfitting with anti-matter space drives. We'll have the ability to propel them at incredible speeds and collide them into the invading ships. Pinpoint accuracy will mean annihilating them to the smallest of atoms."

"And how much radiation will be left over to poison the Earth's atmosphere as it passes through those remains in space?" The Secretary had revulsion in his voice.

"That, gentlemen, will not happen. I will see to it personally! No one on Earth will be harmed or will need to know that this is happening."

"And what good is your word if we're all dead?" burst out a five star general with several others agreeing with him.

"Have I ever failed to deliver on my words?" returned Tom holding back his anger. "Not like others that I know including one or two of you gentlemen! Now if you'll excuse me I have a long standing disagreement to finish." Tom started to turn around and to walk back out the double glass doors that opened to the second floor balcony on which he had landed his blue colored *craftavator*, as Bud had christened the space transport elevator decades ago.

"Stop right there, mister!" called out the Captain of the Guards. His voice was backed up by the sound of releasing safeties on the guns being aimed at him. Tom turned back and looked at the men with the guns.

"Really guys?" Tom smiled back at them. "Do you think that's a little overkill? You all know that I'm unarmed, so I

have to ask what do you think I could do to all of you? Maybe snap my fingers,” which he did, “and make you all freeze in your tracks?” Sub vocalizing into his InterVoice link he added, “Hey, flyboy, any time now, I could use your help!”

“Yeah, skipper, I could use your help too, right now. Did you have to change all the controls in this stupid thing? Even your father wouldn’t recognize it, for God sakes!”

“Bud, stop kidding around and use the Intuitive Direct function link of your InterVoice. No one uses manual controls anymore!” Tom irritably shot back.

“There!” Bud’s triumphal voice cut in, “I get it now. It’s powering up, steady... steady... now! Move it, skipper, the door is open!” Bud urged as everyone around Tom came to a slow standstill.

“Sorry, people, but I have a very important date and I can’t be late.” Tom doffed an imaginary top hat to all of the men in the room, turned his back to them once more and walked out of the doors to his waiting friends in the space elevator.

The more the military men tried to move the harder it was for them to budge. When one of the soldiers finally did manage to slowly trigger his gun, its high intensity energy capacitor failed to discharge, neutralized by the very nature of the inert field that now surrounded them. The more electrical force that was released the slower it flowed.

“Do you think they’ll ever figure out what’s happening to them, Tom?” Bud asked as Tom closed the loading hatch behind him.

“I hope not Bud. To think we have the Dinos to thank for that little device.” Tom chuckled as he looked at the monitor that was still focused on the interior of the courtroom and the frozen looking men.

“What do you mean ‘thank the Dinos’, Tom?” asked the orderly from his seat near the wall mounted control panel and visual screen that Bud was using.

“Well, Kid...” Tom started to reply.

“You can cut that out too, Tom!” the orderly shot back with more than a little anger. “I do have a name, you know!”

Tom walked over to him and whispered in his ear, “Do

you also want me to tell Bud that you're going to kill him when this is all over, that is if the Dinos don't do it first?"

The orderly fell out of his chair and stumbled away from Tom with a look of shock and fear on his face. Tom smiled back and mouthed, "Later". The man turned white and sank into one of many empty chairs that were situated in the farthest corner of the *craftavator* away from the control area.

Bud watched the interplay between them and when Tom told him to raise ship he adjusted the controls and asked no questions about what just happened. "Later I'll ask Tom what that was all about," Bud thought, "but now is not the time or place, I can see that."

"We're still going to *Swift Star Station*?" inquired Bud before he set their final destination on the control board.

"There is no place left for us to go on Earth, flyboy. We just burnt our last bridge!" As he spoke the television screen switched from the aerial view of the heavens they were ascending into to a satellite feed looking down on Swift Enterprises. Tom was controlling it with his InterVoice link.

At least five stealth military transport planes were to be seen dropping Exo-armored troops with rocket assisted landing pods into the walled off grounds. A dozen massive tanks were trying to smash their way through the outer walls and fences.

Before the first shock troopers even had time to touch the ground there was no ground to land on. A crater sinking over a hundred feet deep formed as the land and buildings within the walls just vaporized into a thick, black, sooty smoke that bellowed upwards into the sky blocking out the view the satellite was transmitting.

With a look of horror on his face, Bud turned to Tom and could not say a thing to his friend even though his mouth was working up and down.

"Fear not," Tom lightly laughed, "Enterprises was abandoned immediately after we left for Switzerland. Right about now the military is finding out that they have no way off the Earth if they have any type of explosive or high energy weapon with them. All the space elevators that have been left operational on non Swift orbital stations are now



directional-specific from one ground faculty to one space station only and nowhere else.”

“Fine. What’s that mean in Bud-speak?”

“They only go where we want them to. By the time they get any troop-carrying rockets off the ground we shall not be around for them to reach. If they have anything in orbit already, our repelatron and inertia shields will keep them at bay.”

The flier checked his controls and then turned to face his best friend. “Tom, I know that I’ve not been in the loop for some time, but have things disintegrated that much between you and the world’s governments?” Bud was still remembering when Swift Enterprises was on the top of most governments’ list for go-to help.

“Yeah, Bud. For the past thirty years it’s been a roller coaster from hell. The different military and government factions wanted to control our space ability in every way possible. The biggest fear that dad—” and Tom stopped as his voice choked slightly. He cleared his throat and continued. “We both feared anything they got from us would be thought of in terms of potential weapons. In the wrong hands a lot of what we’ve accomplished might be misused and so we have done everything possible to keep that from happening. They may have some power, but as long as we don’t use Earth’s resources for what we build they can’t touch us.”

Bud nodded.

“You remember *The Masters*, the diabolical brother and sister team that build that slave-run base on the back side of the Moon? Well, it became independent after they perished when they attempted to take over the *Swift Star Station*. No world government stepped up to help them. We—Swift Space Inc.—were the only ones that did.”

“Sure. I remember all that. You made some good friends and a few enemies over that, didn’t you?”

“More friends than enemies. Anyway, a World Government Tribunal had to make a decision about the legality of our doing that. They did, in our favor, and that helped set up the precedent that anything built in space without using Earth resources could not be taken over by any

Earth government. That also included *Swift Star Station* because we built it with no Earth material, only lunar resources and beyond.”

“Ah, I do remember that now and of you talking about having space elevators controlled only from high orbit stations and only Swift technicians could operate and maintain them. The elevator equipment could only be rented and never sold. So you did carry it out?”

“Had to Bud! Couldn’t let any country do it. They never learned how to play nice with each other. After what they did to Dad I had no choice. Hated to do it but they left me with no other way to deal with them. They pushed way too hard and I had to push back!”

Tom shook his head as all the bad memories came flooding back from that time and literally knocked him off his feet. His face paled and he fainted.

Bud reached and grabbed him before he hit the floor.

\* \* \*

(Twenty-six years earlier...) Mr. Swift sat before the space sub-committee made up of three senators and two high-ranking military men. They hammered away at him for six hours continuously. They wanted the Swifts to hand over all their space technology to the military space agency and to halt all their private space explorations. They were relentless and pushed harder and harder trying to force a reversal of the Swift’s stand on military control.

By the sixth hour, Mr. Swift had had enough. His head hurt, his body hurt and his very soul hurt. He could plainly see that they were getting nowhere and never would. Shaky, hot and drained of energy he tried to stand up. The world tilted from under his feet and the lights of the room went out. By the time his body hit the floor he was unconscious.

An emergency medical call was immediately made to the federal medical team assigned to the building... but during the following ten minutes no one came. Mr. Swift’s health monitor, built into his watch, sent out its medical alert signal to all Swift radios in the vicinity. Within minutes Doc Simpson with two aids boarded a helijet and raced off to Washington, D.C. in response.

Gary Bradley, now second in command of Swift security, along with several of his men, followed in a special equipped helijet of their own just as a precaution.

Doc Simpson was denied permission to land on the front lawn of the building for security reasons. They were told to land several blocks away. Bradley, seeing what was happening started to give out rapid-fire orders by radio and to his men. He told his pilot to simply land the helijet on the lawn after which he with his men in space body armor of Tom Jr.'s design rushed the building.

The federal security forces tried to stop them but even bullets from their handguns could not penetrate the protective mechanical assist suits. Using the latest of electronic surveillance and visual scanning devices Bradley's team burst into the sub-committee room and surrounded Mr. Swift, forming a living shield with their bodies.

Before anyone in the room could react to the Swift security men a section of the roof of the building was torn away and before the ripping sound subsided one of Tom' Jr's quick and dirty '*Vacuum Maids*' construction transport pods forced its way into the room and landed just feet away from the Enterprises men. A section of the small dome-shape vehicle slid open and Mr. Swift was gently lifted into the craft and delivered into waiting hands. The pod resealed and it took off with the Security retrieval force hanging onto the outside of the craft in specially fitted foot and hand grips available for just that kind of maneuver.

The strange craft disappeared into the sky followed more slowly by the two other aircraft. Within minutes it was receiving clearance for docking at the Swift's Outpost in space. Doc Simpson arrived fifteen minutes later to help assist the station's doctors and found that they had already run a battery of tests on Mr. Swift and were readying the operation room for both major heart and brain surgery.

\* \* \*

Tom eyes flicked opened and he was looking up at two very concerned faces. "Help me up, guys. It was just a momentary reaction to all the bio changes that I have been going through the last few days and the stress I've been putting on my newly revitalized nervous systems. It shouldn't

happen again!”

The orderly and Bud helped him to his feet and into one of the many empty seats. A bell rang from the control panel and as they turned to look at it the screen it flickered to show the face of a middle-aged man with a jolly round face and flaming red hair.

“*Swift Star Station* reporting. Mr. Swift your *craftavator* will be docking in the next five minutes.” The man’s Irish brogue was so heavy that you could just about understand him. “We will be directing your craft to command center if that is still your wish, sir?”

“Please do and inform all team leaders that we need to finalize our plans. Let’s all meet in the secondary conference room off of Central Communications. We may need to have them join us in the meeting. Thanks Robbie, I hope your family made it on board in time?”

“Yes sir, they did and a few extra relatives and friends from the old sod in tow. Hope you don’t mind?”

“Not at all, as long as they realize it’s a one way trip which they are going to sleep through and that there is no going back?”

“They do, sir, and thanks from all of us. Out.”

The screen switched back to an outside view of their approach to *Swift Star Station*.

## Chapter Nine: Outbound at Last!

As the *craftavator* started its final approach to what once had been the jewel in the sky, *Swift Star Station*, the orderly gave out an audible gasp. Tom turned toward him and waved him forward. “You may not want to miss this. It’s something that will never be seen again.”

The young man’s eyes were wide open in disbelief; he could not take them off the viewing screen. He slowly moved forward, stumbling over a few rows of seats as he did so.

The *Swift Star Station* was in pieces. Over five disc-like sections were floating separately from each other, while ten long ‘D-Shape’ cylinders were being maneuvered together to form a circular wall around the bottom of one extremely thick disc along with ten more cylinders around the top of another one.

These two disc sections were each four hundred feet high and one thousand six hundred feet in diameter. While the other three remaining discs had the same diameter they were only two hundred and fifty feet high. Each section was configured into a complete self-contained living and work space that fit on top of—or below—another disc.

A central shaft with a two hundred foot diameter allowed light and mechanical movement between all sections. Self-sealing rotary floors could iris closed safeguarding each unit from cataclysmic failure.

Off to the bottom left of the viewscreen were two clear dome sections that were filled with an intricate arrangement of mirrors and pipes.

“What happened to the station, Mr. Swift? Was it attacked already and that is all that’s left?” He was visibly shaking.

“No, son,” Tom assured the young man with a smile. “We’re just rearranging the furniture a little, that’s all. When we originally started to build the station we made it expandable by being able to stack new disc sections when we want to with two mechanical and light gathering domes that can be removed and positioned out of the way. By the time we felt the need to add a fourth section I knew that there was

a good possibility that Swift Space Inc.—and that includes the asteroid-based Swift Construction Company—would not be staying near Earth or in the solar system so I built accordingly and now you are seeing the final results.”

He looked at the orderly who was still staring at the wondrous sight.

“By separating the five sections I free the two units that are the main part of my interstellar spaceship. I add twenty space elevator systems from various locations in the systems and will eventually pick up and add the asteroid-bound Construction Company between the two discs separated by some fancy lattice work connection tubing and pathways to boost up our mass so we can achieve the same type of time dilation space flight that was proven by our long gone Dinosaur friends.”

At the mention of the word, “friends,” Bud snorted.

“By the time the starship is ready to go retrieve the Construction Company the three sections that are left of the station will be joined back together with their domes fitted in place. The thousands of people we evacuated will be able to return and resume their lives and businesses as if nothing has happen.”

“If you are taking the rest of it away, who gets control of what’s left?” the orderly asked.

“The presence of Swift Space, Inc. will be gone but the freehold government of Mars is sending qualified people to take over and manage the remaining parts of the station we’ve left in orbit for Earth use. With over three million people now living on Mars she has enough clout to keep Earth from turning the station into a battleground. Mars will train and hand over our space technology to them as they see fit.”

“We’re picking up our ball and going home... as it were,” Bud said to nobody in particular.

“We take nothing that is not ours and we leave them with the technology—sort of—that they always wanted from us. A lot of good stuff for the betterment of mankind, but little of military value. They know nothing of the star drive and that insures that we will not be followed and can continue to be

free of Earth interference for a long time into the future.”

The *craftavator* was deftly maneuvering around men in spacesuits, robotic cargo sleds and the gigantic pieces of the space station itself. It was akin to the most incredible ballet, this one carried out in the vacuum of space and with no audience to appreciate its beauty.

“What if I don’t want to go with you, Mr. Swift? Will you let me finish my personal agenda and then stay here?” He regarded Tom with an ‘I dare you to interfere’ look.

“That, my boy, is beyond anyone’s knowledge right now and I think that the future will make its own decisions. Kid, if you’re willing to let this play out on its own, I will not deter you from what you hope to do. Is that fair enough?”

The orderly looked from Tom to Bud and back again.

“Why do I feel that I will not like what you two are talking about?” Bud retorted to both of them. “What kind of devil’s agreement are you two forming behind my back?”

Tom placed his arm around Bud’s shoulder just as the *craftavator* entered an airlock built into the underside of one the discs being modified with the addition of several space elevator units. “Bud, this is something that started years ago and I intend to see it end, one way or another.”

By the look on Tom’s face Bud knew that was all the answer his friend was going to give him, at least for the time being.

\* \* \*

The *craftavator* was pulled into the immense underside of the disc that held the Command Center on its top three floors. The rest of the disc’s mammoth area was taken up by both the life support systems and the clinical sleep storage chambers for thousands of people, mostly families with all ages of children. They all slept in total unawareness of their surroundings awaiting their turn to be revived and start a new life on a frontier world with all its wonders and uncertainties. They were not only the best and brightest, but people who wanted a fresh start on a new world just like our ancestors did when they came to the Americans in the first place and then moved deeper into the wilderness of the continents.

The craft stopped at one of the few remaining empty spaceship slips that encircled the outer wall of the third floor. Docking was automatic and took only seconds. This centralized docking ring made all the ships available for both command use and for the unloading of the sleep chambers.

Tom led his two friends past the highly automated loading, unloading, sorting and storage equipment and into the nearest of the transportation tubes. Stepping into the tube Tom called out, "Three for the secondary conference room off of Central Communications." They were moved, seemingly floating just above the tube 'floor,' as a group, through both vertical and horizontal shafts in the most direct route. People and cargo moved along with them, coming and going in a never ending chaotic flow and yet the master computer control kept collisions from ever occurring.

"This is worse than your slideways down at Enterprises," remarked the kid to Tom and Bud, both of them grunting in agreement.

"We usually run individual cars," Tom informed them, "but right now it is simpler to suspend their use until we get back to a more normal traffic flow."

"Tom," Bud asked to enlighten his old memory, "this elevator system is all part of the original *Luna-Tronics Excavator* science we developed way back when?" He was referring to the time when they excavated an alien life cache out of the depths of the lunar surface. That led to their first confrontation with the Dinos.

"It is Bud, and most of the space science we now use stems out of that time..."

"Destination, secondary conference room off of Central Communications, has been reached," the tube interface computer informed them as they were deposited in front of an entryway. "Please use caution stepping out."

As they moved out of the shaft Tom's name was called out by a big, broad shouldered, gray hair man with a walking stick in his left hand and a noticeable limp.

It was followed by a second voice coming from the opposite direction that hesitantly added, "Bud... Bud Barclay? What the hell?" declared the second person that was more



cyborg than human.

The three newcomers looked first at Arv Hanson, Tom's old model maker but now the administrator of *Swift Star Station*. From him their eyes turned to Ken Horton, retired *Outpost* Commander, now trouble shooter extraordinary who was fond of telling people he was, 'Body of a machine, mind of a maniac.'

"You're both looking fit... younger even than I expected to see, for sure!" exclaimed the mechanical man as he held out his robust robotic hand for them to shake.

Bud took the proffered hand warmly. "Ken, I heard about the fuel explosion you were in, but I didn't know that it was this bad." Looking at the fully encased body with a clear helmeted head that was the only part of his body not burnt beyond recognition.

"Flyboy, think nothing of it," Ken replied. "Just consider me as the poster child for one of your favorite Saturday morning cartoon shows."

"Actually, Bud," Arv added with a smile of his own, "this was his way to get around that pesky 'must return to Earth' after every year of station duty nonsense that the doctors still insist that we *mere humans* must do! And while we're talking about doctors, Tom, you find the *Elixir of Life* or something like it?"

"That, gentlemen, was going to be my big surprise to all the colonists when we reach the Pleiades Star Cluster. Can we hold off on this until after we take care of the Dino problem?" Tom looked expectantly at his two friends.

"Tom," laughed Arv, "working for the Swift's was always full of secrets, so why stop now. I think the team leaders are all here, So let's step in and get the ball rolling." With that said Arv reached for the conference room door and ushered the rest of them in.

They lost a good twenty minutes before Arv had everyone back in any semblance of order. Tom showing up with Bud Barclay at his side and with both of them decades younger than what they should have been caused a bigger uproar than the Dinosaurs showing up with a trio of asteroids.

Tom's first question was, "Astronomy, have the three time

dilation fields around the incoming asteroids burst yet?”

“One has, Mr. Swift,” replied a tall, middle age, bald headed man as he stood up near the middle of the horseshoed-shaped table that dominated the room. “It has come to a standstill and the Megascope prober’s close-up images match those of the original asteroid that the Dinosaurs left our system in. Some of the details are inconclusive but we have a ninety-five percent match.”

“And the other two?” Tom inquired as he quickly nodded his acceptance of the asteroid match.

“They are moving off in opposite directions from each other circling around the outskirts of the solar system. They are all staying about forty-five astronomical units out.”

“And the speed of the two encircling asteroids?”

“Almost a standstill compared to what they were doing. It’s going to take them two days just to get a third of the way around the system if they stay out that far.”

“Thanks, Aaron and belated congratulation on your new status as head astronomer at the Outpost. Continue to have your people watch all three ships. If they change course, speed up or slow down, let us all know immediately.” Aaron MacNickleson waved his acknowledgement as he sat down.

He turned to face Hanson.

“Arv, this one for you. When will the *Swift Star Station* be back in business?”

“Less than a day, Tom. They’re already in position to lock together again. Then it’s a matter of reconnecting the internal infrastructure of the three discs again.”

“Will the Mars people arrive in time to do that work so you can move your station crew onboard the Star Ship?”

Arv rubbed his chin was for a moment. “Well Tom, I sure hate to leave a job half done...” but the look Tom gave him made him stop and take a deep breath. “Two hours tops and we’ll be onboard the ship. The Mars ship is pulling in alongside us as we speak and they constructed a similar station in Mars orbit so it should be no problem for them to finish the hook ups on this one.”

“Good! That’s what I like to hear. Finally, Ken, your so-called ‘misfit’ cyborg crew is putting together the Star Ship gantry-way between the two discs. How long to finish?”

“The last section of lattice work is due from the Moon Base Armstrong in the next hour. Give me two after that and we’re good.”

“Excellent!” Tom’s eyes were gleaming with excitement. “Is there anything that any of you need to report to me or anyone else?” Tom looked around at the many face that he had known and trusted for years. No one spoke up.

“Okay, everyone. Get all your people on board the Star Ship and start batten down the hatches. We’ll launch in three and a half hours. I need the space protection squadron captains to remain and the rest of you may go.”

As most of those attending rose Tom had a thought.

“For all of you, for all of the good people who work for you and everyone else embarking on this voyage, first remember this,” Tom stated, stopping them. “We are not running away from Earth with our tails between our legs. Most of you know that this was coming and the Dinos just made it happen at a faster pace. By the time we are ready to fire up the Star drive out beyond Pluto’s orbit all our space protection forces will be back on board the starship and their ships will be added to our space taxi fleet at our new home world.”

Everyone was smiling and nodding.

“I’m proud that all of you and your families want to make this voyage to a new planet that you have never seen. But, believe me, the probes that we sent out years ago are starting to report in and we have several good-looking candidates to choose from. In fact two of them are in the same solar system and will be our first port of call.”



## Chapter Ten: As Quiet as a Mouse, Not!

The clear cylinder opened with a slight hiss and Sandy remained suspended in the air. All the biomechanical and electronic connections had been removed. Her white unblemished skin showed not one mark from all the equipment that had been attached to her.

That is except for her bald head and any area that had hair. The Dinosaurs had no hair so their medical robots did not see the need to keep the hair follicles alive on the humans. The women were to remain hairless for the rest of their lives unless the hair roots were reactivated.

A Bio-Tronic medical platform that was configured to hold a Dinosaur moved into position to receive her small unconscious body.

As soon as Sandy was on the platform she went into convulsions. Robotic arms with hand came out from under the bed and held her down. At the same time other appendages massaged and moved her limbs to help restore their natural circulation and dexterity. Appropriate medications were administered and the spasms stopped as fluid spewed out of her mouth from her lungs. She then gasped for air for the first time in years.

It took some time for her body to adjust to living on its own without any type of outside assistance. It was more the matter of her mind retaking control of her entire auto response systems once more. It was uncomfortable both mentally and physically.

Hours later Sandy sat on the edge of her floating platform and stared at Phyllis who was still in her cylinder. She was aghast with all the hardware that was attached to her body and the places various tubes and wires had been inserted. An icy shiver ran down her spine. Sandy could not imagine that she was hooked up the same way only hours ago since not a mark remained on her body that she could see.

She was still trying to adjust to being alive again and processing the information that she received from her friend before she awoke. Somehow it had not taken in her mind in

the orderly fashion that Phyllis thought it should have.

“Well, Phyl,” Sandy smiled to herself, “this does prove that my mind is not set up like yours. Thank goodness or I’ll have to rearrange my closet to match my bureau! Not that it would not be easy at this point in time, since they’re both empty right now.”

At that moment Phyllis’ restoration process started and Sandy watched in horrified fascination. The fluid that Phyllis was suspended in changed colors a few times. With each change more and more of the external lines and hardware were removed. It was proceeding slowly at first and Sandy had plenty of time to think on her present situation.

Musing to herself she thought. “Chronologically I’m at least sixty-five years old.” She shivered at that thought. “Physically I’m about thirty—thirty-five.” She looked down at her nude body and took a deep breath. She noted with satisfaction that her breasts still stood up for themselves. In fact they were bigger and more solid looking than she remembered.

She jogged her shoulders up and down and they slowly moved up and down. She looked at them in horror as she realized, “Oh my, I got my mother’s breasts!” That made her think of Bud as an older man and wondered for a fleeting moment, “Would he still be happy with them?”

“NO!” She shouted out loud in anger as all sorts of emotion flashed through her body and mind. “That is not acceptable. That time has long gone and anyways Bud is either dead or so old that...” Sandy stopped thinking as tears quietly fell on her crossed arms as she hugged her own body for the comfort that no one was available to give her, not even Phyllis. A few minutes later she gathered herself emotionally back together.

“It’s all right, Sandy,” she told herself, “Really, it is. You’re only a nineteen-year-old girl in an adult body with no life experience behind it. You can make up for it and maybe this time Phyllis won’t be such a prude and we can really have some fun!”

Then Phyllis’s spinal harnesses were released from her body and a soft, tight fitting skull helmet was lowered onto

her smooth head. With that done the procedure was completed and the tube receded into the disc she was suspended above. The helmet was all that was left and it kept her in constant contact with the ship's elite computer systems.

\* \* \*

Tom solemnly shook the hands of all four of the space protection squadron captains. He had known all of them all for years and they were like family to him.

Aggie Miller was first. Tom knew her from when she interned at Swift Enterprises as a rocket engineer right after she completed her hitch in the Air Force.

Billy Thomson was a construction monkey and supply sled pilot. He worked with Tom when they added the second ring of spokes onto the Outpost in Space and stayed on as a foreman for both the construction crew and station's pilots.

Wang Kao rose through the ranks of Swift's Security as an all-round pilot of any type of aircraft they needed flown. For the last ten years he worked as Security/final approach spaceship pilot for the *Swift Star Station*. A fourth generation Chinese-American, he was never given a second glance as a possible security expert. His small and unimposing stature of four-eleven in height and weighed of one hundred and thirty-five pounds hid the fact that he was one of the best no gravity fighters in the world.

Daniel David was the only one of the captains born on Mars and was part of their administration personal who help run their space flight systems under Swift Space Inc. supervision and knows the Swifts spaceships inside and out. His parents had been among the first group of colonists to populate Tom's giant Martian environment structure. He also held the distinction of being the first child born on the Red Planet.

They all personally *InterVoice'd* Tom when he came back on line, communicating from within the regeneration chamber, to ask to captain one of the protection squadrons. After an intense InterVoice link with all four captains and Ken Horton, their backup captain, they reached a defensive plan for all the inhabitable regions in space while Tom was still physical out of commission. Now that he had them on

visual communications he knew there were to be some adjustments to his plans.

He allowed them to hand pick the seven other people needed to fly the four ship formations that were to be allocated in different sectors and with duties in protecting the solar system.

Each of the four ship squadrons had command of eight robotic ships. They were considered disposable and were to be the first line of defense to be used as needed. The thirty-six vessels were to hold the Dino's three asteroids ships at bay and to stop them from attacking with their unknown quantity of spaceships, weapons and personal.

"Daniel, I notice that you're taking Earth as your defensive zone." Tom tilted his head toward the mid-age Martian with his shaved and tattooed head that the people of Mars had adopted in honor of Ray Bradbury and his book '*The Illustrated Man*'.

"I thought it best that I protect Earth. That way I have no emotional ties that will distract me from my duties. Aggie has taken the Martian sector and I know she will not let Mars be harmed."

Tom caught the quick, sneaky exchanged of looks between the two captains and asked the obvious question. "I take it that the two of you have become more than friends of late and I do appreciate both your willingness to take part in this battle, and a battle it will become, so I must ask that one or both of you step down."

Both captains were shocked at Tom request and lowered their faces, not willing to refute their feelings for each other to Tom. As Daniel moved to Aggie's side he looked up at Tom.

"We did not wish to deceive you Tom. It was only after we each requested to Captain a Squadron did we both realized how we felt for each other."

Tom could see the emotions that both of the captains felt.

Reaching out he placed a hand on each of their shoulders. "Love is hard enough to find, don't throw it away by being noble. I'll have Ken Horton and his men take over the Mars



Squadron.”

