

# Willow Rosenberg

## And The Mind Riders

*2nd Edition*

BY  
BatZulGer

Made in The United States on America

© 2011 by Batzulger (pseudonym) with 2015 updates.  
All rights reserved.

This is a work of fan fiction and is protected under Section 107 of the U.S. Copyright Code. No attempt is made or implied to claim any of the main and previously-published characters. The author does make claim to the situations and story contained herein.

A BUFFY / TOM SWIFT CROSSOVER STORY

# Willow Rosenberg And The Mind Riders

By Batzulger

Willow Rosenberg arrives in Shopton to meet with Tom Swift. Her purpose? A simple internship with the now-grown Tom's company, Swift and Son Industries, or SSI.

It turns out to be anything but simple as she and her friends—including Buffy Summers (from *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* fame)—get drawn into a web of intrigue and danger along with the inventor.

Now that Tom is minus his favorite sidekick—Bud Barclay was one of the astronauts lost in a space accident years earlier—he finds that having others around him makes this adventure more tolerable. And, can their special skills be of any use here?

Ah, but will it turn out okay in the end?

---

This book is dedicated to the nameless, faceless person who wrote this story. I actually know who it is, or at least the author's real name. Or, is it a made up name to cover a real name? Or, an anagram of the author's real name that has been re-anagrammed into the name I know. I really don't know! Or, do I?

**Note: Buffy the Vampire Slayer is the property of Mutant Enemy and is used here in a way to honor the characters from that television series.**

## TABLE ON CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER</b>		<b>PAGE</b>
1	Internship Ho!	7
2	Job Descriptions	13
3	Landing Emergency	19
4	A Mysterious Theft	25
5	The Spy?	31
6	An Explosive Prize	37
7	Flight to Fearing	41
8	A Little History	47
9	Future Plans and Pursuit	53
10	Captured	59
11	Motives and Rescues	63
12	Pursuit	69
13	Meltdown	73
14	The Raid	77
15	The Villain of The Piece	81
16	An Urgent Message	87
17	First By Air	91
18	Then By Sea	97
19	Boarding Action	101
20	Ethical Piracy	107
21	A Trap Subverted	113
22	Trickery	119
23	The Mysterious Sub	123
24	Interception	127
25	Tally Ho!	133
26	The Attack	139
27	The Cobra's Plot	147
28	Raid	153
29	Defanging The Snake	157
30	The Cobra Speaks	163

# Willow Rosenberg and the Mind Riders

## FOREWORD

Until the evening of December 12, 2011 (at 5:17 p.m. Pacific time, to be precise) I had never heard of the author or this piece, nor had I ever read anything by, what I presumed to be a 'her.' My apologies as I found out the following day I had the gender thing wrong. That figures, or this might have been a Nancy Drew crossover story.

As five of us well know, writing Tom Swift fan fiction is a labor of love, not to mention a labor of time, one of mind over inertia, and is something that can totally take you over if you let it.

Then, along comes BatZulGer (I have added the capitalizations just because it looks better to me this way) with not just a *Tom Swift* fan story, but a very good crossover story involving the world of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*.

Is it a perfect story? Well... There were some typos, and a few misspellings, and missing punctuation, but it is a good story.

Tom is now 64 and it is about the year 2000. Many, many things have changed in Shopton. Bud is gone, Tom's dad has passed away and the two companies—Swift Enterprises and the Swift Construction Company—have officially been combined into a single company, Swift and Son Industries.

There are other changes. A few old favorite characters have given way to their own children taking their jobs. And, a fun surprise is still working his kitchens at SSI.

I barely changed a thing as I edited this for my own amusement. Just added about a hundred 'missing' commas (damn that English non-degree of mine!). Oh, that and fixing a few typos. And, correcting the many 'that' instances that should be 'which' and vice versa. Hope I haven't offended!

*T. Edward Fox*

## Chapter One — Internship Ho!

Willow Rosenberg fidgeted as she sat on the airliner streaking above the northeastern United States. She was nervous that she hadn't made the right decision. That maybe she should have gone to college first. That maybe her friends back in Sunnydale would need her?

She looked out the window and still worrying poked her best friend in the side to get another opinion, "Buffy, wake up!"

Buffy Summers opened one eye and looked at the nervous redhead, "Wha's th'matter, Wills? We there yet?"

"No, not yet. Buffy, am I doing the right thing?" Willow asked worriedly.

Buffy opened her other eye and gave her friend a deep look of concern, "Wills, you made a good decision. A paying internship with one of the most cutting edge companies in the world that counts as college credit and work experience. Yes, you're doing the right thing."

"But, everybody back home... Xander and Giles and Cordelia and Faith and Wesley, won't they need us?"

"We all survived graduation, so I'm sure they'll be fine," Buffy said reassuringly, "Anyway, Oz will be out this way soon to join you at the company, and I'll be here as well."

Hearing her boyfriend's name and Buffy's calming words relaxed Willow slightly.

"So what are you going to do, Buffy? You didn't get an internship."

"I needed a break from home before college and I couldn't let my bestest bud go off into the unknown without some back-up," the effervescent blond smiled gaily. "I figured a town like this has some jobs around even if it's just waitressing. Don't worry. I'll be fine. It takes a heck of a lot to slow me down." She leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes again, "Wait till were on the ground and you'll be feeling a lot calmer I'm sure," she said

confidently.

"I hope so. Buffy."

In less than an hour the plane landed and Buffy went to pick up their luggage while Willow called the number she had been given by the job recruiter.

"SSI. How may I direct your call?"

"Uhm this is Willow Rosenberg. I just landed and I was supposed to contact Harrison Ames about a ride and an ID?"

"One moment, Miss Rosenberg," there was a buzz and a male voice came on the line. "SSI security, this is Ames."

"Mister Ames, this is Willow Rosen..."

"Ahh! I forgot you were coming in today! I'm so sorry, Ms. Rosenberg," the voice said apologetically. "I'll get somebody to pick you right up. How will they recognize you?"

"Red hair and I'm with a really short..."

"Hey!"

"Uh, height challenged blond who has just gotten our luggage and heard me call her..."

"Don't say it!"

The voice on the phone started laughing at the overheard Buffy outburst, "I think my guy can spot you. And I really am sorry about the mess up with your ride. This blond, will she be needing a ride too?"

"Oh yes please, Mister Ames."

"Harry please."

"Only if you call me Willow. Ms. Rosenberg sounds way too formal."

"Done. Your ride's on the way, Willow. See you soon!"

"Thank you, Harry!"

She turned to Buffy. "The ride is taken care of and Harry sounds nice and I'm starting to..."

"Babble? Yes," Buffy grinned at her friend.



"I think I'd better sit down," Willow collapsed on the mound of bags Buffy had managed to skillfully haul over from the claim point.

"So, Harry, huh? Does Oz have any competition?" Buffy asked teasingly.

"Nooo! Oh... Buffy!" Willow glared.

"Sorry, Wills, but your expression was fantastic."

The brilliant redhead had to smile at that, "Thanks, Buffy, I'm glad you're here."

"Hey, that's what besties are for."

The wait was only about twenty minutes before a tall woman with long white hair, a dark suit and an SSI badge came up to them.

"Willow Rosenberg and friend?" she asked pleasantly.

"Yes, I'm Willow and this is Buffy Summers."

"I'm Phyllis Radnor, Harry's second in command. Just call me Phil, everybody does," she then did a double take at the baggage.

"Is all that yours, Willow?"

Buffy shyly raised her hand. "All but three of them are mine," she looked extremely embarrassed.

"Guess we drop your stuff off first then, Buffy. Where do you need to go?"

"A motel first until I can find an apartment."

"I think we can do better than that. Willow, do you mind if Buffy shares your room for a couple of days?"

Willow shook her head no.

"Alright then. Buffy, let me help you get your luggage into the truck then."

"Don't worry, Phil. I can get it," Buffy expertly gathered up her bags and, skillfully balancing them, headed towards the door.

Phil looked after her and Willow smiled, "When it comes to clothes she has a natural gift."

Soon the three were comfortably ensconced in Phil's 4x4.

"The weather's a little different here in New York than California isn't it?" Phil had the windows down and a cool breeze flowed through the truck's cab.

"Yes. How cold does it get here?" Willow asked curiously.

"In the summer it can get kind of cool at night. We're by a fairly large lake you see," Phil pointed over at sign marking the turnoff to Lake Carlopa. "In the winter... Well, it *is* upstate New York. Lots of snow and very cold. You get used to it. The snow is why I have a 4x4 though."

She kept driving, "So, Buffy, what are you planning to do for work out here?"

The blond looked out the window for a moment and then replied, "Waitressing, maybe retail. It all depends on what's available. I mainly came out here to give Wills moral support."

"What skills do you have?"

"Cheerleading, accessorizing and unarmed combat. Not very marketable set actually. That's why I'm going for the waitressing."

"Unarmed combat? Are you serious?" Phil turned to look carefully at the pint sized blond.

"Yeah. I ended up in charge of an Urban Watch group and it was better that we all were trained in self-defense. It seemed that I took to it like I was chosen. Willow was a member too, but she specialized in predicting where the gangs were going to be," Buffy seemed subdued as she said that. "Are there gang problems here we should know about?"

"In Shopton? No," Phil laughed then turned serious, "but at SSI we can always use inconspicuous security people. Do you mind if I spar with you? Just to see how good you are, you understand."

Buffy smiled, "I'd be glad to."

At that moment the truck pulled up to the gates of a huge complex of buildings. There were offices, hangars, laboratories

and warehouses. After an ID check, Phil put her eyes up to what looked like an odd set of binoculars that the gate guard handed her. After she looked into them the barricade lowered into the road and she pulled forward into a private parking lot.

"Retinal scanner," she answered the pair of inquiring looks as she parked and turned off the engine, "We have a lot of stuff here that a lot of people would kill for... literally."

Getting out, she told the two teenagers to leave their bags in the truck and to follow her. The three of them walked up to a side door in the main office building that slid open as they approached. Inside she ushered them into a conference room and left them to wait.

"Well, Wills, what do you think?" Buffy asked her friend softly.

"Wow."

"Yeah, wow is the right word."

A minute later the door opened and a tall man of about sixty entered. His hair was blonde turning to gray, and he wore a pocketed white t-shirt, khaki's and worn red sneakers.

"Ladies, welcome to SSI. I'm Tom Swift the owner."



## Chapter Two — Job Descriptions

"Miss Rosenberg, it's a real pleasure that you decided to take us up on our internship program," Tom sat down across from the pair.

"Thank you, Mister Swift."

"Tom, please. Mister Swift was my grandfather Barton. My dad and I never stood that much on ceremony. So what do you know about my company?" Tom asked curiously.

Willow thought for a second and then started speaking, "Swift and Son Industries, or SSI, is a privately held company specializing in advanced research and development. It was founded in 1914 as Swift Construction and then spawned off Swift Enterprises in the 1950s. The two companies merged in the 1980s after the tragic loss of your father. The Swift group is responsible for the Space Wheel space station, Swift Solar batteries, the Planetoid Nestria colonization project, and used to produce the Mighty Midget enhanced energy cell.

"Since the International Atomic Energy Administration pulled the license to sell the Mighty Midget cell due to fears of terrorist re-purposing, SSI has mainly concentrated on specialized engineering, civilian aviation and marine vehicles, 3-D Telejection systems, and civilian space exploration."

Buffy's jaw dropped open at this torrent of information and even Tom looked slightly stunned.

"Very impressive, Miss Rosenberg. That was a lot more than what I was expecting"

"Uh, thank you? And, please call me Willow."

"All right. So you know why you were selected?" Tom watched her carefully

"I did well on a placement test?"

"Partially, Willow. There were some other factors too. We'll go over them later on this summer. You and your classmate Mr. Osbourne both did very well. In fact, you were the only two in

the entire US to make the cut. You should be proud.

"For the next few months you will be rotated through various divisions of SSI to find where your talents are the strongest. Mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, computer engineering, astro-sciences, the works. Sound interesting?" He looked over at Willow who began nodding her head vigorously in assent.

"Great. Now for your friend here Miss Summers..."

"Buffy."

"...Buffy. Phil said you were a waitress specializing in unarmed combat?"

"Kinda..."

"Well, we have a well outfitted gym. Phil said she'd meet you there in about..." Tom checked his watch, "fifteen minutes. Unless you're not interested?"

"Oh, I am interested," Buffy replied.

"Great!" Tom pressed a button concealed in the decorations on the conference table, "Phil? Tom here. She's up for it."

A faint voice sounded through a tiny speaker, "Great. I'll see her there in a few."

Tom stood, "I'll show you where the locker room is so you can change."

Buffy and Willow got to their feet and followed the older man to a basement floor. The gym was a wide, well lit room with mats, weight training machines, and even a boxing ring set up in one corner.

Phil Radnor was working with a speed bag in one corner and waved at the three when they entered.

"So, Buffy, the locker rooms are over there," Tom said while pointing.

The petite blond had already taken off her boots and was walking over to the ring. Placing her boots and jacket on the floor she slipped on the pair of sparring gloves, foot pads and padded headgear that were waiting for her ringside.

Phil walked over, "You're not going to change?"

"It would take a long time to find the right bag in your truck," Buffy slithered into the ring, "These will be fine." She pointed at her red leather pants and black short sleeve turtleneck.

"Okay then," Phil climbed in as well and the two fighters went to opposite corners.

Phil was taller and looked far stronger than Buffy. But the blonde looked very agile and light on her feet.

The pair closed and exchanged a brief flurry of blows. It looked like Phil had hit first and Buffy was retreating back across the ring. They closed again and this time it looked like Buffy had connected with a leg sweep as Phil was down on one knee and Buffy was coming in with a backfist. Phil managed to block it and regain her feet and the two separated for a second time. The third encounter seemed to be a draw, as Phil used her longer reach for an extended kick that Buffy barely managed to block while retaliating with a shin kick on Phil's other leg. Phil back-flipped from one leg, keeping herself off the mat and landed in a crouch out of range.

On seeing this, the rest of the patrons of the gym began to applaud. Phil pulled off her gloves to step forward and shake Buffy's hand.

"You're really good, Buffy. You're very fast and have a great sense of balance. You do need a little work on strength training though. It felt like there was almost no power behind your strikes."

Buffy pulled off her gloves and headgear, "Thanks, Phil. I know I really need to work on my muscleyness. The price of being my size I guess."

Tom and Phil could not see Willow rolling her eyes behind them.

"Anyway," Buffy continued cheerily, "That was a lot of fun and I hope we can do it again!"

"Of course. Sparring against somebody as quick as you is great practice. By the way what style was that?"

"Oh, my teacher had his own style. A little bit of this and a little bit of that. It seems to work for me alright."

"Well it does work. If you'll excuse me I have to change," Phil said apologetically and walked towards the locker rooms.

Buffy pulled on her boots and jacket and ran a brush through her hair.

"Buffy, you were Willow's best friend through high school?" Tom asked inquiringly.

"Yeah, we were kind of inseparable."

"I had a friend like that and know just how important they are. I don't really have a job for you, but I can offer you room and board and maybe some training if you're interested."

"Training?"

"Pilot, submarine, diving. Maybe give you a chance to go into space. You'd get to see Willow too, maybe help out on some projects."

"Are you serious?" Buffy had a surprised expression on her face.

"Of course. It's my company, I get to make the rules. You interested?"

"Oh yes! I could really learn to fly?" Buffy asked excitedly.

"I don't see why not. It's settled then. Willow, you'll report to mechanical engineering lab eleven tomorrow at eight thirty, and Buffy be at the flight line at nine. See you two tomorrow," with that the tall inventor walked away.

The two teens stared at each other.

"Wills, what just happened?"

"You let Phil win, and Tom Swift is going to give you flying lessons, personally... I think."

"Yeah. I think you're right," Buffy looked guiltily at the locker room door, "I didn't want to make her feel bad. She is obviously so proud of her form."

Willow patted her friend on the shoulder, "You did the right



thing."

The two friends sat on a bench and waited for their ride to finish changing.



## Chapter Three — Landing Emergency

After dinner at the company cafeteria, Phil dropped the two teens off at the employee temporary housing. There they were shown to a comfortable one-bedroom apartment.

"When an employee comes in for training or a project from one of our other plants, we found it easier to have our own hotel, basically," Phil stated informatively. "That way we can put it on the company power and communications net as well as tie it in to the shuttle bus service."

"That's really kind of clever," Willow said as she looked around appreciatively.

"Tom is heavily into employee quality of life. So were his father and his grandfather apparently. SSI is a great company to work for, for that reason alone. Call the front desk when you need a shuttle tomorrow. And have a good night!" Phil left, closing the door behind her.

"Bed or couch Buffy?" Willow asked.

"Couch. I slept on the plane plus I'm going out to take a walk after it gets dark. If I'm on the couch I won't wake you up when I get back and you'll need your sleep to be a big brain tomorrow," Buffy grinned at her friend then started rummaging through the bags till she found the heaviest one and opened it. The first thing to come out was a small stuffed pig that was set on the couch.

"Mr. Gordo will keep an eye on you till I get back. Okay?" Buffy pulled some other items out of the heavy suitcase then changed into black jeans and a black t-shirt before pulling on a light leather jacket. "Don't wait up!"

"Stay safe, Buffy," Willow replied.

"I will." The short blonde left, leaving Willow with her laptop and the television to keep her busy.

Soon the brilliant redhead was on-line through SSI's connection to the internet and was writing emails to her friends back in California. After those were done she realized just how

tired she was and went to sleep.

The next morning she woke to pop music coming from the living room, and walked out to find Buffy in the middle of her morning stretches.

"Anything interesting?" the yawning teenage genius asked her best friend.

"Hmm? Oh last night?" Buffy flipped to her feet from her one-armed handstand and scratched her chin in thought. "No, not really. Not even much dust. Just one, actually. This place is pretty quiet when it comes to nightlife."

"That's good to know."

"Yeah. I made coffee."

"Oh thank you!" Willow moved to the kitchenette counter and poured herself a mug and took a long swallow, "Much better."

"No problem. I also called for the shuttle. It's supposed to pick us up in half an hour, so you might want to take a shower quick."

"Yes, I think I'd better. Why so early though?" Willow asked as she checked her watch.

"So we can grab breakfast at the cafeteria before work."

"Buffy planning ahead? Will wonders never cease..."

"Hey!" Buffy responded irately, but was grinning nonetheless at her friend's teasing.

Smiling Willow made her way, coffee mug still in hand, to the bathroom to get ready.

In twenty minutes, hair still wet, she emerged and poured herself another cup of coffee. Buffy had already gotten dressed and was idly watching the news.

Quickly pulling on a clean outfit, Willow joined her friend in the living room and the two of them headed down to the lobby.

Waiting outside was a small futuristic-looking van. As they walked across the lobby, the front desk clerk called over to them.

"Miss Rosenberg, Miss Summers! There are packages here

for you!"

Walking over they both received a small bracelet, much like one used for identification, with a small silver disk attached.

"Those will allow you onto the main plant area without tripping the intruder alarms. Keep them on at all times."

They thanked him and headed out to the van, putting on their new jewelry as they walked.

Willow looked closely at it, "Probably biometrics and a locator. They must be able to keep track of everybody's location in the plant."

As they approached the van the side door slid open and a woman's voice spoke, "Good morning, Miss Rosenberg. Good morning, Miss Summers. Destination?"

There was no driver. Only three bench seats each wide enough to sit two people.

"Wow!" Buffy exclaimed, "This place is like a high tech theme park. Cafeteria please."

"Thank you, Miss Summers. And you, Miss Rosenberg?"

"Uhm, Cafeteria, too?"

"Thank you, Miss Rosenberg. However, you must fasten your seatbelts before we depart."

The girls quickly followed the instructions and soon were on their way to breakfast."

The trip was quick and after a tasty breakfast the pair split to go to their individual meetings.

Willow arrived at the Mechanical Engineering lab and prototyping building. Inside, she was greeted by a tall dark complexioned man named Abraham Haskell.

"I'm chief machinist here. You ever worked in a machine shop before Willow?"

"No not really. I have experience working with complex mechanisms though."

"What kind?"

"Some robotics. Servomotor set up and disassembly mainly."

"Useful skills here. First though we'll get you checked out on the machine tools. The lathe, milling machine, drill press, laser cutter, can be controlled through a computer workstation, and so's the 3D printer. All are pretty standard except for the printer. It's one of the Boss' designs and uses laser sintered Durastress plastic or powdered aluminum or titanium as the raw material."

"Durastress?"

"It's a plastic Tom and his dad came up with years ago. Durastress is very strong and lightweight. We use it for super-lightweight projects. Aluminum is cheap and we use it for proof of concept. Titanium is for extreme heat resistant applications. We can actually mix different types of material in one production run."

Abe got Willow a pair of safety classes and got one of the junior machinists to start showing her how the various tools worked. The computer interface was fairly simple. After she had been familiarized with the tools, she was shown how to operate them manually. "Sometimes it's just faster doing it by hand then spending the time setting everything up on the computer," she was told.

By noon she was helping a couple of the other machinists build a sort of go-kart frame as an experimental motor test bed. They had just finished welding the aluminum chassis together when Abe called time for lunch. The whole group of them headed over to the cafeteria discussing what would be the next component to assemble.

As they were walking over there was the sound of a siren over by the runway.

"What's that?" Willow asked nervously.

"Plane in trouble," Abe replied, "Let's go!"

The group ran over to one of the SSI trucks parked at intervals all over the plant. Abe passed his wrist with the bracelet over the steering wheel and the electric motor whined to life. Willow jumped into the cab next to Abe, while the rest piled into

the cargo bed. With a surprising amount of power for an electric vehicle, the truck squealed its tires as Abe raced it over towards the commotion.

When they arrived at the airfield the crash crews had already sprayed out a bed of a jelly-like goo. Two heavy electrical cables stretched from the goo to a parked truck. As Willow watched, a switch was thrown on the side of the truck and the goo suddenly turned into a foam slab about thirty feet thick and several hundred feet long.

Looking up, she saw an aircraft with smoke pouring from all of its four engines, on final approach at an extremely high rate of speed. The nose lifted slightly and the pilot pancaked the plane right into the foam slab which crushed, absorbing all the potentially lethal impact.

The man at the truck switch threw it again, instantly collapsing the foam back into a thick gel allowing easy access to the stricken plane. Even as the foam was receding fire trucks were on route across the tarmac when the plane suddenly exploded releasing a massive cloud of a pink, slightly bitter, smoke. As the smoke came in contact with both the bystanders and rescuers they instantly collapsed in boneless heaps. Within just under two minutes, there were no signs of life anywhere near or on the airfield.





## Chapter Four — A Mysterious Theft

Willow regained consciousness and shook her head groggily. The last thing she remembered was the cloud of pink smoke that had erupted from the crashed aircraft, engulfing her. Her head was aching, and her mouth tasted like it had been filled with dryer lint.

Looking around she saw that Buffy was crouching beside her shaking her shoulder.

"How are you feeling, Wills? Except for the headache and that after taste. Yuck!"

"Ow?" she looked up at her friend.

"Yeah, 'Ow' is right. Let's see if you can stand," Buffy helped her friend carefully regain her feet.

"What happened?" Willow looked around and saw small groups of people being revived.

"Ambush it looks like. Tom and I were in the hanger. He was pointing out pieces of airplane and what they do; I was learning; then the siren sounded. Tom and I headed out to see what was happening.

"When we got out to the control tower somebody told Tom that there was a plane broadcasting an emergency and asking for landing permission. They got the emergency vehicles out there and said come on in. Then; crash, boom, pink smoke, nap time.

"Just before I went unconscious I saw men coming out of the wreck. Then it was sleepy time Buffy."

"So it was like a Trojan Horse?"

"Yeah. That's exactly it. I woke up first, took a careful look around, then started waking everybody else up."

"How long were you unconscious?"

"Ten... maybe fifteen minutes. That smoke looked like it covered pretty much the entire plant."

"And it happened at lunch time so people would be out of

airtight labs and protective suits," Willow said thoughtfully, "Where's Tom?"

"Over at the control tower coordinating emergency crews. He was the first one I woke. Sorry, Wills, I didn't see you," Buffy said apologetically.

"That's okay, Buffy. Did you tell him about the men?"

Buffy nodded vigorously.

"Okay then, let's head over to the tower."

The pair made their way through the crowd that was slowly gaining wakefulness and getting to their feet. The redhead and the blond quickly spotted the tall inventor. A dark haired man and Phil Radnor were with him in a heated discussion.

"Buffy! Over here!" Tom waved them over, "Are you okay, Willow? This is not the way we usually greet our interns. Just so you know."

"I'm okay, I just need something to rinse this taste out of my mouth... and about a hundred aspirin."

Tom grinned wryly, "I think everybody here knows what you mean. Buffy. Willow. This is Harry Ames our Security Chief."

"Who will be looking for a new job soon, probably," the dark haired man had a sour look on his face, "Phil, don't wreck the place after I'm gone."

"Take it easy, Harry," Tom said calmly, "I'm sure not blaming you for this. Whoever came up with this scheme was smart and potentially ruthless. We haven't had any reports of any fatalities fortunately, but there were some vehicle accidents and injuries when the drivers passed out."

