

TOM SWIFT
And The
Marianas TechNoids

BY
Victor Appleton II

A special “Hello” to my favorite Australian.
She is someone you likely do not know, but is special to me nonetheless.
So, to Lesley, here’s my thanks for your friendship and wonderful emails
and pictures of your sculptures.

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Tom Swift and the Marianas TechNoids

By Victor Appleton II

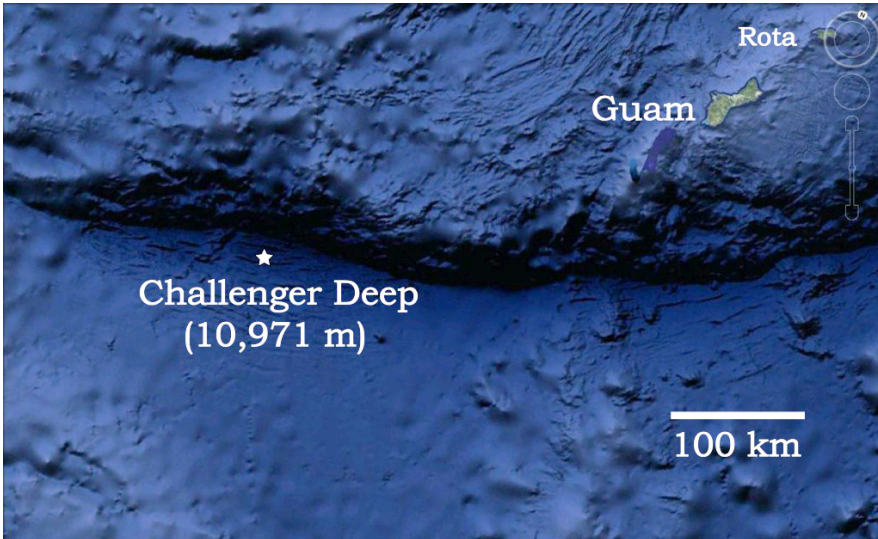
Tom Swift and his father have already met and befriended an alien race from a distant solar system. Now that these “Space Friends” are believed to be gone, possibly forever, about the last thing Tom is thinking of when he undertakes a deep-sea recovery mission in the deepest spot on the planet, the Marianas Trench, is to discover signs of intelligent life.

They are nothing that has ever been seen before, and they are not human!

Tom, Bud and the crew of the *Yamato II* are caught between quietly finding out what they can, or announcing this to the world and letting others come down to see. The problem is, at least one unfriendly scientist gets word and moves toward mounting his own deep exploratory expedition but with the intent of capturing one or more of these intelligent beings and exploiting them by exhibiting them in zoos.

Tom and one member of his crew find themselves in a potential battle for their lives as they come to terms with communicating and protecting the lives of these strange and gentle beings. Or, will they take protection into their own hands... uh-hh, flippers?

Obviously this book is dedicated to the man who has actually traveled to the bottom of the Marianas Trench, (unless you believe conspiracy theorists who probably think it was all done in a swimming pool in Katmandu or some other out of the way place) James Cameron. And, to the crew of individuals who were there helping him survive to tell the tale. You just about helped him do the impossible! Congrats!! It is also dedicated to a fan, Gary Sanger, who make a wonderful suggestion to try to bring in a one-time possible Tom Swift Jr. title—*The Undersea Mountain Mystery*—that was apparently abandoned way back when. That title clicked something in my mind, and it added a missing element to a plot I’d been considering. Thanks, Gary!



“South and both east and west of Guam, there is an oceanic shelf that drops off in some places as deep almost seven miles!” Tom told his friend as they looked at one online image. **CHAPTER II**

The above image was found in several English and foreign language forms on the Internet. I did not see a version with an attribution. No copyright infringement is intended.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Okay. First off, 27 as a number is not a real celebratory figure. It is an amazing number of *books* for one person to write in the space of ten years, especially when you consider there are another 40 or so collections and shorter novels and novels having nothing to do with Tom Swift or any of the Swifts put out there over that same period.

But, enough patting myself on the back.

Writing is a very personal thing and something everyone ought to try, but first a few words of advice. If you find you cannot relate a reasonably long story without having to pause, back up and constantly say things like, “No, wait!” and “Oh, first you need to know...” then you probably won’t be an author. If you cannot write a story down that follows a logical order of things, you probably won’t be an author. If you cannot write dialog in a way that flows and sounds—when you read it out loud—like it is coming from a human mouth, you probably won’t be an author. And, if you like the humor of Jeff Foxworthy, you may be a redneck! Also, for those in the know, “There’s your sign!”