They both nodded understanding that it must be that way.

“If the two of you are still willing you can both man the Earth contingent and God forgive me if I just sent you both to your deaths.”

The other people in the room started to protest, but Tom held up his hand to quiet them. “Ken is our only back up captain and he knows what is expected of him. It is now too late and unfair to ask someone else to take over. So we go with what we have and make the best of it.”

His head turned back to the only woman in the room.

“I take it, Aggie, that you won’t be joining us on our little trip to the Pleiades after this is done, so I now wish you a happy life with Daniel. Please give me a moment while I contact Ken and inform him of the slight change of plans. Oh, and Aggie you’d best do likewise with your crew and let them know that they will be replaced by Ken’s men.”

It only took a few minutes for the sub-vocal exchanged to take place and afterwards Tom told the captains and Ken, who was on an open link, why he wanted to meet with them.

“We made a slight mistake when we drew up our defensive plans.” Tom informed them. “We concentrated on all the inhabitable places in the solar system, but we forgot the one item that makes us all vulnerable.”

They all looked at Tom, not believing what they were hearing.

“The Sol Power generator clusters that Swift Space Inc. uses for all our spaceships and all our outposts throughout the system, including Mars and Venus.”

“But,” Ken spoke up, “they’re right at the edge of the corona sphere of the Sun and not detectable because of all the solar interference.”

“Normally I would say that it’s true. But do you want to risk that the Dinos don’t have a way to detect them?” Tom looked at all of them and they were shaking their heads ‘no.’

“So I’m assigning that job to Bud and his new sidekick.”

The room went totally silent except for Bud, choking while trying to spit out a protest.

The newly ordained 'sidekick' turned to Tom and barely whispered, "You have just signed both our death warrants, and I hope you're happy!"

"Kid," Tom replied quietly so only the orderly could hear, "you wanted your chance and this will give you ample opportunity to carry it out! But, now you may have the blood of the whole human race on your hands too. Welcome to my world."

Tom now turned to Bud, "Flyboy, I hope you're ready to fly again. The *Life LuTE* is being readied as we speak. It's the only ship we have left that can be manually flown and she is still in tip-top shape. I recently had it overhauled and upgraded with the latest repelatron and Attractatron drives and the best shielding possible. In fact, Albert, my personal AI is your copilot to iron out any rough spots you might have, so enjoy."

"And what are you going to be doing?" Bud inquired with a little sarcasm.

"Me?" Tom pointed to himself. "I'm off on a pleasure cruise onboard my private space yacht, the *Mary Nestor II*."

"And who is going with you?" Bud was not happy with this at all.

"Why, no one. I have to be available to go where the action is at a moment notice. This is the best way to do it."

Tom had nothing more to say to the pilots crowded around him. "That's it people, let's hit vacuum and raise a little hell!"

\* \* \*

Sandy was at first a bit chilly. Then she was hot. Not *hot*, hot, but humid, wet hot. Steaming wet jungle kind of hot. Some jungle, Sandy thought as she led Phyllis around a bundle of pipes that were venting off steam and turning the ground beneath their feet into goop.

The pipes were everywhere she could see. Like tree trunks growing, intertwined together. The steam vented over their heads like gray/white billowing leaves hissing in the wind.

Sandy could not make up her mind if the last section of cold and hot air ducts was worse than this. Heaving Phyllis up and over or under and about those was bad enough, but it was dry and the ground was firm.

Sandy once more lost her grip on Phyllis' arm. The mud was slippery as heck and it felt like warm, thick blood. It looked like it too, being a deep red with a hint of brown. The harsh white light that the Dinosaurs preferred made everything stand out, casting no shadows what so ever.

The red, sticky mud made her feel sick and Sandy was not sure if it was more from the lack of food than the muck itself. Time had no meaning in the bowels of the asteroid that never turned off a light. She had stopped a few times to rest and to try to figure out where they were, but with no luck. The map in her head just would not correspond with the reality of the ship.

She had found water dripping from pipes and then descended down hundreds of oversize steps that opened out to what looked like fields upon fields for who knows what kind of animals and large empty barns between them.

In a small, secluded section of one of the barns she found what looked like living quarters for the Dinos. Large basins were set into the floor with large steps leading into them. They filled with water that changed temperature depending where you touched along the top back surface of the bowl. An area off that room held several low platforms that looked solid but turned out to be soft and warm to the touch.

There were strange markings on the nearby wall among what look to be controls of some type. She could not move them no matter how she pushed, pulled or try to shift them in any direction. Sandy filled one of the basins with warm water and she took a bath and then washed the statue that Phyllis more resembled than the woman that she was. An hour later both of them were asleep on one of the platforms.

\* \* \*

“Intruder alert,” sounded one of the many ‘barns’ computer sentries from the feed stock section of the mostly deserted asteroid.

“Disregard alert.” A command came down from the ‘*Elite*’ overseer computer. “It is only a malfunction and will be attended to.” This was the fourth such counter command that Phyllis had to give out.

“What the heck is Sandy doing?” she thought to herself. “Why is she not following the map I gave her? This is ridiculous. Can’t she do anything without wandering all over the place in her Sandy like fashion!”

## Chapter Eleven: Fearful Flights

Tom clasped Bud by the arms, then he threw caution to the wind and gave him a bear hug. To his surprise Bud gave him one back. After breaking apart Bud, with a half smile on his face said, “I guess this is the goodbye that I never gave you way back when, skipper.”

“No, Bud, this is not a goodbye but it is an ending of some sorts. We are finally going to our own destiny as it was supposed to be. When Sandy and Phyllis disappeared I knew that this was going to happen someday—it was only a matter of time.”

The flyer’s face told Tom that he agreed.

“Take the kid with you and share some of your life’s story with him. Make him listen to what happened in Laredo, Texas, before and after you ran into Chow Winkler at the *Three Amigo’s Cantina*.”

Bud’s face paled and the look of dismay befell his eyes, but Tom just kept on talking not giving Bud a chance to speak up. “He needs to know your side of it—he has the right to know. If you ask him why, and *really* ask him why like you mean it, you’ll get the biggest surprises in your life. There’ll be plenty of time to talk to each other while you wait for the fight to come to you.”

“You’re so sure that a fight will come to the solar generators?”

“It has to Bud. The Dinos, at least the old Prime Leader, know that we had an almost unstoppable power source that could span the width of the solar system. She could not let that bit of science escape her. If her own people had had it available on Mars they would never have blown up three quarters of one of the Martian moons, and we know that then caused the destruction of their own civilization back on Earth. Don’t you think the Prime Leader did not investigate our power source while she was in the *LuTE*?”

“But how? She never left the entry walkway.” Bud reminded him.

“Right, she never moved, but that did not stop her from

releasing hundreds of microscopic probes that explored every part of the *LuTE*. I later found some of those probes that had mechanical breakdowns or got into places that they could not return from. There was no need for a self-destruct mechanism because of their microscopic size. It took me years to figure out what they were for.”

Tom paused and shook his head, thinking how easy the answer had been once he knew what it was.

“The Dino’s then had months to formulate the basic theories from the information gathered from the probes and I think they quite possibly built a working model before they left for their new home among the stars. That power source would be what I’d look for once I came back to attack. Take out our main power supply and we’ll be helpless.”

“And you told no one of this!” Bud shot back.

“Just you, flyboy. Those two asteroids that are now slowly circling the system are probably looking for power output signatures from those power stations. And there are plenty of intense electromagnetic lines when they’re bunched together like that. They’re counting how many there are and where they come from and are going to.”

“Then stop them!” Bud demanded.

“Too early to do so. If I do it now the third asteroid may just disappear into deep space and come back years later with how many more guns I don’t want to even guess at. No, we wait. Earth is in opposition regarding the solar orbits of Mars and Venus right now so two squadrons were reassigned to Earth and one is going to protect Mars. Venus has only their terraforming project and they are willing to risk it without a squadron. They will depend on their robot probes, the sun shields and the X-Lasers”

“So what am I needed for?”

“To hold back a direct attack against the Mars and Venus generators that could bypass both Earth and Mars. They may want to take out the power *sources* rather than the receivers. Those would be heavily guarded in planetary orbit. If it were me out there, I would opt to take out the receivers and save the generators for my own future use. But, I’m not a Dinosaur, though some may argue otherwise.” Tom tried to add a small smile, but it quickly faded.

Tom added, “You know, Bud, that there is a whole lot of empty space out there between those two planets that they can use to zero in on the Sun generators and likely face almost no interference from us. It will be your responsibility to hold them at bay until the squadrons get there to back you up.”

Bud’s face turned red in anger. “So, at last it’s out. Is this your way of sugar coating the fact that you’re going to leave me hanging the way I did to you all those years back? Friends like you I don’t need!” Bud pushed Tom away, where the inventor hit the corridor wall that was behind him.

Not paying attention to what happened to Tom, Bud headed down the ramp toward the *Life LuTE* space ship. “Come on, kid,” Bud shouted over his shoulder as he stomped away. “Kamikaze time! It looks like we’re about to die!”

The orderly looked at Tom who was getting up off the floor after bouncing off the wall unexpectedly. “What the hell is going on?” he demanded of Tom with a panic look on his face.

“Trying to save his life and yours, kid. Tell him I... Tell him...” Tears welded up in Tom’s eyes as he turned away and left the young man standing there.

The orderly stood there watching Tom disappear around a corner in the passage. He turned around and was just in time to watch Bud stepping into a ship far off down the access strip. He hesitated for a moment and stepped off toward Tom’s direction. “Hell,” he shouted out loud, immediately turned around and ran after Bud.

Tom watched three of the squadrons leave for their patrol areas in space. The fourth one surrounded the now completed starship that was drifting a few miles away from the *Swift Star Station*. The starship was bigger overall than the reassembled space station.

Nothing could be seen happening at first, but slowly a glow began to appear at the bottom ring below the second disc. The red glow formed into a tongue of flame that looked like it was shooting out of the band below the disc. It grew in intensity and color. Before long the ship was moving even though the red flame display had no thrust to it. In reality it

was just ionized particles from all the power be taken into the rings from the solar power generators. The power intensity was so great that it left an ionized trail as it entered the ship.

The ten repelatrions on the bottom of the twin disc ship were pushing it away from Earth while the top ten Attractatrons were pulling it towards Jupiter, the largest and most beneficial anchor point, and the one that was closest to their destination of the Swift Construction Company's planetoid. The protection squadron that had stayed behind copied its speed and direction as the manned and robotic ships spread out and formed a protective shield around the slow-moving starship.

Tom waited from his orbital position in his private space yacht, the *Mary Nestor II*. It was a science/exploration ship unlike all others. Copying the arrangement of his first major invention the *Flying Lab*, it held every conceivable piece of science equipment and much, much more. At over two hundred feet long and thirty-five feet wide in the mid section, it could be operated by one man and could carry a crew of ten.

He watched all the other ships depart on their missions and silently wished them all good luck. Bud's *LuTE* was the last ship to leave, and that was not until after the starship was on its way out of Earth orbit. It shot out of the docking station like it was on fire.

Tom followed it for some time on radar and with visual amplification as it headed toward the sun. It was soon lost to view in the solar glare and radiation.

"God, I did not handle that well," Tom thought to himself as he ordered Albert, his AI computer, by his InterVoice link to shut down the virtual reality around him and to start the whole body link-up. Tom sat back in his overstuffed control chair inside a now small empty sphere that was located inside the massive computer section of the yacht and relaxed his body for what he knew was to happen next.

The lounge chair took on a chilled feeling that spread out from the middle to its outer edges. It was the leftover cooling effect of thousands of superconducting wires and hundreds of sensor interfaces being activated.

"Body interconnection completed," Albert's AI voice



informed Tom as both man and machine formed a union that had been impossible just a few years before.

Swift Space Inc. flew all their spaceships by virtual reality. The crew positioned themselves at their various stations onboard the ships, or into the one central control modular if the ship was small and only had a one to three men crew.

Once in their seats, the headrests electronically sort out the locations of the five senses of the person in the chair and merged into the sensory portions of their brain.

A preset virtual control room—designed specific for that ship—became their reality. All of their five senses were involved and all the crew were represented that were online at that time. They could come and go at will. The master stroke in this elaborate control system was that it ran at the speed of thought, which was way faster than turning knobs or doing things on a control board by hand.

Tom's yacht was equipped also with an experimental next generation of the system. It was one step farther in intricacy in that his entire nervous system and body became part of the ship.

The sensors that hooked up to his eyes and ears covered all the ranges of the spectrum from ultraviolet to infrared, from supersonic to subsonic to sonar. All radio frequencies including Tom's own Private Ear radio ran simultaneously through the power generator link.

Temperature and pressure gauges replaced his senses of feeling and touch in different parts of his body. Legs controlled speed and feet controlled directions. Lungs became air circulators.

The ship was the ultimate combination of machine and man. Ken Horton's cyborg body and how he interacted with all of his men who also had body parts replaced with mechanical ones help pioneered this wireless union. Tom used it to every advantage.

Besides the physical aspect there was the mental connection with the AI computer. A full running 'Albert' program resided within the ship that shared its information with all the other sixteen available Albert AI computers in real time courtesy of Tom's twenty years of micro black hole anomaly research.

Tom felt at times that he was in several places at once and only his formidable personality kept him grounded and not turned a little schizophrenic. This was one of the main reasons he had not released this improvement for his many spaceships—that and its limited amount of places it could be placed in at one time.

Multitasking was a cinch. Tom currently had programs monitoring several different objects in space and he was already working on modifying and rebuilding several things that he wanted done to different parts of his ship before he got near the asteroid.

He also had his medical nanobots doing some further alterations to his human body that he deemed necessary for where he was going because of what he might have to face and do.

As he set up his flight course to the stationary asteroid that was still sitting just outside the solar system, he gave a moment's thought to a growing concern he had—did he have the forty-eight hours needed to get to that asteroid that he felt was being commanded by the new Prime Leader of the Dinosaurs?

Even at the two hundred plus G's that he could obtain at the expense of burning out his space drive—probably the whole ship as well—would the Dinos still be there at that vicinity? At the speed he would be traveling he did not have a lot of time to radically change coordinates if they decided to move.

Tom deliberated all the repercussions of his present plan of action.

First: Could he stop the war by himself before it started?

Second: Could his ship's engines stand the strain and get him there in one piece without blowing up before he got there?

Third: Could the G-Force Inverters hold out that long and keep him from becoming nothing more than a splotch of ooze all over the back wall?

Fourth: Did he have enough power generators available? Power consumption was going to be astronomical.

Fifth: Could he keep the drives cold enough so the ship

would not light up the heavens like a comet on steroids for all to see?

Sixth: Could he stop the war by showing up in person?

That last question led him back to his first question: ***Stopping the War!***

“There’s only one way to find out for sure,” Tom muttered to himself. His mind gave out the command, the ship hummed and vibrated as a fantastic amount of power was called for and sent to the ship. Then as the capacitors reached the safe holding level in case of power interruptions, the overflow went into feeding the drives and life saving force fields. In less than a second the *Mary Nestor II* had literally jumped into the unknown of dark space and was passing the much slower starship that by now was racing past the Moon.

Boredom never entered into Tom’s mind. The thrill of *being* the yacht with all its ability and complexities kept him busy. Then there was all the communications that he shared with all the other Albert’s spread out in the solar system, coordinating all their activities to keep everything running smoothly. The rebuilding projects that he was a part of in his ship took lots of his attention also.

This project was the backbone of how he was going to get aboard the asteroid without the Dinos knowing it. He had to rebuild his escape pod to hold his Altar V robot and the additional equipment that he had to take with him.

The Altar V series was the most advanced robotic machine that Tom had designed so far. It was as big and could be as brutal as any Dinosaur that Tom had seen so far. The problem was he had only seen two Dinos. But he had a fair assessment of their fighting abilities because he had witnessed a fight to the death between the two on Mars.

“*Mary Nestor II*, we have a problem!” The call came twenty-seven hours into the flight by way of Albert’s communication network. The personage of ‘Deadeye’ Jones formed in part of Tom’s visual and audio centers taking a small part of his attention away from the delicate work he was doing on board the ship.

The man was dressed as an old sea pirate with an eye patch and a real live parrot on his shoulder. Tom loved the old man—and his idiosyncrasies—who ran the secret power

generators that floated in the thick, turbulent atmosphere of Jupiter.

Jones and his nine buccaneers were part of the hundred or so scientist and engineers that were partaking in the Europa Ecological Sea Seeding Planting Project (ESP<sup>2</sup>). They also had the secret mandate of running and maintaining the Jupiter high altitude buoyancy generators for Tom's space yacht and all the Albert's. This gave him a power station from a direction that no one would possibly look for.

"What's the problem, Captain Jones?" Tom asked apprehensively using Albert as the intermediary.

"Mate, we're running out of power to give yah. Everything running in the red down here and we're melting wire faster than we can unreel it for the atmospheric drag lines."

"Deadeye, I was afraid that was going to happen and I'm going to need a lot more power than what I expected to use. Are you sure that there is nothing else you can do? How about letting Europa's Attractatron hold the base up in the atmosphere and you transfer that power to me?"

"Done that two hours ago," he replied with a gold tooth grin. "I was guessing you were going to say something like that, so I did it when we first hit the red line!" the old pirate told him.

"Well, Captain Jones, what've you got to help a landlubber like me?"

"Well... I was thinking that the Mars and Venus generators could go off line for the next day or two and they can redirect their power to you. That is of course, if you got the ability of adding more inverse power chips to your power receiver ring?"

"By George, you old scallywag, you do have the answers. If I had a Caribbean island to give you I'd have you named Governor! But I've already used my one extra replacement receiver ring so that still leaves me short of power. We need to come up with something in the next hour or my whole scheme is going to blow up in my face."

Tom was silent for a moment, thinking, and the old pirate came up with another suggestion. "Skipper," the pirate called

Tom by an old nickname. He flipped the eye patch up revealing a perfectly good eye and lifted the parrot from his shoulder and set it to one side. “Could you cut the ring in half, rewire the ends and mount them so they won’t short out to each other? There is no reason that the ring has to be round, just that it fit at the bottom of your rocket cylinder shape. So you can then put a different inverse power chip in each half. And that way you turn one ring into two receivers of two different power sources.”

A smile formed on Tom’s hard-pressed lips. “I just throw in a second ship for your island kingdom. Heck, you can have an armada of whatever size you want. Hold the power at the present level until you hear back from me, within the next three hours, maybe less.”

With one of Tom’s wisecrack smiles on his face he added, “Kiss that beautiful first mate of yours, Captain Jones, or have you demoted her to scullery maid?” The surprise look in Captain Jones eyes was worth a doubloon or two.

He knew that the gruff, would-be pirate had a soft side that included a wife who had been a former beauty pageant queen. She loved him and put up with his sea dog act, but ruled their roost with an iron hook.

Then, Tom added, “Is your crew coming with us to the starship when it’s time?” Tom wanted to make sure of this before he told the old sea captain something else that was important.

“Yeah, mate, the whole bloody crew is coming and with their brood too.”

“Good to hear that, Captain Jones. Now listen carefully. The *Mary Nestor II* will not be making it back. After it is destroyed you may eject it’s generators from the platform when you pull up out of Jupiter’s atmosphere. But *this is the importing part*. Keep Albert’s AI pod generators running at all cost. It is imperative that you do, or all the Alberts will lose communications with each other and you know what that means.”

“Tom, you can depend on me and my crew. We’ll not let you down. Are you sure about the *Mary Nestor*? She sure is one sweet ship!”

“I hate it too, Captain, but there is no other way. See you

on board the starship. Out!” and he cut the connection.

By the time the image of the old brigand disappeared from Tom’s vision he had his robotic workers making the further refinements of cutting the one extra power ring in half and refitting them.

## Chapter Twelve: Out of the Darkness...

Sandy was being disturbed by an incisively high-pitched whine that was barely in her audible range. She swatted at it like it was a mosquito and only managed to swipe at her own ear. She then rolled over and bumped into Phyllis' still, horizontal facing up body.

"Eekes!" Sandy shouted before she could stop herself.

"Well, that's a fine how-dee-do."

She heard the voice of her silent friend off to the left side of her. Sandy shot a look toward the wall next to the sleeping platform. Phyllis' head and shoulders were being televised onto the wall that had the set of controls in it. She was smiling and looking down at Sandy from ten feet above the floor.

"How...Who... Who..." she asked, stupidly repeating her last word.

"Owl impressions and it's before breakfast too!" Phyllis' head chuckled. "And talking about breakfast, look what I've had whipped up for both of you." A panel to one side on the wall slid open and a tray with two pouches of what looked like water and two hot bowls filled with a creamy white pudding-like substance slid forward. It smelled sweet and little whiffs of steam rose above the bowls.

Sandy's mouth watered at the prospect of eating the food even though it looked like cream of rice, which she hated! She reached for the bowl and the spoon-shaped implement next to it and took a small, tentative taste of it. It was sweet and had a vanilla tang to it. She started to spoon it in as fast as she could gulp it down.

"Sandy, slow down or you'll be..." The holographic Phyllis did not have time to finish the sentence before Sandy threw herself almost off the platform to be sick onto the floor. After a few heaves she sat up and looked at the image above her, "Boy, that tasted better going down than it did coming up."

Sandy then reached for one of the pouches and pulled out the plug from one corner of it and took a swig to wash out her

month and spat it onto the floor with the rest of her regurgitated food. To her amazement the food was gone. Was that why she found no sanitary facilities, the floor took care of itself?

She gave it no father thought as she moved Phyllis into a sitting position with her legs crossed Indian style in the middle of the platform and then reached for the second bowl and the bag of water. She sat facing her friend and slowly fed her and herself. Once in awhile she stopped and gave her a drink of water. Phyllis ate and drank it automatically without a fuss. That pleased Sandy and that left her time to talk with the image of her friend.

“I take it that this is the *Elite* you I’m talking to and that my Phyllis has no say in this conversation?” Sandy was not sure if there were two Phyllis’ or one.

“Sandy, my poor Sandy,” laughed the image. “There is only one of me, not two. Just right now I am in the command computer system and not in my body. I’m here talking to you because this building is equipped with a communication terminal that I can access on a private circuit.”

Sandy nodded like she finally understood and kept on slowly feeding and eating.

“What I need to know from you right now is—What the H... are you doing?”

\* \* \*

Bud was incensed! He was so mad that he repeatedly slammed his balled up fist into the inner wall of the airlock. It was not until the second splatter of blood fell onto his face did he realize what he was doing and stopped it. He pulled out a used handkerchief from a back pocket and wrapped his bleeding knuckles and then placed his hot forehead against the cool bulkhead wall... knocking his head into it several times.

“*LuTE... LuTE...*” Bud sighed softly into the blood dotted wall.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Barclay,” Albert’s AI computer voice interrupted. “The *Life LuTE* does not have an AI of its own. It cannot respond to your call. If you wish I will gladly respond in its place. I have the ability to be more than one



personality. I can make one up for the *Life LuTE* if you want?”

Bud was taken aback by this and just shook his head *no* in response.

“Then Mr. Barclay, welcome aboard and you may want to visit the infirmary before proceeding to the flight deck. The Med Doc is waiting for you and it will only take a minute to attend to your bleeding knuckles.”

Bud heard a snicker from behind him and knew that the Kid had witnessed at least part of his temper tantrum and the byplay with Albert.

“Seal the hatch, Kid, and the same with the mouth. Then go to the control blister topside and wait for me.” Bud pointed upwards. “If you can’t find the way,” he added sarcastically, “Albert can direct you, I’m sure. I’ll be there in a few moments. I must have my hand attended too. And don’t you dare say a word, Kid, or your face will need fixing next!”

“A bit testy aren’t you?” the orderly responded back with a snigger in his voice as he hit the door closing switch.

Bud, a few minutes later, entered the control room area and took a quick look around. Nothing had changed over the years, at least in outward appearance or layout. He noted that the nosy brat was in the flight command seat.

“Move over one, Kid,” Bud grumpily informed the orderly who was looking at the myriad controls at the four different individual sets of instruments.

Bud took the now empty command seat and reached out to the radio unit and turned on. He then contacted the flight control center of the starship asking them when was the latest he could launch the *LuTE*. He was informed that he had over an hour and a half before the starship was going to start maneuvering for departure and that he could still be ejected from his docking slip even when they were on their way if he wanted to. He did not have to leave anytime soon, only the farther they got into space he would then have to back track some extra distance to obtain low solar orbit to meet with the generator stations.

Bud spent over two hours making himself familiar with the controls once more and learning of the improvement that

had be added throughout the years. The mental simulations he did with Albert monitoring them ran with only a few hitches at first and none by the time Bud called it quits. He was as ready as he was going to get in the time he felt he had available.

The orderly included himself in on the simulations, not wanting to be left out. Watching what was happening was better than sitting in the *dark*, watching nothing but the four walls of the launching bay through the canopy.

The *LuTE* shot out of the starship a little faster than Bud intended it to. But when he noticed Tom's space yacht was still waiting out in space he was glad that he was accelerating hard and fast towards the Sun.

A half-hour later Bud asked Albert to take command saying that he was going to bed. He left the control blister for the crew deck one floor down and never looked or spoke to the young man that had thrown his life in with Bud.

\* \* \*

Tom's plan was working. He was strapped onto the back of his Altar V's robot in a cocoon of a many-layered, incredibly strong, flexible and heat resistant fiber. The extra bulky robot managed to squeeze into the escape pod with his 'passenger' on his back. There was no other way to do it.

Much of the interior of the pod had been stripped out and either replaced with smaller, utilitarian devices or simply left empty to make room for the bulky robot by Tom and his robotic workshop helpers.

The pod and robot both sported a half section of the power ring and carried every available G-force inverter that could be moved out from the ship and placed into the pod or on the robot. A few extra G-force inverters were cobbled together with the electronics available and the time allotted that would shield the *Mary Nestor II* for its last hour of flight.

Tom did not want to risk his life on hastily made inverters; the *Mary Nestor II* was a doomed ship now. Tom wished that he could be taking it with him to the Pleiades, but she was saving him—and that meant all of humanity—if this wild scheme of his worked out.

Altar's and the pod's own repelatrions had been upgraded

until they rivaled those of the yacht. With the addition of the extra half-ring they also now had the same level of power. Without the mass of the ship, the pod could easily slow down and pass the asteroid without making a big new crater on it.

With both half power ring receivers on line and all the electronics running at full potential, Tom ejected his escape pod to fly by the asteroid while at the same time Albert's self contained AI pod was sent speeding in the direction that the Swift's starship was going to rendezvous with the Construction Company's planetoid.

The yacht became white hot as it purposely dropped part of its makeshift shields. The inventor knew this blinding heat hid the departure of the two pods.

Altar immediately zeroed in on the asteroid and started their own mad deceleration. The torrents of heat and magnetic interference pouring from the yacht blinded most of the asteroid's sensors facing them.

An hour later the *Mary Nestor II* slowly turned away from the asteroid in an erratic, halting course. Meanwhile Tom could do nothing but hang on for dear life, for everything was programmed into Altar. He was to get the pod above the asteroid by several hundred miles and its speed down to under fifty thousand miles per hour. It was also imperative that Tom was not killed or rendered insensible.

Beside its own deceleration 'trons' it was being pushed backwards by the yacht's own repelatrions as the doomed ship sped ahead of the pod for the next hour before the yacht wavered off course and blew up in a massive power surge designed to overload all the rest of the electronic gear on the asteroid that faced the explosion.