"Tom?" Willow spoke up, "Did you locate the men Buffy saw?"

"Not yet. When the gas went off they also used a device that jammed our security cameras and intrusion sensors. I'd really like to know had they did that, seeing as we use quantum linkage communications and not normal radio or phone lines."

Phil groaned, "That means they knew exactly how our

security worked."

Tom nodded, "And that means some kind of leak."

"How long ago did the attack happen?" Willow asked.

"About half an hour. Buffy woke me fifteen minutes ago. Look, you two ladies can head home and recover, but let Doc Hanson check you out first."

Buffy shuddered at the word doctor. Phil noticed the reaction and raised an impeccably maintained white eyebrow, "Problems with the medical profession?"

"I just don't like needles and the probing," Buffy admitted sheepishly to the others' grins.

"Buffy, you big baby," Willow teased, "Which way to the person with scary needles, Phil?"

The redhead and her grumbling blonde friend headed in the direction pointed. As they crossed the airfield, heading towards the ambulances, Willow stopped suddenly.

"What's up, Wills?"

"I just thought of something that might help track wherever those people went."

"Oh?"

"It's a little something I remembered reading in one of Giles' books that help reveal tracks."

"One of those *some*things huh? What do you need?" Buffy looked eager to help.

"We should be able to get the stuff at the cafeteria."

"Okay, let's go."

The pair changed course and headed towards the currently almost deserted building. As they entered, they could hear a pleasant baritone voice singing along with a country song in the kitchen.

"How do you want to do this? Violent or sneaky, Wills?"

"Sneaky!" She jotted down some names on a piece of paper, "This is what I need cause you're quieter than me. I'll distract the

singer."

"Gotcha!" Buffy slipped into the back hallway without a sound.

"Halloo!" Willow called out.

"Who's that? Brand my skillet... a customer!" The singing had stopped and a remarkable looking gentleman stepped out to the serving line. He was short, not much taller than Willow, and stocky. He had absolutely no trace of hair on his red-faced head and blue twinkling eyes peered out from a sea of fine wrinkles and crow's feet. The thing that was most eye-catching however was his shirt. It looked like somebody from Hollywood Central Casting had requested the most wild west show spectacular shirt ever. It was silk and a bright turquoise blue with the yoke stitched out in shiny silver thread. The pockets were outlined in the same silver thread as were the lapels. Topping this vision of sartorial splendor was a red bandanna loosely tied around this distinctive individual's neck.

"Uh, hi?" Willow said shyly, heavily bowled over by the bright colors.

"Well Howdy, Missy! You new 'round these parts?"

"Uh yes, Mister uh..."

"Chow! Chow Winkler. Jest call me Chow though."

"Thanks... Chow. I'm Willow."

"Purty name fer a purty girl. Pleasure t'meet you, Willow. Say, where is everybody? I was in the middle of doing inventory in the freezer, I come out fifteen minutes ago or so and m'whole kitchen crew has got up an' ski-daddled on me. Left the stoves on and burned the chili, too."

Willow quickly explained the situation to the old cowboy cook who immediately tore off his chef's hat and scooped a white Stetson out from behind the register.

"Well brand my spurs! Sorry about not bein' able t'serve you lunch, Missy, but if there's trouble I gotta b'there fer Tom." With remarkable agility for a man his size and age, Chow leaped over the counter and was running for the flight line, clamping the

Stetson on his head as he went.

Willow stood there stunned for second then Buffy poked her head from the back and held up a small bag.

"I've got them!"

Willow recovered and nodded, "Let's go!"

The pair ran back out to the crashed plane.

"Which direction did you see them heading as they left the plane?" Willow asked.

Buffy pointed and Willow moved in that line before crouching over the small paper bag of supplies. In a few minutes she had a small handful of powder that she scattered on the ground. Ghostly footprints appeared briefly then vanished. "It works, let's go."

Figuring that the attackers would know they had a limited amount of time, Willow thought that they would head in a straight a line as possible to their objective. Obviously Harry and Phil thought the same as a small group of SSI security was just ahead of them.

"Won't all those feet mess that up?" Buffy asked, gesturing at the powder.

"Nope," Willow replied smugly, "That's the beauty of it."

"Better keep it hidden then."

"Yeah, some questions can be very bad. Not interested in a bonfire," Willow responded shuddering. The pair continued behind the SSI searchers. Whenever an obstacle such as a plane or a building appeared in their path, Willow would scatter a small pinch of her powder and they would follow the direction the footprints led.

This zig-zag course led them to one of the many lab buildings on the SSI complex. It was locked, of course.

"Want me to open it?" Buffy looked at the lock plate carefully.

"No, this doesn't work indoors once it has been activated outdoors. I was lucky I got it to work actually."

"No luck. Pure talent," Buffy patted her friend on the shoulder, "I'll tell Phil I just remembered I saw them heading roughly towards this building. Let's go find her!"

The duo soon caught up with the Assistant Security Chief and Buffy told her little white lie.

Immediately a perimeter was put around the building and a team led by Harry and Phil entered. A few minutes later they had exited and were speaking to Tom. Willow and Buffy were trying to look as unobvious as possible while listening in.

"Tom," Harry spoke up, "Lab 3's door was blown open as was the project vault. We're trying to get a hold of the research team leader to find out what might have been taken."

"Lab 3? No need to look for the team leader, I'm standing right here. Did you see a Red Tomasite covered case in the vault? About the size of a briefcase."

"No, Tom. What was it?"

"Very big trouble," Tom said worriedly.

## Chapter Five — The Spy?

Tom had a worried expression as he walked into the Lab.

"So what's the plan, Wills," Buffy whispered quietly. The two were still outside the building, "You got any more somethings?"

"Not with the materials I have right now. I've been thinking though. Why no explosion on the outside door? The locks on all the doors inside and out are pretty much the same kind, but they didn't blow up the outside one, just the inside one."

"They had a key for the outside, but not the inside?"

"That means they had a bracelet like this," Willow jingled the one on her wrist, "So where did they get it? They either stole or were given one, or they made something like it. If they made something like it, where did they get the codes and the frequencies they would need?"

"Somebody in SSI..."

"Yeah, there's a spy or somebody who's missing their bracelet and hasn't 'fessed up to losing it," Willow stepped over to one of the security people.

"Excuse me," she said shyly.

"Yes, Miss?"

"Could you tell Phil or Harry that they should check to see whose bracelets opened this outside door during the attack? I think one of them might have been stolen."

"What? Sure thing, Miss!" the security guard whispered into his radio and a few seconds later Phil was back outside.

"Willow, Buffy? I thought you'd be heading back to your rooms after a morning like this. Whose idea was it about the bracelet?"

Willow slowly raised her hand and explained her reasoning.

"That's logical," Phil tapped her chin thoughtfully, "I'll call it in to Security Control Center. You two want to see it?"

"Sure," Buffy spoke up, "We'd love to!"

"Come on then," Phil walked over to a golf cart looking vehicle and slid behind the wheel. "Harry, I'm going to Central to check the door access logs," she was apparently speaking to thin air in normal tones.

"Neat trick. Even better if Harry can hear you," Buffy piped up.

Phil smiled and pulled back her long white hair, away from her left ear. Stuck right behind it was a dime-sized gray disk.

"One of Tom's toys. He calls it a Neural Inductance Transceiver. We call them Little Sisters. They're a super secure radio link, hands free, really long range, and can penetrate most radio shielding and jamming. They're pretty useful."

"Neural Inductance?" Willow asked.

"Yes, it doesn't use a speaker, just pipes the sound right into the nerves of your ear. It apparently picks up your voice the same way, but I'm no scientist or engineer, I just use the thing."

"That's really neat," Willow gushed.

"You and Tom are really going to get along, I can just tell," Phil said laughingly, "You have the exact same reaction to high technology that he does."

"Is that good?" Willow sounded worried.

"Here at SSI, it's very good."

Buffy looked carefully at Phil, "So, Phil, how did you get hired here?"

"Simple nepotism," she laughed, "My dad, Phillip Radnor, worked here as security for Tom and his dad. I applied for a position. Tom told me he'd hire me after I worked as a police officer. After I graduated the police academy, I worked in Philadelphia for four years. Two years as a beat patrolman and two years as a Detective, then re-applied last year. Tom hired me. Pretty simple actually."

Buffy leaned back in her seat deep in thought.

The cart soon delivered the three to a nondescript building



with only the number 21 painted on it. The two teens did see Phil's truck parked next to it. Phil walked over to a plain metal door and passed her wrist in front of it at which point it silently slid open. The three then walked into a brightly lit antechamber as the door slid shut behind them. Phil passed her wrist across the inner door that also slid open and revealed a large room filled with monitors computers and rushing people.

"What's going on?" Phil snagged one of the technicians by the sleeve.

"Whatever happened to knock out our sensors and cameras is still in effect. At least the doors in this building work again."

"What?" Willow asked. "The doors here stopped working?"

"Well, yes. When the cameras went out we tried to call out to the road patrols but the communications went out. Then we tried sending out people, but the outside doors wouldn't open."

A light suddenly switched on in the redheaded genius' brain.

"Buffy, what we were talking about on the airfield after I woke up... the Trojan Horse!"

"What?"

"A computer virus! That's why things stopped working and doors could be opened and not be able to be opened and why explosives were used and..."

"Breathe, Willow!"

"Oh? Sorry," Willow looked over at the startled Phil who involuntarily backed up along with the technician when the torrent of words started erupting. "I babble sometimes."

She looked over at the technician, "Is there a workstation with Administrative access I could use? You can stand over my shoulder and watch what I'm doing."

The technician looked over at Phil who simply shrugged, "Computers are one of the reasons why she's here on the plant." The technician pointed to an empty terminal.

Willow sat down and started calling up a listing of the various programs the system was running. Soon she looked up with an

expression of satisfaction.

"Found it! This process," she pointed at a line of text on the screen, "was started just about the same time as the smoke erupted from the plane crash. Now let's just see what it does..." she bent over the keyboard again.

In about an hour she had traced it to the concealed file that was locking down the SSI security systems. After halting that file, the cameras and other detection systems started coming back on line.

"The really sneaky thing about this program is that it simulated the results of jamming so you wouldn't think to look for it. Whoever wrote it knew exactly how the security systems here worked."

"I don't like that idea," Phil said, "What else do they know and how do they know it?"

"I can't help you there, but I may be able to tell you when and where this virus was inserted into the system," she bent over the keys again. "I don't know exactly how it does what it did, but it shut down the sensors and unlocked all the doors in Lab 3. They blew up the interior door to probably hide that it just opened for them. They shut down the doors and communications here in the Security Center to keep anybody from seeing them as this place is probably airtight and everybody stayed awake."

Phil nodded, "Yes, it has its own air filtration. Leftover from the cold war when it was built."

Willow continued, "However sneaky and nasty this program was, whoever wrote it made a mistake."

"A mistake, Wills? It sounds like it did exactly what it was supposed to."

"It did, Buffy. Only it did it too well. It should have turned everything back on after they had gotten what they wanted, not just the doors and communications. That way it would have been much harder to realize what exactly had happened and the jamming would have seemed much more likely!"

"So what happened?" Buffy asked.

"The part that reset the doors and communications worked, so obviously whoever wrote this was more familiar with those parts of the system... and here it is. It was inserted a week ago on this very workstation... well what do you know? By... *Harry Ames!?!"*



## Chapter Six — An Explosive Prize

"Harry? That can't be right!" Phil peered down at the screen in front of Willow, then turned to the technician. "Pull up the Security center internal video from a week ago. The camera aimed at this workstation, quick!"

In just a few minutes there was video evidence of Harrison Ames, Chief of SSI security, sitting down, inserting a small USB drive, and then pressing several keys. After a few minutes, he removed the drive and left.

"Harry. Tom. Get to the security center immediately," Phil was speaking to thin air again. Soon the two arrived and were watching the video on the now crowded around workstation.

"What's going on? I never did that," Harry said, apparently surprised by his recorded actions.

Phil spoke up, "While you were on your way over I checked the access logs. Your bracelet entered a minute before this video and exited a minute after. I also found that you had been at a meeting with me just before you came over here. The travel time from the administration building to here matches up. It was your bracelet, Harry."

Tom cleared his throat, "It sure looks like you, Harry, but considering your stake in the company there is absolutely no reason for you to do this. I can't think of any of the three B's that could be used against you..."

"Three B's?" Willow asked quietly.

"Bribery, Bludgeoning, and Blackmail," Phil whispered back.

"...so what actually happened? That's the real question. And that means today as well as a week ago. Harry, you'd better go over and see Doc Hanson to get a full work-up. Phil, that was good work, even though it produced more problems than solutions."

"Willow is the one that spotted the virus."

"Well then, Willow, good work," he looked thoughtfully at the two teens then smiled ruefully. "Now I'm finally getting an

idea of what dad went through sometimes. Come on you two. You're in this up to your necks anyways. Phil, see what clues or visitors may have left behind."

"Got it, Boss."

Tom, Buffy, and Willow left the security center and were soon riding back to the main lab complex.

"So, Tom, what was taken?" Buffy asked innocently.

"Anti-proton matter, about a kilo of it in a stabilized magnetic matrix."

"Anti-proton matter? What's antiproton matter?"

"To explain that," said Tom, "you'd need a basic idea of how atoms are constructed."

"It looks like a miniature solar system right? In the center is a nucleus. Moving around it are electron-like bits. The whole thing is pretty close to planets moving around a sun."

"That's basically it." Tom nodded. "An electron has a negative charge. A proton is the positive charge of the nucleus. Then we have the neutron, which is the uncharged constituent of an atomic nucleus."

"That I get," said Buffy.

"Now in antiproton matter, the atoms have the same 'solar system' setup you mentioned, but there's one difference. The charges on the particles are reversed. What was the electron is now a positron and what was the proton is now an antiproton."

"I guess," Buffy said, "there's a completely different and dangerous reaction if they come into contact with something."

"Definitely!" Willow broke in. "If enough antiproton matter reacted with stuff here on earth, the energy released could start a chain reaction. The world could blow itself into itty-bitty bits!"

"Wow!" exclaimed Buffy. "That stuff wouldn't be anything to play with!"

"No," Tom agreed, "but it actually could be put to good use."

"So this stuff would be really rare. I mean CERN has only produced a few atoms of it with their high-energy colliders.

Where did you get a kilogram of the stuff?" Willow asked curiously.

"Back when I was a teenager in the 1950s, I was on an expedition to Africa to find out what was behind reports of a gas that destroyed everything it touched. In the process I found a source of anti-protons as well as a material that could contain it. The container material I use on all sorts of things that need protection from energetic reactions. The anti-protons are fascinating, but in general are far too dangerous to work with. I kind of kept the discovery secret so that it couldn't be weaponized."

"So you basically had two and a half pounds of anti-matter in your office safe?" Willow looked like she was going to faint.

"In my defense, it was a very good safe. And getting the container open will be difficult as well. If the case is forced open it will start a controlled dispersion instead of an instantaneous release. Basically melting the case to slag and releasing very little radiation."

"So, who knows how to open the case properly?" Buffy asked as they pulled to a stop at Tom's private lab building.

"Only I have the codes needed to unlock it," Tom said thankfully. "The solar battery in the case will keep the magnetic stasis field stable for at least ten years so we don't have to worry about accidental release. As long as that field is powered and the case is closed, the stuff is basically harmless."

Unlocking his lab with a wave of his bracelet he escorted the girls inside. Up a short winding staircase found them in a comfortable office lined with photos and all kinds of curios. One cabinet was filled with scale models, including the Space Wheel, a robot, the Flying Lab (Tom's aircraft-based research and engineering headquarters), several other spacecraft including one that looked like a gyroscope mated with an octopus, and many others. Buffy looked carefully at all these knickknacks.

"You invented all these?"

"Sure did. Invention runs in my family. I'm a third generation tinkerer," Tom said proudly. He then looked over at Willow who was looking at a framed illustration of the cross-section of the

Flying Lab.

"So, Willow, any ideas on how somebody could have impersonated Harry Ames and his bracelet?"

"Huh? You're asking me? I mean I'm maybe a little clever, but I don't have a brain like yours and you probably already have figured it out, and I don't know how I could..."

"Willow..." Buffy said softly.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I babbled again. I really don't know. If Harry was at the meeting with Phil and went straight to the center, that means it couldn't be a double right? It had to really be the Harry that really works here." She thought for a moment, "Tom, who knew about the anti-protons? I'm pretty sure it's something you don't spread around much in conversation. Did Harry?"

Tom leaned back and closed his eyes in thought, "Nooo. Harry didn't. I can only think of about four or five people, not counting you two, that knew about it. Abe Haskell the machine shop supervisor, he helped build the case. Ephraim Updike at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Sandy, my sister, Darian Gordon, one of our high-energy physicists... I think that's all. Most of the folks that were around when I got the sample originally are gone now.

He looked over at them, "You two should get some food and some rest. It's going to be business as usual tomorrow unless something turns up and I want you here bright and early and Buffy..."

"Yes?"

"Make sure you do all your assigned reading on FAA regulations. You score well and maybe we'll all fly over to Fearing Island so you can see SSI's space launch facility."

Willow looked over at her friend, "You'd better do well!"

"I will I will, I promise! Now let's get something to eat."

The two departed leaving Tom sitting in his office staring out the window at them.

"Yes," he thought, "the high school testing was a success."



## Chapter Seven — Flight to Fearing

The next morning both teens were back at SSI. Willow at Mechanical Engineering and Buffy continuing her flying lessons.

Willow's work on the kart frame continued as they began to install the controls and wiring on the bare chassis. The conversation however, was all about the events of the previous day.

"So, Willow," Steve Manly, one of the machinists, asked jokingly, "I hear you're an ace detective as well as an ace mechanic?"

Willow blushed, "Noooo, I am so not an ace detective. I just spotted a few things. It was my friend Buffy that saw which way the guys headed after they left the crash."

"Is Buffy the short blonde that was sparring with Phil? I saw that and she is really good," Gabe Wilkes, the other prototyping machinist spoke up curiously.

"Yes, that's Buffy. She is the best fighter I've ever seen," Willow replied proudly, "And the best friend."

Abe laughed, "It's good to have friends you can count on. So what was up at the Security Center? I saw you and Buffy and Phil go in. Then a little while later Tom and Harry come screaming up like there's a fire. What happened?"

Willow froze, "Uhm, I'm not really sure if I can talk about it. I'd have to clear it with Tom I think," she said hesitatingly.

Abe gave her a piercing look, "That bad huh? Okay, if the Boss is nervous about stuff being spread around then we all can wait till he's ready. Guys, no more questions for our new technician about what happened yesterday. Only about how handsome does she think I am!" Abe was smiling as he said that and the other two machinists started laughing. After a moment Willow started laughing too.

At lunchtime she met Buffy at the cafeteria. The petite blonde looked excited.

"So, Buffy, what did you do this morning?" Willow asked.

"I spent the entire time in a flight simulator. It felt like I was in a real plane. Except for, of course, that I couldn't die when I crashed a bit. Tom's a great instructor. How about you?"

"We finished the chassis and the wiring so right now we're waiting on the test motors. It's been fun so far. Oh! How'd you do on that flight regulations quiz Tom was talking about?"

"I took my notes with me on my walk last night and went over them as I was waiting to see if anything showed up. It was a non-dusty night so I got a lot of studying done and I think I did pretty well actually. Bureaucrat-ese is a lot more confusing than Akkaidian though," Buffy made a face at that.

"Well, hello ladies," Tom walked over with a tray of food, "Mind if I join you?"

"Only if you'll tell us how Buffy did on the quiz," Willow blurted out then blushed in embarrassment.

"Oh? Two days here and already giving the owner orders?" Tom looked sternly at Willow then smiled, "Don't worry, everybody here gives me orders occasionally. And Buffy, you aced the quiz. A perfect score."

Buffy let out a sigh of relief, "I really want to learn how to fly and I was so worried that if I had messed that up..."

"You would have studied until you passed it to my satisfaction," Tom finished, "but you passed it first try and a promise is a promise. I have to go to Fearing Island today—like I said that's where we have our space launch facilities. Do you two want to come along and see the place?"

Both teens answered in the affirmative. The three then set to their lunches. After they had returned the trays they walked over to one of the many hangers by the airfield. The crashed aircraft was being carefully removed from its resting point and loaded on to a large flatbed transport by means of a huge crane.

"Any clues from the crash?" Willow asked.

"The plane was a stolen cargo jet that had a basically crash-proof passenger compartment refitted into it. There were six

seats in the container so that's how many thieves there probably were. No fingerprints or DNA found yet and the container was custom made, complete with a remote pilots station so that there was literally no one in the cockpit at the time of the impact. All the serial numbers on any of the gauges had been removed so the parts are going to be almost impossible to trace." By this time the three were standing next to a streamlined helicopter with stubby wings and an odd looking pair of rotor blades stacked one above the other. Tom walked around the aircraft making sure it was in good condition.

"This is our ride?" Buffy asked.

"Yes. It's the Mark V Whirling Duck. I designed the Mark I in 1954 so this one has a few more improvements. Climb in," Tom pressed an inset switch on the side and a door opened in the sleek hull while a pair of steps extended. Willow and Buffy stepped up and in to find themselves in a comfortable passenger cabin set up like a business jet.

"Buffy, go forward and sit in the Co-Pilot's seat. Willow, you can either sit back here or sit in the cockpit jumpseat," Tom was already heading forward as he spoke. Buffy and Willow followed him into the cockpit.

After showing the two teens how to adjust their seats and use the headsets, Tom took his seat and strapped himself in. He then walked Buffy through the pre-flight checklist, pointing out instruments and controls as needed. When this was completed he contacted the control tower.

"Duck-12 requesting clearance for VTOL takeoff. File for IFR to Fearing, Tom Swift, Pilot in Command."

"Got it, Duck-12. You are cleared for VTOL run up. Flight plan being filed. Will notify when clear to lift," the headset squawked.

Tom pressed a button on a side panel and the Whirling Duck slowly started pulling out of the hanger until it was sitting on top of a huge yellow 'H' painted on the hardpan. There was a loud clank and Willow saw out of the side window a small wheeled tractor rolling out of the way. Tom noticed her gaze and smiled.

"Easier and safer than having somebody push it out," he then pressed the ignition button and told Buffy to watch the engine temperature and pressure gauges. A loud whine started building behind them and the rotors, visible through the roof of the clear cockpit began to spin in opposite directions.

"They counter-rotate so you don't need a tail rotor, right?" Willow asked.

"That's right. How are the gauges, Buffy?"

"All of them are in the green," Buffy replied confidently.

"Great! Swift Control, this is Duck-12. VTOL run up complete. Request clearance for lift," Tom placed his hands lightly on the controls.

"Duck-12, flight plan submitted. You are cleared to lift to Flight Level 5 initial."

"Thank you, Swift Control. Duck-12 lifting," Tom gently twisted the collective and the angle of the rotors changed so that they bit into the air and hoisted the Whirling Duck off the ground. In a matter of seconds the aircraft was heading up like a rocket. Tom switched on the radar and started teaching the girls what the various symbols meant. When they finally arrived at 5000 feet in altitude, Tom pushed forward on the control yoke and the Duck rocketed forward.

In a few minutes Tom asked for and received permission to ascend to a much higher altitude, Flight Level 50 or 50,000 feet.

"Tom, I didn't think helicopters could go that high," Willow spoke up.

"Who said this was a normal helicopter. Buffy, look at the panel to your right. The one marked 'Silentenna Systems'. Switch it to 'On' from 'Standby'."

Buffy did as she was asked and a low hum filled the aircraft. Tom flicked a switch and grinned, "You two might want to look up."

They did and saw the two blade rotors slow, then stop even as the Duck gained speed. The rotors were now locked in the pattern of a large letter 'X'. Looking forward they saw that Tom

was advancing the throttles and the airspeed indicator was approaching 700 knots.

Willow looked at Tom, "You have a supersonic helicopter?"

"Doesn't everybody?" the tall inventor replied with a grin, "Sikorsky came up with this idea back in the 70s after borrowing some of SSI's concepts of the original Whirling Duck. I borrowed back some of their ideas. It seemed fair. Especially since they canceled the S-69 project."

Willow looked back at the airspeed indicator. It was reading well over 800 knots now, "Where was the sonic boom?"

"Good catch. The Silentenna sends out an interference pulse so we don't disturb our neighbors. So, Buffy, want to try handling it? The computer will keep you from being too heavy handed and I'll be ready to correct if necessary."

"I guess so," Buffy gingerly gripped the control yoke in front of her and in a few moments was flying Tom's amazing heliplane.

At the speed they were traveling, it didn't take long before they saw the Atlantic Ocean below them. Tom took over from Buffy and after contacting Fearing control slowed from supersonic flight and hovered in to a soft landing.

A jeep was waiting for them, and hopping in they rode over to the main administration building.

"Wait here a second," Tom told the two girls then he headed inside.

Fearing was a bustling modern facility. There were several hangers and four launch towers next to the runway. A large vehicle assembly building, what looked like a fuel storage area and several barracks and miscellaneous buildings completed the scene. Out in front of the admin building was a large bronze plaque. Willow walked over to it.