I write because I can. Call it a calling, a gift or a mania, a sickness or a compulsion, I think up situations and people and inventions and the next book starts all by itself. Sometimes I start a book and set it aside for (ready for this) as much as four years... so far! Sometimes I start a book and a few weeks later I have 50,000 words and am coming to within sight of the end. You might do that yourself if you try.

If you type about 30 words per minute and can think as you type, you can put about 7,200 words into your favorite word processor in about 4 hours. Do that for ten days and you have a good length for a novel. That’ll be between 200 and 220 pages in book form.

Think of the adoration your friends and family will shower upon you! And, you’ll have a solid example to hold in your hands to show that you did it.

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

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



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

Tom Swift and the Marianas TechNoids

FOREWORD

I was aghast when, in a previous book in this series, I discovered that Tom's wife, Bashalli, was so angry at him over his going off into space, placing himself in danger yet one more time, even when he had children and a wife to think about, I nearly cried as she walked out the door.

It wasn't until much later I realized I had her happiness in the tips of my fingers and so you will have noted (**SPOILER ALERT:**) she came back and she and Tom rekindled their love and relationship.

But, I was shaken by the experience. I know, for example, the Bashalli of another author's books isn't as quite as loving and wonderful, and I must say I suspect her counterparts in other Tommy-verses are also different, perhaps some even evil. I like my Bashi with her smiles and kisses and just a hint of her old accent.

How does that come to figure in this new novel? Well, with Tom settling down and taking on only Earth-bound adventures for a period of time, I realized he had not been underwater—at least water on Earth—for a number of books and so when this story came to my notice I eagerly waited and watched how it all unfolded.

(**ANOTHER SPOILER ALERT:**) I also have long felt the Space Friends could not and should not be the only beings to have visited the Earth in the past. Some may have loved it and stayed. Some may have fled or even perished. Who knows?

I hope you like the *man* Tom our boy inventor has become. I know I get a kick out of watching him grow as if he were my own son. And, in a way, isn't he sort of like that?

Victor Appleton II

CHAPTER 1 /

BACK ON EARTH FOR...?

HAVING JUST barely arrived home from his recent Neptune adventure in time to be with his wife, Bashalli, for the birth—early by eight days!—of their third child, twenty-nine year old inventor Tom Swift was now mentally and physically exhausted. And, it was not going to get better for the new parents until their nanny, Amanda, came back from a family emergency.

Fortunately for both young parents, Tom’s mother, Anne Swift, and Bashalli’s mother, Lalisha Prandit, were loving and doting grandmothers. Between them they came over and covered the house duties and keeping the older two children, Bart and Mary, busy and active while mother and father slept for the better part of a whole day. Of course, Bashalli woke up enough to nurse the baby, which one or the other older women brought to her when needed, but she had been quite stressed by Tom’s absence and the early baby arrival, so she relinquished her first day of “mommy” time to snuggle up against him. And, get real sleep.

But, all good things, as it is said, must come to an end and within three days both Tom and Bashalli had to get on with *things* including bonding with their new baby, Anne Lalisha Swift—named for Tom’s mother and Bashalli’s.

“Don’t you think she is absolutely precious?” Bashalli asked as they sat on the sofa in the living room while Bart and Mary, not truly understanding why this interloper was in their house, played in the other room.

Tom nodded. “She’s as beautiful as Mary was at this very young age, and as cute as Bart was with his day one toothless smile.”

Looking first from the corner of her eyes and then turning to him, she asked in a serious tone, “So, how soon do you have to go back to work?”

She knew her husband very well. And, he knew *that* tone.

“Oh,” he began slowly and as nonchalantly as he could because he understood she wanted him to remain home with her as much as possible, at least until Amanda came back, “I ought to go in tomorrow for an hour or two, but not more than three—promise—to see how things are going with all our collected samples being ferried down from the Neptune trip. Then, it will be the weekend, so you have me those two days, and come Monday I have to get into my plans for bringing the *Yamato II* back down to Earth, but I need to

do it without dismantling it and coming down with the pieces.”

He mentioned this because the very large ship—built to be both a spaceship as well as a submarine capable of maneuvering down in the deep liquid methane ocean of the distant planet—had been constructed in five major sections at the older facility, the Construction Company, trucked over and then outfitted at Swift Enterprises before being assembled in geosynchronous orbit into the final, working ship. Each section had been lofted to that point on the cargo deck of Tom’s giant lifting spaceship, the *Goliath*.