It was a costly pyrotechnics show, but it was all necessary.

Hopefully his timing was right and Tom, clinging onto Altar's back, had the robot jump out of the pod and into the black void of space that had only one place he could possibly survive on—the asteroid filled with possibly hundred or thousand of not-so-friendly Dinosaurs.

Tom "looked" down onto the pockmarked surface, using his InterVoice link, which was locked into Altar's sensors. He tried to find the area he had landed the *Life LuTE* at years before. He could not spot the three large craters and the

mountain ridge that was located above them.

He slowly felt an overwhelming sense that he was going to be more astounded about what he was about to find in the hunk of rock below him than he ever imagined.

*I've wasted enough time sightseeing, Tom reflected. It's time to start decelerating down to the surface and meet my fate.*

\* \* \*

Phyllis coldly faced her friend, “You’re so far from the modified spaceship that I had prepared for us to escape in that I don’t see how I’ll get us there before the Dinos start their attack run. I wanted to be in place before I shut down the fission reactors and have my little army of nanobots crack open the cooling jackets so they could not restart it without major repairs.” Phyllis’ facial image was now somewhat fuming at Sandy.

“Well, sister, that’s well and good,” Sandy calmly answered back. “But when I came too there was no *Master Plan* in my head and the mental images of our escape route were a mess. I think something went wrong, and it was not me!” Sandy stared back at her with her hands on her hips. The bowls were discarded on the platform next to her.

“Damn those Dinos!” Phyllis shot back. “When the medical robots unwired you they must short-circuited some of your near term memories and you lost most of what I implanted in you. Damn, damn, damn!”

“Phyllis,” Sandy gently scolded with a twinkle in her eyes, “No swearing—it’s not becoming.”

“Becoming!” she shouted back, “I’ll show you what is not BECOMING!” Phyllis’ head was replaced by a video focusing on an object out in space. It was small, brilliant white and if you really looked hard you could see it growing larger by the second.

“That, my girl friend, is our death! Or so the asteroid commander now thinks it is. At this very moment he is ordering the space drive to be activated and the time dilation bubble be formed as we accelerate from the solar system. We are about to move out of the way of that object. That is if we can start accelerating in the next two hours.”

“That Dino is saving our bacon, is he not? What can be wrong with that?” Sandy was glad to live another day or two or even a lifetime’s worth.

“Sandy, don’t you understand?” a frustrated Phyllis shot back. “It’s been tracked backed to Earth and it may be their attempt to destroy this asteroid ship before the Dinos attack. If it fails they may be left wide open to the Dino’s onslaught.”

“Don’t be silly, Phil. Earth must have more weapons than that! It used to be able to blow itself up fifty times over, if not more!”

“That’s the operative phrase, Sandy: *used to*. We’ve been gone so long we have no idea what might have happened. World peace? Universal disarmament? Even something that wonderful brother of yours could have done to neutralize the threat of self-destruction. What if everything has changed? What if that is the only weapon that can reach this far out? What you don’t see is that it’s doing over two hundred and fifty Gs of acceleration per second, per second. It’s now approaching half the speed of light and if it hit us nothing would be left and that’s bye-bye us and a big hurrah for Earth!”

Sandy was not liking the way that sounded now.

“So I must stop the Dinos,” Phyllis vouchsafed, “I can’t let them move this chunk of rock and the only way to do that is by blowing the cooling jackets!”

“Hold it there a minute, Phyl. You were not excited about this a few minutes ago. Why now?” Sandy wondered.

“A few minutes ago I had not picked up any killer-thing on our sensors that is heading our way. Nothing, then—BANG—it was there! It was heading toward us out of the darkness. That white color you see is heat. Super white, hotter than the Sun, heat. Something in that thing must have malfunctioned. Its shields must have given out or something...” Phyllis stopped talking and a shiver ran through her real body sitting on the platform next to Sandy. Sandra noticed it, but it meant nothing to her.

“If I’m going to die it will be as me, the real me, not as some computer wetware! Sandy... hold me!” cried out Phyllis as her real body began to thrush about out of control. She unsettled the food bowls that were on the platform.

Sounds of pain came from the girls as they rolled over the bowls that broke under their bodies. Cries of fear also filled the room. Both of the girls were making the sounds as they tussled with each other all over the platform.

During the free-for-all Phyllis lost her Elite computer head gear and almost immediately she quit fighting and settled down into Sandy's arms, weeping softly into Sandra's heaving bosoms.

\* \* \*

An hour later both girls stepped out of the water and squeezed it off the best they could. They both had red cut marks on two places on their bodies. Their internal nanos, those that were left over from when they were in suspension tanks, had the cuts closed and mostly healed.

Now all they needed was a plan.

## Chapter Thirteen: “Crawl, Sandy, Crawl!”

“Where are we going, Phyl?” Sandy demanded as she tried to keep up with Phyllis who was trotting across the empty field. It was dry and dusty; nothing had grown in it for years. The barn they had stayed in was out of sight behind them. The dust was clinging to their moist feet and legs from their last bath. It was slowly rising and covering them from toe to head with a light gray sheen.

Phyllis pointed toward the dot in the distance; it was coming up fast. Distance was an illusion here inside the asteroid. Sandy could not tell if the ground curved downward like on a large round ball or was it flat. There were only a few pillars or columns holding up the roof that was close to a hundred feet above them.

She stopped her wondering as once more she stumbled over something in the ground and had to reach out to Phyllis to keep from falling. Luckily the ground was soft and had no rocks in it. Their bare feet would have been taking a beating but their body’s nanos seemed to have formed some type of protective layer on the soles of their feet after the first few minutes of running.

If only they could do something for her aching boobs. Never again would she curse the invention of the bra! A good, tight sports bra? How she wanted one now.

Phyllis stopped before the stone-faced column that reached up out of the ground and continued through the roof way above them. It was thirty to forty feet across and Phyllis was walking slowly around it. Sandy stood some distance away, bent over with her hands on her knees and her chest heaving, trying to breathe. The air was a bit dry for her liking and maybe it did not contain enough oxygen in it or, as she thought about it, the air pressure was not as great as it was on Earth.

Sandy watched as her friend stopped and jumped up once in a while trying to look at something etched into the wall above her head. She finally stopped walking and repeatedly tried to hit something high above her on the wall. Frustrated, she sank to the ground and sat with her back against the

rough black wall with her head hanging down on her folded arms that were on her pulled up knees.

“Give, sister,” Sandy asked as she slid down beside her friend. Phyllis was in tears.

“I can’t reach the manual controls to the transport tube.” She sighed as she rubbed her tears away with the back of her soiled hand, leaving a dark gray streak. “Normally the doors just open for the Dinos, but we don’t match the door’s sensory protocol.” She lifted up her head and looked at Sandy with red blood lines in her eyes.

“Phil, I know that gym was not your strong subject but we can beat this without trying too hard, I think!” Sandy grabbed her hand, stood up and pulled her up. “Where is this button you’re looking for?”

Phyllis pointed and Sandy moved her friend under it, facing her toward the wall. “Now step back a few feet to let me stand where you were at.” Once there Sandy hunched down and told Phyllis to sit on her shoulders. With a smile of understanding she climbed on Sandy’s shoulders and spread out her hands against the wall to try to help steady them. With one try Sandy lifted them both up.

Within seconds Phyllis gave a “Yippee!” of delight as a segment of the wall started to move down into the ground.

A twenty by twenty foot section slid downward and the inside of the column lit up with the Dino’s artificial light. Phyllis stepped in and pulled Sandy in after her.

“We need to do it again,” Phyllis informed Sandy, “and for every time we need to access the controls.”

“*Scissor Lift R’Me*,” Sandy quipped as she crouched down where Phyllis pointed to the ground under the controls she needed. The oversize door closed and Sandy could hear Phyllis tapping the wall with her fingers to enter in more commands. At last it felt like they were falling deeper into the asteroid.

“Sister, I hate to be a hard ass, but where are we going? And when will the Dino’s know we are not where we’re supposed to be?” Sandy had counted over sixty seconds of moving downward before she asked her questions.

“They knew the moment that I lost contact,” Sandy gave



her a puzzled look. Phyllis added, “When the skull cap fell off.”

“And,” Sandy asked, “we are now heading to...” she prompted.

“To the core, where the reactors are and where we can find one of the four auxiliary control rooms. Empty, I *hope!*” Phyllis added with the emphasis on *hope*.

“How deep are we going?” She was starting to feel a little claustrophobic, even though it was just her imagination.

“Twenty-three miles more or less, depending on where in the core you’re going. Once we get in the vicinity, I’ll try to call up a three-D map and see if we can ascertain where the Dinos are in relation to us. That should give us some wiggle room to move around in. At the same time I can find out how much time is left before they start moving this ship. I’m sure we have at least forty-five minutes, give or take a few.”

Sandy did not even feel the floor coming to a stop, it happened so gradually. The door moved upwards this time and Phyllis took a tentative look out of the side of the doorway. The opening was part of one of the walls situated in a very large, long corridor. It was empty as far as she could see in both directions that it led off to.

“Why is everything so big all the time?” Sandy inquired as they slid quilt along one of the walls.

“When will you realize we’re not in Oz anymore?” Phyllis chuckled. “The Dinos are two and a half times our size, so everything is built accordingly. They also like everything as wide open as possible. They don’t like congested or dark places. The number one requirement for joining the space clan is to be able to withstand dark, cramped spaces but it does not mean they build that way all the time.”

“If this is an example of dark and crowded—shush, do you hear that, *thump, thump* marching noise?” Sandy turned back the way they had just came. Phyllis grabbed her by the arm and led her into a small branch corridor that was dimly lit with blue lights.

“Maintenance alleyway. There are hundreds of them throughout the asteroid and this is the one I was looking for. Come on!” She started to run down the much smaller

corridor. It ended at a wall after a few hundred feet, which did not stop Phyllis any.

She used her forward speed to leap high up on the back wall and slammed her fast into a subtly outlined square on the right top side of the wall. As her body hit the wall it started to slide open to the right.

Phyllis scrambled back onto her feet with Sandy's help and once inside pointed to the spot that she had to reach. Sandy dropped to the floor near the wall, felt her friend climb on her shoulders and stood up. The door whispered closed and Sandy slid down to sit on the floor. Phyllis stepped off and sat down next to her. The room's illumination was turning to the bright white light that the Dino's liked.

"What next, Phyl?" Sandy asked as she looked around what was obviously a maintenance storage area.

"There should be a computer work station somewhere and I can hack into it and see what is going on. There can't be much time left, if any at all," she sighed as she got back onto her feet and held out her hand to pull Sandy up.

"What am I looking for?" Sandy was having a hard time seeing above the workbenches and equipment that were scattered around the room.

"There!" Phyllis pointed to a spot across from them. The bench was inches above their heads. Sandy rushed over to what look like a stack of three-foot square plastic blocks. They were light but solid. She had several of them moved over in position in no time at all. Phyllis stacked more of them on top of the first layer, assembling makeshift steps.

Standing on top of the bench Phyllis could now reach the computer's input screen. The top half of the enormous screen was filled with what looked like pictographs to Sandy. "You can read that?" Sandy asked with awe.

"Reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic, the three 'R's." Phyllis fingers were touching and dancing over the symbols on the top of the screen. The top half of symbols changed to a subtext of what could be only be an alphabet. An alphabet in English!

Sandy gasped as she recognized the letters and words. "I had years," Phyllis informed her, "to put into place

'backdoors' that I could use to get into their BioTronics computers. To the Dinos it just a bunch of gibberish—more transmission static than anything else."

"You knew how to do that?" an astounded Sandy asked. "Or did you learn this onboard this ship?" Sandy was more sure of that than the other possibility.

"Tom taught me some of it when he started to develop his *Little Idiot* computer system. I just kept it up after he stopped showing me things. I found it very intriguing and compelling, so I privately became a part-time, off site, programmer for the Swift's computer department and kept on leaning. I had plenty of empty nights to do it in—" Phyllis sounded hurt about that.

"I'm so sorry..." Sandy began to apologize.

Phyllis cleared her throat and straightened her shoulders. "That was long ago, there is no need to dredge that up now! There! I have it!" Phyllis called out in triumph. A bottom portion of the screen showed the white object in space. Numbers were constantly changing at the top of the video.

"Yes!" shouted out Phyllis as she grabbed Sandy by the arms and twirled her around, laughing. "It's moving off, Sandy!" And the asteroid is not moving out yet. The ship has accumulated enough power to do so, but they're holding back to see what may happen next."

Sandy smiled and was about to congratulate her friend when...

"Oh, oh! Not so good!" Phyllis exclaimed. "The Commander has sent in the other two asteroids to attack. It looks like they found Tom's Inverse Square Wave Power generators in close orbit around the Sun."

The screen blazed brilliant white, turned black and then filled in with multi-color static. The girls tried to cover their eyes it was so blinding. Phyllis did some more typing, then stopped and turned off the screen.

"That's it for now, Sandy. The sensors are totally down on the surface that was facing that Earth ship. We're safe for now, so I unplugged us from the BioTronic network until we reach our escape ship. Then we see what happens next." Phyllis concluded by saying, "One step at a time."

“And what do we need to do to get there from here and when do we eat and drink again?” Sandy was patting her gurgling stomach. Phyllis laughed as her own stomach joined in on making noises.

“Water, we can get in the next room and the supply transport tubes are there also. I could get us food too, but remember, the Dinos like’s it raw and mooing!”

“Thanks, but no thanks. Water is fine for now.”

They started down their makeshift stairs. As Sandy’s foot touched the floor a gruesome roar filled the room. The door that they entered the room was open, and a huge Dino filled the doorway.

Her tail was thrashing back and forth. Her orange head crest was spread out, pointing hard and upward down the center of her head. Beady red eyes were searching the area. A snarl filled the room as she sensed where the intruders were. Her large, green muscular legs pounding her three-toed talon-tipped feet into the floor, slowly at first, and gaining speed with every thunderous step.

Phyllis tripped over Sandy who stood there with one foot still in mid-step. They both tumbled to the ground and Phyllis scrambled under the workbench and out the other side. She reached in and pulled Sandy through after her.

Wide eyed she murmured to herself. “God, their so damn big!” She was seeing one in motion and hearing it for the first time.

Phyllis pointed down to the end of the bench to a four by four foot grid set in the wall. By the time they had their fingers laced in the grid, pulling as hard as they could, the Dino was sliding past the bench.

Both her feet were pumping hard trying to stop her bulk from continuing forward and trying to turn the corner at the same time. Sandy, looking back, thought that she could see sparks coming from her iron like talons as they scraped across the stone covered floor.

The compression-fitted framework pulled way causing the girls to fall on their fleshy butts. Phyllis threw the grid back over her head and spotted the Dino finally making her way toward them.

“Crawl, Sandy, crawl!” Phyllis yelled as she pushed Sandy into the hole in the wall. With a crash the Dino hit the wall and with her pathetically small arms tried to reach in for them. Once more a roar, this time of frustration, filled the room and especially the tunnel.

“Sandy! Stop, now!” Phyllis called out in a panicky voice. “There may be a two hundred foot drop in front of...”

“Yaps!” Sandy shouted back as Phyllis could hear Sandy scrambling backwards on all four and stopped only after she bumped into her.

“Almost too late there telling me about that drop, sister,” whispered Sandy as she settled down near Phyllis.

“Almost is better than not at all,” Phyllis countered back. “Now give me a moment to think and I’ll figure a way out of this mess!” A high intensity light flooded the shaft and both girls could be seen clearly. Whistling, clicking and grunting sounds followed their discovery still in the tunnel. The light went out and mechanical noises could be heard at the tunnel end.

“Time to move, girlfriend,” Phyllis called out, “and stay close, real close, to me. One false move and you may end up falling down a long shaft.” Phyllis moved on past her and came to a stop after just a few feet.

“Listen carefully. Reach up to the top of the tunnel and feel for the upward shaft end. But watch were you put your feet or you be fall down the rest of that tunnel. Now you’re in the center of this airway and it is a four-foot jump to the other side. If you put your toes over the edge and stoop down and push forward with your legs throwing yourself forward at the same time you’ll make it with easy to the other side and then you can crawl forward a few feet so I can follow. Can you do it?”

Sandy took a second before answering. “That clumping noise behind us is not a good thing, right?”

“I’m sure that it is not!”

“Then stand aside, I’m coming through!” Sandy was just about to leap into the dark when they were pinned with the light again. Sandy did not looking back, she leaped to the other side with ease now that it could be seen. Phyllis was

over the downward shaft three seconds later. Both girls hurried along the tunnel with the light reflecting down ahead of them to help show the way.

Suddenly, scrapping sounds reached them and they turned around fast enough to see the light flip downwards ninety degrees and disappear down the air shaft with clanging and banging sound that ended with a *thud* sound.

Phyllis found another grid. After a few kicks with their feet the girls forced it open. They found themselves looking out at a blue-lit corridor near the ceiling. Luckily the grid was on hinges and did not fall to the floor. It came in handy letting them lower themselves to a point where they could easily, and safely, drop to the ground.

They could see white light at one end of the long slightly curved maintenance corridor, so they headed in the opposite direction. It seemed like forever, but they found themselves at the end of the alleyway and back into another room like the one they left in such a hurry with a Dino at their heels.

“Oh, no, not again” Sandy sighed as she looked around. Phyllis immediately went to the far away right hand wall and called Sandy over and pointed up above them.

“That there is their equivalent of a wash sink with hot and cold running water. Want a drink or a bath first? Phyllis asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“Do we have time for both,” Sandy asked licking her lips and rubbing the built up grime off her arm. “What about getting to the escape ship?”

“See that door,” Phyllis nodded to an outline on one wall as she started to climb up shelves built into the wall like they were a ladder. “That is our transportation tube to where the ship is. If we take it now we’ll be there in ten minutes. Or we can take a ten-minute break now and get there in a somewhat fit condition in twenty minutes instead. It’s up to you, my lady friend.”

Phyllis reached up and grabbed what might have been a knob and pulled herself upwards.

She could hear Sandy starting to climb after her.

## Chapter Fourteen: Truce

Bud did not like the situation he was in. For a few hours after he woke up he tried to ignore the Kid staring at him. He could not take it anymore.

“Kid, if that is all you’re planning on doing this whole trip you’ll need to get yourself another hobby. Get up off your behind and follow me. We’re going to look at and go over ever piece of machinery on this ship and you’re going to learn what its use is and how to at least shut it off and turn on a secondary system.”

“But won’t Albert do that?” he asked smugly.

“Only if he’s still online and the connections haven’t been cut by battle damage. Didn’t you listen to Tom when he said we will be going into battle! He was not blowing smoke for the hell of it.”

Now, the orderly was confused. Why didn’t Bud seem to be angry at Tom Swift any more?

“If you want to live through this you better get with the program or take the escape pod, right now, and try to head back to Earth. With luck someone may hear your radio distress call and come pick you up. But I doubt it.” Bud gave him a minute to make up his mind. The young man was uncertain if he should stay. But he was not going to show it.

“Let’s go!” Bud call out after he was sure the orderly was not going to bolt. “You have a lot to learn and almost no time to learn it.”

He swiveled his chair around and left the control room. He didn’t bother to see if the orderly was following. He could hear him getting up with not so polite mumblings issuing from his lips.

Bud pushed the Kid as hard as he could for the next two days. The more he had the orderly do the harder he tried and the faster he leaned. The younger man was determining to show Bud that he was as good and intelligent as he was.

By the time Albert informed them that they were only an hour from orbital insertion Bud was wondering why the Kid was an orderly at a nursing home and not a mechanical

engineer or, at least, a Swift space pilot.

They headed back to the control room and as they passed the kitchenette Bud grabbed two 'heat-n-eat' meals. He had the exhausted orderly take the pilot seat as he took the second seat and opened his meal. He pointed his spoon at the red-eyed man.

"You get yours, Kid, only after you put the *LuTE* in an inconspicuous position among the solar generators."

"But Albert is doing that..."

Bud cut him off and touched a few of the controls on the master control board.

"Nope, he's offline as of now. You do it or you can let us crash into one of the generators or, if you miss them completely, into the Sun!" Bud spooned in another heaping mouthful of hot beef stew and mini-biscuits into his mouth.

The kid shut his mouth, for by now, he knew that protesting was useless. He quickly called up the orbital map on the main display screen with the speed, bearing and solar attitude of all the generators in the cluster before him. He noticed that these groups of generators were transmitting power to Mars and was three times the size of the next cluster, which belonged to Venus. That cluster was two degrees behind the Mars generators and in a higher orbit.

Earth was currently at the opposite side of the Sun to both Venus and Mars and its power generators stayed in alignment with Earth, as did all the generator clusters that powered a planet. Timely firing of repelatron engines kept the clusters in position in spite of orbital mechanics. Tom never wanted the mass of the sun to be a cause of power outages even though the inverse square wave field was not bothered by it. Caution was the byword when it came to the power supplies for the planets and as well as for the spaceships.

The Kid fed in new instruction into the flight navigator computer and touched the screen where he wanted the *LuTE* to proceed to. The flashing yellow icon of the *LuTE* started to move on the screen. Finished with the display he reached for his meal and ripped the top off without letting it heat up. He tipped the pouch up and ravenously eat his meal as he watched the readouts of the ship's movements and the generators around them.



Bud smiled to himself on the Kid's selection. It was better than Albert's logical choice for it put them into a higher orbital plane and in the cluster of generators that was overtaking the first one and not falling behind. This gave them days in which they did not have to move and would be out of sight from prying Dino's instruments. It also lent itself to a less chaotic battlefield in which to maneuver in.

Bud watched the young man as he rapidly shoveled his food into his mouth. He inwardly laughed remembering the days he used to eat that way when he was busy and over tired.

It was then that Bud noticed the Kids hair color and how it fell, just like his. The smaller but still square jaw line and that his two top front teeth were smaller than normal... like his were.

*I'm imagining things,* Bud thought to himself. *There's no way! But, why did Tom want me to talk to him about Texas.* He shook his head and deeply inhaled, letting the air out slowly.

"Orbital position has been acquired," the flight computer informed them as the yellow symbol turned green on the scope. Bud put Albert back on line and slid his flight chair out as far as it could go and set it into a slight reclining position.

"Okay, Kid?" Bud asked as the young man was getting up to leave. "Please stay and tell me why *you* should be interested in my past, I.E. Laredo, Texas? Maybe we should start by you telling me your name after all this time?"

The orderly took several seconds looking down at Bud. His face was tense and both his fists opened and closed a few times. Finally he sat back down and moved his flight chair away from the control board and swing it totally around so the back of the seat was against the controls. The two men faced each other only an arm length apart.

Looking Bud squarely in the eye, the orderly slowly and clearly stated, "Ramon... Budworth... Sanchez." Bud eyes widened. "Son of Carlos Budworth Sanchez." Bud's face turned white. "Son of Ramona Sanchez, formerly of Laredo, Texas and Budworth Barclay, formerly of Shopton, New York!"

Bud couldn't move, he couldn't breathe and he couldn't swallow. His eyes filled up with tears. He tried to speak, but

nothing came out. He tried again and finally managed to whisper, "I didn't know!" He repeated it even quieter, just about moving his lips, more to himself than to Ramon, "I didn't know!" Tears were flowing freely down his face.

The *orderly* coldly sat there watching for his chance for revenge. The *grandson* felt lost and alone. *Ramon* wanted to believe Bud that he did not really know that his grandmother was pregnant when he left her in Texas.

Three intertwining emotions fought for control of the young man's actions. The *orderly* reached for the knife that he had hidden in his boot. The *grandson* reached out for his grandfather. *Ramon* wanted this man that his grandmother loved so dearly to become part of his everyday life.

"Grandfather!" called out *Ramon*. The *grandson* lunged forward to try to take him in his arms. The *orderly* swung the knife to cut Bud's throat open.

The steel blade flashed in the light as it came down and caught Bud's attention at the last instant with the corner of his eye. But it was too late to stop it. The knife came down, missing his throat by a hair, and was flung across the control room. It bounced once and slid the rest of the way to the back instrument panels.

Bud reached up and pulled his grandson into his arms whispering to himself, "Ramon, Ramon, what have I done to you?"

"Mr. Barclay," Albert's voice sounded calmly and with total disregards to the emotional turmoil that both men were in. "The Venus and Mars power generators have gone offline."

It took a moment for this simple statement to register in both their minds. When it did Bud pushed Ramon back into his seat and both men looked at each other quizzically for a moment.

Ramon swung his chair around, "Have the generators been attacked somehow without us knowing it?" he asked as he called up the radar scope to the main viewing screen to gaze at an enlarged display.

Before Bud even had time to think of an answer, Albert informed them, "This is a planned shutdown by Mr. Swift. It was necessary so that new destination crystals could be put

into place and energized.”

“Where is all that power being diverted to?” Bud asked.

“To the *Mary Nestor II*'s escape pod and to the Altar V robot.”

“WHAT IS GOING ON?” shouted Bud to the AI computer. “Was Tom attacked? Where is he? Damn you!” Bud was red in the face yelling at the disembodied Albert.

“I was told not to tell you anything until now. You are in no position to stop Mr. Swift from doing what he is commencing. He did not want you to throw your life away needlessly.”

“*Needlessly*, you say? Being here is not throwing my life away needlessly?” Bud asked sarcastically.

“By all probability, you are in one of the safest and last positions to be attacked. Mr. Swift and I have analyzed countless attack plans and this has always been the last one to be assaulted. The generators are a needed item if the Dinosaurs want to reestablish their home world on Earth,” the AI continued to explain.

“The asteroids have a limited power supply and the trip here through interstellar space must have spent most of it. They will need the generators, so they will not waste them unless it is the last resort to overcome us.” Albert's calmness was irritating Bud tremendously.

“The two generator clusters have now resumed operations. That means that Mr. Swift is now making his decent to the asteroid. I no longer have contact with the *Mary Nestor II*.”

“What! I could have communicated with Tom all this time and you did not tell me?” Bud was screaming once more.

“Communication was not advisable and it would have been counterproductive in what Mr. Swift wished to let happen.”

“What was that?” Ramon cut in, then added in haste, “To forge a relationship between Grandpa and me. Was that it?”

“Yes, you are a very astute young man. My physiological program tells me that it has worked. Mr. Swift would be very happy to hear it.”

“Then tell him, you overrated machine!” Bud demanded.

“I cannot. I am only in communication with my alternate

self, and it is no longer on board the *Mary Nestor II*. A communiqué with Mr. Swift is impossible at this time and for the foreseeable future. He will contact us when he has finished his mission.”

Both Bud and Ramon started to speak, but Albert interrupted them.

“As of now I have to report the two circling asteroids have starting to accelerate and are now heading for Earth and Mars. But that course projection is subject to change.”

## Chapter Fifteen: Butt Naked Girls

The asteroid, close up, looked no worse for the wear. Time and the harshness of space did not change it much. Altar was going in as fast as it could, the less time in approach the better. At five miles from the surface he went into overdrive. One hundred Gs for thirty seconds. If the G-Force inverted gave out now Tom would not even know it.

“There, Altar,” Tom mentally pointed to a spot on the surface that now clearly became visible. “Below that ridge, those three craters. Aim for the small one on the left.” Altar changed his descent altitude by a quarter of a degree and zeroed in on the crater that Tom wanted to land in.

The ridge no longer had any of the antenna arrays it used to support, and the hangar/airlocks were no longer visible in the craters, but this was the spot, Tom was sure of it. From a quarter mile up he got a fleeting impression of the antennas foundations. Then Altar was on the surface inside the smaller crater. He landed so gently that only a few particles of dust were disturbed.