It was a list of names and dates with the phrase:

**"To Those Who Strived..."**

engraved at the top. The first name inscribed was Komorov

dated 1967, then came Dobrovolsky, Patsayev, and Volkov in 1971, Barclay and Davis in 1973, Jarvis, McAuliffe, McNair, Onizuka, Resnik, Smith, and Scobee in 1986, and finally Husband, McCool, Anderson, Brown, Chawla, Clark, and Ramon in 2003. The bottom was inscribed,

**"They Will Be Missed."**

"What is that Wills?" Buffy called over.

"A memorial."

## Chapter Eight — A Little History

Tom exited the building to find the two teens examining the memorial plaque.

"Tom," asked Willow, "I recognize most of these names, but who are Barclay and Davis?"

"Slim Davis and Bud Barclay. The first and only private sector astronauts to die in space. Bud was my best friend and my brother in law. Slim had been a pilot for SSI for almost twenty years. They died when a piece of space junk from a failed satellite launch hit them when they were preparing to re-enter atmosphere from a routine flight up to the Space Wheel," Tom said sadly. "Space flight is still dangerous even though we've been doing it on a commercial basis since the 50s."

"That is so sad Tom," Willow patted the inventor on the arm, "I lost one of my closest friends in high school to gang violence. And a lot more people I knew during graduation."

Tom looked at the redhead curiously, "Graduation?"

"Oh! You didn't know? Our school had a massive gas leak and blew itself up on graduation day. The Principal, the Mayor and a lot of our graduating class died in the explosion," Willow explained.

"It was *so* not of the good," Buffy added.

"That sounds terrible," Tom commiserated.

"Our town had a lot of drug related gang violence, that's why Wills and I both were on the Urban Watch. We were all about doing the make-a-difference thingy." Buffy explained.

"Well Shopton doesn't have that sort of trouble at least," Tom sighed as the trio walked towards the vehicle assembly building. "We had all types problems with espionage back during the cold war, but these days it's been pretty quiet. Until yesterday of course."

By this time they had arrived at the almost six-hundred foot tall building. The massive main doors were closed so they

entered the cavernous facility through a smaller loading dock door. Inside, two Star Streak cargo rockets were being prepped for launch. The two hundred foot tall spacecraft looked dwarfishly tiny inside the massive space, even sitting on the fifty-foot tall transport pads.

"Tom, this place is incredible!" Buffy said in awe.

"Yeah, it is pretty neat," a smile started playing on Tom's lips. "Want to see it from above?"

"Well duh! Willow?" the blond looked over at the redhead, "You up for high altitude viewage?"

Willow was staring at the bustling complex of machinery and workers with a look of wonder, "You invented all this Tom?"

"Of course not," the tall man laughed, "Parts of it sure, but this company has never been a one man show. At least not since the turn of the 20th century, then it was just my grandfather. This way to the elevator... Unless of course you want to climb a lot of stairs?"

"Nooo," Willow snapped out of her reverie, "Elevator good!"

Tom and Buffy laughed at the teenage genius's response as the three headed towards the way up, while even Willow grinned at her own reaction.

The view from above was spectacular. Tom had handed the two girls sound-dampening earmuffs due to the roar of the air handling system.

"This is like the building at NASA in Florida isn't it? It's so tall that you get rain clouds if the air isn't circulated?"

Tom nodded in the affirmative, "SSI designed that one too. We used to work really closely with the government space program until the 80s."

"What happened?" Buffy asked.

"We had a... difference of opinion about military presence in space."

"The Strategic Defense Initiative?" Willow piped up.

Tom winced and nodded, "I didn't like the idea of nuclear



weapons in unstable orbits."

"Oh, that could be very crashy if something went wrong," Buffy responded.

"Or even worse, if something went right..." Tom looked down at the spacecraft far below. "Now I stick with space industry and NASA sticks with space research and the military doesn't get access to all my stuff carte blanche. They have to really convince SSI that what they want is truly needed for crew and mission safety reasons."

"Good for you!" Buffy looked over at Tom with new respect, "Just taking orders without knowing why and agreeing with them usually means trouble."

"Oh yes," Tom admitted.

"So has the government caused problems for you because of that?" Willow asked.

Tom nodded again, "We used have a lot less trouble with the Atomic Energy Commission. Now we can't sell our Mighty Midgets or even use them in our own internal projects. That's why we've switched over everything to the Solar Batteries. We even had to shut down the Citadel."

"The Citadel?" Buffy said curiously.

"SSI's nuclear materials production facility in New Mexico. We originally built it for the U.S. Air Force and Navy so they would have a steady supply of material for power plants and weapons. Now it's covered with the same blend of Tomasite, concrete and Inertite as we developed to seal off Chernobyl. The difference is, the Citadel never had an accident. We were ordered to just seal it off.

"Fortunately they can't mess with our space presence or launches due to the facts that all the major media companies have spokes on the Space Wheel, we wrote the book on launch safety and techniques, and that most of the companies that hire lobbyists need our space lift capacity. We actually do most of our commercial launches from our facility on Loonau Island in the Pacific. Fearing is used primarily for Research and Development

of spacecraft and marine technology."

"Can't they try to grab your company?" Willow asked.

"Privately held. Never sold stock. The best safety record in the aviation, nuclear, marine, transportation, and construction industry. They could try, but they would have a heck of a time doing it," Tom shook his head wearily, "Well ladies, did you enjoy the view?"

Both teens agreed vigorously. It really was amazing looking down at the tiny figures flitting between the readying spacecraft.

They headed back down to ground level and soon were outside in the sun again. Next Tom walked them down the flight line and pointed out various spacecraft including the Star Spear, his very first, with which he had won the International Rocket Society prize. The craft was in a storage cradle and still looked ready to launch. When Willow asked if it was, Tom nodded yes.

Also in the spacecraft area was the Challenger, the weird gyroscope-looking thing that Buffy had spotted the model of in Tom's office. It was gigantic, positively dwarfing almost everything around it except for the launch towers and vehicle assembly building.

"That's the ship that got you to the moon right?"

"Sure is, Willow, and a lot of other interesting places too. The only pure repelatron ship I've built."

"Sorry to keep sounding like the dumb blond that I am, but what's a repelatron?" Buffy asked.

"You're definitely not a dumb blond," Tom replied. "A repelatron... Well, here's the principle. A long ways back I had discovered of a previously unknown electromagnetic radiation given off by each element and its isotopes. As you know, matter is made up of molecules, which in turn are composed of atoms. And each atom has a central nucleus with one or more electrons orbiting around it, like tiny planets going around a sun."

As he paused Buffy said, "I get the idea so far. But keep it simple for us blondish types."

"Well, the inner arrangement of these atoms is different in

each kind of matter. For instance, iron has one kind, carbon another. And because their atoms are different, they each give off a distinct type of radiation, which can be seen under a spectroscope."

"Sort of a colorized chemical fingerprint, Is that right?" Willow spoke up.

"Precisely," Tom answered.

"The molecules in anything," Tom went on, "are made up of various kinds of atoms, each of which gives off its own special radiation, as I just explained. If I can pick up and analyze the radiation of a substance, and then generate a counter-radiation wave, I can repel the substance. This counter-radiation will be exactly out of phase with the incoming radiation—and thus exert a repelling force on the material analyzed.

"And for every action..." Tom trailed off.

"...There's an equal and opposite reaction," Willow finished.

"So you aim the repela-dealies..." Buffy said thoughtfully.

"Repelatrons," Tom corrected her. "Those dishes that are mounted on the rails surrounding the main cabin."

"Repela-*dealies*," Buffy stuck out her tongue at Tom, "at something solid. If it's less massive than what the repelatron is attached to, it moves. If it's more massive, the repelatron and whatever it's attached to moves."

"Exactly! Just like a bullet. The bullet is lighter than the gun or the shooter so it goes one way. The opposite force from the explosion is what's called recoil," Tom looked pleased.

"So if this thing is so awesome, why haven't we seen a lot of use of it? Like flying cars and stuff?" Buffy asked.

"Power," Willow stated as she looked at the strange-appearing spaceship, "Those searchlighty things above the cockpit windows. Are they solar collectors of some kind?"

Tom smiled happily, "You're right, Willow. Power is the problem. Repelatrons are hungry for electricity. They're really only practical for transportation with an almost limitless source

of it. The Challenger has auxiliary power systems to get it above the atmosphere, but for space it uses a massive solar collection system. The solar conversion units you spotted are basically emergency power in case of trouble. The actual primary collection system is not deployed at the moment.

"And Buffy, we do have flying cars using repelatrions at SSI. Problem is we're not allowed to use the power cells we designed the car around so they are not as useful as you might expect."

"The Mighty Midget atomic cell, I bet," Willow said.

Tom nodded again, "Well, I'd better get you two back to Shopton. Don't worry... you'll be coming out here again for diving practice at least. Buffy, on the way back I'm going to walk you through the take-off and rotor to fixed wing transition on the Duck."

The three headed back to their aircraft for the trip home.

## Chapter Nine — Future Plans and Pursuit

The flight back to SSI was uneventful, even with Buffy learning how to control the Duck. Tom was pleasantly surprised to see how quickly the blond picked up the feel of the craft and praised her on her reaction time. When they arrived at the plant the duo said their farewells and headed back to their apartment.

For the rest of the week, while Buffy continued her flying lessons, Willow continued working in the Mechanical Engineering shop learning how all the various systems and tools were used and which materials were used for which purposes. When she asked why she was starting in this area of the plant Abe laughed.

"From what I understand, Tom wanted you to get familiar with all the aspects of SSI. The company started out as construction and specialized precision machining to order. If you understand how something is assembled you have a better than average chance of putting it back together if it breaks, and all things will break. Usually at the absolute worst possible time."

Willow nodded vigorously in agreement at that statement.

"Anyway," Abe continued, "You'll be heading over to Electronics Fabrication and Prototyping next week."

"Aww, I'll miss working with you guys..." the redhead looked sad.

"Don't worry, you'll see us around and remember, you can always drop by to say hi and even lend a hand if you're bored," Abe grinned.

Willow smiled at that and the two returned to finishing Willow's training on welding aluminum.

The weekend finally arrived and the two teens had some time off. The discussion was shopping or beach and beach won. At least for Saturday. Buffy had hopes that shopping would win on Sunday. Her statement being, "All those shoes need good homes."

I mean they get so lonely stuck in a mall."

But on Saturday it was the beach at Lake Carlopa as the girl's destination. After packing towels, snacks, sun block and a big hat for Willow, they changed into their swimsuits and pulling shorts and t-shirts on over them, headed out for the three block walk to the lake.

When they arrived they saw a crowd of people with the same idea as they had, so they hurried to stake out some prime beach real estate and laid out their towels.

"Wills," Buffy said, "I'm going to burn off some energy with a quick swim," as she stripped off her shirt and shorts.

"Have fun, Buffy," Willow was spreading sun block on to protect her fair skin as Buffy ran off towards the water.

Lying back in the sun Willow thought about the events of the past week. It had certainly been a surprising start to a summer job. A high technology wonderland and a mysterious theft were not what she had been expecting out of it.

She sat up startled when a wet hand touched her shoulder.

"You'd probably better turn over, Wills, before you become BFF flambé." Willow blinked and saw Buffy grinning at her, "You were out cold."

"I'm sorry, Buffy," Willow apologized.

"Why are you sorry? You were tired, therefore, the nappage follows. On other stuff, what do you think of our summer internships?" Buffy looked quizzically at her friend.

"That's what I was thinking about before the unexpected nap actually," Willow grinned. "Tom is a different kind of boss and the people I'm working with are great. I am switching departments on Monday though."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I won't be greasemonkey Willow, but soldermonkey Willow," she rolled over on to her stomach

"Grats I guess?" Buffy lay down on her towel and adjusted her sunglasses.

"Yeah. Grats is good. How was the swim? Any true hotties out there?"

"The scenery has potential, but what are you asking for? I believe your personal hottie is arriving tomorrow night."

"Well yeah, but..." Willow mumbled.

"But nothing, Missy. Oz is driving his fingers to the bone to get here and probably misses you terribly," Buffy said mock-sternly, while shaking her finger admonishingly at her friend.

"Hey! We've been texting each other. This morning he sent me the sweetest message, 'Will see you tomorrow!'"

"For Oz that's almost a soliloquy," Buffy mused, "The man does miss you."

"You're not just whistling Dixie, buster!"

Buffy started laughing at Willow's serious tone and in a few seconds the redhead joined her friend in giggles. They spent the rest of the afternoon tanning and swimming.

The next day the pair caught a cab to the mall where they, with Buffy in the lead, investigated all potential sources of fashion. Willow was exhausted by the end of it while Buffy was still going strong. Taking pity on her redheaded friend the blond mandated a sit down with a cool beverage in the food court.

"So how are the flying lessons going?" Willow asked.

"Great. I've been doing ground school in the morning and simulator time in the afternoon," Buffy replied.

"What kind of plane?"

Buffy tapped her lower lip before responding, "A few actually. Mostly it's the Pigeon Special. That's SSI's general aviation propeller plane. I've also gotten some simulator time on the Pigeon Elite, that's the business jet, the Bronco, that's a twin-engine cargo plane, the Whirling Duck and another helicopter called the Skeeter. Except for the Special and the Duck, I've only spent about half an hour or so at a time flying the others. Tom said it was for familiarization purposes so I would understand how different types of instrument layouts were set up."

"Which is your favorite so far?"

"They're all fun. The Bronco is the most boring probably, while the Skeeter is the trickiest. It's a pure helicopter not like the Duck's plane-ish tendencies. The Duck is really a blast to fly though. You know it can hit Mach 1.2?"

"Really?" Willow was impressed.

"Yup. By the end of next week I should be finished with ground school and start getting stick time in real aircraft."

"Is Tom teaching you all this?"

"No, Wills, a couple of his test pilots are my main trainers. And his sister, Sandy, is supposed to start helping me next week."

"You are so lucky," Willow felt jealous.

"Tom said he's going to get me as close to qualified for flight instructor as he can before we leave. I'm going to be doing a lot of flying on weekends I guess to get my two hundred and fifty hours. Once I get certified you will definitely be my first student."

"Don't you have to have a commercial pilot's license before you can instruct?"

"Sure do, apparently I'll be leaving here with single and multi engine prop and jet, rotorcraft, high altitude, high performance, and hopefully, commercial fixed wing, and instructor fixed wing. Tom says he likes to be thorough, but I really he just likes filling my brain up till it explodes with non-accessorizing based stuff."

"That's a heck of a lot!"

"Sure is, at least a lot of the flying time overlaps for different certifications, but my head is still doing the hurty thing when I think about how much studying I have to do. At least I'll have serious job skills when I'm done, though!" Buffy pounded her head on the food court table.

"Careful, Buffy," Willow cautioned teasingly, "Furniture breakage equals bad."

Buffy peeked though her tousled hair and smiled at her best



friend, "I'll remember that. We'd better get back and get you primed for the Ozman's arrival! It won't be good if there isn't a hot looking Willow waiting to see him."

Willow blushed, "Thanks, Buffy, I'll call a cab."

The two friends got up and headed home.

Buffy had gone out for her evening walk when she noticed a nondescript car holding two men in suits parked across the street from the girl's hotel. She was fairly sure that the men had not realized she had seen them, as they were parked deep in the shadows where a normal person wouldn't even notice. What struck Buffy's interest is that they apparently were aiming some kind of binocular camera object at her.

Buffy grinned and made her way along the trail she had usually been walking. Oz had arrived and was up in the room with Willow so the redhead had a bodyguard plus her own skills. Occasionally, Buffy would glance behind her to see if the car was still following her, and to her well-disguised glee, it was!

The next step was to turn a corner sharply to break the line of sight and then scramble over a wall so that she could circle around behind her shadowers.

Staying low and close to the brush at the side of the road, she crept up behind the vehicle which had stopped once the occupants had lost sight of their target.

One of them, the driver, lit a cigarette, "Where'd the heck did she vanish to? Any trace of her on the millimeter wave?"

The passenger moved around on his seat. As he was a big man, there was much squeaking on the vinyl seat, "No movement, and with this heat wave I can't get any decent results on the thermal."

"Scan for her bracelet then."

Buffy gasped. *They were searching now for her SSI ID!*



## Chapter Ten — Captured

Willow and her boyfriend Oz were sitting on Willow's couch talking about the, currently purple-haired, musician's trip east.

"I wish you could have flown with us. It was really pretty looking at the country below," Willow explained.

"Luggage problems," Oz replied.

"Yeah getting that on board or shipped would have caused a bunch of shouldn't be asked type of questions. So drive it had to be. How's Devon and the rest of the band?"

"Got a sweet gig as session musicians in Reno. Sent me a postcard with dollar signs printed all over it."

"Those sellouts to their art!" Willow sounded indignant.

"Art doesn't buy you lunch," Oz smiled at his girlfriend's reaction. "Devon thinks it's good practice so Sam doesn't screw up the chord changes... more. I missed you, Willow."

"I missed you too, as I kept texting you every couple of hours or so, Mister."

"I noticed. It was nice seeing those. So I give you a ride to work tomorrow?" Oz asked.

"I'm not sure how you'll get the van on to the plant property... How about we take the shuttle tomorrow and we ask Phil about parking permits and stuff?"

"Sure. Who's Phil?" Oz looked curious.

"Phyllis Radnor. She's the... acting head of security for SSI. Oh, Oz, let me tell you what happened on Monday last week..." Willow began to explain.

Meanwhile Buffy was still hidden beside her shadowers' vehicle. The large man in the passenger seat had just produced some sort of hand-held device and was staring intently at the screen.

"Only bracelets I'm picking up within a mile are the ones we have. It's like she just disappeared into thin air," he sounded

confused.

Buffy glanced down at her naked wrist. She had taken her bracelet off the day before so she wouldn't lose it at the beach and hadn't gotten around to putting it back on. She grinned at the fact that, for once, not wearing jewelry was beneficial. Then the men started speaking again.

"So, Mullins," the big man spoke, "What now?"

"Not sure," replied the driver, "Maybe Lewis has managed to find out why the two girls are the new confidantes to Swift and how they managed to go straight to the lab building so quickly. The inside team was almost caught."

"I'd also like to know how that little blond we're following managed to stay conscious for a full minute after exposure to the gas. Holding your breath doesn't help with that skin-penetrant stuff," the large man added.

Buffy could see the faint shadow of Mullins, the driver, head nodding in agreement, "From what I was told that gas is supposed to put you under in less than five seconds. That's the other reason the boss would like to talk to her."

"To talk to her, we have to bring her to him. To bring her to him, we have to catch her, and to catch her we have to find her," the large man methodically stated.

"I know, Baxter," Mullins sounded irritated, "Do another sweep with the millimeter wave and then one with the thermal. Maybe she'll pop up?"

Buffy thought quickly and pulling out her cellphone sent a text to Willow. "GETTING CAPTURED NY PLATE 45H-YT2  
MULLINS BAXTER LEWIS XOXOX B"

She then slipped away the same way she had arrived and headed back to where Baxter and Mullins had lost sight of her, after removing some of the items she had had concealed in her jacket and tucking her cellphone in her boot. This time she was walking back towards where the car was parked, however.

As she walked past it she heard the faint whispers of "Get ready!" and "On it!" then a car door being quietly opened behind

her. Rolling her eyes she kept walking as though she hadn't noticed and tried not to struggle too violently or effectively when she was grabbed, tied, hooded and popped in the trunk.

Willow's phone pinged with an incoming message.

On reading it she immediately told Oz then called SSI and requested to speak to Phil. In a few minutes a sleepy sounding acting head of security was on the line.

"This is Radnor. What is it?"

"Phil, it's Willow. Buffy's been kidnapped! She managed to text me with a license plate number and three names," Willow said panickedly.

"What!?! I'll be right there!" Phil now sounded wide awake, "Could you give me the number and the names? And also, is Buffy wearing her SSI bracelet?"

"No, on the bracelet front. I saw it next to the sink," Willow replied.

"That would be too easy... give me the number, names, and Buffy's cellphone number. If the kidnappers haven't gotten it from her yet, we can track it."

"Will do!" the redhead gave the young security expert the information.

"Got it! Now hold tight, Willow, I'll be right there!" Phil hung up.

"So Buffy's been kidnapped?" Oz asked, "Do the kidnappers realize what a big mistake they've made?"

Willow stopped panicking and started to grin, "Probably not. She might've not bothered to put the word 'Intentionally' before 'Captured' and after 'Getting', but I'm pretty sure it's there in spirit." She glanced in the mirror and saw her own smile and immediately put on a grim face. "Must stay sombered up while Phil's around," she said to herself. "The grabbee is supposed to be the one in danger, not the grabbers..."



## Chapter Eleven — Motives and Rescues

**B**uffy had learned at least one thing by being captured. She did not enjoy being transported in a car trunk with, or probably even without, having a cloth bag pulled over her head. At least the roads they were driving over were relatively smooth so she wasn't being bounced around.

Finally the car pulled off pavement and onto a dirt road. Buffy wondered where in the heck she was going to end up and whether Willow had called out for help.

The car pulled to a stop with a crunching of gravel and the trunk was swung open. Buffy felt rough hands lifting her out and standing her on her feet. From the sounds of the footsteps on the gravel there was the big guy, Baxter, next to her. The driver and boss type, Mullins, was to her right and about six feet away. And a third guy had just exited some kind of building to her left and about twenty feet away. She listened carefully for any other movement but didn't hear any more. She smiled to herself. Three wouldn't be any problem.

Baxter guided her towards the building and Mullins spoke up for the benefit of the newest guy probably, "No names! Get the leader on the horn!"

The third person went back inside. A few seconds later, Buffy and her captors entered as well. The place echoed like empty wood and there was a moldy, dusty smell with an overlay of hot electronics. The door closed behind her and even through the thick hood, she could see the harsh greenish glow of an institutional fluorescent light.

"Hey, Number One!" a voice Buffy hadn't heard before called out, "I have the Leader's signal."

"Thank you, Number Two," it was Mullins' voice. "Number Three keep an eye on her."

"No problem, One," Baxter replied. Buffy was shoved down

roughly till she was seated on the floor, her back against a wall. It sounded like Mullins and Number Two had left the room she was currently in and Baxter had lowered his mass into a wooden chair, which creaked and groaned under his size.

Buffy leaned back and pressed her ear against the wall. The wood of the building helped concentrate the conversation in the other room. Unfortunately all she could hear was a one-sided conversation. "Mullins is probably wearing a headset," she thought.

"Yes, sir," she heard obviously coming in in the middle of the discussion judging from the lack of introductions, "We have the Summers girl. We grabbed her during her nightly walk."

There was a pause as Mullins' unseen and unheard boss asked something then Buffy's captor replied, "No sir, it was easy. She wasn't wearing her bracelet so we had a little trouble tracking her for a minute or two, but we got her unharmed."

Another pause then, "No sir, we were not followed. Baxter kept a close eye behind us with the thermal, and millimeter wave showed no aerial pursuit."

Yet another pause, "Let me check. Davis, any word from the inside team?" Mullins's voice had the ring of command.

The third man who Buffy now matched voice to as Davis replied, "Not yet, but they're not supposed to call in until midnight..."

"...or unless there is a problem," Mullins finished, "Sounds like there are no problems so far then. Good. Go check on our new guest and make sure Baxter's not asleep."

"Got it, Jack!"

"So his name is Jack Mullins..." Buffy mused.

The tone of Mullins' voice changed back to respectful as he spoke to his distant commander, "Sir. No emergency calls from the team. Everything appears to be on schedule," a pause then, "Yes, sir, Mullins out." Buffy heard a chair scrape as Mullins stood up and then the sounds of approaching footsteps. She made herself as limp as possible and continued to listen.



"Status, Number Three?" Mullins spoke to Baxter.

"I think she passed out. She hasn't even twitched really since we got her here."

"I got something for that," it sounded like Mullins was rummaging through a bag full of bottles and papers.

"Ah, here we go," He sounded pleased.

Buffy rolled her eyes. She guessed she wasn't going to be able to play possum and wait until the reinforcements showed up. Her suspicion was confirmed when a neatly manicured hand slipped under her hood and began waving a broken ammonia capsule under her nose.

"Wakey wakey, Miss Summers. We have some questions for you..."

Willow and Oz were sitting in Phil's truck while Phil drove. The tall security officer had swung by on her way from her home to SSI to pick them up.

"So, Tom is waiting for us, right?" Willow asked.

"You can count on it, Willow! And don't worry, I'm sure she's okay. She's a smart woman. She did have the presence of mind to send that message after all," Phil looked over at the nervous appearing redhead.

"Relax, Willow," the quiet musician patted his girlfriend on the arm comfortingly.

"Thanks, Oz."

In a few minutes Phil was wheeling into the SSI Administration Building parking lot and the three piled out and headed for Tom's office.

The older inventor was seated behind his desk with a map of Shopton and surrounding area projected on the wall. He turned to face them.

"I was able to track her cellphone signal to here," a small red dot appeared on the map next to a patch of hills and forest, "After this point it just disappeared."

"Jamming?" Phil asked.

"Not really... It was more as if something absorbed the signal. If it was jamming I could triangulate on the electromagnetic interference," Tom scratched his chin.