It would not be possible to take it apart again. Swift Enterprises built things to stay together no matter where they were assembled!

Even at four miles square with a fantastic and nearly endless capability for building the many things Tom and his father, Damon, designed, there had been no good way to fly the space submarine off the planet as a completed ship.

“But, how will you bring that very large ship down, and where do you take it?” she asked.

Tom shrugged. “Not certain right now, but I have a notion I need to look into. In case you are interested, it has to do with building a sort of delivery vehicle that can grab hold of it and lower it down safely. Where? Well, Fearing Island I guess. *Yamato* is a submarine when not in space, and Fearing is our submersibles base.”

That made sense to her even if a lot of what Tom did at work might not. Bashalli Prandit Swift was Pakistani by birth and all-American by having been raised in New York since the age of ten. She was trained as an artist and had helped her boyfriend/husband on several projects but science and mechanical objects were not her forte. Even so, she loved him deeply and always wanted to be a sounding board for him and his ideas.

Amanda arrived back on Sunday afternoon, apologized for her absence, and fawned over the new baby for several hours before going to the kitchen and making them all dinner. Well, dinner for Tom, Bashalli, Bart, Mary and herself. Bashalli would take care of little Anne.

“My aunt, the woman who practically raised me when my mother died in a car accident before I turned six, has had cancer for several years, and believed it was gone... but it came back four months ago with a vengeance. She decided to forego debilitating treatment in favor of spending more time with all of us.” She sniffled a little. “Sadly, she passed on Friday and we all had a memorial last night.”

Bashalli got up, came around and hugged the young woman who was taking such good care of the children that she and Tom already thought of her as a member of their family.

“As much as we love having you back, you could have taken more time to be with your family,” Bashalli told her.

Amanda shook her head. “Not really. I’m the one and only relative she still had around so it was just me and about fifty of her friends. I’ll be receiving a package with her ashes in about two weeks. I hope you don’t object to my keeping them in my room.”

Tom and Bashalli shook their heads.

Tom said, “We probably don’t want you showing them to the kids, but your room is *your* room.”

On Monday, Tom headed to Enterprises for most of the day. He worked at his desk in the large office he and his father shared trying to come up with a viable solution to getting the *Yamato* back down to the ground. Or, water.

Bud wandered in at 2:15 asking his friend if there was anything to be helped with.

“Not that I can put a finger on, flyboy, but maybe we can bat a few ideas around. Want a coffee? My treat.”

Bud nodded vigorously.

Tom got up and they headed out of the office, telling the secretary, Munford Trent, they would be in the cafeteria for about an hour.

“If dad calls from Washington and needs me, hit the recall button, please,” the young inventor directed.

Years earlier he had designed and built the TeleVoc pin every employee wore as their company badge. It had the bonus feature of being able to send subvocalized—unspoken—messages to any other person wearing a pin, but Trent hated the “voices in my head” aspect so Tom built him a special box for his desk. He could press any one of eight buttons—three for Tom and five for Damon—that sent a synthesized message of a specific need for their attention.

“Will do, Tom. He is due back in an hour anyway. Umm, how’s the new baby?”

“Like my sister, she is fussy, makes a lot of noise and fills diapers like they are going out of style. But, I’m guessing that is far too much information. Sorry. She is fine and healthy and that is what is important.”

In the company cafeteria, they sat at a table away from the hundred or so other employees also taking a break and talked about the trip to Neptune and what Tom hoped to do next.

“Well, as I see it you have to either lower it down, and you have the High Space L-Evator occupied in the Caribbean, or build a sort

of delivery truck. I'm guessing she's too long and heavy for the *Goliath*."

Tom nodded. "Yes, she is. The L-Evator idea might have been nice, but even that would be overwhelmed by the weight and the length and mass of *Yamato II*. Although," he said mostly to himself, "if I turned it upright to keep the center of balance... no. Won't work. We'd have no good way to turning it back flat to launch. Oh, well."

The inventor's High Space L-Evator had been built to support the construction of Tom's gigantic second space station, christened the *Space Queen*. Once it had outlived its usefulness, he'd moved and repurposed it to support his underwater growing domes in the southern area of the Caribbean where it was in almost constant use.