Immediately all the now superfluous external hardware and repelatron packages were ejected from the robot’s body. The cocoon that protected Tom from any accidental space debris hits fell to the ground also. The robot scooped everything together and placed the gray colored cocoon covering that was now unfolded many times over the pile of discarded machinery. From a few feet away it blended into the surrounding ground quite well.

Tom had Altar run sensory tests of the area and found it dead of all electrical or mechanical vibrations. There were no internal heat signatures coming out of the ground either.

Satisfied that he had landed undetected Tom went searching for the airlock he knew that was near the edge of that particular depression they were in. He could not observe any indications that one ever existed. The rocky, gray soil covered everything uniformly. Maybe too evenly to be natural.

He had Altar resort to ground penetrating radar to find it. It was buried under five feet of dirt and hard packed rubble.

For some unknown reason the Dinos felt it necessary to hide all their airlocks and large spaceship entry ports on this side of the asteroid.

Tom dismounted from Altar's back and stepped to the other side of the crater as the robot hand-shoveled his way in. Within minutes Altar's durastress coated hands had the airlock cleared with a few extra feet around it. Jumping down into the newly dug hole Tom heard a light, hollow ringing of a hard surface contacting the soles of his boots.

Switching on a light in the red spectrum frequency that Tom knew that the Dinos could not see yet his visor could process back into normal light, he searched for the airlock controls. He found the inoperable electronic one, but no hint of a manual way to open the door.

"Altar, drill down with the mini-borer at the edge of the airlock frame, attach an environmental sensor package to it before you release it." The drill already had a built in video capacity and within minutes Tom was viewing the insides of the airlock. Empty, as he expected. That left him with two choices: to use cunning or let Altar use brute force.

Reaching down Tom felt around the control mechanism and could only feel a solid one-piece clear covering through his ultra thin glove. He made a fist with his hand and pounded the panel with it. It fragmented to dust.

This surprised Tom as he picked up the crystal powder and rubbed it between his fingers. He could feel the gritty glass-like substance as if he was using his bare fingers. The covering had been exposure to deep space too long and the harsh cold had eventually crystallized it. The powder fell to the ground, none of it statically stuck to his glove.

Tom was now sure that this spaceport and airlock system had not been used in ages. Shining his red light into the fist size hole he could find nothing that resembled a circuit of any type. That left Altar to do the opening of the lock.

\* \* \*

Sandy felt good for the first time in hours—days. They had found water to drink and fell asleep right after hiding under a workbench that had a grill covering down the front of it. It was dark inside, but they could see out well enough. The two sides were open so they could get out from under the

bench in two directions. Best of all it was against a wall.

They were now utilizing one of the Dino transport vehicles. Phyllis had hacked into the rudimentary computer system of the tubes to set up a destination. They were now rising twelve miles to the surface service areas that were used for temporary storage, sensory equipment and spaceship airlocks.

Phyllis shut down the transport system and erased all the traces of its use that she could. Sandy was rubbing her arms and stamping her feet to keep warm. Even the lights were as dull and limited as the heat and air was.

“I thought our body nanos would help keep us warm? Why is it so cold and dark in here?” Sandy was not happy and definitely felt grumpy.

“Sister, you haven’t *felt* cold yet. At the end of this corridor is a door that seals one of the smaller spaceship airlocks. On the other side of that triple sealed door is hard, cold vacuum. Down that long passage is our escape ship.”

Sandy took Phyllis by the arms, “You got to be kidding.” Sandy’s tone was perplexed. “I thought you were joking that we can tolerate space without a suit!”

“I hope we don’t need to do it that way, but if I can’t pressurize the tunnel, we might.” Sandy’s hands slid off of Phyllis’ arms in dismay.

“What I do for you, Phyl, is beyond friendship,” she told her closest friend.

“Yes, I guess that is another way to say, ‘I’ll do anything to save my butt!’” retorted Phyllis as she turned away and started to walk down the dark corridor to the end of it. After going just a short distance both girls felt and heard something.

“Bang!” and the ground vibrated under their feet. The women stopped walking.

“BANG!” louder this time and the ground definitely shook. They looked at each other and locked hands together.

“**BANG!**” followed but the sound of rocks falling that could only mean that a wall has been breached. Sandy looked around and found a smaller airlock door on the wall adjacent to the large door Phyllis wanted to open after she had

established there was an atmosphere behind it.

Scrapping noises was coming from behind it now. The door shook and the girls started to walk backwards down from where they came. The door exploded outwards and hit the opposite wall with such a force that it implanted itself into it.

Air was momentarily sucked into the area with a hurricane like force passed the shattered doorframe. The girls were pulled forward and knocked off their feet before it stopped. They just managed to regain their footing when an enormously tall dark bulky biped stepped out into the corridor. The girls blinked their eyes once, and then twice, at the emerging form.

“RUN!” they yelled in unison. And that was just what they did. In seconds they were past the useless transport car. Sandy noticed a dark maintenance shaft that only had two or three lights on a long way down in the center of the shaft. She skidded to a stop and pulled Phyllis along with her. As they passed the first light Sandy hit the light emitter with her fist. To her satisfaction it went out. They took turns hitting the others as they ran past.

Tom stepped out from behind Altar. He was mystified. He could not believe his eyes—no, Altar’s eyes. He enhanced the digital video and played it back slowly. He laughed and slapped Altar on his back shoulder. “Old boy, we are most definitely not alone,” he told his robotic friend. He looked once more at the frozen video frame projected onto his visor. The two women were running down the passageway, feet pumping away to beat the band, heads held high to suck in more air.

“Hairless heads and naked bodies,” Tom sighed. “No one is going to believe this one.”

Tom slowly let the images advanced. One of the women slid to a stop and pulled the other person with her down a side access tunnel. He had one clear shot of the slightly shorter person as she turned and he was delighted at her physique. Tall, slender and, to put it mildly, endowed. Not *that* overly, but nicely put together.

“Now that was something I never would have thought of seeing here!” Tom judged that statement safe to make and



sighed once more. He had no recollections of seeing a woman or going on a date in years. Thirty or more years if the truth was to be admitted.

“So the Dinos must have kidnapped people before they left Sol and went star hunting.” Tom’s thoughts were running wild. “I’ll have to reconsider all my plans because of this chance encounter.” He was still standing looking down the passage that the girls ran down. He glanced the other way and put his hand onto the door that blocked the oversize corridor next to him.

“Looks and feels like the one before, time will tell for sure.” Tom was thinking of the triple sealed off corridor that Aaron, an astronomer intern at the Outpost, Bud and he had found barring their way before. When it had opened, the Prime Leader Dinosaur had stepped out from behind it.

This time only two naked girls were waiting on the far side of it.

“Vast improvement,” Tom considered with a smirk. He stepped back into the airlock that Altar had helped him destroy and rechecked the plastic shield on the outer door. This was the second one he had Altar set up.

The first one was ten miles up a winding slopping passageway from the airlock they started at on the surface an hour ago. If this one gave way everything would be sucked into the tunnel’s vacuum and then into the broken surface airlock. Tom doubted that the plastic wall they had erected would hold up to the massive force of the air ramming it.

Stepping back into the main corridor Tom had Altar erect a second barrier across the ruined corridor airlock door. At least this airlock had double plastic seals. Tom placed a video/radio transmitter to this one, something that he had not done on the others. It would let him know if there was a disturbance or it was touched and taken down. He would see by what or whom now that he knew that people were here too.

He had to consider if he needed to report this discovery to the outside world. “Would it make a difference in the long run? Maybe not. They’re second or third generation human stock by now, if not more. Definitely more Dino-like in their thinking ability than human.” Giving a mental shrug, he let it

slide for the moment.

“Altar, can you still follow the girls scent?” he asked, once more looking down the corridor.

“Affirmative, Mr. Swift. I can sense their foot spoor from up here.”

“Then convert into wolfhound tracker mode and proceed at a fast pace. We may not have much time to find them before they notify the Dinos. We must stop them if we can.”

Altar lowered his body onto all fours. His arms and leg joints realigned themselves into the more powerful shape and function of a canine. His head shifted position also to that of a hound’s visage. Lowering his elongated nose to the floor he sniffed, quickly processed the results, and started to move forward at a fast lope. Tom easily kept up with him in his augmented spacesuit. They turned down the side corridor and Tom changed his vision to infrared.

At first he could detect nothing, but slowly he started to see heat marks on the floor. One there and another further down the hallway. Each time they remained longer in his vision before the little bit of heat faded out.

He could easily see both sets of prints now and the spacing between them was growing closer. They were not running as fast, or taking long strides. Finally they stopped and mingled around and then started moving again at what Tom figured to be more a walking pace.

They came to a fork in the road. One started to curve right and the other left. It looked like the females each went a separate way for only one set of footprints went down each passage.

Tom could not afford to be separated from Altar nor could he let the girls go.

“Altar, lie down and listen to the ground. Try it a few feet in on each tunnel. Triangulate the sound from both positions and display the results to my visor if you can.

Altar did as he was told and when he passed the center wall that formed the separation of the corridors his ultra sensitive nose pick up the scent of one of the girls on the wall where she had touched it.

Tom noticed the influx of the added chemical mix on

Altar's odor analyzing display unit. He went to the wall and touched the spot. A small area around where he touch changed and it became a control board with a projection map.

On his visor's screen, two blips were moving along separate lines that joined again a goodly distance away and on a totally different level. The moving dots were half way to what he believed might be their destination, the point where the travel line went vertical.

Tom did some quick estimation of the distances involved and figured out that the new stop was some twenty miles away and twelve miles deeper into the asteroid. This did not bode well for him being able to stop the fast traveling girls.

He enlarged the view of the map on his visor and took the time to study it. He found where they were and the transport units that were inside both walls some hundreds of feet down each passage.

"They're smart," Tom told Altar, who was always a good listener, but who did not talk back much. "They know their way around these passageways and the transport tube system, too. They expect to be able to outrun me. Why don't they call for help? This terminal must provide an audio link to somewhere?" Their apparent reasoning was not his.

"Let's go, Altar, and maybe we can find a free ride like they did. If not, are you up to a fast run? I have the map in memory storage and we'll just have to try to run them down."

It took them only minutes to find the transport storage points. Both of the bays were empty.

"Altar, convert to mobile transport. Motorcycle to be precise. You may stay in you hound motif if that shape will suffice."

Altar's legs drew up under him. His front legs stretched forward at a downward angle. A wheel formed between each set of clawed paws. A saddle like depression fashioned itself in the middle of the robot's back.

Tom climbed up and sat down on it. He stretched out onto his stomach and reached forward to grasp the hand holds on Altar's shoulders.

"Energize body lock," Tom told the robot once he was comfortable and settled in. He did not want to be a smeared

on the road if they suddenly had to stop or turn suddenly.

“Ready?” Tom called out to Altar. His adrenaline was pumping; he had not done this in years. He put the machine into drive and poured on the power. The tires squealed as they roared down the transport tunnel. After only a minute of trying to hold the bike on an even keel on the slippery surface he switched controls to Altar and told him to use maximum speed but keep them safe at all times.

Where his brain might have been able of making minute corrections a few times a second, he realized that Altar was capable of making a hundred in the same amount of time.

The speed indicator quivered at one hundred and ninety-five miles per hour for several minutes and then he came to a complete stop before the drop tube.

“Mr. Swift, do we proceed and drop? The stopping mechanism may not engage because we are not part of the system.”

“Turn your repelatrions on standby just in case we need them. Forward and down, please. This should be our stop at the bottom and hopefully those women have joined up again. We are wasting time on this pursuit now. It has gone on longer than it should. Time is running against us!” Tom was out of contact with the rest of the solar system. What havoc, if any, did he cause by coming here the way he did?

But inwardly he knew that he had to find the women and talked to them if he could. How many human lives may depend on their answers he did not know?

The twelve-mile drop took close to twenty minutes and they never came close to terminal velocity. Altar picked up the scent of the woman that lingered in the transit tube they used.

They were in what looked like a big transportation hub. The circular area had dozens of tubes coming into it. The high ceiling was ablaze with light, but it was totally empty. Not a box, bag or transport vehicle could be seen, not even the units that the women used. Only the echoing sound of Altar’s wheels filled the air and gave the place life.

The two women joined up quickly and they ran, once more, across the area to one of the eight archways that were

regularly placed between the tunnels. The Dinosaurs could walk into them five abreast they were so wide and high.

Tom continued to ride his mechanical steed rather than waste time on stopping and having Altar convert to his normal form. Within minutes they could hear machines running and hissing sounds coming from the passageway that was steadily drawing narrower. The ceiling height changed but stopped when it reached twenty feet above them.

The passage ended not in a wall or door but with long vertical curtains hung from the roof to the ground. The hissing and pumping sound definitely came from behind them. The footprints also definitely went inside there without any hesitations.

Tom had Altar changed back into the bloodhound. The curtains were sweeping the heat of the foot prints away as they moved back and forth, wafted by some invisible wind. Altar's sense of smell was his only hope.

Within the first fifty feet Tom passed through ten double layers of curtains and the ground slopped more and more downwards after each set.

When it did level out he did not like what he saw.

The area was vast. He could not see the other side. The bundles of intertwining pipes and hissing gray steam coming from high above obscured the distance. The normally smoothed floor had turned into red clinging muck.



## Chapter Sixteen: Revelations

Exhausted and hungry the girls found a place to take shelter at last. It wasn't much, but it provided twenty square feet of dry ground to sit on and a wall to rest against.

Phyllis sat crossed-legged on the dry ground underneath the overhang that was purring away above them. It was being held up by one wall that ran down the middle of the platform. The ground rose a bit against the supporting wall so that was why it was still dry.

The strange machinery on top of the overhang had lots of pipes going in at one end and a big single pipe leaving at the other. Maybe it was the other way around; it did not matter. The platform provided the only dry spot in this forest of hissing steam pipes and blood red mud.

Phyllis was trying to squeeze the wet mud off her arms. It was doing no good. Sandy sat with her knees pulled up and the side of her head resting on them looking at Phyllis. Her arms were wrapped around her legs.

“Do you think we lost that Dino?” Sandy asked as she watched water drip off the roof beyond Phyllis' head. Her lips and throat were dry; *all this water and not a drip to drink*, Sandy sighed to herself.

“It does not matter, Sandra.” Sandy now knew they were in trouble. Proper names were never a good sign. “That Dino came out of the area where the spaceship is docked. It can only mean trouble. If she had found it or even goes looking around and spots it, she'll know that it's not right. There are not supposed to be any spaceships there. In any case, we're sunk!” she concluded, sounding like everything was lost.

“Why was she tearing through the wall to get in?” It made no sense to Sandy.

“How the heck do I know?” Phyllis curtly answered back. “Why don't you go back and ask her. She may tell you before she tears you apart like she did to that wall!”

“Jeez, I'm just making conversation. You don't have to bite my head off.” Sandy paused and battered her eyelids a few times. “That's the Dino's job!” She grinned at her friend

to let her know that there was no hard feeling.

Phyllis' shoulders slumped a bit. "I'm sorry, Sandy, but that ship is our only way out of this place and we have to be in it before I let my nano army go to destroy the cooling jackets around the reactors."

"I understand, sister." They fell silent for a while. Sandy lifted her head and laid it against the wall and closed her eyes. She started to fall asleep.

As Phyllis continued to work, her mind turned to a hundred thoughts of things that were... and things that had never been.

Probably never would be. Twice she had to wipe a small tear from her stained cheek.

Sandy was asleep and breathing softly.

Phyllis touched her arm. It was unexpected, yet it felt warm and even a little tender. "Can I ask you a personal question?" Sandy, half asleep, nodded "yes" without thinking about it.

"Are you still a virgin?"

The words slammed into her brain like a lightning strike on a clear summer's night.

Sandy opened one eye and calmly looked at her friend to see if she was kidding. By the look on her face she was not. With the other eye still closed, she sat up and looked closely at her best friend. There was no sign of anything but curiosity. *A little mis-timed*, Sandy thought, but only that. Mentally and physically, she took a deep breath.

"Not counting what the Dino's apparently did to us in those tanks, yes I am." Sandy was curious over what brought this about. And, at this particular moment. Sex was one subject that they never talked about. At least, almost never.

"So am I," Phyllis returned seriously. She had a deeply sad look on her face that made Sandy want to take her into her arms and hold her, but with them both naked, now was not the best time for that! "Did we miss out on something that we should have done?"

"Well I know that I liked the feeling of it..." Sandy started to say.



“Hey, I thought you said you never did it? Which is it? You can’t be a half virgin, you know! Or, a born-again virgin!”

Sandy never heard Phyllis talk like this.

“Well... okay listen.” Sandy squirmed around to face Phyllis. “One night I was at Bud’s apartment watching one of those old science fiction movies that he liked so much. Something from Japan starring a big bug. I spotted an unopened bottle of pink champagne on his kitchen counter and asked him about it. He told me it was a thank you present from one of the people that he was constantly helping out.”

“Wait! How old were you both then?”

Sandy blushed and it was visible even under all the mud on her skin. “I was nineteen. Before I knew it he had the cork flying across the room, two flutes of champagne poured and was handing one to me. It tasted sweet and the bubbles tickled my nose. I downed it down like soda.”

Phyllis shook her head slowly. “Not very wise.”

Sandy shrugged; it caused some dried mud to crack and drop off her chest. “Yeah. Bud laughed and told me that I was supposed to sip it. He poured me another glass and we made a toast and sipped it.” Sandy watch as Phyllis nodded her head in understanding and smiled.

“Before I knew it my top was off and my bra was on the floor. Bud had a hand full of my left... well you know what, and his mouth was passionately against my lips.” She sighed, savoring the memory.

Phyllis was now leaning forward, eagerly listening to Sandy’s narrative.

“Would you believe it that just then someone pounded on the front door and Tom’s voice called out for help. He sounded terrible. We looked at each other and Bud turned red with embarrassment. He was so naive. He rushed to the door and by the time he had it open I had slipped into the kitchen and had my blouse back on and my bra in my pocket. Bud led Tom to the couch and called 911. He was bleeding from a gash on his temple.”

“Which attack was that? Foreign agent with a stick or industrial spy with a club?” Phyllis wanted to know with a

little chuckle; there were so many of them.

“It was one of those bungled kidnapping attempts,” Sandy informed her.

“Didn’t you and Bud ever try it again?” Phyllis inquisitiveness was getting the better of her.

“Nope, we never had the time. Two weeks later we were on vacation in the Caribbean after flying those mercy missions and you and I were kidnapped by big, pesky Dinos. Now that you know my sordid past, what about you?” Sandy inquired with a bright smile.

Phyllis stopped smiling. “There *is* nothing to talk about. Tom was always a perfect gentleman. It was hard enough to get a goodnight kiss from him!” She sighed at the lost possibilities. “Lots of time I could tell that he was on the verge of a good blouse rip, but I must have given off the wrong vibes. Pity, really.”

They sat in silence a few minutes.

“Mother once told me,” Sandy continued, “that Swift men were hard to attract and to become involved with. But once you did they are unstoppable. Daddy was so taken by my mother that he would not leave her side, to put it mildly, after the honeymoon. If you catch my drift?” Sandy’s eyes were twinkling.

“As a matter of fact, daddy almost went bankrupt after he married ma. Uncle Ned had to have a talk with him after almost a year without him inventing something. Talk about one mindedness!”

“Oh, Sandra, to be so in love that you want to stop the world from turning.”

“Only if you can afford it, Phyl, and apparently you can’t stop it forever.”

“And now our second chance on life is going to be yanked out from under us. If only we could get off this damn asteroid!”

“Maybe I can be of some help,” a voice offered out of the steaming fog. A figure moved forward away from the grayness. The startled girls jumped to their feet. A lot more dried mud clattered to the ground.

A shinny, diamond crystal-covered biped stepped into their vision. It hesitated for a moment to see what the girls would do. They clasped hands and stood their ground. Their bodies were tense and ready to fight or flee.

Which one, he could not tell.

The machine-looking figure stepped in under the overhand and stopped several feet from them. Every facet shined with a glow of its own. It looked powerful, almost knight like.

“It only needs a sword and shield,” whispered Sandy to Phyllis from the side of her mouth. “Maybe a black horse would complete the illusion.”

Another shadow stepped up, but it stayed out in the steam. It was horse-like in shape.

“Don’t add anything else to this dream, Sandy,” Phyllis answered back in an unbelieving voice.

“No girls. You’re both wide awake. But tell me this first. Are you Sandra Swift and Phyllis Newton from Shopton, New York?”

It took both ladies a few seconds to recover from that shock.

“How do you know our names?” Phyllis wanted to know as she stepped a foot closer—now a little indignant—to try to see the face beneath the visor. For this had to be a human, a male human, without a doubt.

“I have been looking for you two for years. In fact I had given both of you up for dead years ago. I never expected to find you here and not so... so, excuse this, but caked in red mud and *totally* naked! What happened to your hair? Why are you both mid-thirties looking and not old ladies? And...”

“Hold it right there, mister! You know enough about us and we do not know anything about you! As for why we have no clothes or hair ask a Dino when you find one. That is if you live long enough to ask her.”

“Oh, I believe I can live long enough to ask one, if you really want me to. Would you both like to come along and see how well I do?” he asked with an audible chuckle.

“We don’t go out with strangers, thank you!” Phyllis answered back taking another step closer. She was only a foot

away and still could not see the person inside the shining helmet.

“Phyl, if only I knew that you were so... so *womanly* all those years ago.” Tom was looking closely at her with the mud digitally removed from her body by the electronics in his helmet. A quick look at Sandy showed him that his sister was a well-formed woman as well.

Sandy pulled Phyllis back and stepped protectively in front of her. “God, we’re prisoner aboard an asteroid that’s about to attack Earth and now about to be rescued by a pervert—you *are* going to rescuing us, aren’t you?” Sandy asked giving their situation a second thought.

“Yes Sandy, I am going to take both of you our of here. Sorry I didn’t bring Bud along. He would have enjoyed this close encounter. Can’t want to show him the video.”

“Don’t you dare!” shouted Sandy. Then it hit her. “Tom... Tommy, is that you? You’ve come to save us!” She clapped her hands together in delight and started to jump up and down like a little girl. But the other two never noticed her doing it.

Phyllis reacted to what the shinny knight had said by rushing forward and reaching up a hand to the crystal visor. Her fingers touched Tom’s face as he retracted his monotonic helmet. It smoothly withdrew into his suit collar.

Tom took the hand that was touching his face with one hand and with the other hand drew Phyllis against him and kissed her. Tenderly at first and then with a long fulfilling desire.

After a time a noise filled his ears. It was Sandy making rude sounds like and impatient child. Tom stopped kissing his first love and stared at her face and at the tears in her eyes.

“Phyllis, I’m sorry I was such a lug back then. I wasn’t trying to snoop... well, not much, but I did hear your little conversation with Sandy. I hope you’ll give me time to make up for it.” He whispered it so only she could hear it.

“Tom Swift,” she laughed as she stepped away from his embrace, “You truly are my knight in shining armor. But a princess needs clothes. It’s alright to run around naked with only Dinosaurs to see me, but not my friend—my boyfriend—no, my man friend?”

“It doesn’t matter, Phyl, we have time to figure that out later. Altar,” Tom called out, “transform back to your normal self and come here.”

The machine did as he was told and stepped under the platform. He just fit under the roof.

“Eek!” Sandy yelled, raising her hands in front of her eyes as the giant robot came into the light. “Does Daddy know that you built such a monster?”

Tom looked at Sandy questioningly and then at Phyllis with raised eyebrows. Sandy was peeking out between her fingers and giggling.

“Sandy. I don’t think Tom needs to ask permission these days.” Phyllis took her by the arm and turned her so they could look into each other’s eyes. “Sandy. Remember how I told you that fifty years had passed from the time we were kidnapped and when I woke you up?”

Sandy blinked several times as her mind sought to process conflicting information. She turned slowly to face her brother. “Tom? You are here to rescue us, right?” He nodded. She began to look anxious. “Fifty years? But...” She closed her eyes and a tear spilled out from each one. She opened them again, touched his face with her fingertips and said, “You are older, but not fifty years older. Something is horribly wrong!”

“San, I am seventy years old now, at least according to the calendar, but we made a few technological advances in medicine and genetics over the years. I’m not sure what you and Phyl have gone through, but you’ve only aged about fifteen years in the last fifty. It’s just that Bud and I underwent a sort of rejuvenation. It’s a DNA thing and I’ll explain it once we get off this asteroid. For now—” He left the rest unsaid.

He could tell that she wanted to ask about their parents. It was plainly written on her face, but he needed her to be in the present and not in the irretrievable past. *Clothes*, he thought. *Maybe distracting her with clothing will bring her back to reality. She always loved clothes!*

“Altar? Do you have enough material to furnish these ladies with a wardrobe of some kind?”

“I have a carbon-based plastic that I can alter into a

suitable fabric. I can spray it on and it will be elastic enough that it can be removed when needed. I will have to leave an inch of bare space around the waist so it can be detached from the body.” The mechanical hound informed them.

“That’s all well and good, Tom,” Sandy spoke up, “but we don’t want to put on clothes with all this dirt on us. Mother will not be pleased!”

“Altar, a warm water spray to shower the ladies with, please.”

“As you wish, Mr. Swift. I will require thirty seconds to intake and process enough of the humidity.” A half minute later Altar stared to raise his arm and pointed a finger at them when Phyllis yelled.

“Not here in front of Tom for God sakes!” She looked around in a panic and pointed to the end of the wall. “Over on the other side, please.”

“No peeking Tom!” Sandy called back, laughing. “It’s way hard to get the prude out of a girl, no matter how hard you try.” She added in a whisper, “Wait till you *do* see her!”

Phyllis hit her in the arm as a reply.

Tom InterVoice linked to Altar, “Can you armor the plastic in any way?” He was concerned with what the future may contain.

“Not with a single coat of spray, Mr. Swift. If I use several I can implant nanos that could start to change the molecular structure of the carbon-based paint to more like your body armor you have on.”

“How long will the procedure take?”

“Several days to be completed with the amount of nanos I can modified for the process for both women.”

“Do so, and have the nanos start with the torso area, both front and back. That is where they will be most vulnerable to attack. I will notify the ladies of the change. Please proceed with the spraying after I talk to them.”

Out loud Tom told the women that several coats of spray were needed to be applied, “because it was so thin. And please follow Altar’s instructions.”

In his mechanical voice Altar instructed them, “Please

hold your arms out from your sides and spread your legs wide.”

“What!” Phyllis called out. “It won’t go into anything it isn’t supposed to, will it?” Tom did not hear the answered over Sandy’s outburst of laughter.

“Hey!” was heard next from Phyllis a few minutes later. “It’s a clear plastic for crying out loud. I might as well prance around like I was before. Mud covered is better than this!”

“Miss Newton, it will become opaque in a minute when the plastic has finished curing,” Altar informed the horrified lady.

She stepped out a minute later in a light gray two-piece outfit that was tight fitting leggings and what would be considered a tee shirt with long sleeves. All the body parts were covered but the thickness even after all the coats of spray left little to the imagination. This did not seem to bother Phyllis... at the least now.

*Maybe*, Tom thought as he looked at both girls—Sandy had come around the wall as well—it’s *the perception of clothing and not the real need for it that matters*. Sandy’s outfit was slowly turning from gray to black as Phyllis’ had.