"That sounds suspiciously like your old security amulets."

"Phil, the thought had crossed my mind," Tom said dryly. He looked over at the two baffled teens. "I assume you're Mister Osbourne?"

"Oz please, sir."

"Alright, Oz, I'm Tom. Oz, Willow, before we had the encrypted RFID bracelets as a security measure we used a low powered radar system that was attuned to human tissue density. The amulets we used then trapped the low powered pulse that basically made you invisible to the radar. Intruders would not have the pulse trapped and would show up as white blips on the main screen. The system worked very well, but as computers grew more advanced, even the low-powered search signal would cause interference and errors."

Willow spoke up, "So you think someone set up the same sort of thing for cellphone signals?"

"Possibly. We know that whoever is behind this is probably also behind the attack on SSI and those attackers used some very sophisticated technology and software." Tom stood up and walked over to the map.

"We know Buffy was grabbed here judging from her location at the time of her transmission of a text message to you," he pointed at an area about a mile from the apartment. "I was able to map her cellphone's location signal as she was transported, by truck or car probably, along this road at a speed of about forty miles an hour. At this point..." he gestured again at the red dot, "...her signal turned on to a dirt road and vanished."

"How big an area?" Oz asked quietly.

"Assuming they stick to dirt roads, about fifteen square miles," Phil replied looking at the map.

Oz closed his eyes for a second, "The signal trapper would be

noticeable if people started losing their cellphone service for no obvious reason."

"That must be the reason they started the area off the main road," Willow responded.

"How much power would something like that pull?" Oz asked.

"Not much really. A home emergency generator could power it," Tom answered.

"Thermal signature," was Oz's next word.

Tom started smiling, "That's brilliant, Oz! But I think we can do better than raw thermal differentials. This is SSI, home of the impossible, after all." He spoke into thin air, "Communications, I need a channel to the Space Wheel. Priority One!"

"George, this is Tom, set the prober on low frequency generalized search from 300 Terahertz to 300 Gigahertz and sweep this coordinate array," he rattled off a series of numbers. "Send the real time imagery to my phone. We're looking for a cluster of sources. Three or four in the human thermal range close to a high output motor and probably a source that is radiating in the higher communications bands."

"Prober?" Willow asked.

"Yes, it's a telescope that uses an electromagnetic virtual lens that's tunable to almost any range of the electromagnetic spectrum. I've got the one on the Space Wheel being aimed towards Shopton and it will be searching for a particular type of heat signature..."

"...Buffy and her captors and the generator powering their trappy gadget!" Willow finished. She turned and kissed Oz, "You are brilliant!"



## Chapter Twelve — Pursuit

**B**uffy was sitting in a chair with a bright light shining in her now unhooded eyes. They had tied her wrists and ankles to the chair frame that seemed fairly robust as well. Number One, Mullins, had been asking her questions about why she and Willow had gone directly to Lab 3 after she had woken up.

"Before I went unconscious I saw a group of people going towards that building. Why you are holding me? I'm a nobody!" she pleaded, trying to sound convincingly scared.

"No, Miss Summers," a smooth, unusually accented voice filled the room, "You are most definitely a somebody. No one has ever resisted that vapor for as long as you have and I am very curious to find out why. Number One!"

"Yes, sir!" Mullins replied briskly

"Transportation is en route for the young lady. You and your team need to leave that site immediately. Swift and his associates have turned that accursed prober of his to this vicinity. Also, make sure she is well secured for transport."

"Of course, sir. Number Two, start destroying the radios. Number Three, hood her and tuck her in the closet for now. I'll get the car around."

The three kidnapers started their tasks as Buffy wondered where that fourth voice had come from and who the mysterious leader of this group was. She felt the hood coming over her head and realized she had to move now to escape.

Flexing her wrists, she felt the rope part and reaching back grabbed Baxter's—Number Three's—wrists hauling the larger man over her head causing him to crash into the lamp that had been shining into her field of vision and slam into the floor on his back.

Quick as a flash she reached down and broke the bonds on her ankles and was rolling to one side even as Baxter tried to grab her with one of his massive hands. She kicked him in the

side as he struggled to rise to his feet and at the same moment hurled the chair she had been tied to at Davis who was on his way to the radios. The impact felled him with a satisfying crash.

She looked down at the gasping Baxter. Her kick had knocked the wind completely out of him and he was attempting to get some air. Using the remnants of the rope, his jacket, and his belt she soon had him hogtied. Moving quickly to Davis she soon had him trussed like a securely bound pot roast as well.

"One left," she thought to herself. Moving to the outside door, she opened it a crack and peeked outside. She saw Mullins' car, headlights off, pulling up so she closed the door and waited, pulling her cellphone from her boot. She soon saw she had no signal, so she tapped her chin thinking. At that moment she heard the faint yet telltale *thwap thwap* of a helicopter approaching. For a second she thought that it might be Willow and Tom, but it didn't sound like the Duck or a Skeeter.

"What to do?" she thought. If she ran she was fairly sure she could elude her searchers until she got to safety. If she stayed she would be subject to a whole new set of questions that she really did not want to answer...

"We got a reading! A massive sudden heat flare up," Tom called out from his seat in the Duck.

Phil, who was in the co-pilot's seat, looked over, "Where?"

"Due east from the trailhead where the signal was lost. It's in the cellular dead zone about two miles."

"Got it, Boss," Phil looked over her shoulder, "Hang on, we're almost there."

Willow and Oz in the back nodded in assent.

Tom expertly brought the heliplane over the flaming ruins of what used to be a summer cabin.

"Buffy!" Willow cried out. "Is she in there?"

Soon the plane was on the ground and Tom and Phil were hurling small silvery capsules into the roaring blaze. When

flames touched the capsules they burst into a fire-quenching cloud of gas that soon had the conflagration under control. Phil was the first one in wearing a small oxygen mask from the helicopters emergency kit. She came out a few seconds later.

"No bodies! A lot of cooked electronics though."

Willow sighed in relief. At least her friend could still be alive.

Tom's phone buzzed and he instinctively answered it.

"Willow!" he called out, "The signal trapper has failed so we now have a location on Buffy's phone!"

"Where?" Oz asked.

Tom pressed some keys on his phone and began swinging it in front of him like a metal detector, "Very close," he replied.

After a short search they found the phone carefully hidden under some dirt a safe distance away from the burned house.

"Why'd she leave it behind?" Willow asked. Oz shrugged in response. Willow took the phone from Tom and tried turning it on.

"Of course it needs a password," she muttered to herself. "What would Buffy have used?"

She thought for a second and pressed A-N-G-E-L on the keypad. The phone immediately activated. As she looked at the screen she saw the flashing 'To-Do' icon. Pressing it brought up a short video recorded by the phone's camera.

It was Buffy looking excited and tense, "Wills, I got free just before they could wrap me for Air Mail. The leader of the three that grabbed me was a guy named Jack Mullins, his buddies are a really big guy named Baxter, and an electronics guy I think. His name's Davis. They are led by a guy with a spooky foreign voice they called 'The Leader' and are support for some kind of inside team that's making a move tomorrow. The leader sent a helicopter to pick me up and I hear it coming in. I'm going to record this and stash my phone, then hitch a ride on their helicopter. Hopefully they won't see me.

"Oh yeah, they have copies of Tom's special bracelets and a

way to spot them as well as something called millimeter wave whatever that is... These guys have a lot of scary tech. Don't worry about me, I've survived worse. Take care, Wills, and I'll see you soon!"

With that the message ended.

"Millimeter wave radar, copies of the bracelets, cell signal trapping, an inside team..." Phil looked worried. Tom had stuck his head inside the cooling building and had just returned.

"It gets worse," he said. "Judging from the radio gear they had in there. They were using an older version of my Private Ear radio system."

"Private Ear? Willow asked

"Something I developed in the early 60s using the first hints of quantum tunneling research. It's a completely secure paired set of transceivers. Untraceable, un-eavesdroppable and un-jamable," Tom shook his head, "The one in there has the telltale antenna design of the third generation systems. The ones developed around the early 70s."

"More of the scary tech Buffy was talking about?" Phil asked.

"Scary that someone else has it? Yes, I'd say so," Tom responded seriously, "I didn't even let the military have this particular version."

"What about the inside team?" Oz asked.

"Inside what?" Phil replied.

"How did the thieves get off the plant without getting spotted?" Oz continued, "Did they even leave?"

The other three looked at him in surprise.

"Back to Lab 3!" Tom yelled as they ran for the jeep.



## Chapter Thirteen — Meltdown

**B**y the time the Duck had arrived back at the plant, Lab 3 had been cordoned off by Security.

"The big question is why did the thieves want people to think the door to the lab had been blown open? Answer, they didn't want people to catch on to the computer virus. There must have been a bunch of bracelets that could open the outside door, but if the inside door was mysteriously opened then you start looking closely at the how. Second, they grabbed something that is incredibly deadly but is almost impossible to open and use. Why? Answer, to make people think that's what they were after!" Willow was building up speed. "So what else were they after?"

"Nothing else was taken from the lab except the anti-protons," Tom interjected.

"That lab. The one with the obviously exploded door... right? How many other labs are in that building? They had control of all the internal doors, which meant they could open and close them without any signs they'd been tampered with. Which lab did they go to and what were they really after?" Willow finished.

Tom, Phil, and the two teens exited the Duck and ran over to the cordon.

"Tom," Phil asked, "No projects have reported anything missing from the building that I know of. Can you think of anything?"

"Nothing missing from any active projects that I know of, but there are three projects on hiatus in there!" Tom smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand, "That has to be it. Willow, Oz, Phil, you are geniuses!"

Tom turned to his acting security chief, "Phil, first one is an advanced neutrino detection system. It would be usable for sensors and communications. It isn't even at semi-usable plans stage. Lab 8, third floor.

"Second is a standing harmonic wave barrier system,

basically a solid fence of sound. It really is only a defensive technology as currently it must be used in a static emplacement. That's in Lab 2 first floor. And lastly is a negative charge suppression tunneling device. That one has a prototype. Lab 5 on the second floor."

"Got it," Phil called out to a group of security to follow her and headed for the main door.

"Tom," Willow asked, "That negative charge suppressor. Wouldn't that be a disintegration ray?"

"Well, yes."

"That's how they're getting out, they've been in there all week!"

"Phil," Tom called out to thin air, "Lab 2!"

Just then a crackling call came in over the security radios, "Tell the Boss some kind of field just popped up on the other side of Lab 2's door. It's kind of transparent and Phil's stuck on the other side!"

Tom, Willow, and Oz ran into the lab building. At the end of the hall a loud humming sound was apparent, with a wall that looked like heat waves coming off of blacktop in the sun. Phil was visible walking slowly towards a cleanly cut hole in the floor and then climbing in helped by a masked man in loose coveralls who followed her descent. On the floor, halfway between the hole and the open door, was a red plastic case with a large metal device fastened to the locking mechanism.

"Everybody back!" Tom yelled, "It's the anti-protons!"

There was a mad scramble for the exits and a minute later Lab 2 was filled with lightning and intense waves of heat as the failsafe slow release was tripped.

Tom was heading for his jeep, Willow and Oz in close pursuit. He drove as quickly as possible to one of the hangers and was soon boarding a strange looking machine followed by the teens.

The machine looked like a flattened on top cylinder with a sharply pointed bow and stern. It was mounted on apparently retractable caterpillar treads and was studded with what looked like, at first glance, satellite dishes. By this time though Willow could recognize the telltale design of a repelatron antenna.

The machine was built in two sections over a sliding coupler and as soon as the three had boarded, the sections slid together forming a seamless hull. Tom climbed a short ladder to the pilot's station of this strange machine and began snapping on switches. A loud whine filled the air and the rear of the vehicle started elevating as powerful hydraulic pistons mounted on the rear treads started angling the bow towards the ground. Willow and Oz were quickly strapping themselves in to the padded seats, when through the heavy window of the cockpit, they saw the heavy concrete floor of the hanger begin to dimple and crack as though an invisible weight was crushing it.

"What is this thing, Tom?" Willow asked as it began to slip into the rapidly forming crater.

"This is my Geotron. Think of it as a mechanical mole. Switch on that display over there would you," he gestured at a radar-like screen between the Pilot and Co-Pilot seats.

Willow did so and a fuzzy x-ray like view formed on the large glass display.

Oz started rubbing his ears and asked, "Infra-Sound?"

Tom looked surprised, "Why yes, Oz. That's ISADAR. It's so I can see where I'm going underground. How did you know?"

"Ultra-low frequencies make my ears itch," he shrugged.

By this time the Geotron was completely underground and Tom was navigating it across the plant dodging tunnels, subterranean facilities, power and water lines, and building foundations. The reached the lab building in question and Tom dived his mole to avoid the incredible heat arising from the slow release anti-proton reaction.

"There's the new tunnel!" Willow called out, pointing at a faint trace on the ISADAR display.

Tom turned the mole to run parallel to the trace and followed it until it ended in a construction site foundation, just off the Swift property. Tom surfaced the mole and began broadcasting his location to the Shopton police department along with a request for assistance. By the time the three had exited the underground exploration vehicle and ran to the mouth of the tunnel, there was no trace of the thieves except for Phil Radnor lying unconscious on the ground.

"Good sized truck idled here," Oz said looking at the exit ramp of the foundation pit, "Diesel. Just left."

"How can you tell?" Tom asked curiously as he attempted to revive Phil.

"Exhaust smell is still really fresh," the quiet teen replied.

Willow reached into her pocket and walked over to Oz, "Where was it?"

Oz pointed and Willow bent down to look at the ground while muttering something, then began walking up to the top of the ramp where surreptitiously she scattered a small bit of powder on the ground. The tire tracks appeared briefly then faded just as the footsteps had.

"Tom," she called down, "I think they went south!" In a quieter tone she looked over at Oz who had climbed the ramp to join her, "Can you track it?"

"Not like this."

"Can you keep control?" the redhead asked.

Her boyfriend nodded and smiled, "Don't worry." He headed over towards a clump of bushes and disappeared.

"I'll run interference for you. Be careful!" she whispered to his departing shape.

The police arrived shortly thereafter, and soon Tom was so involved in getting Phil to a hospital that he accepted Willow's story that Oz was somewhere around without question. He asked the police to take Willow back to her hotel, before he got to work returning the Geotron back to SSI.

## Chapter Fourteen — The Raid

Willow woke up when she heard movement in the other room. Glancing at the clock on her nightstand she saw that it was only five in the morning.

Rising from her bed, the redheaded teen moved softly to the door and peered out into the living room. There she saw Oz attempting to quietly put on his shoes. He looked up at her and smiled, "Sorry."

"It's okay, Oz. What did you find?" She moved over and sat down on the couch next to him.

"Easy to track. There's a quarry south of the town. The truck's still there I think."

"Let me get dressed and put some stuff together. They'll probably leave if we don't stop them."

Oz nodded, "Tell Tom?"

Willow shook her head, "No. Then he'll want to know how we went about the finding. I really don't want to answer questions like that."

Oz nodded again, "I agree; get ready. Oh, where's Buffy's special suitcase?"

Willow pointed it out in the mound of luggage in the corner then headed back to her room to change into something more sneaky.

In a few minutes she returned dressed in dark colors and with a small backpack. Oz was standing there waiting with a backpack of his own.

"Did you find what you needed?" Willow asked.

"Sometimes I'm glad Buffy can't imagine packing light," the quiet teen replied.

The pair left the hotel and headed over to Oz's van. Soon they were headed south towards the old quarry.

When they could see the chained off gate to the abandoned

site, Oz pulled off the road. As Willow was about to climb out he placed his hand on her arm.

"Careful. Lots of cameras."

Willow smiled at him, "Not surprising," she unzipped her backpack and started pulling items from it. "I have a synthetic Marcie Ross solution here, though."

"Who?" Oz looked puzzled.

"Oh, sorry. Forgot about that part of it. Anyway not being seen is really, really hard, just being ignored is a lot easier," she started lighting a candle. "This will be good for ten or fifteen minutes as long as we keep moving... I hope."

A few minutes later they were moving as quickly as possible down the rutted road to the quarry. Sticking to the shadows cast by the waning moon, they passed a pair of armed sentries who glanced their direction briefly then promptly disregarded them.

"Works well," Oz whispered.

"Yeah! First try too," Willow sounded giddy, "I think I'm getting the hang of this!"

The pair continued on until they could see the stone pit proper. At the top were a couple of old sheds obviously empty and derelict. Then a road carved into the side of the pit descended down to a large ledge above the small lake filling the very bottom. On this ledge were several more buildings and a parked semi truck.

"Time?" Oz asked.

"Not sure. It doesn't feel like it's fading though. Let's hurry anyways."

Soon they had made their way to beside the truck. Oz cocked his head listening for a second, then relaxed.

"I don't hear any cameras."

Willow nodded, "This place is hard to spot anyway and anybody coming in would be picked up by the cameras and guards at the top. Why waste resources putting stuff down here?"

She looked at the back of the semi-trailer. The doors were

secured with a heavy padlock.

"I wish Buffy were here to open this," Willow sighed.

Oz took off his jacket and shirt and began untying his boots, "Step out of my line of sight. If I don't see you, it'll be easier to keep control."

"You sure?" Willow asked.

Oz smiled encouragingly and nodded in the affirmative. Willow moved around the side and crouched. There were slight groans and rustles, then silence. Then, a snapping sound and more groans.

"It's safe," came Oz's whisper.

Willow moved back around to see Oz pulling his boots back on and rebuckling his belt. The lock's hasp was completely broken and twisted.

"Impressive," she murmured. Oz smiled at the compliment and finished pulling his shirt and jacket back on.

Willow swung one of the doors open and peered inside. In the dark interior was a tarpaulin-covered shape. Flipping back the cover revealed a tripod mounted gun-like device with an oddly shaped barrel. Scrambling up next to it, Willow started searching for any easily accessible components she could remove or destroy. Finding the electronics cabinet, she swung the door open and immediately started unclipping the circuit boards from their mounts.

In a few moments she was done with her sabotage and was slipping down to the ground next to Oz.

"Finished?" he asked. She nodded and the two of them gently swung the door shut. Oz suddenly grabbed Willow and dragged her under the trailer, "Helicopter coming in," he whispered.

People started exiting the closest building and a few ground flares were lit, illuminating the area with a wavering spooky red light. Willow and Oz made their way under the trailer to between the rear wheels of the tractor.

They had just gotten situated underneath the twin differentials

when a shout at the back of the trailer let them know that the lock had been found missing.



## Chapter Fifteen — The Villain of the Piece

The sound of the incoming aircraft covered the teens' movements underneath the semi tractor.

"Oz," Willow whispered, "I can't make us ignorable without lighting the candle, and I'm pretty sure they'll spot that."

Oz thought for a second then pointed at the still open door of the building that was now only ten feet away, "Inside then?"

Willow nodded in agreement, "Last place they'll look. I mean, they just came out of there right?"

The two waited until the entire group of ten men were gathered at the back of the trailer and several had even climbed inside, before they made their move. Moving quickly and sticking to the shadows thrown by the large truck they ran into the building.

They found themselves in a short hallway with three doors. Light streamed from under two while the third was dark. "This way," Willow whispered as she headed towards the dark door.

Soon they were in a small storage area where Willow set up her materials as Oz listened at the door. "Ready," she said as she lit the candle.

A moment later they were back outside trying to move as quickly as possible without making themselves too obvious. This was made far more difficult by the fact that the men at the truck had fanned out to block the roadway to the top of the quarry and were slowly and carefully moving up towards the rim.

"They want to catch us between the perimeter guards and the guys from down here," Willow whispered to Oz.

"Looks like it. Any ideas?"

"Do the sneaky thing between two of the lower guys and then make a run for it to your van?"

"Okay," Oz thought for a second, "I could run faster and carry

you. Might be dangerous."

Willow's eyes widened, "Are you sure?"

"The running faster part or the dangerous part?"

"Yes?"

Oz nodded, "Both."

"If bad things happen, no smoochies for a month," Willow said resolutely.

"Understood," Oz smiled and he began taking his shoes off. In a minute he was ready and hunched over in front of Willow. She scooped up his discarded clothes and hopped on to his back.

"You're warm," she said almost involuntarily as she wrapped her arms around his neck, "Let's go."

Oz took off at a quick lope zipping past the lower ring of searchers without a sound. He then ran parallel to the outer ring until he could find a break in their coverage. Quickly darting through, he headed back towards where the van was parked, where Willow pulled out his keys and unlocked the back door after swinging down off his back.

Carefully not making eye contact, he jumped into the cage just inside and slammed the door shut. Willow closed the outside door and ran to the driver's seat where she started it up and pulled away from the quarry.

After a few minutes of driving she called back to Oz, "You okay back there?"

"I'm good. Thanks."

Soon they were back at the hotel and, after letting Oz loose, they headed up to Willow's apartment.

"How do we tell Tom?" Willow looked at the recovered circuit boards sitting on the coffee table.

"Not sure. Maybe the truth. Hopefully no silver or bonfires in the future?" Oz looked pensive.

"Yeah, that's probably the best way. I'll call SSI security and tip them off about the quarry."

"Buffy?"

"Let's stay quiet about her Chosen-ship. That's her story after all," Willow replied decisively.

Oz nodded and Willow called the plant before going to bed.

The next morning they were awoken by a knock on the door. Willow, still in her nightgown, tiredly stumbled towards the living room where she found Oz had already answered it.

At the door stood Tom with an expression of deep curiosity on his face.

"Come in," Willow yawned and saw that it was only six in the morning, "Coffee?" she mumbled as she headed for the pot.

"No thank you," Tom said as he entered.

"Those are yours I think," Willow waved towards the stack of circuit boards. "The charge suppressor is kind of missing them." She finished measuring out the coffee and started filling the pot with water.

Tom looked at the stack of electronics in surprise, "By the time we got to the quarry they had left."

"Helicopter," Oz spoke up.

"They took off in a big hurry though. Left a lot of stuff behind. How did you find that place anyway?"

"Tracked the truck," Oz responded casually.

"How?"

Oz looked over at Willow who nodded as she waited for the water to heat.

"By scent," he said.

"What?" Tom looked incredulous.

"I have a sensitive nose," Oz expanded, "I followed them then came back and got Willow. We snuck into the quarry, Willow disabled the charge suppressor, we snuck out."

"It was really that simple?" Tom looked disbelieving.

Willow nodded, "Yeah, pretty much. Oz is fairly awesome."

She poured herself a cup of coffee and took a sip. "Will those missing circuit boards slow them down?"

"Not them, him," Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out a small crystal cube. Suspended in the center was a beautifully carved ebony model of a cobra, hood flared and poised to strike. "This was found at the quarry."

"What's that?" Willow asked, moving closer to get a better look.

"The symbol of an old enemy of mine. The Black Cobra. Now, you'd call him a terrorist, I guess. He runs a research and development organization. Very similar to SSI except centering primarily on weapons development providing support to various dictatorships and criminal businesses."

"He's capable of all the high-tech hanky panky over the last couple of weeks then?" Willow took another sip.

Tom nodded, "Easily. He's the smartest individual I've ever run up against, and he's completely ruthless. To answer your earlier question though," Tom picked up the circuitry, "Yes. The loss of these will slow him down considerably. I have no doubt he can duplicate them given time, but now that we know what to look for we have a much better chance of stopping him."

"How's Phil?" Oz asked.

Tom's face sagged, "Still unconscious. We don't know what they did to her as there are no traces of any odd chemicals in her system and no evidence of head trauma." He looked back up at Oz, "Seriously, you tracked it by scent?"

Oz nodded, "It's a gift."

Tom shook his head, "All right. Still no sign of Buffy and you both don't have to come in today. I'm sure she's still okay though."

Willow nodded in agreement, "She may not look it, but she's really tough." She looked pensive, "Maybe we should come in to work. Now that the inside team is gone SSI is probably the safest place around."

Tom gave Oz another piercing look, "If you're sure, okay. Oz,

you'll report to mechanical engineering. Willow..."

"Electrical assembly right?"

"That's right," the tall inventor answered as he scooped up the circuit boards and turned towards the door, "Oh, and, Oz."

"Yes?"

"Next time you do some tracking... please let me know, I'd like to see it," with that Tom left.

Willow let out a sigh of relief as the door closed, "Well, he knows something's up."

"But not what," Oz answered, "Take your shower and get ready for work. Today will probably be interesting."



## Chapter Sixteen — An Urgent Message

Willow was still yawning when she stepped into the Electrical Engineering building. She had walked with Oz over to Mechanical where she had said hello to Abe and the other machinists before giving her sweetie a hug, a kiss, and a promise to see him at lunch time.

EE was not set up as a huge machine shop as ME was. It was a series of clean white rooms with well-lighted tables. Henry Sterling, the shop supervisor showed Willow around.

"Abe told me some things about you Willow."

"He did?" Willow squeaked.

"Relax," Henry said, "That's a positive statement. He said you learn quickly and are good with your hands."

"Oh! That's nice. So what do we do here?"

"It works sort of like the Mechanical shop. We get schematics from the research groups or Tom. Usually they have built a proof of concept prototype first actually. Anyway, we get the schematics and refine them to use as much off the shelf components as we can. Tom is really bad with using one-off or hand-made components. Granted he can be a mad scientist in a lot of ways and custom built parts I guess is one of them. At least he usually will build the initial one-off so we can copy it," Henry scratched his chin, "Seems to come up with new ways of breaking physical laws in the process."

"Like the repelatrions?" Willow asked.

"Great example. If they didn't exist, I'd tell you they were impossible to make. Tom's shown me the math on those and I have my doctorate in Electrical Engineering and it still made my head explode."

"You have a PhD and you're doing rapid prototyping?"

"Deciphering Tom scribbles requires a doctorate sometimes," Henry grinned.

Willow looked scared at that statement.

"Don't worry. If you have a problem reading something, come to me and I'll translate. I end up doing it for everybody else," he laughed.

He then continued showing Willow the printed circuit board creator, the component storage racks, the automated soldering stations, and the small shop used for creating cases, along with introducing her to the other technicians. By the time lunchtime rolled around, she was in the middle of laying out a simple printed circuit board as practice with the tools.

She was glued to a monitor, carefully laying out a circuit trace on her practice project, when there was a tap on her shoulder.

"Eeep!" she squeaked as she jumped.

"Sorry, Willow," it was Tom and Oz. Tom looked embarrassed for having startled her and Oz looked Oz-like.

"It's okay," the redheaded teen gasped, "I did not just have a heart attack... I think."

Oz patted her on the shoulder, "Come on. Lunch and Buffy news."

"Buffy! Is she okay? How did you get the news? Are we going to get her? When do we leave? Where is she? How long is the trip? Do I need to pack? How will we get..."

"Willow, please breathe," Tom gently interrupted her. Willow's mouth snapped shut like it was spring-loaded. Tom turned to Oz, "Buffy did mention this trait."

"Makes her more endearing," Oz responded before helping Willow out of her chair.

As the three walked over to the cafeteria, Tom filled the teenage genius in. Apparently Buffy had managed to smuggle herself onto the Black Cobra's helicopter after it had landed at the cabin. She had been at the quarry and had seen an alarm go off and the entire security force begin searching. She had not seen what they were searching for.



At this point Tom looked suspiciously at both Willow and Oz, "Anything else you want to tell me?"

Willow shrunk slightly and Oz shook his head, "Can't think of anything at the moment."

Tom continued. "She then said they started packing everything into the helicopter and several trucks that were brought in. Somehow she got on to the helicopter again and found herself landing on a container ship. She apparently got a hold of somebody's cellphone this morning and called SSI. The call came in about twenty minutes ago so I grabbed Oz and came over to get you."

"Do you know where she is?" Willow asked again.

"Somewhere south of New Jersey and out to sea. The signal cut out which means they are probably activating their cellphone stopper again. There are a lot of ships in those sea lanes so picking out the one she's on will not be easy."

"Of course she didn't mention the ship's name," Willow added.

"No," Tom said sadly. "I am amazed that she's managed to stay un-captured this long."

"Buffy is pretty good at the amazing stuff. She tends to make it look scary easy," Willow answered, "It's the normal logical stuff she has issues with."

Tom raised his eyebrows at this. "Anyway, we managed to get a fix off her last location. There is a chance we might be able to track the ship she's on."

"How?" Oz asked.

"I invented something about thirty-five years ago that could help. Not one of my most profitable ones," he added ruefully.

"Anyway lunch first, then we head to the airfield."

"Airfield?" Willow asked.

"You've met the Whirling Duck. It's time to meet the Sea Hound."



## Chapter Seventeen — First by Air

In the hanger, Willow and Oz saw a different type of Swift designed vehicle. It was a large disc-like craft with an open shaft in the hub, running from the top to the bottom. In this shaft was a massive, horizontally mounted, rotor. The saucer had two sets of large windows and rested on retractable tractor treads. At the moment it was in the process of having a large device being attached to one end.

"Meet the Sea Hound," said Tom. "This is a Swift Seacopter."

"Seacopter?" asked Willow.

"It's essentially a nuclear powered underwater helicopter that can also fly in the air. It's consists of a central rotor section with variable pitch blades that provide lift in the air. The pitch of the blades is reversed for submerging and the blades turn slower due to the higher density of water compared to air. The nuclear reactors also power jets that provide steering.

"The big advantage of this kind of submersion," Tom continued, "is that these blades eliminate the need for ballast tanks. With the rotors, the seacopter can easily stay at any level beneath the surface the navigator chooses, merely by adjusting the blade pitch."

Oz looked at the crimson hull, "Cool."

"What's that thingy being mounted on the front?" Willow said as she pointed at the item in question.

Nine long, bell-flared horns projected around the nose of the craft.

"Those," Tom explained, "are repello-spectrograph detectors, or RSG units, with built-in driftometers. They use the identification circuitry from the repelatrns. They're the business end of my aquatomic tracking system.

"They'll sample the sea water from nine different directions around the ship," Tom said. "A computer inside, called a coincidence analyzer or CO-AN, will spot any particles of matter

which show up evenly among the samples. It will also figure the direction in which to find the greatest concentration of those particles, after allowing for current drift.

"The foreign particles spotted by the CO-AN will show up as flashing lights on this readout panel," Tom went on. "I'll pick out whichever ones we want to follow, and then tune in those same elements on this TC, or trail constructor.

"Now, those orders are fed to a compound trace synthesizer or CTS. It compares them with the signals it's receiving from CO-AN—and figures out what course must be steered to keep the two sets of data matched up. It outputs that data to the internal monitors. They're our visual guides if we want to steer manually. On the first display, a luminous dotted line will show the compass heading of the object we're tracking. The second scope is a depth chart, to show its upward or downward course. And a dot will center on this cross-hair scope if we steer on the beam."

"So it's a high speed high sensitivity spectrographic tracking system?" Willow spoke up.

"Exactly!" Tom sounded pleased at the speed of her comprehension. "If we can get to Buffy's last known position quickly enough, there's a good chance we can get a lock on the freshest trace sample left by the container ship. It's not a hundred percent of course, but it is a chance."

"Then what are standing here for, Mister? We have a ship to catch!" Willow headed straight for the Sea Hound's airlock leaving Tom standing there gawking at her.

Oz looked over at the tall inventor, "You won't change her mind you know. Not when she has that face on."

"She can be quite forceful," Tom mused.

"Yes," Oz replied as he headed for the airlock as well.

Inside, the seacopter was divided in to two separate sections. Each section was virtually identical and contained duplicate control gear, bunks, and a lavatory. The section Tom entered had the two extra displays for the tracker mounted above the window however.

As the two teens strapped themselves in a roaring baritone sounded behind them, "Brand my skittle! Ya t'warn't gonna leave without yer cook now, were ya, Tom?"

Willow looked round to see the cook she and Buffy had encountered at the cafeteria the first day. This time he was wearing a scarlet and green silk cowboy shirt with a large rising sun appliqué stitched onto the back.

"You sure you want to come along? This is a search mission you know. However, that shirt may provide emergency lighting with its colors."

Willow nodded.

Chow turned to face Willow, "Ya like it? Got in a little shop jest outside o' El Paso." He turned side to side, almost modeling it for the redheaded teen.

"Tom's right, it is... colorful?"

Chow smiled as he took that statement as a compliment, "Not half as pretty as you are, Missy," the old cowboy cook said gallantly.

Tom laughed, "Okay, Chow, you're coming along. Strap into Airmo with Abe and Jimmy and get ready to takeoff."

"Got it, Tom!" the loudly dressed cook stomped off in his cowboy boots to the other compartment.

Tom turned to look at the teens, "I've known Chow most of my life and a better friend you could never ask for. He may look silly, but he's pulled me out of some serious trouble more than once."

Willow thought of something, "Why aren't you calling the Navy or the Coast Guard or some government officials about this."

"SSI used to work very closely with the government back when we were still Swift Enterprises. As I mentioned before, we had a little disagreement over military presence in space. Since then I'll still provide medical and defensive technology when requested, but for anything else they're on the bottom of the list. And for just about everything we're on the bottom of their list.

"Fortunately my dad negotiated in perpetuity clauses for our flight testing areas, Fearing Island, and atomic research at Shopton as well as a bunch of other perks before we had the separation. We make most of our money from Swift Construction doing impossible civil engineering jobs, commercial aviation and marine engines and vehicles. The Solar Batteries, of course, and various mining projects on Earth, Nestria, and the asteroid belt. Plus there a bunch of my inventions I do sell on the open market."

Abe's voice crackled over the intercom, "Ready, Skipper!"

"Taking off," Tom answered.

One of the displays in the control panel was a video view of the large central rotor. As the seacopter trundled out of the hanger on its treads, the rotor began spinning up, becoming first a blur, and then a transparent silvery disk. When they were clear of the building Tom pressed forward on the stick and the Sea Hound leapt from the ground like a shot, and was soon screaming southeast.

The seacopter was in no way as speedy as the Duck but, according to the gauges, it was still capable of flying at over six hundred miles per hour and at their altitude of 35,000 feet, which put them very close to the speed of sound. At that rate they were soon over the ocean and angling towards the cellphone fix Tom had gotten on Buffy.

"We'll be at the site in about an hour and a half," Tom spoke over the intercom.

Oz had been dozing and Willow had been reading the tracker's documentation that Tom had brought along. She jumped a little as Tom's voice disturbed her studies.

"Uh, Tom?" she asked looking at one particular passage.

"Yes, Willow?"

"This aqua-atomic tracker of yours originally used an analog computer as a comparator?"

Tom smiled, "Sure did. At the time, digital systems, even my designs, were a little large. Analog systems were relatively

smaller. Of course I've upgraded over time."

"I see," Willow answered, "Mind if I take a look at the software?"

"Go ahead, criticisms are always welcome here."

Soon the redheaded genius had a screen full of computer code in front of her. Some of the analysis routines caught her eye.

"Tom, did you know a man named Ted Buchanan?"

"Not off hand, why?"

"He was an early independent robotics researcher in Sunnydale back in the 50s. Some of these routines in the comparator function look sort of like his artificial intelligence decision trees. Not the same, just kind of like."

"How fully enabled were his AI routines?"

"Oh they were... surprisingly advanced. Anyway I think from what I remember of his work, that your version would be a far more stable foundation of code to work from."

"Okay, that's your internship project. When we get back with Buffy, you need to start developing an AI research program based on both Mr. Buchanan's and SSI's work. Start by outlining the steps and equipment and tech requirements. I'll get you an office and you can draw upon SSI's research resources like any other project lead. Once you have an outline and a concept, show it to me. If you can't come up with one, tell me why exactly," Tom told the stunned Willow.

"You can't be serious."

"Of course I am," Tom replied, "SSI does the impossible all the time. You have six weeks to draw up an outline that suggests lines of inquiry. Even if you don't succeed, you've learned how to set up a project and manage it. But don't worry about it now, we're here."

With that Tom pressed a button on the control board and a horn and flashing flight signaled an imminent dive. Slowing as he approached the water, Tom submerged the seacopter with barely an extraneous ripple.





## Chapter Eighteen — Then by Sea

The Sea Hound transitioned from air vehicle to submersible without a pause and soon was rocketing beneath the waves.

"So Willow, have you figured out how the tracker works yet?" asked Tom.

"I think so. I'm pretty sure I can at least turn it on," she replied.

"Then turn it on," the tall inventor ordered as he swung a small keyboard in front of his pilot's seat.

Willow threw a pair of switches and watched as the tracker's display flashed to life.

"The problem here is that there are multiple traces visible," Tom gestured at the screen above. "Obviously other ships have passed close enough to provide a fair bit of noise to the signal we want. How do we find that signal?"

"Is there a way to check diffusion?" Oz offered.

"Exactly! We know when the signal we want was created, and the bearing it was traveling from the start of the call till the time it was ended. We also have a speed from those two points. All we have to do is zig-zag across its direction of travel until we have a chemical map of the various isotopic materials. Those with an identical spread for distance and proper directionality are the ones consistent with the trace signal we are looking for."

He clicked on the intercom, "Hang on. I'm about to do an acquisition course."

"Got it, Tom!" Abe's voice responded.

Tom pressed some buttons on the keyboard then leaned back in his chair, hands off the control yoke. The seacopter surged forward and turned to port. After a few minutes it turned sharply to starboard and accelerated up to speed again. This turn to port then to starboard was repeated perhaps thirty or so times before the ship came to a stop.

Tom pecked away on his keyboard briefly, and after a minute or so a series of varicolored lines started appearing. These lines were of varying length and thickness and quickly started being clumped into groups. Soon it was obvious there was one group longer than the rest. Tom pressed a few more keys and the other lines faded out.

"And we have a lock," Tom keyed the intercom again, "Got them. Ready for trailing... going to automatic follow."

The Sea Hound snapped onto a new course and Tom unstrapped, stood up, and stretched.

The door to the compartment opened and Chow clomped in on his cowboy boots, "So kin I interest ya in some sandwiches?"

Tom, Willow, and Oz all answered in the affirmative, so the jovial chef headed over to the compact galley and got to work. Willow got up and stretched as well before going over to ask Chow if he needed any help.

"Naw, Missy, 'less ya want ta hear me gab."

"I can do that," Willow answered smiling, "How long have you known Tom?"

"That's easy, be forty-eight years this August. I met his father an' him out at th' ranch I used ta work at. They liked my cooking, so Tom Senior offered me a job. I've been cookin' fer him ever since. So you an' yer boyfriend gonna be workin' fer SSI? I hear tell yer both really smart an' that's what this company likes."

"I don't know yet, Chow. I'll be happy if I survive this summer honestly."

"It hasn't been this excitin' fer a long time. Usually it's a lot quieter fer us," the old cowboy whispered to Willow, "and a derved shame it's been so derved quiet. This is th' happiest I seen Tom in a long piece."

"He likes this kind of excitement?"

"Shucks yes! This is th' kind of problem he lives fer ta be honest, but don't ya worry 'bout yer friend none. Tom'll get'er back safe an' sound."

"Oh, okay," Willow answered, "And I am so not worried about Buffy. She really is amazingly good at taking care of herself."

"That's good ta hear. Self-reliance seems ta be goin' th 'way o' th' dodo," Chow finished making the plate full of roast beef sandwiches. "Want ta give me a hand servin' them?"

Willow nodded and soon sandwiches and coffee had been distributed among the crew that had all gathered in the primary compartment.

"What's the plan when we catch up, Boss?" Abe asked. The tall machinist had just finished his third sandwich.

"Not sure yet, Abe," Tom punched up an inventory on the computer monitor, "We have two Fat Man suits, eight hydrolung sets, two repelatron rifles and four pistols, a portable telejector and a bunch of other odds and ends in the micro machine shop. That gives us plenty of options."

He punched a few more keys, "We're currently traveling at 30 knots. The last speed we had of theirs was 20 knots. We should catch up in a matter of hours. Willow, will Buffy be able to hang on that long?"

Willow nodded in response then almost immediately shuddered, "Unless she gets bored. Bored Buffy is really dangerous. If she gets bored I would not be surprised if the ship suddenly started sinking or randomly exploded."

Oz nodded in agreement, "Bored is bad."

"That little blond friend of yours is that dangerous?" Jimmy Po, the SSI security lieutenant that had come along, asked.

"She can be," Willow replied, "especially if you call her short."

Oz nodded in agreement again as he tucked into another sandwich.

"So," Tom spoke up, "The ship is potentially in more danger than Buffy is. Guess we have to get on board and rescue it from her."

"Sonar?" Oz asked.

"Hmm?" Tom looked over, "Oh! We've got a variant of the silentenna installed. Suppresses our acoustic signature completely."

"Cool. Get close then and toss up a line," the quiet teen responded.

"Simple is good," Abe commented.

"What 'bout hobblin' them so they cain't get away?" Chow spoke up.

"Like fouling their propellers?" Willow asked.

"We can do that," Tom said, "Abe, you and Jimmy will take some Tomasite braid hawser up ahead of the ship by hydrolung. Drop it weighted to float below the keel depth. The props will spin it up into the shafts and it should foul the blades."

He turned back to the inventory, "We have two hundred feet of three inch hawser in external compartment #4. When we catch up to them we'll fall back about the horizon, surface and prep the line. Abe and Jimmy, you'll wear the hydrolungs and ride on the outside till we get ahead of them. We'll drop you off with the buoyed line."

"If I can get aboard I can find Buffy," Oz said.

"On board. Are you sure? It's going to be very dangerous," Tom replied.

"Did you worry about this kind of danger when you were our age?" Willow piped up.

Tom looked sandbagged by that statement and Chow started chuckling, "She's got ya there Tom. Th' amount o' frettin' an' worryin' that ya put yer dad through..."

Tom sighed, "Well, you *are* eighteen and you will be getting the full SSI experience this way. Abe, how long do think it will take us to build a ship boarder?"

"I have a couple of ideas, Boss."

"So do I. Willow, give Abe and me a hand would you. Oz, keep an eye on the navigation display with Jimmy. Let's get to work.

## Chapter Nineteen — Boarding Action

Tom, Willow, and Abe were clustered around the seacopter's tiny workshop. Willow was using the lathe to wind fine copper wire around a piece of non-metallic tubing. Two windings she had already completed were set next to her on the bench. Tom was in the electronics section building a high capacity power amplifier powered by three of his Solar Batteries. Abe was welding together a mortar-like device with a bulbous compressed air tank set up next to the barrel.

Willow finished the third winding and turned to Tom, "The coils are done."

"Great," the inventor looked over at her work, "You ready to cut the armatures?"

Willow nodded, "You think this is going to work?"

"Why are you asking me?" Tom replied with a grin, "This was yours and Abe's idea. I'm just a fabricator on this job."

Willow looked so worried, Tom took pity on her and patted her on the shoulder, "It's a sound design using known technology. It'll work."

Abe looked up from his welding, "Those electromagnets are going together nicely by the looks of it and I've almost finished the launcher," he patted the mortar looking tube.

Willow looked happier at hearing the positive encouragement and got to work cutting three iron cylinders that would just fit inside the coils she had just wound. She then fitted them into their respective coils and painted each assembly with a thin insulating coating of a quick-drying liquid rubber. She then went to the milling machine and with Abe's help, once he had finished the launcher, started building the mounting points for her small but powerful magnets onto the end of a short metal rod. The magnets were hinged so that they could flex around two axis and in the center was set a small switch.

Tom had finished his amplifier and this was mounted directly

behind the magnets of the rod and wired in. One of SSI's compact industrial electric motors was mounted behind that with a reel of Tomasite fiber rope attached.

By the time the container ship was in passive sonar range the three were finished.

"Brand my belt buckle! What kinda artillery ya got goin' here?" Chow exclaimed when he saw the rig.

"Chow," Willow explained, "it's a compressed-air-powered mortar firing a magnetic grapple. When these contact steel," she pointed at the three stubby prongs on the front of the rod, "a circuit is completed and the magnets are energized holding it to the hull. Then a remote signal will engage this motor which will reel in this line. Oz will be on the end of the line and will be hauled on board."

"Pretty nifty!" Chow replied.

"It's Willow's and Abe's design," Tom said, "It's nice not being the big brain for a change."

"Nice work," Oz said admiringly.

"Uh, thanks?" Willow embarrassedly replied.

"Take the compliments when you deserve them, Willow," Abe commented.

"Guess we'd better start getting suited up, Abe," Jimmy spoke up. Abe nodded and the two of them went to one of the lockers and pulled out some odd-looking belts, packs, and full face masks with a small camera lens mounted on the forehead.

"No tanks?" Oz commented.

"That there hydrolung uses somethin' Tom calls 'forced osmotic interchange' in that li'l ol' beltpack."

"Chow's pretty much spot on," Tom added, "Think of it as synthetic fish gills. The backpack is a magneto-hydro-dyne drive."

"Using magnetic fields to create a current?" Willow asked.

"Exactly. The system basically allows unlimited underwater endurance and high underwater speeds. If you want we can

check you out on them when we get back to Shopton."

"Cool, but that seems like more of a Buffy thing actually," Willow replied, "Thanks for the offer though."

In a moment the pair had changed into wetsuits and donned the hydrolung sets.

Tom resumed his seat at the controls and checked the tracker's range estimation, "Sixteen miles out! We're surfacing."

The Sea Hound broke the waves as evening approached. Abe and Jimmy headed to the top hatch and soon exited. Once on the top deck they unpacked the hawser and attached floatation assist buoys to the ends and the middle, then clipped themselves to pad eyes.

"Ready, Tom!" Abe called out.

Tom took the seacopter in a wide circle to get directly in front of the container ship's bow before submerging again. Once submerged, he moved more slowly to keep his deck-mounted passengers from being too heavily buffeted. When he was five miles out, he came to a full stop to allow Abe and Jimmy to detach and start moving their ends of the hawser into position.

When they had separated sufficiently, the pair dived to 40 feet and using their MHD backpacks started moving forward towards the oncoming vessel.

Meanwhile Tom had dived the seacopter and, moving under the ship, had taken up position a half mile behind the much larger target.

"Oz, when you get aboard, if you can manage to drop one of the anchors it would make things a lot easier," Tom suggested.

"Sure. I'll try," replied the taciturn teen.

"Good enough, Willow, let me show you how to do basic holding position with the Sea Hound. Chow's done this before, so don't worry too much," Tom added.

"We'll be fine, Tom," Chow said.

"Thing is, Chow, if Oz can drop the anchor, we can get aboard using the Fat Man suits."

"Fat Man suits?" Oz asked.

Chow walked over and opened a hatch revealing a strange looking suit. The body of it was egg-shaped and was four feet in diameter at the center. Inside an operator's seat had been built, surrounded by a number of instruments. There was also a quartz vision hatch on top that was swung open to allow entrance.

"Think o' them as deep sea armor. They're basically bulletproof an' strong as heck, but they ain't much good at flyin'."

"They are propelled by air pressure and equipped with small ballast tanks, which enable them to be manipulated like tiny submarines. However they also have servo amplified arms and legs for deep sea salvage and construction. These are controlled by the operator's own limbs. Even though they weigh almost a half ton, they can climb something that can hold their weight quite easily," Tom said, "Chow, could you warm them up?"

"Got it, Tom," the old cowboy started to bring the pair of suit's systems online.

"Sea Hound," a message crackled over the private ear communications system. "We're in position. Ready to drop hawser."

"Thanks Abe," Tom answered. "Moving alongside. Drop when ready!"

"Line away," was the next transmission.

"Come on, Oz, let's get ready," Tom headed for the top hatch along with the grapple mortar.

Chow and Willow were at the controls, Chow proving extremely skillful as a pilot.

"You're really good at this, Chow," Willow commented.

"Heck, I've been ridin' with th' Swifts for almost fifty years. Course I'm gonna pick up runnin' some o' their gear, especially since I'm a bronc rider from way back. They like it when people know how to do all sorts o' crazy things. Comes in awful handy on occasion."

"I've noticed," Willow said with a smile. "Say, does it look



like the ship is slowing?"

Chow glanced over and nodded, "Time ta surface then." The old cook carefully brought the seacopter up and soon the deck was barely awash.

As soon as the water was clear from the top hatch's porthole, Tom spun it open and he and Oz were on deck. Setting up the mortar took the pair of them a matter of moments and soon Tom was sliding the grapple's shaft into the launch tube.

"Ready, Oz?"

The teen nodded and Tom aimed and pulled the trigger. The grapple rocketed out with a fairly silent hiss easily masked by the noises of the ocean and the container ship itself. It struck the hull just below the safety railing high above. The magnets energized and clung tenaciously. Oz tripped the remote and the powerful motor began reeling him in soon he was swinging just below the rail.

In a few seconds he was over the railing and aboard.



## Chapter Twenty — Ethical Piracy

Oz crouched on the other side of the rail and gave the air an appraising sniff. There was the tell-tale scent of Buffy's hair conditioner on the night breeze. The ship was continuing to slow its forward progress due to the incredible tensile strength rope stretched and snarled in its propellers, and crew was starting to rush to the stern to see why.

Ducking behind a bollard to avoid contact, Oz moved towards the source of the scent. Soon he was outside a container with a suspiciously deformed latch. Carefully opening the door he saw a small bed made from packing blankets, a few empty water bottles, and some food wrappers. He was getting ready to leave when he saw three words in Sumerian scratched into the paint, "Look Underneath Panel."

Carefully levering up the wood he found a paper bag neatly flattened with writing on it. Tucking it into his pants pocket he turned to go, but froze when he heard movement outside the container.

A thickly accented voice called out, "Is this where you saw him?"

A second answered, "Yes! Near that blue container. He was short and moved quickly."

Oz sighed and began methodically removing his boots and shirt. As an afterthought he wrapped strips of Buffy's bedding around his hands and secured them with his bootlaces. It didn't hurt to take precautions after all. Soon he was beginning his meditative mantra.

The voices were getting closer to the container so he crouched down and readied himself. When the door opened he erupted forth bowling over the opener with the ferocity of the impact. The other searcher began raising his rifle, but Oz had batted it from his hands before it could move more than a few inches. Springing away from those two and leaving them basically uninjured due to the padding he prepared, Oz moved

towards the bow. His only driving thought, the anchor chain.