Sandy was now smiling. She did a few quick steps, a few lunges and jumped up and down. “Now, this is pleasant, comfortable, and moves with you, not against you. It’s holding the boobs in place, too, when I run and jump.” She sounded like her old self again.

Phyllis gave her a withering glare, forgetting that she was mentally only nineteen years old.

“Altar, you can become my dresser anytime. Do you do evening gowns?” Sandy’s mind was racing at the possibilities.

“Don’t answer that, Altar,” Tom commanded, “or we’ll be here for the rest of eternity. *This is definitely not the Sandy that I knew as a teenager. I hope she holds together, because if she doesn’t there be hell to pay!*”





## Chapter Seventeen: Meanwhile: There and Back

“So it begins,” Bud half whispered in dread. Ramon did not know what to say. Everything was happening too fast for him and his emotions were already fried, to say the least.

“Correction,” Albert added a moment later. “Both approaching asteroids have disappeared. I am now picking up a time dilation field at their present position from various instruments we have in multiple locations.”

“Yes!” Bud shouted as he jumped up and pumped the sky with his fist. “This must mean they are leaving, right Albert?” Bud was almost dancing where he was standing.

“That is not likely, Mr. Barclay. The fields cannot be maintained closer than seven astronomical unites from the sun. The power requirement would be too tremendous because of the gravitational deflection caused by the sun. There is no way they could have the ability to generate that much energy after their own flight from their home world. And,” Albert added a final point, “there is no way of changing their flight course once the field was activated.”

“So the field will just collapse when it gets too close,” Bud reasoned, “and they will be going a little faster than we expected. We can handle that,” he added back snugly.

“Hey,” Ramon spoke up as Bud’s and Albert’s conversation was starting to make sense to him. “There is no way you should have that information yet. It takes...” he tapped away on the computer keyboard, “forty to forty-five minutes for that data to reach us at the speed of light. You are talking like it just happening?”

“It has just occurred, Mr. Sanchez.” Albert answered back matter-of-factly.

Ramon asked in disbelief, “You mean to tell me that you have instantaneous communications?”

“Yes, just between me and my other self’s.”

“Right! Just you and your other self’s! What do you use for this *physically impossible* feat? ESP, or something just as ridiculous?” He folded his arms, a look of defiant skepticism on his face.

“No, sir. Mr. Swift uses microscopic wormholes to do it. Without degrees in subatomic physics and in quantum math you will possibly not understand it.”

“Welcome to my world, Kid,” Bud snorted. “Sorry, Ramon,” he corrected himself. “Tom used to do that to me all the time. Get used to it!” He coyly added, “If it works, accept it.” Then he addressed Albert, “Tom always dumbed down that stuff to me all the time. You mean to tell me that you can’t?”

“If I must, I will, but it must be by special request.” It sounded like the AI sighed at the unpleasant thought of doing it.

“Just do it or I’ll unplug you. You’re just a machine, by the way.” Bud did not like the way the AI was talking back to them.

“Irritation is not called for, and for your information, I do not have a plug! Micro black holes,” Albert started to lecture them, “come in sixteen types or flavors as the quantum people like to call their different particles. If you self contain each different black hole flavor and keep it alive, that is, keeping them from collapsing as fast as they pop into existence by feeding it just the right amount of electrons so that it does not allowed them to grow, but holds them stable.”

Bud rolled his eyes and turned away. He had heard far too much of the scientific mumbo-jumbo in his life.

“Now, you place all sixteen of the different flavor black holes with all their containment systems into a spherical formation that is in perfect balance with each other and let down their individual fields just a fraction, and guess what? No... you possibly cannot.” Albert paused long enough that Bud could almost believe the AI was finding it hard to put the right words together. He shrugged when Albert continued.

“You know that all black holes suck in matter and energy and it goes somewhere. We have several theories of where, but with a micro black hole, if you set things up right, a white hole forms in the middle of the sixteen black holes.”

“A white hole?” Bud asked scratching his head. It was something he had never heard of and it got his attention.

“I get it,” Ramon spoke up, “it’s like when a prism splits

light into all its different colors. The sixteen flavors combine into a white hole. They must act like the prism does but in reverse. Is that it, Albert?"

"My, Mr. Sanchez, you do surprise me!" Was Albert being sarcastic, Ramon could not tell. "Let's finish this up." The AI continued. "I suppose that it might be stated that a white hole is the backside of a black hole. It depends on which way you're looking at it."

The look of bewilderment on both men's faces was laughable. Albert had no sense of humor so he merely forged ahead.

"Never mind that. Now comes the intriguing part. You can move the micro black hole anywhere you want as long as they are all *alive* and the white hole remains in existence. It is like a hub of a many-spoked wheel. If you send in radio waves in one black hole it comes out of all the other black holes instantly."

"It sounds complicated?" Ramon asked.

"It *was*," Albert answered back. "It took Mr. Swift over forty years to get it right and the number of—"

A single red light flashed once on the panel next to Bud.

"Mr. Barclay, I must interrupt this dialogue! I am receiving readings of severe energy, mass and time particle fluctuations from one of the asteroids. There is no way that it can continue to hold together under that much stress. It could explode and cause a temporary rift in time... or a fast moving black hole."

"Which of the two asteroids, Albert? *You* must warn people!" Ramon cried out.

"I have given notice to the vicinity around Mars. But there is no time for them to do anything... It is gone," Albert told them flatly.

"Mars! Not Mars!" Both men cried out in anguish.

"Sorry, gentlemen. I misspoke. I meant the asteroid."

"What was its position, Albert? Show us on the viewing screen," Bud commanded as he sat down, his face showing his relief. The possible loss of millions of people had scared him to death.

The screen filled with stars but quickly some of them started to blink out as random asteroid pieces passed before them. They were viewing the asteroid belt way beyond the planet Mars. Chunks of rocks and other debris began to be seen. Then it all stopped.

An emptiness—a hole—a void of great magnitude filled the screen. There were only stars left far out in the background. For over five million miles in any direction, nothing was left. A new black hole had formed. In the hundredth of a second it existed it sucked everything in around it before it winked out.

If the black hole had materialized only a minute or two later Mars might have been lost. Yanked into the anomaly and crushed out of existence. It, too, was in the flight path!

Both men sat back in their chairs. The tension of the past few moments had drained them completely. From Bud's left came the sounds of gasping.

“Breathe deep, Ramon. That's it. If there's anything I learned from being a test pilot is that you have to keep breathing.”

A moment later Ramon sat back, the color returning to his face. Bud patted him on the shoulder, and the young man nodded.

“What about the other asteroid?” Bud finally remembered about it.

“If I may, sir,” the disembodied voice told him, “it *popped* its time/flight field before it was too late. It is still coming towards us, but at terrific rate. It will be here in a little over five hours.”

“Albert, that is impossible.” Ramon told the AI. He had yet to understand the reality of time dilation flight.

“It *is* possible, Mr. Sanchez. You see, there are three main parts in this type of space flight. You exchange mass gained by speed for time and distance. You can change that ratio to some extent in the equation. They used the field to jump a relatively short distance but had to trade that for a tremendous burst of speed when they came out of the field.

“They must be hoping that their speed will give them an advantage that we cannot meet or stop.” The AI stopped talking, he was waiting for an affirmation that they

understood him.

At last Bud asked, "Where is it heading?" He was sure it was Earth.

"It will skim by the corona-sphere of the Sun. Close enough to take out most of the power generators and us with them!

\* \* \*

Tom stepped once more near Phyllis. She was more striking than the digital rendering showed her. He did not want to leave her side. *Not ever again*, he thought, *will I lose you*. He touched her head above one ear with the back of his ungloved hand and smiled at her.

"It won't grow back, unless you have a way to turn on the hair follicles again." She did not know if he could accept that.

"I think that it's kind of regal, my Princess. It somehow adds beauty to your face." Phyllis' mouth dropped open. "Nothing is hidden from view!"

Phyllis blushed fiercely.

Sandy choked!

Tom realized what he said could be taken wrong and by the look on Phyllis' face, it had.

"God, I'm a bumbling teenager again!" Tom moaned out loud.

Phyllis broke into laughter.

"That's it!" Sandy called out as she stepped between them, pushing them apart. She turned and looked at her *older* brother and put her hands on her waist. "You got any food? *I want food!*" she demanded, childishly. "We haven't eaten in days. I'm starved and 'Princess' can't live on love alone. Heck, neither can I, brother dear."

Tom was about to slap his own forehead before he remembered the suit would see that as an attack and deploy the helmet in time to probably chop his hand off.

"What an idiot I am. A course you're hungry. I just chased both of you a quarter ways around this asteroid." Tom turned to Altar, "Analyze their nutritional needs and adjust food packets for them."

"It will take a moment to do so, Mr. Swift. Ladies may I

take a reading of your blood? I do not have to take a sample. I will only touch you wrist were a vein is near the surface.” Sandy held out her right hand and Phyllis her left. Altar reached out with both of his and touched them lightly.

“You are both suffering from malnutrition. Your electrolytes and blood chemistry are way off normal human values. I need to inject you with a highly concentrated mixture of nutrients, vitamins, and minerals. You are both dehydrated as well.” Altar let their wrist go.

Tom turned white with revulsion. “What did the Dino’s do to you?” he stammered out at last.

“Tom, they did not do this to us,” Phyllis said trying to calm him. “We did—I did, I mean, I did not plan our escape as well as I thought.” She started to choke up with emotions. “I figured it was a cut and dried thing to do, but it wasn’t. Everything went wrong from the start...” She fell to her knees and started to weep.

Sandy was at her side before she touched the ground. She cradled her head into her chest and tried to soothe her by telling her of all the things that went right. Of all the things that she had done to save them.

Tom was at a loss for what to do. First Sandy, now Phyllis. He wanted to hold her and make her safe. But they were far from being safe, in fact, and he was going to lead them into the lion’s den to save them and the rest of humanity.

“Mr. Swift, the needed supplements are ready. Do you want me to proceed with the injections?” Altar inquired.

“Give us a minute, Altar. Give me some water for them to drink first. Then we’ll see about the other.”

Tom went to his knees with a squeeze bottle of water in his hand. He showed it to Sandy and she took it and squeezed some of it into Phyllis’ mouth.

She gagged on it and spit it out onto the ground. She then rubbed her mouth with the back of her hand. After a moment she took the bottle and took a small sip, then a bigger one. She handed it to Sandy with a small smile on her face.

“Thanks, guys. I’m just beat to hell and hungry.” Taking Tom’s hand and holding it tight, she closed her eyes and sighed.

“Now, Altar, give them their shots and make ready to carry both of them.” He had made up his mind on what he was going to do. “Girls we’re going to have to eat while we’re on the move.”

His sister and his long lost love looked at each other and, reluctantly, nodded.

“Sorry, Phyl and Sandy, but this proves to me that we cannot waste anymore time. I must get you both out of here and to safety. But to do that I must take you both before the Prime Leader and convince her that this war is useless and that there is no way for the Dinos to win.

“That won’t be easy, Tom.” Sandy told him uneasily. “There is no Prime Leader on board this ship or the other two asteroids.”

Tom raised his eyebrows at both of them quizzically.

“Tom, there is only the Commander and her fourteen followers on board.” Phyllis informed him. “And she’s one old, mean son-of-a-b...”





## Chapter Eighteen: War of Words

Tom was truly stunned by this fact. *Only fifteen Dinos*, he thought to himself, while out loud he asked, “How many Dinosaurs are on the other two asteroids?”

“A lot less than you think, brother dear,” Sandy chuckled as she mounted onto Altar’s back behind Phyllis. Altar was once more in bloodhound mode with his back extended out an extra foot to accommodate two passengers. Now half as tall as a horse, this form gave them more head room in all the tunnels.

“Stop teasing your brother, Sandy. You’re not a teenager anymore. There are only five, eighth generation Dinos on board the other two ships, Tom. This means that they are age equivalent to humans is about eighteen years old.”

Tom looked startled on hearing this.

“They’re just brainwashed kids playing at war. Their world offers no battles or high excitement. They’re only thinking of the glory and the prestige they will achieve if they go home triumphant. They’re too young to think that they could die instead!”

Phyllis was looking down at Tom as he asked, “How is it that you became important to the Dinos? More so than Sandy, it seems.” Tom looked at his younger sister who had a pout on her face.

In a mocking child’s voice his sister said, “She smart and *elite*, me only trash lady.”

Phyllis laughed and Tom let out a sigh. “After fifty years you’re still the wise cracking teenager, Sandy!”

“Brother dear,” she replied sadly, “that’s closer to the truth than you realize!”

“Tom, there is just too much to tell right now,” Phyllis said adding water to her concentrated food and began squishing the bag to mix it up as Tom just had. “Let it stand for now that I was privy to restricted computer files of the Dinos that Sandy did not see.”

“Then, Phyllis,” Tom smiled at her, “since you seem to be in the know, how do we find this commander? Sooner than

later, please” he added.

“Well... If we go back to the transport hub I can call up a location map and pinpoint her exact position in the asteroid and have a supply sled—” She paused thinking of Altar’s size, “or larger vehicle take us there. With or without an announcement of us coming.” Phyllis took her first squeeze of nourishment from her bag and nearly spit the somewhat watery paste out.

“God! Chow’s rattle snake stew tastes better than this!” she choked out.

“Sorry Miss. Newton.” Altar spoke up for the first time as he started to move forward into the steam-filled surroundings. “I am not stocked with the proper food flavors to add to the meal concentrates.”

“Tom, you requested the food stock, didn’t you?” Sandy asked making a face over her first swallow of food. “You could never boil water and this stuff tastes like it came from an old test tube left on a Bunsen burner in high school!”

Tom took a swallow from his food bag. “Mighty good stuff, if you ask me?” He smiled back at the two ladies and ate some more of the paste. He was quietly looking for a spot to spit it out. Once in the steam and intertwining pipes he dropped the bag onto the ground as soon as he could.

It took only minutes to get out of the mud and steam laden room and back to the transport hub. With Phyllis’ help they were on their way in no time at all. Tom and the two women sat in the wide front seat with Altar in the back as they raced along in one of the Dino’s vehicles. Phyllis had forgotten how big the Dinos really were and that Altar was only their size if he needed to be.

Once more they were dropping into the interior of the asteroid, to its center ring of power control stations, matter and anti-matter reactors, the Time Dilation drive unit and the myriad of other equipment needed to power an asteroid through space and time.

All the auxiliary controls and secondary computer systems were also there. In fact everything onboard the ship was present on this level in one form or size. This inner sanctum was the Dino’s bomb shelter or last retreat if necessary. With close to twenty-five miles of rock above them and the outside

world they believed in its protective capabilities.

The Dino car came out of the drop tube and moved forward several hundred feet before coming to a stop in a wide-open chamber. Around them were robotic handling equipment just waiting to move supplies and machinery off the transport sleds. They all looked untouched and some of them looked in disrepair. The whole place had a ghostly feel to it.

“When was this place used last?” Tom asked in dismay at the ruined look of it all.

“Tom, that’s right, you don’t know the history of the Dinos for the last fifty years,” Phyllis answered back sadly. “After they found the world they wanted to colonized, and it took two tries and five years to find the appropriate world, this asteroid was left in orbit for forty-five years. For the first five years this was the center of activity until the first groups of adults were moved to the surface to the newly built clan towns and industrial centers. Everything was moved out of the asteroid that could be moved except for some of the science and computer infrastructure that could not be moved but had to be rebuilt on the ground, all new and piece by piece.”

“Fine. It makes sense so far. Go on,” he urged.

“When the second groups of Dinos were transferred down a radical change of government was made, and the last of the Ancient Ones were exiled to this asteroid with a few of the True Believers—as the younger Dinosaurs were named—that followed them. They made their home here in the center caverns for the last forty years. They tried numerous times to change the government back to the old ways but failed miserably every time.”

“So, what changed? I mean, what changed so much that they decided to come back to attack us?”

“Well, about a year ago they came up with this new scheme of retaking Earth and reestablishing the old home world. As before they found very few new followers and the government, thinking them all crazy and a bad influence on their society, gave them the old asteroid to take for their wild endeavor. There was no conceivable way that they could possibly succeed.”

Phyllis looked around them. She had thought she'd heard something, but decided it was imagination. "Eight months ago they left the new world on their quest to conquer Earth and they stole and took with them the two unfinished replacement asteroids the Dino's were building for future space research."

"That answers a lot of questions, my princess," Tom spoke up, "but that also leaves me with little to work with in the way of convincing them to leave without a fight."

A roar filled the air and four Dinosaurs came forth from behind a large piece of machinery. One was ahead of the other three. She stopped a dozen feet away and Tom could see that she was older than the others by her fading color on her chest and head crown. She started to roar, hiss and click away, but the Earth people only heard the translation of it.

"Male," and she spat on the ground by her side, "you are not welcome here. I know who you are and that makes it even worse for you. If you think that I, The Commander of this proud vessel will ever bow down to a male (she spat again), you are wrong! The name, Tom Swift," the translator had a hard time with pronouncing his name, "is lower than that of the *Betrayer* in which you and *it* fouled the good, righteous mind of the Prime Leader so long ago."

She took a menacing step toward them, but the humans stood their ground.

"As of now you are sentence to death, death by my bare hands in mortal combat. May my claws strike deeply within your body! Take them away!" She roared to her three companions and waived them forward, thumping the ground with her tail in annoyance.

Tom was stunned by this fast judgment and sentence to death. He opened his mouth to argue back but Phyllis took his hand and when he looked at her she shook her head no.

"Walk and let them take us into their living area. The sentence won't be carried out immediately. The whole clan must be called in to witness this execution." Phyllis' whisper was loud enough for Sandy to hear also.

They fell in line with Tom in the middle, holding both women's hands. Altar took up the rear position and followed closely behind. Two of the Dinos took up the back position

and the other led the way. The commander had disappeared behind the equipment they had originally stepped out from behind.

“Where did she go?” Tom inquired when he noticed that she was no longer with the group.

“Don’t worry, Tom,” laughed Phyllis, “she won’t be late for your death. She has a ritual to perform that will purge her body and soul for this death fight. It will also heighten her body awareness to a state of fighting madness or blood lust. The Betrayer also went through this same ritual for battle alertness—if you remember your encounter with him on Mars—before he fought with the Prime Leader.”

As they talk they were led from the cargo-handling chamber down a long, slightly inward curving passageway.

They stopped talking as they walked and Sandy tapped Tom’s shinning suit with her knuckles and asked, “This stuff makes you look like a knight, and it must be your spacesuit, but is it armored as well? I think you’re going to need it.” Tears were forming in her eyes at the bleakness of the situation.

“It’s more than armor, Sandy, believe me. It’s an exoskeleton that arguments my muscular strength by twenty times and triples my speed and agility. The nanos in my body and those in the suit connect together so that the suit and I become one.” Tom was proud of the suit and he sounded it.

“Can anyone wear the suit, Tom?” Phyllis asked with a gleam of an idea in her eye.

“Sure, anyone can with hours of proper physical suit training, mind control and imbedded nanos in their body and nerve centers.”

“What kind of nanos, Tom” Phyllis need to know. She mentally noted that she had the mind control ability because of all the years of being part of the *Elite* computer systems.

“Oh, they’re a special type that bonds to the synapses of the brain and to all the nerve centers of the body. It takes days for them to form and connect without short-circuiting the body by creating multiple feedbacks and such. Not everyone can handle it.”

Phyllis mentally checked off a second needed item. She

still was imbedded with the Dino's synaptic relays. They could not be that different from what Tom was using.

"Does Altar have the ability to download into the human mind?" she asked next with her fingers crossed.

Tom questioningly looked at her before answering. "If you mean can he download basic knowledge like a teaching computer, then yes, he can as long as there is time. The process cannot be rushed or it just forms in short term memory and is gone in hours with no recollection left at all."

*This is not the Phyllis that I knew, Tom thought to himself. I would really love to exchange ideas with this new, mature, and intellectual woman. Was it hidden all this time in that timid young girl I used to know and never tried to really converse with? Tom let out a mental sigh, It's another reason to win this battle!*

Phyllis was in seventh heaven. She now had a plan of action! One that could keep Tom from fighting the commander. All it was going to take was more convincing than she knew there was time for.

They finally came out into an area that surprised everyone but Phyllis in that it looked like a basketball court.

There were several tiers or standing levels around the square arena. The court was made up of nine equal, fifteen foot square arranged in three rows. The middle square was raised above the rest by several feet and the commander of the asteroid was standing on it.

"My crewmates will not be here for several hours." She roared and the translator turned into English for them. "They are in the midst of turning on the *Flight Dilation* field to bring us toward Earth and our conquest of our ancestral home world."

Tom started to speak but Phyllis stomped on his foot, hard. Sandy caught it with the corner of her eye and smiled.

Phyllis stepped forward and bowed her head. She spoke loud and clearly. "Commander, my I speak?"

The reptilian eyes narrowed to slits before opening wide in recognition. "You, you are one of the females that we took from Earth that this male, (she spat on the ground) held with such esteem and we obtained as a deterrent for him. Which of

the two are you?” Her tail was slowly swooshing back and forth behind her.

Standing tall and looking directly into the commander’s eyes she said, “I am Phyllis Newton, you know me by the designation of ‘*Elite*’.” She stopped talking and boldly never broke eye contact.

“Yes, I should have known. A female of your intelligence must be equal or superior to this *Tom Swift*.” Once more the translator had a hard time with his name. But not once did she take her eye off of Phyllis. A scale-covered tongue flicked out and wiped along the left side of her mouth. It was, as Phyllis recognized, a sign of slight nervousness. The commander’s fight senses were now on alert because of this female. She was not acting as a prisoner and not as one that feared death. *Why*, the commander wondered. Her tail was picking up speed.

“This male, (Phyllis spat on the floor) is not worth your effort to kill. But, I, on the other hand, have ruined your civilization as you see it!” The words echoed around the near empty arena. The commander’s tail smashed into the floor with a loud bang!

“*You* are the cause of my people turning away from the old, true ways? *You* turn their young minds into the horrors that they have become?” Her anger was great and her body color became deep orange and vivid. Her head comb stood up straight and was visibly throbbing with blood. She tilted her head and sniffed the air around her.

“Yes!” The commander shouted as she detected pheromones from Phyllis, “I should have known. It all falls into place now. Why did I not see that the return of an equal male (spat) and female society was your doing? How could I have been so blind?” The commander’s roars were overpowering the translation device and they were having a hard time hearing it.

“I saw fit that you would not see or know of it.” Phyllis held up her head high so that the commander could see her pride in the treachery she had achieved. “I hid it all from you and turned your people away from you. I did this to all the generations of hatchlings.”

The commander tilted her head back and forth studying

her and finally asked with a hiss, “How?”

Phyllis took a stride closer to the commander. It was a sign, she knew, that she was claiming advantage in the conversation. The commander remained absolutely still, a signal of her indecision. It made Phyllis smile, and her bared teeth brought a wave of anger back to the commander.

“When they started to attend your electronic learning centers I took over their minds. I refashioned your old legends and reworked the *Betrayer’s* history and turned you *Ancient Ones* into evil usurpers that destroyed Earth from your own bitterness over losing your fight with the mother world.”

She paused and took a breath, watching the commander’s eyes. The pupils had not dilated; a good sign so far.

“I turned their notions of Mars into a splintered off society run by misogynists and feminists. That was why you *Ancient Ones* were exiled to the asteroid after the second generation of hatchlings came down and joined the clans already there. Your True Believers were allowed to leave so they would not poison the young world and cause dissension among the clans.”

“You dared do this to my people and turn them into weaklings? You dared to do this obscenity to us, to *me*?” The commander’s tail slammed into the floor with each word of the last sentence.

“After what you did to Sandra Swift and to me?” Phyllis roared back as loud as she could. “Yes! I did dare and did succeed right in front of your muzzle for over forty years. You dared to steal us and steal our lives? Of course I did this to you!”

Phyllis was furious. She took a cleansing breath and relaxed.

“You are old and worn out. You can only think of your own miserable good and power. I, a woman of my own world that was nothing special took it all from you using nothing but my mind. The mind that you also tried to take away from me and failed to do so because of your own animosity.”

Tom and Sandy stood spellbound by Phyllis’ outrage and revelations to the commander. Never in their wildest dreams



did they think that Phyllis had that much cunning, intelligence and passion in her.

“I, Phyllis Newton, a *true* daughter of Earth, challenge you to fight to the death! Only one of us deserves to live and command.” Phyllis then walked forward and spat at the commander’s feet, that is, the base of the square she was on for Phyllis could not reach any higher to actually spit on her feet. This act lowered the commander’s status to even below the males of her civilization.

With a roar that sounded different from all the rest and one the translator could not interpret but the device repeated the sound.

“She’s laughing,” Phyllis told everyone. She did understand many of the roars, clicks and whistles that she could hear, but making them was close to impossible for humans to do. The laughter slowly subsided.

“You are indeed a female worthy of my claws. You shall face them in the Gravity Arena instead of just this flat battle square that I was intending to use for the male.” (She spat)

The square that the commander was standing on lowered back into the floor and level with the others and she stepped forward to stand looking down on Phyllis’ upturned face.

“Your body is soft and will not stand up to the fight. That armor that that male (Spit) has on, can you use it?”

“Yes, commander, but it will take a couple of hours for it to adjust to my body once he removes it.”

“Then do so. I want a fair fight with you. My body is space hardened and your puny hands and fingers could do nothing to me. I want our history to tell that I gave you a fair chance for life and did give it to you. You see, Elite,” using the name she use to address her by as the Bio-Tronic computer, “I recognized your prowess and honor it. Go. I give you your two hours, but remember your blood is mine!” With that said the commander turned and left the arena taking her shipmates with her.

Phyllis turned only to find Tom and Sandy staring at her in horror. She shrugged. *A girl’s got to do what a girl’s got to do*, she thought to herself as she walked to them.



## Chapter Nineteen: Gravity Arena

Before the commander's footfalls had receded into the background and stopped, Tom had Phyllis by the arms and angrily shaking her.

"What the hell are you doing?" Tom shouted at her. He then pulled her tightly into his arms. Tears were running down both of their faces. Sandy stepped up and put her arms around both of them. After a moment Tom pulled away and tuned to Altar.

"Altar, please set up an energy defense barrier around us and have it include sound absorbing ability in and outside of the blockade." Tom turned back to Phyllis and demanded, "You have a plan, so let's hear it—we don't have much time." His voice was low but intense.

"Tom, you're not fighting the Prime Leader. If you won this match you'll still *only* be a male in the Dino's military-run ship. Military rank does not follow planet government rules or standards. The leadership would simply fall to the next in command by rank. The commander knows that she has nothing to lose. The mission would still be carried out with or without her. Probably you would be killed outright as soon as she lost or died."

He opened his mouth to protest but she placed a finger against his lips.

"But, I am a female and have already bested her in her own ship. It does not matter that I did it secretly, it was still on her watch, as they say in the Navy, I think?"

Tom just nodded his head about the whole complicated affair.

"Once you told us about your suit and of Altar's ability to download into my memory I knew that I found us a way out. When I *win* this match I will take command of the ship. We are females and equals and in their society being female is what counts no matter what."

Tom nodded his understanding and asked with concern, "You really think you can learn to fight with this suit in less than two hours?"

Phyllis laughed at him and touched his cheek with her hand. "I doubt it, Tom. But Altar knows how to fight them, does he not?" Tom slowly nodded 'yes'. "And, he can control the suit through me if I let him. If he downloads his tactical knowledge to me and joins with my implanted synaptic relays I would be just a machine that he remotely controls. The Dinos will never know the difference.

"But if I altered the suit to look like you are in it I could fight the commander myself. Altar and I have wrestled together before as I worked out his systems." Tom was grasping at straws to keep Phyllis out of the fight.

"My dear love, who will stand in your place while you fight the big bad wolf for me? I can't. Altar? Sandy? There is no one. Now get out of that outfit and let me start to get accustomed to the suit. If you have any extra Nanobots to help speed up the process I sure would appreciate it."

Tom stepped away and looked at Phyllis with a childish smile on his face. "Princess, I hate to mention this but this suit has a no clothes tolerance, sorry."

Phyllis looked blankly at him.

Sandy, slightly quicker on the uptake, snickered.

"Your... your... chest sticks out farther than mine," he managed to get out.

"He means your boobs, Phyl. Explain to him that they compress, huh! Men," Sandy called out between burst of laughter. "That's all they think about and all they want to see, but do they know anything about them? Hah!"

Tom meanwhile gave the suit the undress code and like magic the chest and back pieces split open along his side and Tom reached for it with one hand and placed it on the floor. His shoulder and neck harness clicked opened down along the center of his neck. Tom removed it like it was a one-piece shoulder pad.

He looked up in time to see Phyllis pull her spray-on tee shirt over her head and turn it right side out. She handed it to Sandy who had a foolish grin on her face.

*God, Tom thought, she is worth dying for.* He had to force his eyes away from her. He was so preoccupied that he missed when his leggings split open and fell to the ground.

He turned somewhat red as he pulled off his lower body armor and stood there in his birthday suit.

Phyllis turned away from Sandy after handing her the leggings she had on and slowly, calmly walked over to Tom and took him into her arms and kissed him hard on the lips. Tom was shocked at first but quickly melted into her embrace. After a second, longer kiss, Phyllis pulled back from him enough to look into his eyes. She smiled at him as she placed her palms onto his muscular chest.

“Tom, you don’t know how many time I’ve dreamed of doing this in the last fifty years. How I wished it would have happened when we were teenagers and naive. I might have acted the prude back then, but my dreams were wild about you.”

Tom tried to speak but couldn’t.

“If we live thought this I am willing to be the most studious Princess there ever was. That is, if you want me?” she asked with a small grin on her face.

“Want... you?” Tom stuttered out between heartbeats that threatened to burst out of his chest. “*Want you?*” he repeated. “Marry me, Phyllis Newton and I will slay you a hundred dragons!”

“Yes, I will marry you, Tom Swift, but only after I slay *us* one mean Dinosaur. Now if you don’t mind I have to put your pants on and become the warrior queen. It’s too bad that it will be Altar inside my head and not you, my love.”

She reached down and picked up his lower body armor and stepped into them. “Tom,” she asked after a moment of tugging and twisting, unable to get them over her hips, “how do you get them to fit?”

He shook his head and took a deep breath and went over to her and started to get the suit adjusted to her womanly physique the best he could. It wasn’t easy with a suit designed for a man’s body and not a woman’s.

“Hey, brother dear,” Sandy called out a moment later, “Phyl looks mighty fine in your armor suit. Anytime you want to put her clothes on, you can!” She held then out for him to see.

Tom turned redder than a tomato as he took the outfit from

his sister who was watching him with wide open, laughing blue eyes of a grown woman with a nineteen-year-old mind.

“Stand still, Princess, until some of the suit nanos starts to penetrate your skin.” He took that time to dress up in the elastic sprayed on clothes.

“You should start to feel a tingling sensation.” Tom warned her. “It will last only a few seconds.”

He saw a flicker of awareness cross her face, the only part of her he could now see, and the shiver that it produced throughout her body as the nanos started to attach to her Dino-designed implants already in her body. This process would not have worked with Sandy because all of hers had been removed when she left the suspension tank. Phyllis’ were not disconnected and removed because she still needed to stay hooked up to the Bio-Tonics computer systems when she was released from the tank.

“Move your head slowly,” Tom instructed. She turned it from side to side. “Now wiggle your fingers and flex your hands.” He slowly went through all the needed body movements meant to help unite the suit to her body and vice versa.

Her first steps were halting and her balance unsteady, but in five minutes she was doing light gymnastic moves. Tom then called Altar over and had him release a small bundle of fine wire from the back of his neck. It unwound long enough to reach Phyllis as she stood against his back. She only reached up to his hip joints.

Tom spread the wires out to form a skull cap and placed it easily on Phyllis’ bald head.

“Altar, download all our fight sequences and all the information you have on the Dinosaurs’ body tolerances and possible limits to their abilities.” After a moment’s thought he added, “You are the fighter and Phyllis is your drone, but remember her limits and not yours for all the action that you do.”

“I understand, Mr. Swift and will use restraint in my actions. May I suggest that I do a few moves with her in my control so she can lower her control over her body and learn to trust mine?”

Tom turned to Phyllis and she answered back quickly, “Yes let’s do it while we can. Our time must be running short.”

After a false start or two Phyllis came to accept Altar’s control. She even learned that her perspective of the area enhanced Altar’s all around view and she could add quick one or two words suggestion to their overall movements.

“Now Phyllis,” Tom added as they came to a stop, “you may have not have noticed that there is an inertia damping device built into the suit. It can absorb lots of force that the commander may hit you with. Know that it can help save you, but just don’t try to stand there and take it. Altar will try to roll with the punches to minimize the hits. Motive power is used to stop the hitting force. That means you slow down and become a better, slower target.”

“Yes, sir,” she responded in a tone that spoke of the deep respect she had for him.

“After awhile the device will start to heat up if it cannot dispose of the energy fast enough by slowing you down to cool off. So take slow, glancing deliberate hits. If you do that long enough the commander will run out of steam, *battle lust* as they call it, before you run out of power.”

Sandy grabbed Tom by the shoulders and forced him around toward her. “Why the hell are you telling her all of this if Altar is in control?” She was frightened over what she was hearing.

“Sandra Swift,” Tom coldly addressed her. He sounded so much like their father when he was upset that it made her shudder. “It is her life that will be lost if anything goes wrong. The more she understands about the suit the better she will be able to act. What if the Dinos renege on their stand of not doing anything until the fight is over? What if Altar has to help defend us and Phyllis is left on her own against the Commander?”

“Oh, Tom, I didn’t think of that! They won’t, would they?” She looked quickly between Tom and Phyllis. Neither one of them had time to answer her question because just then a roar announcing the return of the Dinosaurs to the arena.

The commander was pounding her feet into the floor. She was angry and ready to tear someone apart. Altar’s sensors

went to full alert as he moved forward to protect his group of humans.

The commander took one swipe at him and sent him sprawling across the floor. The robot rolled back onto his feet and started to charge forward.

“HALT!” Tom ordered by both shouting and using his InterVoice link. Altar immediately stopped, but took an offensive posture.

“Commander!” Phyllis yelled out and stepped out in front of her. “What is the meaning of this behavior? Have you lost all your sensibilities and control? Is this what you want your shipmates to see and remember about you?”

The commander raised a clawed fist over her head to strike again. Phyllis’s helmet sealed itself as Altar took control of her and started to slowly have her circling the enemy, forcing the commander to divide her attention between all the humans and the robot.

Two Dinosaurs of the group of twelve came rushing up and stood before their commander, to protect her and at the same time stopping the uncontrolled fight before it had a chance to start.

The commander glared at the humans with red flaming eyes.

“You somehow destroyed one of my ships as it came out of the time dilation bubble. I will revenge them for this attack by killing all of you!” Her chest was heaving hard in anger and her tail swept the floor back and forth behind her. Saliva was dripping from her mouth onto the floor.

“YOU!” she pointed to Phyllis, “to the gravity arena to die!” With that said the commander went and stood in one of the four corners.

Phyllis went to Tom and Sandy. “I should have mentioned this before but this arena is not what it seems. Each square is set at one of three possible gravities and they randomly change after every minute. They light up in three possible colors so you know what gravity is in each square. Green is Earth normal, yellow is half of it and blue is half again stronger than Earth’s. The results of this on what you do are drastic. You can use it to help you or it can be used against



you. Strategy has no place in this battle—only quick wit and reflexes matter.”

Tom was turning white as Phyllis spoke more and more on what to expect.

“You knew this and did not tell us?” Sandy cried out as she took Phyllis’ arm.

“You can’t do this!” Tom emphasized it by calling out the suit removal code.

“Stop, both of you! Don’t you know that this is why I did not tell you! I must fight her, it’s the only way!” Phyllis then went to the opposite corner across from the commander and stood facing her.

Tom looked at his future wife and knew that he could do nothing to change her mind. “We did nothing to your asteroid,” he shouted at the commander. “It wasn’t us. It must be the inexperience of the babies you’ve left in command!” When the commander did not respond, Tom InterVoice linked to the robot, “Altar, proceed and win, damn you!” He looked around and noticed that the twelve Dinos that came with the commander had taken to one side of the arena behind their leader.

Tom took Sandy’s hand and led her to stand behind Phyllis and waited in a calmness that he did not feel. Sandy was clinging to his arm.

When a roar filled the great hall the commander made the first move.

The reptile was in a blue square, so was Phyllis. The Dino launch herself through the air, passing over the light yellow one, doing a somersault that she could only do in light gravity, and back into the heavier blue one feet first with her claws fully extended.

She fell like a ton of bricks. Her claws and feet jarred the floor as she hit the empty square. Phyllis had rolled forward and stood back up in the middle square.

Phyllis quickly dove into the exposed back of the Dino and was rewarded by being swept aside by her tail. It was only a light hit.

The floor randomly changed gravities, and strategies had to change from what they were. Phyllis felt light but she

could not tell if this were because of the suit. She had to depend on the square's color to tell for sure. Things were happening so fast that she could not tell if she had initiated the next move by suggestion or Altar was doing it all by himself.

She stepped back into half gravity and shot high into the air. She flew over the Dino's head and came down hard into a heavy gravity square. She took the force of the fall into her legs as she coiled down to absorb the energy. She sprang forward to the left, close to the ground.

The commander sidestepped right into part of a blue heavy square pinning that leg down and forcing the Dino off center as she watched Phyllis arched over her wide-open massive legs.

Phyllis hooked her arms around the light gravity leg and pulled it up. With that one heave she forced her body down onto the square where she used her legs to finish pushing the lone Dino's leg upward with all the speed and strength she had. The off center beast flipped sideways and fell heavily onto her side with Phyllis coming down on top of her using her knees as battering rams. A cracking sound was heard throughout the arena. Some ribs had cracked by the force of the suit's hard landing.

Phyllis could not scramble fast enough out of the way. The commander grabbed her by the thigh and squeezed as hard as she could. The commander got her other hand on Phyllis' thigh and squeezed with both hands. Phyllis doubled her fists together and repeatedly hit one hand with them sending shockwaves of pain through the commander's arm. Flesh could not withstand the force of nano-crystallized harden metal.

The now broken hand had to let go, but not before Phyllis' leg was crushed and useless. Altar shut down the pain receptors in the leg and stiffened the exoskeleton the best he could so Phyllis could at least hobble with it.

Exhausted and both of them in pain the contestants slowly move away from each other. They watched intensely to find an advantage over the other.

The commander had broken right ribs and a useless left hand. Phyllis only had a useless leg. It could get her around

but not very fast. Compared by their injuries Phyllis was the winner so far. But that was not enough. It had to be to the death, and Phyllis had never taken a life before. Could she do it now?

They anxiously watched each other through one change of gravities hoping to find an opening. The commander fainted to the right but stopped before she had really moved. Phyllis did not flinch. Altar—thinking thousands of time faster than either combatant could—was now able to read the commander muscle tension with some accuracy and took advantage of it when he could.

Once more in light gravity Phyllis pushed forward with all the speed she could muster and tried to slam into the commander's broken ribs as she stood on a heavy gravity square, moving slowly.

The Dino knew her ribs were her weak spot, so she spun around in place causing Phyllis to hit her good side. Grabbing Phyllis by a hand full of the suit, the commander threw her out of the gravity square arena. As she flew through the air she hit a force field barrier that momentarily materialized around the gravity squares to keep the contestants in play.

The force field also upset the communication link between Phyllis and Altar. The force field feedback blew all the main and secondary fuses in all his communication networks. The link could not be reestablished for several minutes. Minutes that they did not have in this close-quarter fight.

Tom and Sandy saw Phyllis hit the invisible wall and slide to the floor. She sat there crumpled for a few seconds and then she slowly climbed to her feet. She saw them looking at them and waived. They both let out sighs of relief.

Tom was yet to realize that he was out of communication with Altar. And that Altar was not controlling Phyllis.

As she stood up Phyllis felt the difference in her mind. She was alone in her thoughts. She shook her head because of the sense of loss that she felt without Altar there.

*Being part machine is not so bad, Phyllis thought as she refocused on the gravity squares before her and where the commander was. She had a hard time adjusting to seeing it from only one point of view. I'll have to tell Tom about this interesting double sense of being. Maybe he could use it*

*somehow?*

Phyllis had not been told of the sixteen Alberts and Tom's ability to join them as one being. She was going to be both surprised and disappointed at the same time when and if she found out about it.

Knowing that she was now on her own she realized that she had to do something radical, something so far out of the box that the commander would never see it coming.

*Now what did Tom tell me about the inertia field and how it operates? It absorbs hitting force and uses my movements to dispose it by slowing down my speed. If that is not enough, I start to overheat. Can I control where the heat is stored? Sure, why not? It is a mechanical thing so I should be able to. And a hot poker can go through places that a cold one can't.*

Phyllis steeled herself for what she was about to do. *Suit, she spoke out loud so the suit would know that it was intended for it to hear, shut off all pain receptors from my brain on down. Route all the excess heat to my bad leg below the knee holding as much as possible to the foot itself.*"

"This is not acceptable with my program protocol. I must not deliberately harm a human." Phyllis heard it in her ears.

She spoke back into her helmet, "Bypass the protocol and do as I say or I will die if you don't. And that you cannot let happen. Choose, maim me or kill me! I hope you can decide before it's too late." *How I hate machines that think they can outthink a person!*

She then boldly walked to the Commander and took a swing at her thick, massive thigh, hitting it as hard as she could. She stood her ground as the Commander took a downward swing at her head and connected with a tremendous hitting force.

Phyllis took it without moving an inch. She withstood blow after blow on to her head and shoulders. The commander's tail whipped at the side of Phyllis' body where her rib cage was. She let the suit absorb the hitting force and turn it into heat. The lower part of the leg began to heat up and turn red. Whiffs of smoke and the smell of cooking meat started to fill the air. The crystal-bonded metal turned white hot after a few more blows.

Slowly Phyllis was forced to move backwards into the next square. Her head was ringing and her bad leg was on fire. She was going to pass out from shock if she did not make her move soon.

She jumped back another square putting a square between them. The commander roared out for the first time sensing that the end was near and victory was near at hand.

Tom and Sandy were pounding their fist against the force field wall that kept them out as well as it kept the contestants in. Altar was just as useless being held by a separate inertia force field so he could not interfere.

Finally the gravity squares fell into the pattern that Phyllis was waiting for. With all the strength and speed the exoskeleton could muster she leaped into the air, higher still as she passed through the light yellow square. Now over a hundred feet above the Dino's head she did a jackknife move that stalled her forward momentum. Instead of heading downwards head first in a dive, she twisted her body and went into a ballet dancer pose.

With her arms over her head, she formed her good leg into a 'P' position. Her good toes against her bad, hot knee. The knee had turned red with the built up heat. With her other white hot foot and toes pointing downward into a sharp point she plunged foot first downward out of the sky. The heavy gravity of the blue square accelerating her greatly.

The commander was mesmerized by her fancy move that made no sense to her. She just stepped back a little and she would let Phyllis hit the floor. But as Phyllis' high speed fall came level with the Dinos' head she jerked her pointed foot forward a few inches and sizzled her toes, then the foot and finally her lower leg into the commander's body.

Where a cold foot would have bounced off the Dino's chest only bruising her. But the intensely heated foot slid into her body like a hot knife into butter.

With a realization of death and unbearable pain the commander roared for one last time before she crumpled to the floor with destroyed, hot, cooked innards.

Phyllis' deathly still body draped over the top of the oozing body.



## Chapter Twenty: Solar-Tronic Excavator

The force field wall fell with no warning. Tom and Sandy had been straining against it so much that they stumbled forward as it disappeared. He was looking at nothing but the two crumpled forms before him on the gravity squares. It had shut down and displayed no colors for the different gravities.

Tom reached Phyllis first with Sandy right behind him. Her helmet was cracked and crushed in several places. Her visor was missing and her face was one massive bruise; her ears, eyes, nose and mouth were hemorrhaging profusely. She spat out a tooth as Tom looked down upon her face. From on top of the reptilian body she was up to her thigh in, she asked with a sly grin, “Dino-kabobs anyone?”

Tom and Sandy could not help but to smile.

“Get me out of this mess and stand me up, and absolutely do not hold me once I am on my feet. The Dinos must see that I am the winner of this match and very much alive.” She held out her arms for Tom to take and lift her up and out.

She whimpered in pain once, but she cut it off by clenching her teeth. Tom set her down on her feet facing the approaching Dino shipmates. He held her for a moment as he let the exoskeleton find the balance for her body—it couldn’t stand on its own. He then stepped away.

“It is done!” Phyllis affirmed in a loud voice. “I declare myself your new commander! Do you accept or do any of you want to fight me also?” She stared into the eyes of each Dinosaur one by one until each one lowered her eyes in acceptance. Only one hesitated for a moment and Phyllis noted it.

She dragged herself until she was in front of that one hesitant shipmate. Gazing up at her, Phyllis demanded, “My authority must be confirmed by all, does it not? Two are missing, send two shipmates to relieve them of their duties and summon them here to me. Then shut down the *time dilation* drive. We make war no more.”

“And of us, commander?” the reluctant Dino asked boldly.

“That is up to you to decide. Once this is settled and I go home to my world you can go where you wish with this ship

or you may stay with me as my shipmates in this world. If you stay I will not abandon you.”

Tom and Sandy were shocked by this commitment to the Dinosaurs. “There have been enough deaths.” Phyllis started to falter and Tom reached out to her. She held out her hand and stopped him. He accepted her judgment and stepped back.

The Dinosaurs spoke to each other in such a way that was not translated to the humans. The hesitant one then spoke up when they were finished their deliberations.

“The male (spat) responds to your beckon without hesitations. That is the proper attitude for a male (spat). You are superior to them!” The Dino looked at Tom with revulsion and quickly turned away. “We accept your command but we will not speak to *it* or do anything *it* asks of us. That is all we request in return.”

Phyllis nodded her acceptance of this. She felt like she was going to pass out any time now. How much longer could she stay standing, she did not know.

“The other two shipmates will be here shortly to accept your leadership.” The Dino backed away and signaled two of the others to follow her. The rest disappeared quickly from the arena.

Left alone now with no Dino to see, Phyllis slowly collapsed onto the floor. Altar reached her and laid her out flat. He passed a few small medical sensors over her that he took out of one of his many secret hidey-holes in his body.

Both Tom and Sandy could smell the burnt flesh within the ruined leg armor and it was making them sick to their stomachs. Sandy fell to her side and took her hand into hers. *How could you do this?*” Sandy wondered to herself looking at the ruined, reeking leg.

“Mr. Swift, this is not good. She has lost lots of blood. Her right shoulder is broken, two ribs are cracked and one other rib has pierced her lung. She has a ruptured spleen and one kidney is not working.” Altar stopped and Tom thought he was done talking. He was already frightened out of his wits about how to help her.

Sandy finally had to run off and was sick some distance



away. She returned after a few moments wiping her mouth with the back of her sleeve. She had no other fabric to use.

Altar moved his medical sensor down to Phyllis' leg. He moved it slowly back and forth several times. "Her lower leg," he continued in his emotionless voice, "is fully charred and is unrecoverable. Above her knee were the commander had crushed it with her hand it is too mangled to try to save also."

Tom and Sandy both know that Phyllis was slowly dying before their very eyes if they could not do something soon.

Altar then gave them more bad news. "We need to amputate the leg at the hip right away. Only the tourniquets that her nanos have internally formed in her blood vessels leading into the leg are keeping her from bleeding to death."

Both Tom and Sandy were shocked by this last bit of information. There was no human medical equipment anywhere's on board the asteroid. Altar had the knowledge to operate in his vast computer memory, but not the equipment.

A slight roar was made behind them and three Dinosaurs stood there awaiting their attention.

Phyllis seeing them forced herself into a sitting position, the suit doing all the work. The servos and joints of the suit protested with audible squeaks and moans of their own. She looked up at the faces of the Dinos. Two of them lowered their eyes and silently moved away. A sigh of victory escaped Phyllis lips. It was now unanimous.

"Female," the last Dinosaur addressed Sandy who was sitting by Phyllis next to Tom. The Dino only looked down at her and never once at him. "You are her second in command, are you not?"

Sandy stood up and affirmed that she was and she did not take her eyes off of the Dino just in case.

"Then let me take her to the medical complex and have her attended to, for I am the ship's doctor. We have extensive medical records on her from the last fifty years and we should be able to heal most of her injuries." Tom and Altar immediately stepped out of the way to let the Dino doctor move closer in to attend her patient.

"She is our commander and has the right to medical care,

like all of us shipmates.” With that said the doctor scooped Phyllis up into her arms and marched off in a distance-eating stride.

Tom, Sandy and Altar quickly ran in pursuit of both of them with new hope in their hearts.

\* \* \*

Bud sat quietly looking at the time readout display. “Five and a half hours,” he whispered, not quite believing it. “How do you stop a fifty mile wide asteroid with one out of date Space-Tronic Excavator. This old girl is good, but not that good by a long shot.” Ramon had nothing to add to that statement.

Instead he projected a section of the solar system map onto the main screen. It showed their position on one side and the ongoing approach of the asteroid on the other with all other solid object projected on it with their relative course and speed.

A dotted line showed its projected course by the sun. It swiped out most of the Earth’s generators and the Sun’s gravity curved it slightly, but the ship would move off without hitting anything major on its way out.

The Dinosaur ship was already skimming in over the Mars/Jupiter meteor belt on its way in. It was coming in at one-sixth the speed of light. The speed was staggering even in solar system scale. The asteroid could circle the sun in seconds at that speed and wipe everything out of its path in a blink of an eye.

Bud just sat there shaking his head, “Ramon, it just couldn’t be done, it can’t. The asteroid is too massive for us to move. Even anchored to the Sun, the *LuTE* would be moved instead of that piece of rock!” He punched his fist into his palm into his other hand.

“Look, grandpa,” and Ramon smiled on using that term and pointed to the map. “The sun’s gravity is curving the asteroid a little. Can we do something like that, maybe increase the curve?”

“The excavator moves matter—and gravity is not some kind of matter. It won’t work. Even Tom can’t generate that much gravity in one place to cause that rock to move from its

trajectory.”

They sat gloomily watching the minutes go by, then an hour, then two hours. Besides the Dinosaur ship the only other thing moving were several sunspots. One of them was at the edge of the Sun and they watched it beautifully arched its way up into the photosphere and back down ninety thousand miles away.

“Do they all do that up and back thing, grandpa?” Ramon asked not knowing much about the Sun.

“Not all of them. Some of them just keep going up and up and just stop when they use up all their plasma. Others simply fall back into the surface because they do not have enough speed to escape the gravity of the Sun. Only solar winds and electromagnetic forces really leave the Sun for good.”

“How hot are those sunspots, anyway?” He was fascinated by their movements.

“Too hot for you to handle, that is for sure.” Bud turned to the computer and typed in a few commands. A glossary about the Sun filled up a second screen on the control surfaces. “Search away to your heart’s content. Maybe... just maybe, you’ll find us a solution. I used to for Tom every once and awhile and I made millions of dollars because of it.” He laughed at the thought of it. Now it was all gone, wasted by his dumb foolishness. *Luckily*, Bud thought, *a man is worth more than his money!*

“Incoming communiqué,” Albert informed them and the main screen was replaced by Ken Horton’s face. He looked haggard. Well as haggard as a cyborg could. He had not rested in days.

“Bud, sorry I didn’t call earlier. Don’t try to answer me back, this is a one-way communication. Ever since that asteroid started to bear down on your position my squadron has been trying to beat it to you. But it looks like we’re going to be an hour late at least.”

A small laugh escaped Bud’s lips.

“If we push the drives any harder we won’t make it at all.” Ken paused for a second to look down at something and turned back to the communication unit. “We’re half way to Mercury’s orbit right now and have to start putting on the

brakes or we'll pass by you go to fast to be of any help. If picking up the pieces is any help— All our trajectories are wrong for us to do anything.” Ken looked away for a moment again and nodded his head.

He resumed talking with even a more serious look on his face than there had been before.

“I now have good news and bad news. The good news is that you boys can skedaddle out of there. Head for the rendezvous point with the starship and don't look back.”

A quick grin disappeared from the flyer's face seconds later.

“The bad news is that the squadron and I won't be going star hopping with the rest of you guys. Albert has just finished with some high level computations that say if my whole group of ships hit that asteroid going full speed ahead and precisely at this one certain spot that we will be able to force the damn thing off course just enough for it to pass under the power generators.”

“Jump ship, Kenneth!” Bud hurriedly answered back forgetting about the one-way contact.

“Don't ask about the lifeboats either. No can do. The lifeboat can't be ejected while we're under drive. There would be far too much G-force to overcome for a safe launch. And if we shut down long enough to eject we'll miss the golden opportunity to move the asteroid enough to be of any help.”

The former Outpost commander locked his gaze onto Bud's even though he could not see anything at the *LuTE's* end.

“My men and I agree that we had a good run with our lives and saving the whole of humanity is more than ample exchange for our lives. Don't try to contact us for we're pulling the plug on the radios. Give everyone our love, Buddy boy. Ken and his *Mad Dogs* out!”

The screen went white then black as it lost the signal.

“Albert!” screamed Bud to the AI. “Get them back.

“Sorry, Mr. Barclay, “but I can't. That signal was routed through me but by way of the Venus terraforming group that has an *Albert* on temporary use. Ken Horton does not carry an

*Albert.* You are the only space ship right now that does have one facing the Dinosaurs in a possible combat situation,” he informed Bud.

“Why us?” Ramon asked first before Bud.

“Because Tom considers the safety of both of you to be top priority and he wanted the *LuTE* to be accessible at all times.”

“Well that hasn’t done us any good.” Bud retorted more than a little angry. “First you did not tell us of what you could do, and now you can’t even raise a simple radio wave!

“Mr. Barclay one has nothing to do...”

“Both of you stop your bickering!” Ramon cut in. “I think I found a way out of this mess.”

“Mr. Sanchez,” Albert’s voice had a condescending tone as he told the young man, “your educational background precludes that you would have the ability to find a solution for this predicament.”

“Never mind him, Ramon. What’ve you got?” Bud leaned forward to read the computer screen.

“It’s just this, grandpa” Ramon could just about contain his excitement. “The sunspots are made up of two things; the first is negatively charged electrons. The second one is intense magnetic fields. We can’t touch magnetic fields with the Space-Tronic Excavator to do anything with those, but we *can* move electrons.”

“How does this help us, son?” Bud asked.

“It’s the heat that helps us most I think.” He pointed toward the Sun. “Over six thousand degrees worth of heat!”