By this time, others had roused to the presence of an intruder and Oz found himself dodging random gunshots as he weaved through the metal mountains covering the deck of the huge ship. Someone had had the logical thought to turn on all the deck lights, but the container towers still provided enough shadowy passages that he could stay well concealed in the darkness.

Now instead of single shots it sounded like someone was using a machine gun, as short bursts of tracers were fired into the darkness. Oz growled with irritation and rounding a corner, ran directly into a patrol of three men, obviously searching for him.

He had come at them from an un-illuminated angle of attack, so they were all down before they could react, and he was off and running again before any of them could have even yelled for help. By this time he was close to the bow so he began searching for a way to get below decks.

Spotlights were scanning back and forth however, so he slipped over the side rail and going hand over hand negotiated his way to the where the massive anchor was socketed into the side of the ship. Once astride the anchor, he followed the chain up into the winch house, squeezing past the sprockets that raised and lowered the massive chunk of iron and into the control room. Reciting his mantra again, he got control of himself and carefully studied the clutch mechanism before grabbing a crowbar and wedging behind the chain's locking clutch.

Heaving with all his might and baring his teeth in a terrific snarl of exertion, there was a heavy clank and he fell over backward as the clutch gave way. The chain unspooled with a massive roar and the links started speeding by in a blur. Oz retreated as far back as possible but was still pelted by chunks of scale and rust sluicing off of the rapidly deploying chain.

In a few minutes there was an immense thud as the anchor had fully extended out to the maximum length of its holdfast. The impact was severe enough to cause the jarring of the entire ship and Oz was fairly certain that it wasn't going to be easily reeled in again.

Moving over to where he had entered the chain locker he saw that the opening he had squeezed through was now very hot from the incredible impacts it had received from the anchor chain flailing its way through. Gritting his teeth and with a slight smell of scorched hair he made his way through and dived down to the ocean below.

On board the barely submerged Sea Hound, Willow had been watching the lights spring on the ship above as Tom and Chow had climbed into the apparently ungainly looking Fat Man suits. Abe and Jimmy had made their way back aboard by this time and were pulling a pair of strange looking rifles from another one of the seacopter's many storage locations.

Everyone aboard heard the anchor's roar as it pounded through the ship, and the gargantuan splash as it hit the water's surface. Abe slid into the pilot's seat and started bringing the ship forward, before yelling, "Look at that!" as a dark figure dived from the bow of the ship below neatly splashing into the ocean far below.

"That's Oz!" Willow cried out, "He did it!"

Soon the Sea Hound was beside the anchor chain and as Tom and Chow were climbing it with the tireless metal grip of the deep sea salvage suits they were piloting, a thoroughly soaked Oz swam aboard the seacopter's deck. Jimmy who was crouching in the ankle deep water began firing his strange rifle at anybody who looked over the side near the bow. It didn't make any sound but a dull hum when it was triggered, but the heads went flying back as though they had been punched by a heavyweight boxer.

Willow stuck her head through the top hatch and, blinking the water that splashed past away from her eyes, called out, "Oz!"

"I'm okay," her boyfriend answered, "The water just looks silvery." He carefully moved to the hatch and leaning over gave her a hug.

"Did you find Buffy?" Willow asked.

"Nope," Oz responded, "But she left us a note."

Tom and Chow had finished the climb to the top and had

scrambled over the rail to find themselves standing on the foredeck. They were met by a hail of bullets that proved completely ineffective against gear developed for extended operation at the crushing depths of the Mariana's Trench. Also by this time the ship had come to as complete a stop as possible and was now drifting with the current.

"Tom," Abe's voice came in over the Fat Man suit's radio, "The U.S. Coast Guard has got a cutter vectored this way. Unless you want to get arrested for piracy you might want to leave now."

"What about Buffy?" Tom asked.

"Oz says she's not aboard, but that she left a note."

"Got it. Chow, over the side."

"Okay Boss, over I'll be goin'," Chow hopped the rail and plummeted into the water followed quickly by Tom. The heavily padded operator's chairs and the extremely tough 'eggshells' of the Fat Man suits easily soaking the impact.

Soon the pair were aboard and the seacopter had submerged.

When everyone had dried off and stowed their gear they met in the primary compartment.

"So what's the note?" Tom asked.

"I found where Buffy had been hiding," Oz replied. He pulled the sodden paper from his pocket, "This had been left behind."

"What kind of ink is this?" Tom asked looking and the strange reddish lacquer the message had been scrawled in.

"Passion Pink," Willow spoke up, "It's nail polish. Buffy's favorite, she always has a bottle on her."

Tom looked amazed and amused, "Well it's certainly waterproof. Let's see what she has to say..."

The letter read:

*Dear Willow, Oz, Tom, Phil, and whoever else,*

*I'm okay. These guys are nowhere near as alert*

*as gangs on PCP. The Boss is here and I've seen him. A tall scary looking guy named after a snake. Weird huh? He seemed bummed that this ray gun he stole from Tom wasn't working and angry that they don't know how parts got missing.*

*Anyway he's got a submarine in the hold of this ship and he's planning on taking off in a little while to some place called Tarra del Fugo (I think I screwed up the spelling). I'm going to try to get onboard. Oh yeah, he's got a second in command who I'm getting a very Miss French vibe off of. Likes red leather jumpsuits and trashy makeup. So not tasteful. I'll be boarding in a few minutes so good luck!*

*xoxox*

*Buffy*

"Tierra del Fuego I assume?" asked Tom.

"Probably, Buffy is terrible with names," Willow replied.

"What about this 'Miss French'?" Jimmy spoke up.

"High School science teacher. Kind of... well, kind of a man-eater I'd say. She hit on my friend Xander when he was in her class. It did not turn out well."

"Oh," said Tom uncomfortably.

"Oh is a pretty good response in the greater scheme of things," Willow agreed.

"What's the plan, Tom?" Abe asked to get rid of the awkward silence.

"Head back to SSI. We can pick up the Sky Queen there and then head south. They should arrive at the Straits of Magellan in about a week. We know the rough course and their approximate starting time, and when it comes to satellite reconnaissance, SSI

knows no equal. We'll find them, don't worry. Oz, that was amazing by the way."

"Not a big deal. Buffy's my friend."

"I've had friends like that. Treasure them."

"I will," said the quiet teen.

The Sea Hound streaked away for some distance underwater before it was safe to surface and return to Shopton.



## Chapter Twenty One — A Trap Subverted

The Sea Hound landed at SSI's airfield early the next morning. Tom ordered the two teens straight to bed as he headed to the office. Willow and Oz headed for Willow's apartment and immediately went to sleep.

The next morning Willow's phone rang, "Mmmrello?"

"Good morning, Willow, this is Tom."

"Oh? Tom!!! Am I late for work or following or something?" Willow began to warm up to a babble as she clawed her way to full wakefulness.

"Oh no, I'd like you and Buffy to come over to my house instead of the plant. Just tell the shuttle. See you in an hour?"

"Buffy?" Willow's mind raced past the last shreds of sleep, "Sure, Tom, we'll be there. See you in an hour."

"Thanks, Willow. Goodbye," and there was a click as Tom hung up.

"Oh, boy," Willow thought to herself as she got out of bed to wake Oz on the couch.

"Huh," was the quiet teen's comment after hearing about the phone call, "You sure that was Tom?"

"It sure sounded like him," Willow replied.

"You said Harry planted the virus and didn't remember doing it, and we saw Phil walk willingly into that hole," Oz mused. "Sounds like some kind of charm at work."

"Yeah, that sounds right. I didn't pick up any magicky stuff, though," Willow answered thoughtfully.

"Tech then?" Oz asked.

"Probably. So what are we going to do?"

"You and Buffy are going to see Tom. Can you make me look like Buffy?"

"A glamour! Sure I can do that. It won't last all that long, but it should be pretty stable. I won't be able to do the voice though," Willow replied.

"Won't talk then. Get dressed and get your stuff ready. Didn't Buffy leave her bracelet behind?"

In thirty minutes Willow, and apparently Buffy, entered the shuttle and were en route to Tom's house. The Swift compound was located in a wooded area off of Lake Carlopa and was surrounded by a tall fence. The shuttle slowed when it approached the gate and the shuttle's voice said, "Bracelets accepted as clearance."

The gate swung open and soon the pair were standing outside the low, sprawling house. The door opened and Tom stepped forward.

"Hey! Glad you got here okay!"

"That's us, Tom. Buffy and me. Always arriving in the okay way. Not like there would be any problem with that, of course," Willow's babble was subtly interrupted by a nudge from 'Buffy'.

"Uh, I see?" Tom looked slightly confused from the verbal torrent.

"Sorry, Tom," Willow apologized.

"That's okay. Come inside you two."

'Buffy' nudged Willow again and stepped beside her whispering, "Guys from cabin close by." Willow nodded and entered the house mumbling softly under her breath. There was a faint shimmer and 'Buffy' slowly faded from sight as the glamour was removed, allowing the ignorability effect to come to the fore. Tom looked behind him to see if Willow was following and didn't even notice the disappearance.

Inside the living room was a strange man wearing a hood and holding a pistol. He spoke, "Good morning, Miss Rosenberg, Miss... Where's the Summers girl, Number Two?" he called out.

Willow looked over and saw another hooded man seated at a table with an unusual web of wires and metal strips on his head. This web was tied by a thickish bundle of cables to an intricate

looking radio and a laptop computer.

Tom spoke, "She was the only one in the shuttle, Number One."

"What?" the man with the gun sounded worried, "But I saw her in the gate camera and on the millimeter wave..." he gestured at a small display screen. "Okay, Rosenberg, where is she, and how did you do that?"

"I'm alone. Buffy's really not a morning person, and do what?"

"Make her disappear like that. I mean this gear would have picked up any known cloaking technology activating," the man with the gun was sounding more agitated.

"Well, how would I do that then?" Willow put on her best 'well aren't you an idiot' voice, "I mean, I'm an intern that's just starting to learn the ropes at SSI. And by the way. How are you controlling Tom? Is it the same way you controlled Harry and Phil?"

"I don't know how you're doing it and there's no way you could have contacted SSI. But first she's here and now even her bracelet signal is gone," he started looking around the room.

Willow smiled. She recognized the telltale signs of fear of Buffy-wrath. She came forward and sat down, "Are you okay? I mean I hear paranoia is an early sign of stress. Have you had your blood pressure checked recently?" She made sure to sound concerned.

"I'm fine, Rosenberg. Number Two, check outside!"

Tom walked to the door and stepped outside. A moment later the man at the table collapsed. Number One ran over and at that instant, Willow dived under the coffee table while yelling, "Now, Oz!"

The door crashed open and an indistinct blur surged into the room and headed straight for Number One.

"What's going on..." was the only thing Number One had time to say before he was slammed forcefully into the wall and lost consciousness.

When he revived he saw Tom with an icepack on his head and Willow sitting across from him. His hood was gone and the now-revealed Mullins found himself tied firmly to a chair next to Davis and Baxter.

"Sorry about the headache, Tom," Willow was saying, "Oz had to make it as quick as possible."

"It's okay, Willow. I would have done the same if I had figured out what had happened," the tall inventor replied. "I have to say your old urban watch program had some excellent self-defense teachers."

"Oz is just a natural at it. He has to get himself psyched up for it first, though. Hey! Mullins is awake! Hi, Mister Mullins, how are you feeling?"

Mullins shook his head, "What hit me?"

"That would have been my boyfriend. He doesn't like it when I'm in danger. I know it's kinda sexist, but I do think it's sweet, too," Willow cheerily replied. "I think when he knocked out Tom, the feedback took out your buddy Davis there. He took out Baxter first of course."

"Speaking of feedback, Willow," Tom had gotten up and was examining the machine Davis had been attached to, "I think this device subverts the Little Sister communication devices. Probably with an artificial pattern of alpha rhythms. It basically turns a human wearing one of the devices into a remotely operated vehicle. I don't think they can maintain the linkage for more than an hour or so and there is no direct memory access, fortunately, but while it's operating they can drive the wearer like an RC car."

"If they could do that, why didn't they take you over earlier?" Willow asked.

"Probably need to calibrate the alpha rhythm," Tom looked at the hardware more closely. "I think they drugged me while I was in my convertible stopped at a light. They probably had done the same with Phil and Harry earlier."

"Are there more people they've been calibrated to?" Oz asked

as he entered, straightening his shirt cuffs.

"Five more. Abe, Doc Ryder, Garrett Dillinger at Fearing, Sandy, my sister, and Jeff Simmons at Swift Construction," Tom tapped a few keys, "and now, all the calibrations are wiped."

Tom looked over at Mullins, "Now, Jack, you have something to tell us. Right?" Tom did not look happy.



## Chapter Twenty Two — Trickery

The Shopton police were called and the three hoodlums had been hauled away in cuffs. Tom, who had been checked by the paramedics and judged not to have a concussion, was examining the mind riding apparatus, Oz was straightening up the furniture in the living room, and Willow was making breakfast for the three of them.

"Oz," Tom said, "Thank you for not hitting me any harder," as he adjusted the ice pack on his head.

"Sorry, Tom," Oz replied as he moved the chair Willow had been sitting on back into place.

"Pancakes are ready!" came the call from the kitchen, so Tom and Oz made their way to the dining room where they found pancakes and orange juice set up.

"You really didn't have to do this, Willow," Tom said.

"Don't be silly. You got clonked on the head and Oz can't cook." The quiet teen nodded in agreement at that. "Who else was going to cook you breakfast?"

"I could have gotten something at the cafeteria..." Tom argued lamely.

"I don't think so. See this face," Willow pointed at her stern expression. "This face means I mean business, Mister. Now sit down and eat."

Tom stepped back for a second then grinned and sat down and began digging in, "I know when I'm beat."

"Good answer," Oz replied, "Willow makes great pancakes."

After breakfast the three climbed into Tom's silver convertible, which Oz drove, and headed to SSI, the apparatus stowed safely in the trunk. When they arrived, Tom checked in to see if the satellites had found anything and then retired to his lab to take the mind rider equipment apart.

Willow and Oz headed to their respective shops and worked until noon, Willow helping assemble a new type of power supply

and Oz working on a revision of a transmitter. When it was time for lunch the two teens received word to head over to Tom's office.

Arriving they found Tom, Harry and, wonder of wonders, Phil!

She looked pale but was dressed in normal clothes and awake. Willow ran over and gave her a hug.

"Phil! How are you feeling? I was so worried!" the redhead gushed.

"I'm fine, Willow," the assistant security chief replied smiling.

"I figured out how they used the synthetic alpha rhythms to knock her out. Once I figured out the frequency it was fairly simple to reverse the effects," Tom added.

Oz spoke up, "Any news on the sub?"

"No, Oz, not yet," Harry answered. "When Tom got in this morning he told me what was going on and headed straight for his lab. I've been in contact with Fearing Island's satellite tracking center and we've been moving our sky-eyes to optimal orbits all morning. We can start going over the plots this afternoon. We also have the Space Wheel's prober on standby to refine possibles. The Flying Lab is being prepped with a seacopter in the payload bay and will be going on standby as well," he finished.

"Excellent work, Harry," Tom replied.

"I want these people badly, Boss. They messed with our minds," Harry sounded a controlled sort of furious.

"I understand," the tall inventor said. "Any word from Shopton police on our new friends?"

"I got this one, Harry," Phil looked over at her supervisor who nodded at her to continue.

"After I was woken up and had stretched the stiffness out and the doctors pronounced me fit to work, I manned the desk at the security office while Harry wrangled the satellites. Shopton called about an hour ago with the info on our merry band of



brainjackers.

"John 'Jack' Mullins, wanted for armed robbery, extortion, and escape from a medium security Federal prison. Graduate student at Harvard Law before he got into crime. A methodical planner according to known information. William Baxter, known associate of Mullins. Also wanted for armed robbery, extortion and prison break. Expert at unarmed combat and former professional weightlifter. How Buffy got away from him I'd like to hear. He is a monster."

"She's really good," Willow said proudly.

"I guess. Anyway, the last one is Karl Davis, former professor of applied electrical engineering at Cooper Union. No prior criminal record. All three have assault, grand larceny, and attempted kidnapping charges currently filed against them.

"Davis started talking immediately. We have contact frequencies, codewords and communications timetables. Their leader always initiates contact and supplied the mind-rider device and private-ear clone radios to Mullins."

"By Leader, you mean the Black Cobra?" Tom asked.

Phil nodded, "Davis only heard that name once though, I think," she paged through her notes, "Yes, only once. Mullins mentioned it to Baxter and Davis overheard it. Mullins apparently recruited Davis with a lot of cash up front, over a hundred thousand dollars, so Davis really didn't ask many questions. Mullins and Baxter aren't talking, obviously, and have immediately called for their lawyers."

Tom scratched his chin, "Well, we have their private-ear receivers so I could pull a radio bearing if they're contacted again. I might even be able to get a distance as well. Problem is, their lawyers probably contacted the Black Cobra about their client's capture so he won't be contacting Mullins again."

"The Police Chief might be dragging his heels a little bit on allowing them their phone calls," Phil said with a slight smile.

"Oh, really?" Tom said with raised eyebrows, "Well then, what time did Davis say was the next scheduled contact?"

"In about three hours," Phil replied, again referring to her notes.

"I'll get set up for the tracking then. Oz, Willow, after your lunch head back to work," Tom ordered. "We'll keep you posted on what's going on."

The two teens left for the cafeteria and then to their projects for the afternoon.

## Chapter Twenty Three — The Mysterious Sub

At around five in the afternoon, Willow and Oz were headed to the shuttle back to Willow's apartment when Harry caught up with them.

"Come on you two, I'm taking you out to dinner. I was supposed to do this the first week you were here, Willow, but as you know..." his voice trailed off.

"Yeah, things got a little weird pretty fast," Willow agreed, "Dinner sounds good. Oz?"

The quiet teen nodded in the affirmative.

Harry looked slightly surprised at the quick acceptance of his offer. "You two really don't seem too worried about Buffy's safety. Why is that?" He didn't sound suspicious. Just genuinely curious.

"Like I said before. I'm more concerned that the high tech terrorists with the exotic weapons and mind control devices are in danger than Buffy is. She can be a force of nature when she gets annoyed." Willow smiled when she said that.

"You're serious, aren't you? Why are you so confident and how did a small woman like her incapacitate three full grown men including one I'd never want to run into in a well lit street, let alone a dark alley?"

"That's Buffy's story to tell, not ours," Oz answered.

"But don't worry about her. She gets grumpy when people worry about her and she finds out about it. It's the kind of grumpiness that is only quelled with shopping," Willow added.

"Shopping?" Harry sounded confused.

"Shoes usually. But dresses when she's really mad."

"Shopping. I see... I think? Well okay, how about you two then? How did you sneak in and recover those circuit boards? And how did you, he looked at Oz, "take out Baxter, too?"

Harry looked very curious for some kind of answers.

"Uh, we're so good at sneaking it seems like magic and Oz is really good at tapping into his primal rage when necessary?" Willow said softly.

"Uh-huh," Harry looked, unsurprisingly, not particularly convinced at that answer. "Once this is over, the four of us, including Buffy, are going to have a little chat. And I expect some real answers then. I'm responsible for the security and safety of this company and its personnel and not knowing what's going on doesn't make me feel like I'm doing my job."

"I'm sorry, Harry..." whatever Willow was going to say next was cut off by Phil driving up to the walking trio in an SSI jeep.

"Hop in. Tom thinks he's found them!"

They arrived back at Tom's lab where he had his wall monitor set to a projection of the Atlantic Ocean.

The older inventor was sitting on a lab stool working away at a keyboard, "Ah! There you are!"

"How'd you find them, Tom?" Harry asked.

"It wasn't easy. The Black Cobra's sub is of unknown dimensions. I was able to make a pretty good idea about her mass though. I backtracked the container ship's course until I found a satellite image and determined her waterline. Then I got the current waterline so I was able to calculate the change in displacement. That change is roughly the mass of the submarine." Tom sighed, "Of course they could have pumped in ballast which would have completely thrown off my calculations, but right now I think it displaces around 14,000 tons."

"That's huge!" Willow said in surprise.

"Not really. The old Soviet Typhoon Ballistic Missile Submarine displaced almost four and a quarter times that, at around 48,000 tons," Tom replied as he punched a few more keys, bringing up a wireframe model of the container ship on the main screen.

"Also, there weren't any external mount points on the mothership's hull that we saw, so it had to be stored completely

internally. That means that a space had to be hollowed out around the surface vessel's engines, fuel tankage, crew quarters, and structure. I tried looking inside it with the prober, but there is a quantum screen in place which keeps the signal from the anti-inverse square wave generator from being able to focus and produce the electro-magnetic lens." Tom looked annoyed at that but continued, "I used whatever blueprints I could dig up to whip up this wireframe and figure out how they had remodeled the interior by measuring the amount of strain and warpage of the decks and hull."

Hitting a few keys he brought up a new wire frame, "It's up to 400 feet long and 80 wide if it was a solid rectangle which it probably isn't. It probably is a wing or manta shape for improved stealth and speed, that's what I would do at least. Still, it's a big one," he cleared his throat.

"Anyway, once I had its displacement, I started running wave-height measurements. As it moves under water, water has to be forced up and out of its path no matter how good its hydrodynamics are..."

"So they would alter the wave patterns on the surface," Oz finished.

"Precisely! I had a rough starting point from the mother ship's course. I ran a wake measurement back to when Buffy's cell phone call ended, and found where it suddenly sped up, probably from the release of all that mass. Working a zig-zag course south and using a fusion of thermal imaging, sea state radar, and gamma absorption measurements I found this..." He clicked back to the map of the Atlantic and this time there was a small glowing streak heading south.

"Wow!" Willow gaped, "That is so awesome!"

"It is pretty cool, isn't it?" Tom said. "They unfortunately have a prober-proof bubble that extends about a mile out in radius so I can't get a good look at it." He hit another key and a new wireframe appeared. "But what I've managed to gather from thermal signature, wake and turbulence characteristics, green laser LIDAR, magnetic field distortion and maybe even some

acoustic data possibly borrowed from some of the U.S. Navy's static sonar emplacements gave me this..."

The wireframe was of a sleek narrow shape with broad wings on the side that narrowed as they headed towards the stern. It was about 90 feet wide at the widest point of the wings but the hull itself was closer to 50 feet in diameter at its widest and tapered to 20 at the stern.

"It's fast, close to 60 knots, and it's currently traveling at about 12,000 feet down."

Harry gave a low whistle at that, "The only things we have that can handle that kind of depth are the Dyna-4 and Fat Man suits. The suits aren't fast enough and the D4 is in drydock right now."

"Oh, I have a couple of ideas about the problem of getting to it and getting aboard. Right now, we can track them and keep an eye on their progress—" At that moment a thunderous roar shook the building.

Looking out the window that surveyed the flight line of SSI, it was obvious a large underground hanger had been opened. From this hanger a massive aircraft, twice the size of a C-5 Galaxy, was gaining altitude on what looked like a belly of fire.

"Where's the Sky Queen going, Tom?" Phil asked.

"To pick up the couple of ideas I was mentioning. It'll be back in a few hours. Harry, you and Phil get an assault team ready. We're leaving when the Queen gets back. Willow and Oz, come with me to mechanical engineering. We have some building to do!"

## Chapter Twenty Four — Interception

Tom had outlined a metal structure that looked slightly like a huge backpack frame. Abe, Oz, and the rest of the machinist's were assembling it while Tom and Willow headed over to electronics. There, he quickly sketched out a power distribution node and a remote control interface. "Give me hand with this, Willow," and the two geniuses got to work.

Over at Mechanical, an SSI cargo truck dropped off some items from Swift Marine Division. The three crates, when opened, revealed four, three-foot long cylinders, and an odd bell-muzzled cannon-looking thing.

"Oz and Steve. Start mounting those mini-jetmarine drives to the swivel mounts. Gabe, help me with fitting the Insta-Rock gun on the pantographic arm," Abe called out.

The backpack soon sported a waterjet drive mounted on two corners at the top and bottom. Each drive was set on gimbals run by two powerful electric motors. In the center of the frame was a box about two foot on a side with 'Mighty Midget APC' and the old Swift Enterprises logo stamped on its gleaming white Durastress casing. Extending off the side of the frame was a motorized articulated arm with the odd looking Insta-Rock gun clamped to it.

The next step was running the wiring harness for the motor controls that Tom and Willow were in the midst of building, as well as the base power conduits from the atomic power cell to the waterjets and the motorized arm.

Back over in Electronics, some crates had arrived as well. Henry opened the first one, "Tom, why is there a landing forcer being delivered?"

"What's a landing forcer?" Willow asked as she finished soldering together the remote control interface Tom had designed.

"It was originally designed to override aircraft navigation and

control systems. Great for stopping trespassing overflights when you're prepping to launch a rocket. We use them on those drones that are constantly circling over Fearing and SSI," Henry answered, "So, Tom, why is one here?"

"The sub we're after is most likely state of the art," Tom answered, "That means digital controls and navigation. Plus the forcer can influence standard altimeters and compasses. I need you to prep it for underwater use, Henry. Maybe we can get it to play with depth gauges as well?"

"That's an interesting use for it, Boss. It can already spoof GPS after all. Subs usually use inertial trackers too, though," Henry closed his eyes in thought, "Any suggestions?"

"Inertial trackers rely on gyroscopes, don't they?" Willow asked.

"Sure do. Influencing a gyro is tough. You can do it with an intense magnetic field..."

"Or," Tom grinned, "you can open that other crate which contains a gravitex unit."

"That's a kind of reverse repelatron, Willow," Henry explained. "It concentrates gravity at a specific point and makes a sort of string tying two objects together. Tom, what do you have up your sleeve?"

"Just make sure both the forcer and the gravitex are set up for marine use, you two," Tom said mysteriously. "I have to finish building the control circuits."

The Sky Queen, Tom's flying lab and exploration headquarters, returned some five hours later and a large tarp-covered object was delivered to the Mechanical building. When the tarp was flipped back it revealed a ten-foot tall mechanical man.

"Ator, the third?" Abe exclaimed, "Haven't seen you in a while, buddy!"

"What's that?" Willow asked as she, Tom, and Henry wheeled in the carts with the various pieces of electronic gear.

"Third generation of my nuclear waste handling giant robot,"



Tom replied. "I know it can take pressure and ridiculous amounts of abuse. We used them at our atomic research facility, the Citadel. Ator was mothballed and never actually operational as a waste handler, so he was outside in storage when the place was shut down. Unlike his relations, which are still locked inside the plant." Tom looked over the robot appraisingly. "I had them run diagnostics on the flight back. Ator's in perfect shape."

"Now what, Tom?" Abe asked.

"Mechanical team, get the pack mounted. Electronics, we're going to start splicing the control leads into the wiring harness. Once Mechanical gets done with the base mounting we're moving everything over to the Sky Queen and finishing en rou..." Tom stopped speaking for a moment, "...en route. Phil just called; we have a bearing over the private ear. The Black Cobra just tried contacting Mullins. He isn't on the sub, he is in Tierra del Fuego."

"What now, Boss," Henry asked.

"Willow," Tom asked seriously, "How likely is it that Buffy is still free aboard the sub?"

"If she's not free, she probably can be free in a short period of time," was the response from the redhead.

"You're sure?" Tom pressed.

Willow nodded, "Very. If we could get a message to her, she will do whatever she can to hamper the sub's operation."

"Acoustics," Oz said quietly.

"Oz, you are so great!" Willow gushed, "He's right, Tom. Buffy has superb hearing. I could record a message at higher or lower than normal frequencies and she could get notified that way."

"How high or low?" Henry asked.

"Her hearing is a little worse than mine," Oz responded, "If I can hear it extremely clearly, she should be able to hear it slightly and the sub's crew wouldn't hear it at all."

"Hmmm," Abe said, "but their sonar would pick it up. High

or low frequency, it wouldn't matter."

"Only if it's a signal that they would recognize as a language," Willow grinned, "I wonder how many sonar men speak Sumerian or Polgara?"

"Sumerian's a dead language," Tom spoke up, "and what the heck's Polgara?"

"You'll see," Willow said mysteriously then turned to Henry, "Low frequencies would work better, right? Let's see what Oz's range is and tune slightly higher than that, okay?"

Henry looked over at Tom who nodded with a smile, "The woman's got a plan. Henry, rig up an underwater speaker when you're done with Oz's hearing test, optimized for low frequency of course. The rest of us had better get back to work!"

Several other Swift craftsmen had filtered over to the project by this time and soon there was a gang of twenty or so working on the various systems required to turn the giant robot into an underwater vehicle.

Within an hour the backpack was mounted and the entire assemblage was carted over to Tom's massive aircraft and loaded into its copious cargo bay. There, the construction continued in a space shared by the Sea Hound, still fitted with the tracker assembly. When the cargo bay doors closed, there was a sudden shudder and the sensation of an elevator suddenly rising as the VTOL-capable behemoth took to the skies. By the time the Sky Queen was over the Atlantic, all the mechanical work had been completed and all effort was being directed to wiring; for Oz and the Mechanical crew, now supervised by Henry, and programming, which was Tom and Willow.

The backpack frame Ator now sported was crammed full equipment and wiring and was given a thorough coating of quick-drying Tomasite paint to keep out any undesired moisture.

By the time the Queen had arrived over the site where Tom's tracking routine had indicated the sub's current position, the calibration had been completed and the remote controls had been set up inside the Sea Hound. Willow took this opportunity to

record the message for Buffy, and Henry shifted its frequency down to a level where it was inaudible to normal human hearing.

"Are you sure she can hear this?" Henry asked.

"Pretty sure. Oz can hear it easily, so I think Buffy can hear it at least faintly. The fact that it's going through water and will resonate through the entire sub will help too."

"Alright then," Henry took the recording and slotted it into the remote control panel on the seacopter, "We also have a communication link so we can broadcast other stuff if necessary."

At that moment, Tom's voice came over the intercom, "Ator's loaded. Assault team and support time to come aboard. Let's go catch a sub!"



## Chapter Twenty Five — Tally Ho!

Chow Winkler gawked at the strange looking conversion that had been performed on the once basically anthropomorphic Ator. "Brand my kettles! What th' heck happened t'th' poor guy?"

"Willow, will you do the honors?" Tom asked as he prepped the Sea Hound for takeoff.

Ator was attached to a cargo cable that, in turn, was fastened to one of the seacopter's winches. When the Sea Hound had cleared the Sky Queen's hanger, Tom would simply reel Ator in so he could be carried suspended below the flying submarine.

"Sure, Tom," the teen answered. Looking at Ator, it was hard to recognize what he had once looked like. "We took off his legs so we could use those control lines for those mini-waterjet drives that are fastened to the backpack. Inside the pack is a Mighty Midget..."

"Didn't th' government say we cain't use those anymore?" Chow asked suspiciously.

"Are you going to tell them, Chow?" Willow replied.

The old cowboy grinned and shook his head. Willow smiled back and continued, "We're using the Midget so we have enough juice to run Ator and all the stuff that's tacked on to him. Anyway, those four mini drives should give us enough oomph to chase down the Black Cobra's sub. That's also why all the streamlining is there too."

Cleanly shaped sheets of aluminum, strengthened with thin ribbing and also painted with Tomasite, formed smooth curves around Ator's formerly blocky shoulders and head. The backpack had also been streamlined to minimize turbulence and maximize the robot's hydrodynamic qualities.

"Well, he's certainly shiny enough," Chow commented. Looking at the light gleaming off the tough black plastic coating.

"The Tomasite will help keep him from being picked up by radiation and electromagnetic detectors, and where he's going

visible light won't be easy to come by. The shinyness won't make him easier to spot," Willow answered. "In fact, finding the sub is the first big problem. Fortunately, Tom used an invention of his dad's, the Magna-Ear, and coupled it to a passive sonar system. He can hear really, really well now."

"That's pretty neat, Willow. What else is in that there backpack?"

"A landing forcer and a gravitex generator. The gravitex emitter is that bulge on his left shoulder."

"Gravy-tex? That's the gravity kite string right?"

"That's right, Chow," Tom answered, "This time we're going to use it for two different purposes. First to fool the sub's inertial navigation, and second as a kind of harpoon."

"So what's that arm thingy then?" Chow was still curious.

"That's one of Tom's Insta-Rock guns," Willow responded, "I'm not sure what it's going to be used for. Same thing with those two metal disks where Ator's hips are."

"All will become clear, Willow," Tom answered, "Everybody strapped in? We're taking off!" with that he eased the rotor into lift mode and the seacopter slowly exited the hanger.

The Sky Queen had halted and was hovering in midair, sustained solely by the awesome thrust of its atomic powered, belly-mounted jet lifters. When the Sea Hound was clear, Tom slowly winched Ator free. A restraining rope attached to one of the Sky Queen's cargo winches keeping him from suddenly penduluming. When the modified robot was hanging suspended from the seacopter, a command was given and the Queen's safety line was quickly snaked back inside.

"Sky Queen to Sea Hound. Good hunting, Boss!" came the call over the radio.

"Hound to Queen. We'll get our bag limit! Hound out," with that Tom slowly submerged the seacopter and its payload.

Once underwater, Tom unteathered Ator and turned control of the robot to Abe Haskell. Abe ran some quick checks and powered up the four drives before checking the systems and

giving Tom a cheery thumbs up," Everything's green lit, Tom. All across the board!"

"Alright," Tom said, "the plan is this. We're here," he gestured at a blinking light on the main chart-board, "the Cobra's sub is roughly here," he pointed at a blurrier spot. "That means we're about a hundred nautical miles ahead of them. Abe will attempt to refine their location with Ator and get the message to Buffy. Once he's spotted them, we'll move to intercept while Ator tries to spoof their navigation to get them a lot closer to the surface and slow them down. That sub is at least a good 20 knots faster than us and can dive a heck of a lot deeper. So, Abe, do whatever you have to."

"Got it, Tom. Ator away!" The middle screen in the control board lit up with the eerie wavy black and white image from Ator's sensors. Abe increased the thrust until the modified robot was traveling at almost 70 knots, "Can't take him up much faster. Turbulence is building pretty bad."

"That's fine, Abe. In fact, take it back to forty or so. With them traveling at sixty they should intercept in about half an hour or so," Tom ordered.

"Roger, Boss, forty knots it is," the big engineer set the thrust with one of the many controls in front of him, "Leisurely zig-zag search started."

The plucky robot bored on into the darkness of the vast deep. Technological ears questing for a trace of the enemy sub.

On board the enemy sub, Buffy stretched her cramped shoulders. She had made it on to the skid of the helicopter at the cabin and had hung on until she got to the quarry. When the bad guys were leaving the quarry she had simply hopped a ride inside a packing crate until she got to the container ship. Once there she had hidden out in one of the many empty containers, and while searching had found the sub bay deep inside. After she had heard the plans for the sub to separate from its mothership she knew what she had to do. Get aboard before it sailed.

That had been just a matter of patience and waiting for a maintenance hatch being left open long enough to slip inside. The sub was surprisingly roomy and there had been plenty of places to hide during the trip, but they were all amazingly uncomfortable and besides, she needed a shower so badly.

She let herself get caught while she was drying her hair and was dragged up in front of the Captain. He had a thick Brungarian accent, but spoke excellent English and asked her how she got aboard. Buffy's only response was that they should check the crates they loaded more carefully and that she had only just gotten out before being captured.

When Captain Kirgov asked her why she was taking a shower, she turned on her most blond expression and said, "But my hair was soooo nasty..."

Now she found herself handcuffed to a railing on one of the empty bunks. They had fed her, which was nice, so she thought to herself she would really try not to hurt any of them *too* badly.

She was leaning against the bulkhead trying to find a comfortable position for her pinioned arm when a faint low voice started to make its presence felt.

It was in Sumerian which was odd, and it was almost below the range of her hearing "Chosen. This is Red River Tree. I am near. Make their lives unpleasant and distracted. Fast rescue imminent" After a moment the message repeated and continued repeating. Buffy smiled and freed her wrist from the handcuffs.

"Distraction and annoyance I can do," she thought to herself as she moved towards the bridge. By the time she got there, she had already incapacitated two crew members she had stumbled across in transit. The bridge, however, had at least twelve people in it so a simple frontal assault wasn't a good idea. Especially since she had no idea on how to surface the sub and really didn't want anything necessary to surfacing broken in a melee. She did have an idea though.

Back on the Sea Hound Abe called out, "Ator's found them and is matching speed!"



The blurry dot on the chart sharpened and brightened.

"Okay, send Willow's message and hang on," Tom ordered. "We're in pursuit!"

The main rotor of the Sea Hound blurred as Tom fed more power to its motor and adjusted the pitch for rate of travel.

"Tom! Ator's close enough for the gravitex and the forcer!" Abe called out.

"Set their instruments for a gradual ascent without them noticing. Ending with the depth gauge being 10,000 feet off. At the speed they're traveling they shouldn't be able to correct in time without seriously slowing. And set their course to be a gradual circle."

"On it, Tom," Abe replied.

Phil, Harry, Jimmy, and the rest of the assault team started putting on their hydrolungs and picking up their repelatron rifles and pistols. They then sat down and waited for the underwater chase to be resolved.



## Chapter Twenty Six — The Attack

Ator streaked through the darkness in hot pursuit of the Black Cobra's sub. He had activated the gravitex unit in his pack and, with a precisely modulated beam, had altered the apparent gravity gradient of the surrounding area.

Inertial navigation systems, such as the one aboard the sub, are normally assumed to be completely immune to tampering due mainly to the fact that they are completely self-contained, and require no external input except for gravity to determine which way is 'down'. This use of the gravitex had just enabled the successful spoofing of that constant force.

At the same time the modified landing forcer activated. Its signals insinuated their way into the sub's digital navigation systems and started altering the apparent course, direction, and speed. Neither the autopilot or the human watchstanders monitoring the readouts, noticed the slow and subtle change in course and depth.

Back on the Sea Hound, Abe Haskell watched the readouts with care. They showed both Ator's information and the false information that the hunted sub's instruments were currently displaying.

"It's working, Tom! They're starting to ascend!" he called out.

"Status on Ator?" asked the inventor from his position at the seacopter's controls.

"All systems green. He's doing fine, Boss," was Abe's response.

"Excellent. How long till they drop to forty knots?" was Tom's next question.

"About an hour and twenty minutes I'd say. I could slow them faster than one quarter knot a minute, but I'm pretty sure somebody would notice the hanky panky then," Abe answered while delicately adjusting one of Ator's trim controls.

"That's fine, their ascent will burn off their lead as well. Keep

at it, Abe."

On board the hunted sub, Buffy had been amusing herself by picking off stray crewmen that she found going about their duties. So far, she had captured and restrained ten of them and she was wondering when people would start noticing their absence. She was in the middle of stalking the eleventh when that question was answered. The Captain's accented English voice boomed out of the intercoms, "The prisoner has escaped! Seal all hatches! Guards to intruder defense stations!"

"Well," Buffy thought to herself, "this makes it harder."

She began heading towards the bridge, barreling past the first guard post without slowing down. Her small size enabled her to slip through the second hatch she encountered while it was still closing, and she finally was halted by the final sealed portal to the command center.

Rummaging around in the lockers and storage bays in the section of corridor she was sealed in, she found a damage control pallet with various lengths of heavy timber, jacks, sledges and other tools used for reinforcing the hull in case of collision or battle damage. She walked back to the sealed door and started thinking. A second later she grinned and after rapping on the heavy metal hatch, waited for a response.

"Yes," came a voice from the intercom box by the door frame.

"Little pig! Little pig! Let me come in!" she recited.

"What? Who are you? What are you?" was the Captain's answer to her polite request.

"I guess it's huffing and puffing time. See you and your chinny-chin-chin in a little bit." Going back to the damage control supplies, Buffy started gathering up what she needed.

An hour after Ator had started his subversion of the navigational instruments, the hunted sub was running just above 43 knots in speed and was up to a depth of 5,000 feet. The Magna-Ear on Ator had picked up unusual bursts of sound from aboard including a strange all-hands alert about an intruder

running rampant. Willow grinned when Abe passed on that information.

"Buffy?" Abe asked.

"Buffy," Oz answered definitively. "She has a gift for annoying people into making stupid mistakes."

"Guess your message got through, Willow," Tom added, "All we need now is that sub to rise another 3,000 feet and we can begin. They're only ten miles ahead and we're closing in."

Willow thought for a second, "Abe, can you patch this microphone into Ator's speaker system?"

"The low-frequency one? Sure, give me a second," after flipping a few switches, he passed the mike over to the redhead and nodded.

Willow thought for a second, then said something in a strange gobbling language.

Aboard the sub Buffy was lashing together three 4x4 beams to make a horizontal tripod braced against the hatch frame when that faint voice started echoing around the hull.

"Polgara?" she thought, "That has to be Willow." Thinking for a second she slowly translated the alien language into English. "If free, hit something hard." Buffy grinned and picked up a sledgehammer, "I can do that," she thought to herself.

Swinging the mallet into the corridor wall hard enough to dent it, sent a massive thud through the sub's frame and the water surrounding it. Ator was easily able to pick up the booming noise.

"What the heck was that?" Abe said startled, as the sonar receiver display flared up with the sudden signal.

"Buffy telling us she's loose and can hear us," Willow raised the mike handset to her mouth again and this time in a guttural language, spoke several sentences."

"Keep them busy so they can't pay attention to their vessel, huh?" Buffy thought after mentally translating the Sumerian message she had just received, "Wills, what are you up to?" She

shrugged and continued fastening the chain of the come-a-long to the apex of the tripod. The other end was already wrapped around one of the massive hinges. Once Buffy had finished attaching the chain, she duplicated her effort with the other hinge. Moving back to the two chain hoist levers she took out the slack and began tightening them as far as they would go. "This should get their attention," she grinned as she picked up the portable plasma cutter and put on the goggles, beginning her assault on the hinges.

"I'm picking up lots of yelling," Abe called out. "Whatever you told Buffy seems to have had an effect. Apparently, she's in the middle of breaching the bridge?"

"What can I say," Willow replied modestly, "She has a true gift for destruction."

"Right," said Tom, "Speed up their ascent, Abe. I think their minds are on other things than navigation right now."

"Tom, Ator is in range right now for Phase 2," Abe spoke up.

"Remember though, as soon as he switches modes on the gravitex we lose the control on their inertial guidance. And all sorts of alarms will probably go off. What depth are they at right now?" Tom asked.

"3500 feet and two miles ahead. Speed 38 knots and still slowing one knot per minute. Now ascending at 100 feet a minute, Boss."

Tom tapped his chin, "Okay, prepare for Phase 2. Get Ator in front of them and ready gravitex mode change. We'll initiate when they're down to 30 knots and 2700 feet depth."

Abe hunched over the controls and sent Ator his new marching orders. On board the other sub, Buffy had cut halfway through the first thick armored hinge, and the tension applied by the chain hoist was causing it to bend and deform off of its retaining pin. The blond took up the slack in the chain and began cutting away at the bottom one. She could hear pounding at the door on the other end of her chunk of corridor, but she had wrapped the access wheel with a spiderweb of chain to keep it

from the slightest chance of turning, "Now I understand why Willow likes working in the mechanical shop," she said as the plasma jet bit into the resistant metal.

"30 knots and 2500 feet, Boss," Abe sang out from his controls.

"Assault teams, get ready! Abe, switch modes! Willow, tell Buffy to brace herself! Go!" Tom ordered as he gunned the seacopter forward and to the side of the target.

Abe hit two keys and the gravitex locked on to the sub's hull, dragging Ator to the deck. As soon as the robot touched down on the slick coating, the two disks attached to his hips bonded themselves to the sub while simultaneously releasing from Ator. Ator, still tethered by the gravitex beam, then swung out into the slipstream around the sub until he could locate the intakes for its massive water-jet drives. His articulated arm with Insta-Rock gun attached sprayed Tom's catalyst directly into the vortex, allowing the chemical reaction to begin inside the motors. Soon the dissolved elements in the water, precipitated directly into mineral solids causing massive damage to the finely balanced compressor vanes and shattering the subs motive power.

"Direct hit!" was Abe's call out on the success, "Engines are inoperative!"

Tom immediately throttled back the Sea Hound and spun it to illuminate the rapidly slowing vessel with the seacopter's powerful underwater lights. "Ascent rate, Abe?" He called out.

"Coasting at 20 foot a minute. It's a negative buoyancy craft by the looks of it."

"Figures. Alright, Phase 3!" He pressed a switch on his own controls and the metal disks ruptured outward releasing a massive quantity of white bubbles.

"What the heck is that?" Willow asked.

"DuraFoam. Basically my DuraStress plastic with helium whipped into it. It's lighter and much stronger than aerogel but nowhere near as thermally resistant. I built a highway out of it once," Tom looked slightly amused. "Never used it for ship

salvage before though. Don't know why, because it looks like it does a great job."

The sub was rising nose first, supported by a pair of massive balloons filled with Tom's buoyant plastic. On board, Buffy grabbed on tight when Willow's warning had come through and after the massive shock traveled through the sub, and had finished cutting through the hinges. By the time the deck was starting to tilt she had cut through the locking bar and the massive hatch popped open narrowly missing her.

Inside the bridge was complete chaos as the Captain was yelling orders and the crew was shouting back and forth. Flashing red lights were on display everywhere and Buffy was mildly surprised that she wasn't even being paid attention to in passing.

A minute or so later there were several clangs against the hull and hydrolung-equipped people, Phil and Harry in the lead, had forced the airlocks and were in the middle of boarding.

The crew surrendered without much of a fight and the damaged sub was towed to the surface where a Swift oceanographic research vessel would take charge of it in a few days.

With the sub's crew loaded aboard the Sky Queen for a quick ride over to Argentina, Tom looked over at Buffy. "Not bad. Willow said you had a talent for this."

"Piracy? No I could never pull off the eye-patch and I don't like parrots."

"I'm sorry you missed so much flight training," Tom replied.

"I've been studying!" Buffy pulled out the PDA Tom had given her. "I've been going over high-altitude and navigation problems. FAA regs and cockpit layouts just like you told me to."

At that moment Willow arrived. "Buffy!" she cried, wrapping her in a giant hug.

"Hey, Wills! I see you got my note," the blond was happy to see her friend, "And thanks for the messages. I wasn't sure how



you would find me or communicate, but I knew you guys would find a way."

"That reminds me," Tom said, "We need to have a talk about how exactly certain things were accomplished..."

"I have absolutely no clue what you're talking about," Buffy piped up, looking as innocent as possible.

"That's not what Harry and Phil say. But that's really a chat for later... there's still a Black Cobra that needs catching."



## Chapter Twenty Seven — The Cobra's Plot

It was nighttime while Tom's massive Flying Lab soared high over the South Atlantic. The passengers couldn't see through the cloud cover below, but it was obvious, even from above, that there was a terrible storm lashing the Eastern coast of the continent.

Tom was piloting with Buffy sitting behind him observing. Willow and Oz were back in the mess hall chatting with Phil, Harry and anybody else around. Or rather, Willow was chatting and Oz was remaining his quiet self. Chow clomped over and after serving coffee and hot chocolate, began telling stories of his early adventures with Tom and his father.

"So Tom's run into this Black Cobra guy twice before?" Willow asked.

"Yup, at least two times. He's a cagey ol' polecat though and kin sneak around th' cracks. We might o' run into stuff he's responsible for an' not even known it."

"What happened those two times?" Willow pressed.

"Weeell, th' first time was when that black hatted galoose tried ta take over Nestria..." Chow started.

"That's our second moon right?" Willow asked.

"Yeah. Accordin' t' Tom it's jest an oversize asteroid really. Real purty place t' visit though. Anyhow, Cobra an' his boys sprinkled anteye-matter all round it as a barrier. If'n a ship tried t' get through it'd run into th' anteye-matter an' kerblammo! No more ship," Chow took a sip of his coffee and continued. "Boy genius came up with a magnetic cowcatcher kinda thing an' we got Nestria back. We thought th' Cobra had been blown up when his ship tried t' get through th' anteye-matter an' exploded, But no such luck.

"Th' very next year was when that weird asteroid th' Green Orb moseyed on by. Th' Cobra wanted ta keep Tom from

investigating fer some reason so he caused a whole heap o' trouble fer Tom an' his dad. We didn't find out till late in th' game that he was responsible and we never did see hide ner hair o' him th' entire time. Like I said, he's a cagey cuss."

"And we don't even have government support this time," Yancy Devon, one of Harry's security people spoke up. "Harry. Does Chile even know what we're doing?"

Willow was surprised by this concept as Tom had seemed a fairly law-abiding individual.

"I don't think so, but we're heading to an area that's pretty deserted. Hopefully we won't step on any toes. Like Chow said, Black Cobra and the Boss have a history."

"Harry," Oz spoke up, "What do you know about him?"

"The Cobra? Not a whole lot really. Born in French Indochina sometime during the late 1920s to a French father and a Indochinese mother. So, he's about ten years older than the Boss. Physically, he's a big guy and seriously good fighter. Mentally, he's apparently a natural genius inventor in the Boss' league. Maybe even better when it comes to weapons design, atomic power, and biomechanics.

"He started working for the Japanese during World War II as far as we can tell, then when he saw the way the cards were falling he took a lot of gold and the experimental submersible aircraft carrier he'd been working on and went private. Rumors were he did contract work for Stalin and Mao as well as anybody else who would pay him after the war and up into the 60s.

"His main reason for running up against Swift Enterprises as far as we can tell, was that he wanted a space based headquarters. Nestria and the Green Orb had that potential so that's why he made the plays for them. He's staggeringly rich and has kept a very low profile for the last forty some years. That's about all I got. Sorry, Oz," Harry finished apologetically.

"No, thank you, Harry. That's helpful to know," replied the quiet teen who returned to his silent thoughts.

A question popped into Willow's mind, "Harry... or anybody

really. Why does the Cobra want Tom's disintegration machine? It seems an awful lot of unnecessary work for a guy who has been able to make enough anti-matter to surround a planetoid, transport it to orbit, and control it so it doesn't spontaneously react to random space dust?"

"I don't know, Willow," Harry responded, "but you're right. He really doesn't need it to destroy something."

"Willow, what did Tom say about how the ray worked?" Oz asked.