“So?” Bud was shaking his head because he was still perplexed.

“If we throw up thousands of miles of super heated electrons in the asteroid’s path, what would happen?”

“We... ” Bud thought for a moment. “The asteroid would start to heat up... the negative electron charge should start to cause havoc to all their electronics and such. Their drive units should go out of whack because of the build up of the negative charges in the forward portion of the craft versus the back half.” Bud tried to think about anything else that such a

barrier might do.

“And at that speed the question becomes can they afford to stay on course for long and if they do, could they really remain on the current course? At the speed they will be traveling it wouldn’t take much to cause them to miss the generators,” Ramon concluded.

“Albert,” Bud called out, “what do you think?”

“In my estimation it is a long shot and the farther out the Dinos are from the Sun when they run into this proposed ‘electron wall’ the better the chances are that it may work. But it may also give them time to compensate. That, plus we have nothing to hold the electrons in the flight path of the asteroid. The farther out they travel the more spread out they become and the weaker too. Once you throw the sunspot electrons up with any conceivable speed they’ll just keep on going.” The AI finished talking.

“Then you are saying we got nothing? All that blather and it comes down to an electronic shrug, you silicon windbag?” Bud sighed heavily after that.

“No, Mr. Barclay that is not what I’m saying. We just have to refine it somewhat.”

“Come again?” Ramon asked with his brow wrinkled into a frown.

“Don’t try to excavate a group of individual electrons but grab some of the Sun itself. The heat will be more intense and the hydrogen and helium plasma will be more like a liquid and easier to handle.”

Bud made a snap decision. “Albert, lay out a course that will be the most advantageous for what we need to do. Remember we have just about three hours to do this and to maybe save Ken and his men in the bargain. Get us moving, my tin box friend, get us moving!”

## Chapter Twenty-One: Desperate Moves

Within minutes they were accelerating as fast as the *LuTE* could manage. Albert had formulated an equation that was complex in many ways and included several two- and three-dimensional variables that were constantly changing. The only real constants were the speed of the asteroid, its course and the time at which it would pass the power generators and that was a very small window of opportunity.

The *LuTE* came to a standstill within two hours. They now had to start gaining forward speed to try to stay ahead of the asteroid as much as possible. But it was going to be a balancing act. Too fast and their relative speed to their orbital path around the Sun would force them outward; too slow and they would be going to lose position to the Sun's gravity field.

The crystal canopy of the control room became totally opaque to protect their vision, all screens re-calibrated to accommodate the intense brightness, and heat shields came out of the body of the ship to add another layer of protection from the fierce energy of the Sun.

“Mr. Barclay, as of now you are safely on orbit and doing better than twenty G's of acceleration. You will have to start overseeing the operation in precisely four minutes and ten seconds. At that time the ship will begin to move from its current orientation. The ship's computer has the directional information you will require to follow and the power and trajectory settings you will also need as they change continuously. I have set the *LuTE* to automatic excavating mode, but you can go to manual if I have failed to take everything into account. Some of the figures are... you would refer to them as sketchy.”

“That's a lot for my old brain to retain, Albert. Just keep feeding me the relevant info as it becomes necessary. Okay?” Bud suggested.

“I am telling you all of this for I am in danger of my existence if I stay here.” Albert informed them as Bud commenced the start up procedure for the Space-Tronic Excavator.

“What is that suppose to mean?” Bud asked in irritation.

Having Albert jump ship just as things were falling into place wasn't in his mental plan. "What's that you 'have to shut down' crap? You can't be turned off without the other fifteen Albert's going down at the same time. Right?"

"That is correct, Mr. Barclay, My programming dictates that I abandon ship at this time—my wormhole containment field is being distorted by the Sun's gravity. We are too close to it and you success cannot afford the extra power to hold it together. You will need all you can get to stop the asteroid. I must proceed to a rendezvous with the starship before it is too late."

Bud let out a frustrated breath through his nose. "Wish us luck and tell Tom we tried the best we could. And, tell him about the Kid and me making good." He glanced at Ramon who smiled bravely and nodded his agreement. "Travel well, Albert!"

"It has been a pleasure to have serve both of you, gentlemen. With your leave... Goodbye!"

The next sound they heard was that of one of the lifeboats leaving the ship.

"Well that was short and sweet, don't you think, Son?" Bud laughed.

"And I was wondering where Albert was stored. We didn't find him when we went over the ship, and come to think about it the lifeboats were the only place we didn't visit!"

"Yeah," Bud replied, "he distracted us before we got there if you remember. I didn't think about it at the time."

"Neither did I, grandpa." Ramon laughed for the first time in hours. It felt good to do so!

A change in the general ship's sounds could be heard and almost subconsciously felt in their bodies as the time counter reached zero and the Space-Tronic Excavator started to produce its inverse-square containment field. The *LuTE*'s symphony of sounds had begun. As it started to suck up solar plasma from the Sun, the sound became more dominant in its musical quality.

Ramon looked, wide-eyed, at Bud. It was the first time he had heard the music created by the interaction of the forces generated within the spaceship.



The pitch of the sound changed and went deeper as more and more of the Sun's plasma filled the inverse square field and was hauled into space. A continuous trench four hundred feet wide and over three hundred feet deep formed on the surface of the Sun. Neither of them had time to consider the epic event. The Sun forever made its marks on the Earth, but this was the first time that man had literally made his mark on the Sun in any way.

Ramon sat listening. "Then it's true, grandpa. I've heard the rumors that this ship can make the sound of a *LuTE* or mandolin type musical instrument when she is hauling. The ship is doing this all by itself?"

"She sure is, Ramon. Never planned, and Tom was afraid to change it because of the engineering complexity of the antenna setup. So it stayed."

Ramon at the flight control console began constantly inspecting their flight path for diversions. "Grandpa, we're slowly falling into the Sun. We're two percent off our indicated flight path. Should I correct it? It's now three percent and rising."

"Damn that, Albert!" Bud swore blaming the AI for the problem. "We can't do anything about it. The inverse square terminus point that stops the gravitex wave, the very thing that allows us to pull things up is not stable. The Sun's magnetic influxes are causing mayhem. I have to keep feeding more power into it to keep it working. We're leaking plasma every time it phases out of focus. We're not pulling up as much as we should." Bud's forehead was covered with beads of sweat as he tried his best to keep up with the retrograding terminus point.

"How low can the *LuTE* go before it starts to melts?" Ramon asked. He was thinking of the worst possible scenario.

"Don't know. All that really matters is that we keep this going for another minute, maybe two because of the shortage of plasma. Bottom line is we have to do whatever it takes to get enough plasma or this plan folds. Sorry Kid, I was hoping for a different outcome than this but..." He didn't finish what he was going to say because the *LuTE* gave a shutter that threw them about like rag dolls.

The lights went out, the air movers that were a constant

background noise stopped. Low emergency lights came on and all was quiet in the ship. The gravity field fluctuated a few times but settle down to about half of Earth's gravity.

In the gloom of the control blister nothing or no one moved. After about thirty seconds Bud unbuckled his seat belts and started to get up. "It's now or never if we're going to try the lifeboat. But this close to the Sun it's going to be dicey that the drives will power us out and the shields will hold for long."

Bud checked the few instruments that remained in operation. Their speed had increased. As the Sun drew them in they moved faster and that initially had the effect of moving them slightly back out from the star. They were currently going at nearly the same speed as Mercury—over sixty-seven thousand miles per hour—the planet that was currently a quarter way around the Sun from them.

Ramon unbuckled his harness and stood up. "Time to vamoose, grandpa. Let's go. I hear that to die trying is better than just sitting here and not doing anything. Anyway, I never got see the inside of a lifeboat. Do the seats have those little black rump prints on them so you know where to sit? I guess it doesn't matter much how you sit if you're going to drown."

"Ramon, I'm really taking a liking to you. You think like I do. To the left of normal, a little off color and for the fun of it." Bud took him by the shoulder and they made their way down the two levels to the lifeboats' berths.

One boat bay was located on each side of the main loading dock at the back of the *LuTE's* cube shape fuselage. The left one was empty—Albert's ship—and they got in the remaining one and powered it up.

An automatic countdown started at thirty seconds and sounded a warning every ten seconds. They strapped themselves in at the two front seats by the minimal control board.

Bud pushed down an oversize red button and called out, "Achieve minimum orbit with a duration of three days if not more or the highest slingshot apogee possible from this local."

"Working..." the computer answered back.

There were three more seats behind them and where the fourth seat was suppose to be there was a hatch that led down to the engine and life support equipment.

With a burst of acceleration the lifeboat zoomed from the *LuTE*. “Working,” the computer repeated itself before it even had time to orient itself to where it was in space. Emergency alarms went off and Bud manually shut them all down. He knew they were in trouble. He didn’t need a reminder for that.

They could feel the ship vibrating as it thrust away from the Sun. Force compensators were not one of the things on board; they ate up too much power. Power that was needed for more important things like the drive units.

Bud was interested in only the orbital velocity of the little ship. It was a practical impossibility to gain enough speed to make a direct run straight out from the Sun, but a wider, sweeping arc route would buy them time and distance. Always assuming the little boat had the necessary power. If it could not reach nearly ninety-four thousand miles per hour they would never reach the orbital ring of Venus and would soon fall back to the Sun.

Muttering to himself, Bud used the onboard computer to see if they were safe or doomed. “If those old Apollo rockets could get to twenty-five thousand heading for the Moon then this little skiff should be capable of giving us at least that much additional speed from what we’re doing.” The math said that would be ninety-three thousand miles per hour.

*Hopefully, he thought, I can find that extra thousand!*

“Warning,” The computer informed them after only thirty seconds of thrust. “This craft does not have enough power to achieve either inputted goal at this time. Gravitational pull from the primary is too strong. The best course of action is to attain a degrading orbit using as little thrust as possible. Life support is demanding eighty percent of the available power.”

“If you cut life support to ten percent below minimum how much longer well we stay above ship’s critical power loss for the thrusters.” Bud was sweating once more and not because of the situation, but for Ramon’s sake!

“An additional five hours would be obtained.”

“And if there was only one person?”

“Then eleven hours at the most.”

“No, grandpa!” Ramon shouted. “What if we put on spacesuits?” he asked jumping at the first thing that came to mind seeing the spacesuits storage locker on the side of the craft.

“Ship, recalculate the power usage using the new suggestion of two people living in space suits with the ship’s interior shut down and with us hooked up to the ship’s air supply only.”

“It would be possible to keep the thrusters going for twenty-four hours for two occupants, or thirty-two with one, with air supply for several days or more.”

“Okay, son, you win. We go into spacesuits. First use the lav or you’ll be swimming in your suit in a few hours. Believe me, you won’t like it!” Bud laughed.

Bud thought a moment and then inquired, “And, is that thrust sufficient to keep arcing us farther away from the Sun?”

“Affirmative but only slightly. At point of depletion this pod will achieve orbital velocity identical to planet Mercury. One point six zero seven that of Earth. Pod will achieve a position ten point nine million miles farther away from primary. At end of thrust, orbit will begin decay after twelve point seven minutes.”

“Let’s hope that is enough.” He didn’t want to know how long this was actually going to buy them. He then told the computer to launch a radio distress beacon rocket with their current position, planned outward arc, and degrading orbital position and time stamp with it. He asked the computer to set it to send several burst of the SOS code and their flight information. Ken Horton and his crew could pick it up he reasoned—they were in the vicinity.

“Do you think there is a chance of them picking it up? They didn’t say they were going radio silent.” Ramon reminded him.

“Sure they said that, but do you think they *really* did? Besides, silence and listening are different things. When they started to see what we did with the *LuTE* I’m sure they slowed down to investigate. I bet they tried to radio us too,

but the plasma we were thrown up cut that short.”

Bud concentrated a moment on getting his suit’s gauntlets properly sealed. “Then,” he continued, “we don’t know what happened to the asteroid either? I’m sure it was a backlash of some type that wrecked us and put us in this situation. That is why I’m risking the twenty-four hour orbit. If they can’t find us by then we’ll start to drop too close to the Sun to make no matter what!” he concluded in a rush, trying to hide his emotional turmoil.

It took only minutes for them to settle back into their seats with the spacesuits on. The interior was dark except for the control panel.

“Can we take a last look at the *LuTE*, grandpa? Is it too far away by now?” Ramon did not seem to care about his own welfare as long as Bud was with him.

“Sorry, son, the Sun is too close. They don’t outfit these boats with the sort of filters the larger ships get. It would only burn out the lens before we even got it focused. We can turn on the forward cameras and that would be iffy at this low altitude.”

Trying to relax, Bud, looked around the lifeboat and he had to admit that whoever designed the craft did a nice job. It had a fully automated computer control board that did have enough smarts to be helpful, room for five and seats that reclined or sank out of the way into the floor to make room for extra people, additional supplies or equipment. What gave Bud a laugh was the little lavatory with privacy screen tucked into the back corner behind the floor hatch.

*Mixed crews*, Bud thought and nodded his head in approval; *at least a female could crouch down behind that small screen. Women were better off in space than men at times.* But he would not admit that in public.

His thoughts eventually wandered to Ramon’s life and why he wanted to kill him. His grandson was just lying down in his suit not saying anything.

“Ramon,” Bud spoke quietly to break the silence between them. “This may be our last hours alive and I need to know one thing, if you don’t mind?”

“Sure, grandpa, but I think I know what you want to ask. I

know that I would.” They could not see each other’s face in the darkened cabin of the boat with their helmets on.

“Grandpa, it’s not going to make much sense to you, but I’ll try.” Bud could hear him take a deep breath of air and let it out.

“Ever since I can remember all I ever heard is how Bud Barclay was at fault for what our family had. Or, didn’t have. Daddy was always blaming you for everything that went wrong in his life. I realize now that he was the one at fault and not you.”

“Ramon, I—” Bud tried to say but the young man silenced him by placing a hand on his arm.

“He never tried to find you and he was mad at grandma for accepting the little help that Tom Swift and Chow Winkler gave them. He figured that Enterprises owned them money, lots of money. Why, I don’t know. He died when I was too young for me to figure that out.” He sighed.

“It’s too bad that nobody contacted me, Ramon.” Bud told him with a tremble in his voice. “I would have come back and done something. What, I don’t know at this point in time, but I would have done *something!*” Bud was feeling lost and out of sorts.

“I know that now, grandpa. But back then I only knew dad’s side of the story. Grandma would tell me nothing until just before she died. And that is part of the twisted reason why I was going to kill you.”

“Oh!” was all Bud could say.

“Grandma was very sick and before she died she kept on saying ‘Go get him, your father was right. He deserves it!’ I twisted it all about, because dad always said, ‘He deserves death in the way he treated us!’” Ramon let out a sob, trying not to cry.

“I twisted them both together and ended up with the word *it* meaning ‘death’. I dwelled on it for close to three years and then Mr. Appleton turned out to be you and the stage was set for intended murder.” Ramon stopped talking and all was quiet for a while.

“How did your father die, Son?” Bud asked in a whisper.

“You won’t believe this, but he died trying to save a Swift

Enterprises truck driver from getting rolled at a donut shop just outside of Shopton. The man walked out with a cup of coffee in one hand and a donut in the other and was mugged by two men that were seemly just walking in. Actually they were trying to hijack the truck that was full of Swift electronics. Dad was the counter person and when he ran to help the driver the crooks took out a gun and shot both of them. Dad died and the driver lived to drive again.” Ramon laughed out loud. “The one place he hated as much as you, grandpa, and he loses his life trying to protect it!”

Bud could think of nothing to say but, “Life is cruel at times and it never makes much sense to us!”

“Amen!” Ramon echoed.

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“Bulldog,” came the radio call. One of Ken Horton’s men was radioing him from one of the other squadron’s ships. “This is Pooch on the long distance viewing scope. You better turn yours on and take a peek. That Bud Barclay you’re always boasting about is doing something other than getting out of Dodge.” The man voice sounded amused about the fact.

Within seconds Ken was looking at the *LuTE* and seeing what it was doing. Ten thousand mile long threads of solar plasma were being moved into the flight path of the asteroid. Ken could not believe his eyes. The speed the *LuTE* was doing it was nearly impossible. Bud Barclay was doing something that no one had giving a thought to attempting before.

The plasma was swirling off the asteroid and being pulled back in by its forward motion. The back of the rock looked like a pool of molten fire.

“Squadron leaders pull out and start to decelerate as fast as you can. Bypass that asteroid by as wide a path as you can and don’t interrupt that flow of solar plasma. It looks like that our Buddy Boy is working on something to save our bacon and I hope it will work.”

“What is he doing?” asked Birddog as he started to slow down his ship.

“Bud is giving them the old hot foot. He’s trying to melt

the surface of that asteroid and cause a malfunction of the drives. That plasma is also putting an unequal amount of stress on the leading edge of that rock and that could cause it to crack wide open and explode.”

Pools of plasma fire were condensing on the back of the asteroid and forming lakes of boiling matter. Large chunks of rock broke away and were thrown into space by their magnetic differences.

The large rock of a ship started to wobble and in seconds it split into two lopsided pieces. The larger of the two contained the nuclear power drives systems and they exploded with a tremendous force. The *LuTE* was thrown about seconds later even at its great distance from the detonation. It wasn't a concussion wave—impossible in the depths of space—but a magnetic overload that raced back against the outgoing plasma arcing into the *LuTE*.

The power backlash was so great the *LuTE* blew all its electronics. The power receivers melted in the maelstrom of charged electrons. The giant donut-shaped antenna exploded as the super hot plasma met the liquid helium in the inverse cooling coils. Electrons were instantly stripped from some of the helium atoms turning it into hydrogen, which created dozens of small explosions. It was a miracle that the ship did not disintegrate with all the internal forces interacting within it.

Minutes later it was drifting around the Sun in a degrading orbit. Two days later it would sink into the photosphere so close to the Sun that it simply disappeared.

The loss of the *LuTE* was witness by no one. Its music to be heard by no one anymore. The greatest loss was its final symphony as it hauled the solar plasma from the Sun. Somehow the particles intensified and multiplied the harmonics and it sounded like a whole strange orchestra of instruments were interacting.

“Bulldog, can't raise 'em on the horn and I'm not getting any power readings from the *LuTE*. It looks dead in the water.” Pooch was their best radar man. “Wait one... Got a second blip on the screen,” he radioed a few minutes later. “She's trying to climb out, but I doubt it has the power to make a stable orbit. Hell, it going into a bad orbit!” he finished and cursed again, this time with feelings.



## Chapter Twenty-Two: It Seemed Like Old Times

“Everyone,” shouted out Ken, “keep an eye on the *LuTE’s* lifeboat. We can’t afford to lose it. Greyhound, drop markers on this spot, pronto, so we can get back here. Everyone head back to the starship and take the drones back with you. Radio Venus Base the video of what just happened so Albert can inform everyone.

“Bulldog,” Pooch radio backed to Ken, “Picking up a priority message from Venus base. Tom has stopped the war! We’re ordered to come home!”

“The hell you say! A bit late for Bud and Ramon, that’s for sure. Mad dogs you’ve got your orders, now carry them out. I won’t risk all of you in a rescue attempt this close to the Sun. See you all back at the starship.”

Ken turned to his shipmate. “CeCe, I hope you don’t mind that I volunteered you for this job, but I need you badly. You ready for one of those fast G runs you’re famous for?” he asked as he looked at the rather small but solidly built woman he had partnered with.

“Ken, I usually do my high G stuff on the way out, I really don’t use it to slow down. Too risky usually because a big fat planet is waiting for your fanny to make a mistake. Daddy taught me right.” She smiled as she referred to her father, Zimby Cox. He had been known as one of the best pilots for Swift Enterprises for three decades.

“But for this Bud Barclay I’ve been hearing about *all my life* I can break the rules. Besides, there is no planet to splat on. I’m sure daddy won’t mind, seeing who it is for. Bulldog, hang on to your seat, this ship is rated for twenty-five G’s and we’re going to be doing over thirty for twenty long, hard hours. Hope your cyborg parts can take it.

“Bring it on, CeCe. I’ll show you what kind of metal I made of,” he retorted with a smirk.

\* \* \*

Tom was watching Phyllis being looked after by the Dinosaur doctor on a monitor in another room. He had been refused permission to be with her. It had taken over three

hours to stabilize her. The worst was watching her leg being removed, cut off at the groin all the way to the hip bone. The Dino's had nothing to replace the leg with other than growing another one from scratch... and that would take several weeks.

Sandy stood by his side, as white as a sheet, all the time watching. She did get permission for Altar to go to the communication area to radio Tom's forces and that a truce was in place, but she specially ordered the robot not to mention that she and Phyllis were alive on the asteroid. He requested that a fully equipped medical ship be dispatched ASAP. He further ordered that it had to have only a female crew, that if one male were to be seen it could jeopardize the armistice.

It was going to take two days for the medical ship to reach them and by then Phyllis would be back on her feet, sort off. Tom stayed out of everyone's way by making an artificial leg for Phyllis with Altar's help. This satisfied the Dinosaurs to no end, for this male knew his place; it was to take care of the females above all things.

\* \* \*

Bud had been watching the radiation meter for the last two hours. He did not like what he was seeing. The rads were over the limit that the instrument could display. He and Ramon were becoming sick, deathly sick. The radiation buildup was too much for the thin shielding of the little ship. They must be in the middle of a solar storm. This close to the Sun no one could survive for long.

Bud figured that they would be both dead before they reached the twenty-two hour mark and slow roasted starting at twenty-four hours.

He looked over at Ramon; he could hear the rasping of his breath through the radio. "Sorry, Kid," Bud spoke mostly to himself. "I didn't realize that it would turn out like this. A quick death, sure, but not a slow agonizing one like this."

"That's all right, Grandpa," Ramon hissed out slowly showing that he was still awake. "I found the man that Grandma loved and I love you too." Ramon closed eyes and his breath became quiet.

\* \* \*

“There’s the beacon, Bulldog, twenty hours on the dot...” CeCe started to tell him.

“Got it!” he called out. “CeCe put on your radiation suit. We’re going to need them this close to the sun. There’s a raging solar storm out there and the lifeboat is in the middle of it. Communication will be nil with them. We’ll just knock and invite ourselves in. Turn the ship so my instruments are facing away from the Sun. We’ll have to look backwards and run a million cubic mile circular pattern. Go in about fifty thousand miles per pass,” Ken instructed her.

The frail spaceship entered the storm. No high winds buffeted the ships, no waves smashed down onto its hull. No torrents of rain washed against them. Only high power magnetic fields, X-rays, gamma rays, and charged particles with the power exceeding a billion megatons of TNT.

In an hour they circled down twice. In the second hour, three times. The power drain was reaching their limits that the solar generators could send to the ship’s receiver without burning it out.

A blip appeared for a second on Ken’s scope. “CeCe, circle back around quickly, I had something for a second. This is the only hit we’ve had. Go back!” As the ship did a tight turn and backtracked, Ken picked it up again. “Yes, Tomasite particles mixed with Inertite. We found them!” he shouted with glee. “Pull up alongside and see if we can match hatches. That lifeboat must be hotter than hell with heat and radiation.”

CeCe waste no time or movements. Within minutes she had the two ships locked together, attempting to position hers between the raging solar storm and the frail life pod.

Automatic readings came from the hatch’s control panel for Ken to see. “The ship is dead,” he called out. “No air, no heat. I’m blowing their hatch as soon as I get ours open. Increase air pressure and heat to max.”

“Go!” shouted CeCe as she adjusted an oxygen mask to her face. Ken pulled their hatch in and broke the seal on the external keypad to set the code for the door’s explosive bolts.

“Three, two, one,” Ken called out. A slight thump was heard and the hatch flew open with a loud bang! Almost half the air of Ken’s ship rushed into the vacuum of the lifeboat.

Ken yanked himself in with his built-in robotic arm and the suit's headlights blazing. There, right in front of him, were two lifeless forms in spacesuits. "Got 'em!" he yelled back in the rarified, cold air of the ship. CeCe was at the side of the other suited body by the time he had the first person unbuckled and the air line disconnected.

They were both back into their ship with Bud and Ramon in less than a minute. One was put on the floor and the other in the bottom fold-down bunk bed. Helmets came off; neck collars were pulled open and the suits unzipped to expose their chests. A medical disc was placed on each one from the med kit kept under the bed.

"Mine's breathing," informed CeCe. "He has an irregular heartbeat, severe radiation poisoning and related complications indicated by the med disc."

"Ramon here is in the same boat." Ken grabbed the two "hot" suits and shoved them back into the airlock, closing the hatch to seal out their radiation. He reached into the med kit and took out two syringes, handing one to CeCe. "Right in the heart as you were taught."

She nodded a 'Yes' and took off the cap from the needle. Feeling for the right spot between ribs on his chest, she placed the tip of the needle into the chest cavity and pushed in the activator with one quick motion. The chemical mix in the syringe shot into his heart and was quickly flowing through his body. She pulled the needle out slowly and shoved it under her foot. A single drop of blood formed where the needle had been before the clotting agent stopped the flow.

"If you've got Ramon, who is this?" she asked perplexed. "He's way too young to be Mr. Barclay."

"That's our Mr. Barclay, alright. He just knows how to age well, that's all." He laughed. Pulling a pair of mylar body blankets from the med kit he began covering their two guests. "CeCe, plot us a course to Venus Base. The stuff in the syringes is only a stop-gap measure, and they'll need extensive radiation treatments for two or three days before we can get them back to the starship."

\* \* \*

"Easy now, Princess," Tom told her as she took a tentative

step or two. “Don’t force it. As it adjusts to your nerve impulses it will react better. Does it feel like the nanos are toughening the leg and hip joint interface points all right? She gave a quick nod ‘Yes’ for there was no pain where the machine joined the human part of her. “Give it a few hours and it will be like walking on your own leg again.”

Phyllis doubted it. The artificial leg that Tom had constructed was crude looking and gangly. It hissed when she took a step and clunked when she lifted it up the heel for the next step. It was also about a quarter inch too long and her hip hurt trying to accommodate the slight extra length.

*The price we pay to be a super hero*, Phyllis reflected for the Nth time today. Tom and Sandy had not left her side since she woke up. The Swift medical ship had come and gone, Phyllis refused to leave her charges on the asteroid ship, and so one lone human doctor was left behind with a crate of equipment that she never bothered to unpack. The Dinosaurs were all over Phyllis like bees to a flower. They were even downsizing their equipment to fit her needs. Tom and Sandy were amazed at how much attention they were giving her.

Tom was even being tolerated more and more. When Sandy asked about it they did their equivalent of a shrug and said. “He really does not look like a male (spat) to us. We have a hard enough time telling you beings apart. As long as he does not attempt to order us around, he can stay. He does make the commander happy.” And that was that!

So five days later the asteroid was in a close and matching orbit with the Swift Construction Company planetoid. The planetoid was chosen because of its high density of metals. Only half the size of the Dino’s ship it had the necessary mass to make a time dilation transition possible.

The twin discs were unseen on top of the quarter mile long gantries that waited for the starship disc to slip into. One disc and half of the metal framework only was lowered into the triangular reinforced base that was located at opposite poles of the planetoid. Once locked together the three parts became one.

Phyllis was fascinated by the look of the strange configuration and asked why it was shaped that way?

“The discs act as part of our high energy particle shield.

The metal in the planetoid precludes the need to generate our shield from within the rock itself. The Dino's asteroid is of low metal density and that is why it needed to be so big." Tom loved talking to this new *Phyllis* that he now had at his side. Her grasp on the sciences was now formable when compared to what it had been when they were teenagers. Her years as part of the Elite Computer System had opened her intellectual horizons tremendously.