"It suppresses the negative charge on any atoms in its beam. That makes anything hit by it, kind of just fall apart into dust. From what I saw of its power boards it isn't very long range. Maybe two feet?" the redhead answered after thinking for a moment.

"So the Cobra now has something that can specifically affect atomic charges at range. I wonder if it can increase as well as suppress a charge?" Oz leaned back and closed his eyes.

A light flashing on behind her eyes, Willow jumped up and kissed Oz, "You are such a genius, Mister!" then rushed off towards the cockpit.

"That was impressive," Jimmy Po was the first person to speak after hurricane Willow had departed. The rest of the others were still sitting or standing stunned.

"Some guys got it," said Oz, eyes reclosing.

"Tom! Tom! I think I know what the Black Cobra's up to!" Willow stormed into the cockpit.

Tom turned his head to look at the rushing redhead, while Buffy stood up and caught Willow before she tripped and crashed into something.

"Easy, Wills," the blond suggested to her friend.

"Sorry, Buffy," Willow sat down in a free seat and took a deep breath.

"So what've you got, Willow?" Tom asked handing over control to his copilot and turning to face her.

"He wants to make a backwards version of your disintegrator!"

"A de-disintegrator?" Buffy asked, confused.

"No, a concentrator. He wants a space base right?"

Tom nodded affirmatively to Willow's question. "Yes, he's tried to steal a couple in the past," he agreed.

"Well, he's decided to build one of his own and to do that in space is impossible. Too many people and governments would notice it and he's a guy that likes to stay out of the public eye. At least until he's ready," Willow took another breath. The parts of the puzzle colliding inside her racing brain.

Tom nodded again, "That all makes sense considering what we know about him and I'm beginning to see what you're getting at."

"I'm not," said Buffy, "Small words for the non-giant brains in the room please."

"Tom's disintegrator works by making the atomic bonds fall apart. Like ripping apart two pieces of velcro," Willow explained, "Atomic bonds have a really short hooking range and if they can be disrupted they will fall away from that hooking range. Just like if you hold two pieces of velcro next to each other they won't stick together, but if you press them really close..."

"...They stick. So your gizmo does the tearing thing," Buffy looked over at Tom, "and the snake guy wants to do the pressing thing with a Mirror Universe version of it?"

Tom looked serious, "Keep going, Willow."

"Right. It makes it so atoms will be squeezed really closely together. A critical mass is the smallest amount of material needed for a sustained nuclear chain reaction. The critical mass depends on a bunch of stuff; the material's density, shape, purity, temperature and more. The de-disintegrator would make it so you could directly affect a material's density. That means making an explosion would require a lot less nuclear material like plutonium or uranium."

"So you could make teeny bombs with a big bomb's explodey-ness?" Buffy said.

"Or, make a lot more bombs with the same amount of nuclear material. The Cobra really isn't all about the world's destruction, so why would he want to do this?" Willow asked.

"Super-deadly firework displays?" Buffy replied.

"No, but you're really close. Back in the 50s there were a lot of wacky ideas for getting a space ship up to orbit. Right after World War II and through to the 60s atomic power was the go to idea," she looked over at Tom who raised his hands in surrender.

"No argument here. Compact and clean energy sources are awfully nice to have. I mean, look at the Queen and the Sea Hound," he said.

"So," Willow continued, "How do you make an atomic powered spaceship. Tom does it with his repelatrions which turn electricity into physical force, but I'm willing to bet building those is really tricky and needs some stuff only Tom knows how to find."

Tom nodded in agreement, "That's why you don't see them everywhere. Some of the materials are pretty exotic and unbelievably expensive to manufacture."

"Now how do you use atomic power to make a spaceship go? Two ways, really. First you use a reactor to heat up something like liquid hydrogen into vapor. The problems with that are the same as with a chemical rocket. Power to weight ratio isn't bad but could be better, and there are lots of fiddly bits that can fail. The second way is a lot more exciting. What would happen if you put a stick of dynamite under a bucket and the bucket wasn't destroyed by the blast?"

A light dawned in Buffy's eyes, "You could build a nuclear-powered bucket!?"

"It was called Project Orion. Timed launches of small atomic bombs under a blast resistant shield. Each blast pushing the shield and whatever was on top of it higher and higher. Thing is you need a LOT of bombs—we're talking hundreds to thousands

of them. The Orion developers figured if they had enough explosives, they could lift something the size of a city into orbit... or a really big, pre-built on earth, space station."

"The Black Cobra is an expert on nuclear materials, but getting that much raw or fission grade uranium and plutonium would be very difficult these days. He must have found a vein and been manufacturing it himself, or been stealing it from somewhere and for some reason he just didn't have enough. It makes sense, Willow." Tom finished.

"So, what happens when that many explosions go off that fast in the atmosphere? Do we all die of radiation poisoning or fallout or something?"

"Oh, no," Tom said. "It uses sub-kiloton yield warheads. In fact the cleaner they are, the more effective they are at providing lift. Wherever the first blast happens won't be very healthy, but after that it's actually very safe. SSI was consulted on the initial research on it. However, whatever he's got installed on that station may not be so nice."

"So, we're going after a Bond villain, cool," was Buffy's reply.



## Chapter Twenty Eight — Raid

After taking off from Tom's Flying Lab, the Sea Hound, with its cargo of Swift Security and technicians, dove into the waters of the Pacific. The storm was in full force in the Drake Passage, with waves over forty feet high and 60 knot winds.

Once Tom had dived the seacopter beneath the surface the buffeting still continued, showing the power of the wind and water overhead. In fact it wasn't till the vessel had gone more than two hundred feet down before the shuddering slowed.

Once the seacopter was sailing smoothly Tom started talking, "We got the charts from the Black Cobra's sub and they gave us an entrance point to his base. The goal is to render the base uninhabitable or at least unusable."

"How, Boss?" Jimmy Po asked the obvious question.

"Simple. We borrow a few of his bombs and detonate them sufficiently far away from the fissionable storage area outside the base to keep from causing any additional problematic explosions. This will have the U.S. Navy on site in a very short period of time because the seismographic signature of this kind of underground explosion is quite distinctive," Tom answered.

There was a stunned silence aboard the Sea Hound.

"Isn't that a little dangerous, Tom?" Harry spoke up.

"Not really," replied the tall inventor, "Back in the late 50s and early 60s my dad and I worked on developing compact atomic mining charges. With the size of the devices I'm expecting to find, the actual danger is equal to blasting with a heavy charge. These devices will be designed as efficiently as possible to minimize wasted energy."

"So what'll we do, Tom?" Phil queried. "How do we find them?"

"I grabbed a couple of portable Damonoscopes from the Lab before we took off. Along with some other stuff."

"Those Damonoscope thingies is what y'use t'take photos

o'radioactivity, right? Even if'n it's buried real deep like?" Chow asked.

"The newer ones use a different method, Chow, but yes they can locate radioactivity behind heavy shielding. Two teams searching, each with a scope. Third team on board the Hound or in the docking bay. As soon as a team finds the stockpile they call back and the third team will help with the extraction and moving of the devices. Phil, take eight. Harry take eight. The rest of you will be here with me."

"Can I take Buffy?" Phil asked.

Tom looked over at the short blond, "I'd rather you stay here, but seeing what you did on that sub..."

Buffy thought about it for a second, "Oz, stick close to Wills," then stepped over to Phil. "You got me."

Oz nodded, "No problem, Buffy."

"I'll keep an eye on her too!" Chow added.

"Right then," Tom continued, "Get your teams picked and geared up. We should be arriving in twenty minutes or so and I've been picking up a low level active sonar scan. Very faint but persistent so I know we're on the right track."

The security team picked up their repelatron weaponry while Buffy went into the seacopter's small workshop and picked up two short lengths of DuraStress rod about an inch and a half in diameter and two feet long. She then wrapped one end of each with some adhesive tape bandage from the medical kit for better grip. Taking a few practice swings she nodded, satisfied with her work. Tucking them into the belt of her coveralls, she waited for the rest. Harry passed out light bulletproof armor made with some of Tom's superstrong plastic fibers and backed with thin metal plates made from atomeron, a natural alloy Tom and his father had located at the site of their second underwater city. Tomasite helmets completed their protection.

The entrance to the base was in a man-made cave that, at first glance, appeared completely natural. Tom's tracker picked up chemical traces of plastics and other chemicals, however,

revealing its secret as they cruised past. Nosing into the mammoth cavern, which was easily able to fit the Cobra's now disabled sub, revealed nothing but a bare stone wall at the back.

"Huh, guess they don't want to open the door for guests, Boss," Abe who was in the co-pilot's seat quipped.

"Maybe we should knock?" Tom flipped a couple of switches and a large cylinder was unslung from underneath the seacopter before jettied forward on its light metal frame with buoyancy tanks and drives. The five horn-like protuberances on the front of the cylinder began to glow red and the water surrounding them began to bubble as it was exposed to the earth blaster's incredible operating temperatures.

"Isn't that what you used to drill to the Earth's core?" Willow asked.

"An earlier and much larger version of it, but yes. We carry this small one on the Queen as standard equipment," Tom said as, with a small joystick, he guided the business end of the blaster into contact with the stone. In a short period of time, the now white-hot cutting tip burned and melted its way through the concrete covered steel doors. Tom then tracked it sideways cutting a long slot across the top and along one side. Then slewing it across the bottom and up the last side completely cutting the door from its frame. As he pulled the rapidly cooling blaster back to the seacopter, Abe adjusted the rotor wash to push against the freshly cut entrance. The door collapsed inward into another huge chamber.

"Get ready, reversing thrust now!" Tom threw the throttle lever forward sending the Sea Hound racing into the sub pen, then reversed the rotor.

The Cobra's men had been gathering to repel whoever was attacking the base's entrance and were caught off-guard when the massive shape of the seacopter leapt from the water sending a torrential deluge of water and high pressure air smashing across the dock. The entering personnel were knocked sprawling from behind their defensive positions. Tom landed the Sea Hound on the dock and the two security teams exited as quickly as

possible, subduing the still dazed defenders and rushing forward towards the airlock from which troops were still exiting.

The SSI personnel with their repelatron weaponry, were able to knock down their opponents with invisible waves of force while the small arms fire ricocheted off their armor. Soon they had forced their way past the checkpoint and were in the main base area.

The two teams split up and, with one eye on the Damonoscope display, commenced searching for the weapon storage. Harry's team got lucky and ended up not encountering much opposition and soon got a bearing on their target.

Phil's team ran into a whole lot of reinforcements. Buffy was dashing around a corner, batons swinging when a heavy feeling of fatigue started washing over her. Looking around she saw the other SSI personnel started collapsing as well.

On board the seacopter, Willow, Oz, and Chow watched as the rest of the crew collapsed at their stations, Tom included.

"Brand my spurs! What th'heck is goin' on here?" cried out the old cowboy, "Tom! Wake up!"

Oz shook his head as a wave of exhaustion passed briefly through him. Willow and Chow staggered at the same time.

"Willow?" Oz asked.

"Yeah, it's probably that alpha wave device again. Chow, you don't use a little sister do you?" the redhead spoke up.

"That phone type thing-a-ma-bob? Nosirree. M'head is pristine."

"How'd they get so many alpha patterns?" Oz pondered.

"I don't think they did because we felt it too. They must have cranked up the power and set it for a wide range. We didn't get the full effect without the little sister to amplify it, I bet," Willow said to herself.

"I'll leave th 'thinkin' ta th' smart folks laik you," Chow said as he picked up a repelatron rifle, "Right now we got folks ta save an' a bad guy ta stop. Now, how are th' three o' us gonna do that?"

Oz thought for a second, "Chow, can you keep a secret?"

## Chapter Twenty Nine — Defanging the Snake

Chow stared blankly at the two teens as Willow dumped her backpack on the deck of the seacopter. Rummaging through her materials she picked out the candle and spices she needed. Setting up the small circle.

"What kinda hoodoo is this?" Chow spluttered.

"Just a different kind of science, Chow," Oz explained, "Can you shield all three of us?"

"Oh, yeah. After all the practice I've been getting recently, it's getting to be a snappy kind of thing," Willow said as she mixed the powders into the proper proportions.

In a few minutes she was done with the ritual, "This should get us by the guards on the dock before it wears off."

"Time to go then," Oz helped her to her feet and grasping the still dazed Chow by the elbow guided the old cowboy out of the Sea Hound, Willow following.

To Chow's amazed eyes, the guards that were picking themselves up weren't paying any notice to the three of them.

"We invisible or somethin'?" he whispered.

"Nope, just really ignorable, even your shirt," Willow answered, commenting on the amazingly bright purple and yellow with white fringe number Chow was wearing.

"Well brand my boot soles! That is really somethin'! This yer secret y'two?" the old cook asked.

"Mine, not Oz's," Willow replied.

"I'm actually six foot nine," was Oz's answer to Chow's look.

By this time they had made it across the dock and through the airlock into the main base. Oz stopped and sniffed the air, "Buffy and Phil went this way," he said pointing.

"Okay, you and Chow go that way and get the Damonoscope they had to find those bombs. I'll see if I can track down the

knock-out device," the redhead ordered.

"You sure?" Oz sounded concerned, "We should probably stick together."

"No time, we have to split up. Don't worry sweetie, I'll be fine. I got mad skills remember?" she shook her backpack slightly, then gave him a peck on the cheek. "Don't let him get into trouble, Chow!"

"I got m'eye on him, missy, so don't y'all worry none. Let's go an' save some folks, Oz!" with that Chow clomped his way down the hallway.

"Be careful, Willow," Oz whispered to her before he took off after the cook.

"You'd better believe it, Mister," she whispered as they rounded the corner and she found herself basically alone.

While she was still ignorable, she quickly repeated the glamour she had used on Oz back at Tom's house. But, instead of Buffy this time she used the appearance of one of the base's guards. Then she concentrated deeply and called the small identity badge clipped to his collar over to her hand before heading deeper into the base.

The place was enormous and she had to move slowly. Otherwise, she ran the very real risk of losing the concentration required to maintain the glamour. The halls were wide and plain gray in color. Various pipes and cables ran near the ceiling and along the walls and Willow looked them over to see if she could learn anything from their markings and labels.

From her examination she identified the computer room cold water chiller lines. "If computers are broken, things controlled by computers will have issues," were her immediate thoughts on this discovery. She began following the pipe run.

The pipes led her on a long trek past various barracks and labs. The alarms had just started sounding again, so apparently Oz and Chow or somebody was causing trouble on the other side of the base. She kept going, though, trying not to think about it while she searched for the alpha override device. Finally, after

she had descended a long flight of stairs, she was outside a large room packed full of pumps and filters. Even through the windowed door, she could clearly hear the roar of the mechanical devices on the other side.

She took a chance and peeked through the glass porthole. Inside was a mechanic wearing hearing protection earmuffs bent over a motor of some sort. On the other side of the room was a heavy pressure door. Carefully, she pulled open the door and was almost instantly deafened by the tumult of noise that came spilling out. It didn't appear that the mechanic had noticed the door opening, so she slipped in closing it behind her. Quickly moving across the room caused her glamour to slip, but getting to the other door was her main priority at the moment. Once at the other sealed hatch she examined it, ducking down to keep out of sight of the mechanic who was still tinkering with his project.

The door was heavy and had '**Danger High Voltage**' and '**Authorized Personnel Only**' notices painted on it, as well as being secured by an electronic lock. "So how do you get in if the power screws up and you have to fix it?" Willow thought to herself as she examined the wall next to the lock-plate. A well-concealed panel revealed itself to her intense scrutiny and swinging it open allowed access to a strongly built key lock.

"This is doable," the redheaded genius placed her hands on either side of the key-way and began to concentrate. At first there was no visible reaction, but then a slight vibration could be seen as the lock cylinder began to oscillate back and forth very slightly. Then a series of faint clicks, inaudible over the din of the pump room, signaled the pins being driven up into their unlocked position and the lock cylinder spun freely releasing the bolts holding the hatch closed.

Willow reached over and grasping the hatch release lever carefully pulled it down. The hatch swung open easily at the same moment letting out a siren's blare. The mechanic still wearing the muffs to protect against the din didn't even twitch. Still, Willow slipped inside and closed and locked the hatch as quickly as possible.

The room she found herself in was dark and hot and smelled like ozone. Glowing racks of indicator lights showed her that she was in a power switching room. Groping around, she found a light switch revealing another door just like the first on the opposite wall. This door had a simple lever rather than the heavy latch though, indicating it was probably more frequently used. Willow pressed down the latch and opening the hatch a crack, peered out into a gleaming white room filled with computer banks. Ducking back inside the power switching room, she started studying the controls.

The watch stander in the computer room started with surprise when all the power systems started failing at once. Not in the careful power down sequence so emergency power could take over, but suddenly and violently. The systems that were monitored by those computers also began failing in a cascade of trouble.

One of those systems was the array of centrifuges used to separate uranium 235 from uranium 238 located on a deeper production level. These centrifuges need to have their speeds monitored constantly and balance and gas flow corrected as needed. Without this monitoring they proceeded to shake themselves to pieces and released toxic vapor across the entire nuclear materials refinery area from ruptured pipes. That triggered the radiation leak alarm.

Throughout the complex, klaxons blared and red lights began spinning. The alpha rhythm inducer's master control was taken off line as well by Willow's forceful hard power-off of the entire facility, so the guards were surprised to see all the SSI personnel suddenly waking up during the middle of transit to the prison area. As only a token force had been assigned to escort the captives, they were soon overpowered and the two SSI teams were continuing on with their mission. And, with the communications systems snarled by Willow's sabotage, the guards were unable to call for help.

Willow now had to figure out how to get out of there without being trampled or shot. Turning back to the door to the pump room she activated the release on her side of the hatch and



peeked out. The room beyond had gone silent except for the alarms; all the pumps and air handlers had come to a complete stop. The mechanic was frantically trying to get through to someone on a hand-held radio, the panic on his face clearly visible in the eerily strobing red lights.

Willow ran as fast as she could across to the exit, but the mechanic caught sight of her and began to pursue. She made it to and through the door just ahead of him, slamming it in his face just as he was about to reach her. Taking off up the stairs, she began to retrace her route back to the sub-pen. She was joined in her flight by an assortment of guards and technicians, all running for the exits. As she ran she noticed that a layer of water was starting to cover the floor and was rising.

It was suddenly obvious. When Tom had cut through the sub-pen doors he had left it open to the sea. Normally the atmospheric pressure of the environment of the base would have kept the water at bay in what was essentially a large moon pool, but when the pumps failed, so did the pressurization. Now the ocean was beginning to force its way inside.

Well, at least the direction the water was coming from told her which way to go. Willow headed upstream, the water getting deeper as she ran. Now it was ankle deep, now knee deep. By the time she had made her way to the sub-pen's level, it was up to her waist and was creating a significant current which slowed her progress. Then finally ahead, she saw the large airlock to her destination. Someone had tried to close it, but it had been damaged and bent, possibly by some of the flying debris from the seacopter's destructive entrance, and water was spilling through the gaps at a high pressure.

Wrapping her arms through the spokes of the hatch wheel, Willow strained to spin it open while trying to brace her feet in the now armpit deep water. The wheel started to slowly crank and with a grating sound the remaining locking lugs eased out of their sockets. Willow swam quickly away as the pressure finally forced the tortured metal door open wide allowing a surge of sea water to bull its way through the now enlarged opening. Grabbing on to the hatch coaming, she pulled her way past the

current and was soon swimming in the air bubble trapped near the top of the now almost completely flooded sub-pen. Ahead she saw the Sea Hound bobbing and occasionally scraping against the ceiling. With her last strength she made her way over to the main window and rapped on the armored glass before passing out.

When she came to she was inside with Oz and Buffy crouching over her.

"Wills," Buffy asked pointing at the water filled cavern outside, "Did you do that?"

"Uhm... Maybe?" Willow answered in a very small voice.

"Cool!" was her friend's surprising response, "No one can call me destructo-girl ever again!"

## Chapter Thirty — The Cobra Speaks

The Sea Hound roared its way back to the Flying Lab. As it cleared the water, it was plain to see many small dots of humanity boiling out of the concealed exits on the surface of the land mass that had concealed the Black Cobra's base.

"I hope they're all right," Willow said.

"The Cobra trains his personnel well. They were heading for the exits when the first alarms started blaring. Now with the facility flooded, he's going to have a difficult time doing any kind of salvage. The important thing is, see those lights?" Tom pointed at a couple of sets of dim glows through the driving rain.

Willow nodded.

"Those are some good sized fishing villages. Twenty thousand or so people in each of the three you can see. If his ship had taken off, as it would have to be firing out one bomb per second, they probably would have been radioactive within the first few seconds. You did the right thing," Tom finished.

"Sky Queen to Sea Hound. Come in Sea Hound," the radio squawked.

"Hound to Queen, over," Tom replied.

"Couple of things, Boss. First the U.S. Navy and the Chilean government received anonymous tips of a terrorist training camp in Tierra del Fuego. A pretty specific location was given. You'd better hurry up before we're noticed."

"Roger that! And the other thing?" Tom asked.

"We received a tight beam message for you including a frequency and a request for immediate contact," the radio read out a series of numbers.

"Got it! Rendezvous in twenty minutes. Anything else?"

"Nope, that's all, Sea Hound."

"See you in twenty, Hound out." Tom answered before flipping several switches on the radio set, "Let's see what he

wants..."

"Who?" asked Abe from his co-pilot's seat.

"The Black Cobra, who else?" was the response.

The radio hummed to life, "Swift to Cobra come in please," Tom spoke clearly. The conversation in the seacopter had immediately quieted down.

After a brief pause a handsome older man with a long white ponytail appeared on the screen, "Hello, Mr. Swift. It's been a while since we chatted last."

"Cobra," Tom responded quietly, "the reason for this call?"

"Simply to congratulate you. This is the third time you have thwarted my plans. It will be the last. You can be assured of that. That young Miss Rosenberg is quite competent. You should be pleased with your recruiting."

"Eep," Willow gasped, "He knows my name!" Oz rested his hand on her shoulder and Buffy stepped forward.

"Hey, Mister Cobra, don't you dare mess with my friend!" the blond growled.

"Ah, the unexpected one! Miss Summers, I'm really not sure how you can do what you do, but rest assured, I will find out. Why couldn't you have stayed at home this vacation? Your assistance was the proverbial want of a nail. Unexpected, and with damaging repercussions," the Black Cobra actually looked slightly peeved at this.

"I have a knack for that kind of thing. What can I say?" Buffy replied, her tone light but controlled.

"My dear, you have a truly diabolical gift for understatement. Anyway, my quarrel is with Mr. Swift, not you or your friends as long as you stay in California. I am very sorry, I may have startled you Miss Rosenberg. In fact, I wish I had offered you an internship first," the Cobra actually had a rueful smile on his face.

"I really don't think I would have taken that internship," Willow answered nervously.

"Probably not, but I should have offered it anyway. Mr. Swift, your company has cost me a great deal of money and time and materials. I will reclaim my pound of flesh. Good day," with that the signal snapped off.

"Get a fix?" Tom asked Abe.

"Not a usable one. Looked like he was bouncing it off a weather satellite," Abe replied.

"Not too surprising," Tom looked pained, "At least he won't be coming after SSI for a while. There was probably several billion dollars worth of hardware in that base. When the power went off, so did the proper jamming field and we were able to get a good read from the Space Wheel. The Cobra is now the proud owner of a very flooded, half built, space station the size of an aircraft carrier. He is definitely going to need to regroup and he won't catch us with his Little Sister control trick again. I have a few ideas on that."

"So what now?" Oz asked.

"I'll pack up the Geotron and a team in Fat Man suits and burrow in from underneath to recover and dispose of all the nuclear material. You two continue your internships and Buffy continues her flying lessons," Tom answered with a grin, "All in all this has been a fairly nostalgic couple of weeks. I haven't done anything like this since the seventies."

The flight back to SSI was uneventful and at the end of the summer an SSI cargo plane came in for a landing at Sunnysdale Airport.

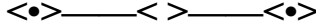
Xander, Cordelia, Joyce, Faith, Wesley, and Giles were waiting for the arrival, and looked on in astonishment when the pilot's side window slid open and Buffy waved down at them after taxiing in. The cargo ramp lowered and soon Oz's van carefully backed out followed by Willow and Phyllis Radnor.

"Willow!" Xander shouted as he ran over to greet his friend with a big hug.

The next few minutes were a confused mass of greetings and introductions as Tom and Buffy exited from the cockpit

discussing the flight cross-country. Finally, though, good-byes had to be said and Tom looked over at Willow...

"You know we have a work-study program with the State University of New York at Shopton."



### **Author's Note—**

Wheeee this was fun!

All the weird inventions of Tom Swift are from the series except for the Little Sisters, the automated shuttle vans, the ID charm bracelets, the Pigeon Elite, the Bronco Cargo plane, the Duck Mark V, and Ator third generation. The last two are extrapolations of what he did build, and the others he could have built.

In case you can't tell, I loved the series as a kid and it's been so much fun introducing more people to it. In the reviews are a number of links to sites specializing in all things Swift including fanfic, so if you want more info it is easily accessible!

Thanks to everybody, including the unexpected support from the Tom-Swift Yahoo group, which completely blindsided me. Thanks guys and gals!

**Batzulger**