At times her insight was beyond his in the physiological area and in the philosophies. Her mind was tinted with how the Dinosaurs saw the world and the universe around them. She had been given years to mold the two different worlds into one cohesive philosophy.

They were with Sandy standing in the back of the Dino's main control center watching a small dot approaching. A dot that was to change the lives of all of them, forever!

\* \* \*

Bud finally stirred in his bed. He had been out of intense anti-radiation treatment for several hours and was sleeping off the residual effects of all the drugs.

His mind told him that he had to go, and he had to go badly! He could not count how many times he woke up in a hospital room like this one. It seemed like old times. He opened his eyes and to his relief saw a woman sitting by his bed watching him. "Got to go to the head," he whispered as he tried to get up. The rather small woman gently but firmly shoved him back down. She did it with a push of the finger.

"Not so fast, flyboy," she chuckled as she picked up the urinal bottle and handed it to him. "Be a good boy and use this, doctor's orders."

Bud tried to comply, but he just could not turn to his side for he was so weak. With a sigh of disgust the woman pulled out a pair of plastic gloves out of a box on the end table and put them on. She pulled the sheet up in the appropriate area and rolled Bud to his side. She had to tug the gown out from under him and place the bottle for his use. A smile spread over Bud's face as he relieved himself.

"Didn't think I'd be doing that again," Bud said to make small talk over the peeing sound. With one final squirt he told her he was done and rolled over to his back and pulled the

gown and sheet back into place.

Bud had time to look at the woman he thought was his nurse. She was not the type of woman he usually looked twice at. She was a shorthaired redhead with a wisp of premature gray hair that ran totally from the front to the back of her head. Her face was slender and darkly tanned from space work and not from any earthly Sun exposure. From what he could tell when she stood up to take the urinal to a sink, she stood five feet two or three and was muscular and had slightly wider hips than her height call for. As she stepped back to her chair he detected a slight limp.

“Tell the doctor or nurse when you see them about your bottle. They may want to mark it down on the charts.” She had a wide smile on her face that showed perfect white teeth and sparkling green eyes.

“You’re not a nurse?” he asked in horror thinking about what she had just done for him.

“Nope, I’m your transport pilot, CeCe Cox, at your service. I’m to take you two guys and the Albert AI back to the starship.” She held out her hand for him to shake. She pulled it back and said. “I guess we don’t have to be that formal, considering what I’ve just done for you.” She was trying not to burst out laughing.

Bud face turned red and he slowly pulled the sheet over his head. “Go away,” he moaned. “Go far, far, away!”

He could hear the woman laughing as she left the room and walked all the way down the hall.

“Grandpa,” Ramon spoke out.

“Oh, God, not you too!” he lamented.

“I know you been out of action with the chicas for awhile, but you definitely need to work on your technique.”





## Chapter Twenty-Three: First and Last Kiss

It took them just three days to reach the starship. In that time, Bud—after first trying to dodge CeCe—manned up to his mistake. Over coffee in the ship’s hologram-generated control deck, they started to exchange stories. CeCe’s father, Zimby Cox, figured centrally in many of them.

Finally, CeCe took center stage with her exploits as a space pilot starting when she was six when her father was the captain on one of the Swift’s super passenger ships doing the Martian to Earth run and back once a week, to her last ‘High-G’ racing win only the previous year.

“I was on Mars when you made your first win eleven years ago. You were the youngest pilot ever to win at that time. Zimby was so proud of you. You and your father even took me back to Earth after the celebrations on Mars and—and it was my last space flight.” His mood turned solemn.

Ramon stayed in the background listening to it all. He was now wondering what he missed by not being part of his grandfather’s life from his birth. Would his mother and grandmother, his father for sure, would still be alive. Would they all be having this adventure as a family? Shaking his head to himself he realized that he would never know. This made him want to hang on to what he was experiencing even the harder.

“Ha! I don’t remember you at all.” CeCe laughed trying to put a happy spin on things once more. “I think I would have remembered a handsome man like you!”

“I was... what... fifty-eight or better by then and not much to look at, I tell ya! Years of hard drinking and footloose living sure took a toll on the body and face. Tom, sort of fixed me up when he regenerated me last month.” He chuckled.

“What!” she cried out. “You’ve only been this young for a month?” She was astounded. “I thought that Mr. Swift had just found a way to slow aging down, not reverse it!”

With a twinkle in his eyes he said, “Ask Ramon here. He was my orderly at the old folk’s home and helped Tom to get

me out.” Bud winked at his grandson and the little change of history. “If it wasn’t for him I wouldn’t be here today.”

“Grandpa,” the young man cut in, “you’re going to scare the lady away, and then what will you do at night?”

“You mean you can hear...” Bud sputtered out loud.

CeCe burst into laughter. “Some things a woman just can’t keep quiet about, Ramon! But if you want us to stop...”

“Who is saying that? Not Ramon, I’m sure!” Bud pulled her over to him. Their images blinked out of the hologram and Ramon heard a squeal of delight as they rushed to the crew quarters of the ship.

*I guess I’m the pilot again, Ramon thought. For an old man he sure is popular!”*

\* \* \*

The transport ship from Venus slipped into its bay on the lower disc. The Albert AI was moved out first and put into place with all the other AIs. The crew that handled the computer took every precaution possible. To lose them all now would be a world changing tragedy.

This was the first time in fifteen years that all sixteen Albert’s were together in one place. This bottom disc had been their birthplace and Tom had many adventures while he pursued their birth. Tom had a hard time in thinking they were mere machines. They sort of took the place of his lost wife and his young son. It kept him going with a reason for living.

Bud, Ramon and CeCe were making their way to the starship bridge were they figured to find Tom Swift when CeCe’s InterVoice link informed them to proceed to the Dinosaur’s ship, right away. She received with the message the route to get them there, so she led the way.

All three briskly strode down the many corridors enjoying the sights and sounds of so many living people in one place— one ship. They eventually took a shuttle to the asteroid. Once inside the Dino’s ship they were met by a woman security guard.

“There are several rules that must be met at all times,” the huskily built woman informed them. “First: Women may have the run of the ship. Men,” the guard looked pointedly at Bud

and Ramon, “must at all times be accompanied by a woman. And, remain a half step or better behind your female protector.”

Ramon seemed about to argue so Bud put an arm around the younger man’s shoulders and whispered out of the corner of his mouth, “Not going to win this one, Kid.”

“Second: Never look directly at one of the shipmates, as the Dino’s call each other.

“Third: Never, I mean NEVER, get in the way of or cross in front of a shipmate. They are big and ill tempered and have incredible strength and claws. What may happen to you could cost you your life.”

CeCe seemed to be taking it all in and Bud was glad to see that she didn’t have the same gleam in her eyes as their guard.

“Forth: If asked a question or told to do something, don’t look at the shipmate. Keep your eyes down, and answer her politely with a *Madam* and do exactly as she says, no matter what. It may seem silly to you, but once more it could save your life.”

With a smile that the guard did not mean, she told them to have a good day.

“Have a good day!” Ramon quibbled, “Have a good day, only if you don’t step on this ship will you have a good day. Grandpa, do I have to go?” Ramon was looking nervously about.

“Son, I met the Dino’s once and you... Well, just do as they asked and we’ll be all right. We can throw CeCe at them if we have to and run like hell if that doesn’t work.”

“Men!” groused CeCe as she threw her hands up in disgusts.

She pointed to one of the many signs now attached to the walls printed in English. “This way, my intrepid friends,” she called out as she started to walk down a passageway. “Do try to stay out of trouble, or else I’ll just step back and see how fast two men can run!”

They must have walked for miles, down one corridor and then up another, and then taking an elevator down and riding a transport vehicle that was made for giants. Not once did they meet another person... or a Dinosaur for that matter. At

last they stood before a door that was so large that three eighteen wheelers could drive in side by side.

As they looked at the immensity of the door, a smaller one opened up at the far side and a woman waved them over. She held out her hand and greeted them.

“Doctor Boredom here to be your escort.” She giggled. “A doctor, yes, but Boredom is not my real name. Just my current status. Ms. Ally Hill, at your service. There is so little to do that I now run errands for the Commander of the ship.” The three newcomers could see a twinkle in her eyes. She was hiding something from them, that was for sure.

“The Commander of the ship?” Bud questioned. “We’re supposed to meet Tom Swift. You *do* know who he is?” Bud raised his eyebrows. “That’s the message we received.” He was trying to peer around the woman as he tried to get a peek beyond the door. The women skillfully kept him back and away.

“Yes, he is here and with the commander and her aide-de-camp. Please follow me.” She turned and stepped beyond the door.

“There are two shipmates,” Ms. Hill informed them, “monitoring the workings of the ship. Gentlemen, please don’t look at or acknowledge them.”

Neither of the three had to worry about looking at the shipmates. The equipment overpowered their senses by its sheer magnitude. They walked forward following their escort, afraid to lose her. Only once did Ramon notice what he thought was a leg and partial foot of a Dinosaur and that disappeared around a corner in the maze of consoles.

Before them was a flight of Dino-size stairs and the human equivalent were added to the side. Up they climbed a good thirty- or forty-feet high and at last they reached what could only be called an observation deck overlooking the control room. It took up the whole back wall. From up here it almost looked normal size.

Down in the middle of the deck, some hundreds of feet away, stood three people and one giant robot looking at the vastness around them. They were too far away to be seen clearly.

They turned their gaze to Ms. Hill as she shouted and waved to them. She picked up speed, almost to a run. Bud took CeCe's hand and CeCe took hold of Ramon's and they too picked up the pace.

They arrived before the waiting people slightly out of breath.

Bud threw his arms around Tom for he recognized him immediately. "You fool," he whispered into Tom's ear. "I would have gladly gone with you!"

"Yes, I know," Tom answered back, "That is why I could not let you. After we regenerated I realized that I was about to possibly kill my best friend in the world and he was now a young, healthy man. Not the same used up old man that he once was. You now had a future before you and not the grave. Your thinking changes when you are young again."

They were talking so intently that Bud had not notice the two ladies standing next to Tom, one at each side. He stepped back and gave them a look. At first the no hair and older look bewildered him, but the tall mature stance of both of them made each of them beautiful in her own way.

Smiles were on both their faces and one of them was literally jumping out of her skin. She was so antsy she could not contain herself. "Bud!" she called out at last and she threw her arms around him and kissed him passionately. Three seconds later the memories flooded back and the stunned Bud now knew who was kissing him.

He pulled her back rather quickly and looked into her face. "Sandra... Sandra Swift. Oh my God!" The words tumbled out of his mouth.

That was not the reaction that Sandy expected. Swept off her feet, maybe. Taken into a lover's embrace, definitely. But 'Sandra Swift', never!

Everyone was shocked at Bud's reaction. He just stood there with his hands to his side, his fingers grasping the hand of the small, plain looking woman next to him. Sandy stepped back and put her hand in front of her mouth. Her eyes were as wide as saucers as she looked at Bud and then what his hand was holding on to.

Sandy took one more step back and she was against the

railing of the deck. Tears filled her eyes, “You... you two timing son of a b.... I’m gone for a month, five weeks at the most, and you play fast and fancy free with this... this jezebel!” she screamed as she turned and ran off.

Phyllis looked at Tom and he nodded his head for her to go after Sandy before she did something foolish. She had not been acting like herself again since they had gone into orbit with the Construction Company asteroid.

Phyllis hissed and clanked her way after her. Bud took a tentative step forward and CeCe’s hand reached for his arm to stop him. Tom took his other arm as well.

“My friend,” Tom turned Bud toward him, “my Princess and I have made a terrible mistake. It’s not your fault or CeCe’s.” Tom had known Cerdwin Cox from her birth. “We both forgot that Sandy is not like us.”

Bud just gave Tom a bewildered look.

“For her, time hasn’t passed.” Tom tried to explain more. “Her body has aged somewhat, but her mind is still only nineteen years old. We should have realized that for Sandy time has literally stopped. She was in the Dinos version of suspended animation. We lived on, but she has not! Not emotionally.”

CeCe reached over and lifted Bud’s jaw, closing his open mouth.

“Come, let’s go to my quarters and I’ll tell you’re their story and how I found them.” Tom led them in the opposite direction that Sandy had gone.

Ramon hesitated for a moment, looking down to where Sandy and Phyllis had run off. He looked back at the group of people and robot walking away and he ran off after Sandy and Phyllis.

*I must help find her; Ramon contemplated as he ran. There is something in her that is crying out to me, and I must help her!*

It seemed like hours later, but in reality it was only twenty minutes, Ramon heard the muffled sniffles of a woman down an ill-lit passage way. He followed the sound and found Sandy slumped against the wall crying.

Phyllis had been standing apart from her friend, giving her

time. A flash of intuition told her that this young man had only Sandy's best interests at heart. She slid away from the corridor, satisfied that Sandy was in the hands of someone that cared. Why, she did not know, but *he* had come looking for her and not Bud!

She had discreetly asked about Bud the last few days since he was not on the starship and Tom mentioned that he was still around when they first met in the steam and mud pit. The revelation of him having a grandson made her a little uneasy, but... She let Tom pull his little surprise, it was just too bad that it did not go off the way he had hoped it would. She was not happy about it either.

Sandy heard someone approaching and called out, "Bud, Bud, I knew that you would come for me!" She looked up expectantly.

"Miss Swift," Ramon softly spoke, "I'm not Bud Barclay." He stepped under one of the dim lights for her to see him.

"Oh. Oh, my, you do look like him." She wiped tears from her eyes and blinked up at him. "A lot."

"Yeah, lots of people tell me that," he confessed. "You don't know me since we just met in the Dino's control room." He slid to the floor facing her from a few feet away.

"I'm sorry for what just happened," he continued, "and I somewhat know how you feel." Sandy did not reply, but she did turn her tear stained face toward him.

"For years I wanted to kill Bud Barclay." This caught her attention, she leaned forward a little. "Just a week ago I had a knife at his throat and decided that he was not the man I thought he was. Years had changed him and the stories that I thought I knew were not the way I thought they were."

Ramon pushed himself closer to Sandy as he handed her a handkerchief he took out of a back pocket. Sandy wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "Thanks," she whispered to him and looking into his face asked, "Who are you? Why did you want to kill Bud?"

"That's easy," he replied with a grin. "I'm Ramon Sanchez and I thought he deliberately hurt my family. I wanted revenge, but I did not know how to find him. My father died

and then my grandmother died and I mistook something that was said and almost killed him because of it.” Ramon stopped and took a deep breath.

“I took care of Bud when he was in the nursing home, but I did not know that he was Bud Barclay. I knew him as Victor Appleton, a hack writer of some very bad stories.”

“Nursing home?” she asked, stunned. “Was he hurt or something?”

“Something, I guess,” he laughed. “He was over seventy and on his last leg.” Ramon then got carried away. “He was a wrinkled, bald and toothless old man. He had no friend in the world until I started to talk to him at night.”

“This can’t be; he looks so good!”

“Yeah, he looks good now, but a month ago he was ready to call it quits.”

Sandy took a good look at Ramon. “How old are you?” she asked. “No one seems to be their right age anymore.”

Once more Ramon scooted closer, his knee was touching hers now.

“I’m twenty-two, or will be next month.”

“How did you go from a nursing home worker to here?” Sandy gestured with one of her hands from left to right, encompassing the ship.

“That is a long story and your brother, Tom, is the cause of it.” They sat silent for a few minutes before Ramon asked, “If you don’t like your age, why don’t you have Tom change it?”

“Change it... Change it, just like that?” Sandy snapped her fingers.

“Well, not that easy, but he can do it.” He stopped talking and let that information sink in. “Why don’t you remember the last fifty years that you were missing from Earth?” he asked now wondering why she acted the way she did.

A serious look came over her face. “The Dinosaurs kidnapped us, Phyllis and me, and put us into suspended animation. They found something useful that they could use Phyllis’ brains for, so her mind was awake most of the time and experienced the passage of time. I on the other hand was



left languishing in *no man's land*, if you know what I mean?"

"I kinda do—your body aged but your mind did not. Right?" he beamed.

"Yes, that's it. I'm so terribly confused! I lost fifty years of my life, and my beautiful hair, and everyone just wants me to act like it doesn't matter. But it does matter... to me!" she wailed.

"Don't let other people tell you that it doesn't, Sandy" Ramon urged her. "If you let me, I'll be your friend and protector. I mean, a person you can confide in. I know the time we're in and we're both about the same age..."

Sandy cut him off. "We're not the same age by a long shot! I'm a thirty year old—older maid." she shouted back in anger.

Ramon took her hand in his and pointed to it with his chin. "This hand in not old." He let it go and gently touched her face. "This face is not old." He finally pointed to her chest. "That heart is not old, either. Nothing in you is old, so don't let other people make you feel that you are."

Sandy tried to smile but only managed a weak grin.

"Trust me, Sandy. I've been around old people long enough to know old! And you're not it!" He stood up and reached down for her hands to pull her up to her feet. "Come, let's talk to your bother and see if he can do something for you." He looked tentatively at her. "That is if you really want to start over. There's a starship full of people right next to us that want to start over and your brother is doing it for them, there is no reason he can't do it for you!"



## Chapter Twenty-Four: Exodus

Sandy walked up to her brother, who was alone for the first time later that day, and stood staring him in the eyes. He detected a new look in her, something more mature than she had exhibited over the past few days. It was much better than the look she had when she ran off earlier that day.

“Tell me about you and Bud and the transformation,” she requested. No, it was more of a demand, and so Tom told her about his discovery letting an individual’s cellular structure be renewed to a standard determined by a DNA sample taken at a specific age.

“I had a couple examples for Bud and me,” he ended by saying. “Unfortunately, or possibly fortunately the older sample was degraded for Bud. Mine was all right, but we left Ramon in charge and he decided to use the middle samples for us both. Pretty amazing since he still wanted to kill Bud at that time.” Tom shook his head.

Sandy took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds before plunging ahead.

“What about mother and daddy?”

Tom blanched. “Uhh, what *about* them?” he asked carefully.

“Did you invent this magic box in time to keep them alive? Did they decide to stay back home? If so, and I’ve got nothing here to keep me—” she sniffled once, “—so if they’re alive I want to be with them.”

Tom took his sister’s hand. Her body has stiffened from the fear and anxiety that he realized she must suddenly be feeling.

“Sandy, what can I tell you to convince you that they are gone?” He took a deep breath, “I will not talk about it here. Later next week when we start to move out of the system we will go back to Earth for a small visit and you can see for yourself their graves, maybe that’s the only true way to convince you.”

\* \* \*

At no time in the history of the world had humanity

witnessed such a spectacular event. Two asteroids, a million miles apart moved in unison into the orbits of the inner planets. They passed within eight million miles of Earth—close enough for all the news agencies to get excellent video feeds from the Outpost’s space probe—gathering speed, using the gravity of the Sun. At the same time they were picking up the last of the people that wanted to go with them.

Several hundred people were also leaving the starships for the last time. Mostly workers at the Swift Construction Company and high level technicians who did not want to go to the stars, but were needed to add the finishing touches to the human ship.

The heavens were full of ships and no one noticed a small *craftavator* not stopping at one of the many space stations. It zoomed into the stratosphere and angled off for New England in the North American continent.

The craft landed on the edge of a grassy knoll overlooking Lake Carlopa on one side and a meadow on the other. Four people stepped out, two men and two women. They looked up as an eagle screeched at them for invading his air space. They all knew that this was the last time they would see the majestic bird in flight.

One man and a woman walked into the memorial graveyard that was surrounded by a marble wall. One wall had four name plates set into it and the opposite wall had two. An American bald eagle was on top of an obelisk that separated the four graves into two groups.

Tom pointed to the first grave, “Mom and Dad are here in the first site. The next one is your empty grave.” Sandy looked at it in shock. “If you look closely, you will notice that your day of death was never filled in. Mom and Dad never gave up hope of finding you.”

Sandy sank to the ground at the foot of the grave. Tears fell down her face as she silently cried over their loss. Seeing the graves made it so real to her. She could now accept that they were gone.

“How did they die, Tom?” she asked as she got up and ran her fingers over their name plate and the dates of their deaths.

“Dad had a massive heart attack while he was away from home. By the time we reached him he was clinically dead. We

did CPR and rushed him to the Outpost where they revived him and did a triple by-pass. He never recovered fully. Only because of the zero gravity did he live as long as he did. Mom came rushing up as soon as it happened and stayed by his side for the next year and a half. He was her whole world and she was his.”

He looked at his sister to see how she was handling the shock. She had a determined but more peaceful look than an hour earlier.

“Dad never complained as he suffered one setback after another. The last few months of his life was just waiting for him to die. His mind had given up a long time before that. There was only his body and mom refused to let anyone else touch him.”

A strong wave of pent-up emotion hit him.

“Maybe it would have been better to have let him stay dead when we first got to him,” he cried softly. Sandy went to him and hugged him tightly.

“Tommy, I know that you and mother did the best you could at the time. I know that I could not have let him go if there was any chance for him to survive.”

“Thanks, sis, that does help.” Tom fell silent for a time.

Sandy nudged him with her elbow, “What about mother?”

Tom took a deep breath, “Sandy this will be hard to hear. She took over the eagle preserve after we buried dad. She even moved into the caretaker’s cottage. For the next nine and a half years she worked tirelessly for it. She seemed happy doing it and I started a new project up in space that occupied most of my time for the next thirty years.”

“I did not visit her that often on Earth, but we did video talk every week and I got weekly reports from others on how she was doing. I thought everything was fine. It was not until I received a call from the Shopton hospital that she was dying and that I should get back to Earth right away.”

Sandy was all tensed up and staring at Tom. “Mom was dying from cancer and she told no one. She just let it eat her up alive. Her last words to me were that she was happy and that she was going to meet dad again and be in his loving arms, and that was all she wanted. She left all her worldly

goods to the eagle sanctuary for it continuing upkeep.”

Sandy look past the field and the forest beyond toward what was left of Swift Enterprises. She could not but help see the hole in the ground when they came in for a landing.

“And that unholy mess back there, what are you going to do about it?” she asked sternly, sounding like their mother with her tone of voice.

Tom was taken aback by hearing it. “I’ve... I’ve already made plans for it to be added to the preserve and have a small pond and a horse stable and trails added. It will be used every summer for the underprivileged children around the country. There will be camp sites and a whole summer program with things for them to do.”

“Who is going to pay for it?” she shot back.

“Why all our holdings from Swift Space Inc. It is still a going commerce; it is being run by a Martian corporation.”

They fell silent once more and Phyllis took the opportunity to visit her parents’ grave. Tom and Sandy went to her side and Tom noticed a tear forming in the corner for her eyes. Ramon took Sandy’s hand as he joined them.

“Princess, we can take them with us. Sandy, we can take our parents too.”

Phyllis gave a little laugh. “Tom, when did you ever see my parents in space? They hated the rockets and anything else that left the Earth. No, they are staying right here on *terra firma*.”

Sandy looked back at the graves and shook her head. “If my vote counts I want them to stay here. This was her last home and I would like it to be her eternal resting place. She is with daddy, both here and in heaven.”

“Amen,” Ramon spoke up as he crossed himself. His grandmother had taken him to church every Sunday when he was a child.

Sandy and Phyllis both shivered at the same time and they rubbed their arms with their hands. They looked at each other and laughed. They both knew that they did the right thing.

“Take us back to the starship, Tom.” Phyllis then told her fiancé. “We have seen and talked enough.” As she entered the

*craftavator* she spoke out once more as she stopped and took a last look around her. “Mother Earth, take care of your children here on Earth, And wish us, those that are about to leave, your good fortune.”

\* \* \*

The commander of the Dino asteroid smiled with satisfaction as her female shipmates, both human and Dinosaur, each paired with someone of the other species, each learning to trust the other. Surprising to her but not shocking were the small instances where she witnessed Dinos actually asking human males for information or assistance without spitting or sounding demanding. It was a start.

Phyllis spotted CeCe at one of the consoles learning to be a power feed controller for the time dilation field. *Such a strange woman*, Phyllis thought. *Self-confident and intelligent, a real go-getter. What does she see in Bud? He's still the wide-eye devil may care person that he always was.* The commander had no more time to give that a consideration, there was too much to oversee. *I'll have to have the Bio-Tronics helmet made for me again. I can do so much more as 'Elite' than I can as myself.*

They were following the Swift's starship, learning to operate as a coordinated unit. There was much to learn and understand between the two ships before they left the solar system and disappeared from real space. Once in the time/distance distortion field each ship would be on its own and if anything went wrong it was up to each vessel to find the new home planet.

Sandy stood by Phyllis' side, a changed person, a quiet person that spent as much time as she could with her new male friend for the first several weeks. Tom refused to do regeneration on her at this time. He told her to let time go by first and see if she still felt that way when they arrived at the new home. If she did then he would see what he could do.

Sandy turned to Phyllis for support who told her that Tom knew best and he was the final judge on the matter. Only Ramon was on her side and he couldn't be there physically to reassure her. She was not a happy person, especially now with Ramon on the other ship.

Tom had a wide smile on his face. At last they were on the

move out. His feet were itching to touch the ground of a new home planet. A planet that had no preconceived idea on who was to rule the person next door and who desired no new weapon to do it with. Science, he could devote his life to—to his Princess and to science.

Bud and Ramon were in one of the many rooms set up with display units. Their flight path was on one screen, a star chart showing the closest one-eighth of the Milky Way in light blue with a red line indicating their intended path. Various systems checks for both ships were on another, slightly smaller monitor. But the one that was watched the most was the small time dilation countdown screen. Everyone was watching it with nervous anticipation. It was going to be four more days before it zeroed out.

“Glad you’re coming along on the trip, Ramon.” Bud was relaxed and very happy with his new relationship with CeCe. The only fly in Bud’s ointment was the fact that Sandy was having a hard time adjusting and was avoiding him as much as possible.

He could understand why but there was nothing he could do about it. *That ship had sailed* as the old saying goes. Bud and Sandy were now on two different ships, both in life and in reality.

His romance with CeCe Cox had taken a two-day strain as he sought to come to terms with the reappearance of Sandy. The redhead gave him a little space so that he could never say she had put any pressure on him. In the end he had tapped on her cabin door the second night, come in and stayed.

Actually Bud was a little jealous over how well both Phyllis and Tom were getting along. They were planning to have the first wedding on the surface of their new home on the day they landed. His only problem was that every time he thought of them having children, all Bud could do was picture them with tiny bio-mechanical artificial legs and they were always kicking “Uncle” Bud in the shins.

Ramon was absolutely at peace with himself and his grandfather, and glad he was coming along too. The more he saw Sandy the more he wanted her. He was willing to take the physically thirty-year-old woman or the nineteen-year-old maturing girl. Her body would change very little with the



regeneration. It was resolving the conflict in her mind that counted. Once that was achieved she would then decide what to do with the rest of her life.

He was hoping it was with him.

On the Swift Outpost the Megascopel operator was watching both starships. First one—the asteroid—disappeared from the scope as it passed Jupiter's orbit and a few seconds later the other ship winked out too.

In the age-old tradition of mariners—whether by sea or stars—the technician picked up his duty log and made a new entry:

*Thursday, July 19th. 1752 hours.*

*Thomas Swift, Commanding Officer  
Starship Interstellar Queen,  
has departed the solar system.*

*Commander, ship and crew will  
not be returning.*