Bud knew better than to even ask what Tom had muttered. Generally it was the inventor asking himself a question he usually shook his head about. This was no exception.

"Well then, any solutions come to mind? Something like a giant sling under the... oops!" Bud turned a nice shade of red. "Can't put it under *Goliath* because that would interfere with the giant repelatron dish. Sorry I started on that one."

"It's okay, flyboy. Truth to tell, I sort of considered that myself, although I was thinking of something offset. As you figured out, it just won't work. Darn it anyway. If we had two of that ship we might rig a sling, but we don't... so we can't."

They sat in silent contemplation another minute before Tom asked, "Any other wild ideas swimming around that head of yours?"

Bud shook his head. "Not really. I was just thinking it is too bad the plasma jets that got us out there and down to Neptune and back can't just lower the ship down here. Uhh, why is that?"

Tom considered the question a moment, "Well, there are two major reasons, one of them is a showstopper. First, we don't have the fuel in the ship. Even if we arranged to refuel her in orbit, it is the other one we cannot get around. There is no way any nation will allow a full plasma jet that powerful to be used inside the atmosphere. Small test rigs are okay, as long as they are well contained, but the level of plasma flame—not the right word by the way—*Yamato* creates is far beyond anything allowable. By the time we might get permissions, it could be worthless. Certainly costly and perhaps too little too late."

They sat silent, again, another two minutes before Bud stood up. "Sorry to leave you with nothing, but finishing up the HoverCity and the Neptune thing took me away from my testing duties, and that newest version of the *Pigeon Commander* needs a final three-

hour FAA shakedown. Got to run!”

The *Commander* was the fourth generation of the *Pigeon* line of propeller aircraft coming from the Swifts. The front-and-back 2-seat *Pigeon* had given way to the side-by-side *Pigeon Special*—a favorite of Bud’s wife, Tom’s sister, Sandy—and then the *Racing Pigeon*, a super fast four-seater. Now, the *Commander* was for sale, and as it was based on Tom’s commuter jet the SE-11 featuring an underslung cockpit and two engines sitting on top of the wings; it was a very good seller.

Times changed and so did the public’s desire or need for more speed, so now the six or seven-seater had a more powerful pair of engines, better propellers, and nearly one-third greater range.

Tom and Bud had been literally knocked out of the sky by an old foe, Octavia Whitcomb, when they were giving the near-final test plane one of its final flights seven months earlier.

She had gone to prison, never to be getting out, but had died while trying to escape when she knifed on of her guards and was shot. The older Construction Company had built another test plane that Bud, along with three of the other Swift test pilots, had been flying for more than two weeks. It had nearly one hundred and seventeen hours of trouble free flight and only needed this final FAA certification flight.

Which is what Bud had left to perform.

Tom thought a few seconds before racing from the room to catch up with his friend out on the tarmac.

“Care for some company?” he inquired.

With a grin, the flyer nodded. “If you can spare the time and as long as you take over the notes and check off list, come on.”

The plane was waiting for them at the Barn, the open-sided hangar closest to the main building cluster at Enterprises. One of the ground technicians was waiting with a clipboard and a small clear vial. “All the checks I can do are complete, Bud and Tom. She’s fueled and the break-in oil changed out last night with new 5W50. Purrs like a contented kitten to my ears,” she told them with a smile.

While Bud made a full walk-around check, taking a small fuel sample before handing the vial to the woman for recycling, Tom climbed in and started turning the plane’s systems on.

Bud climbed in and started the left engine as the canopy clicked shut, nodding in satisfaction and commenting, “She’s right. It really sounds like it is purring.” He added the right engine to the mix and revved them both a little before contacting the tower in the center of

Enterprises for taxi permission.

“Roger, Commander Test. Winds are coming in a little crazy so we’ll have you lined up on 1-4-0 for starters, but be advised you might need to preposition on 0-9 for take off. Oh, and those winds are fifteen to nineteen from zero-nine-five right now. Barometer is three-zero-point-six and dropping about a tenth every two hours since 5:00 am, temperature on the tarmac is fifty-seven and at tower height it is fifty-three. You’ll have to hold for Canadian traffic to traverse area in three minutes. Call when you are ready.”

“Roger, and thanks!”

Bud had them at the indicated runway, the nearest one to the Barn coincidentally, in a minute where he stepped on both pedals to set the brakes and brought up both engines to three thousand RPMs for half a minute.

“Yeah,” he said enthusiastically. “Like a dream. I guess we hold here for a couple,” he stated as he dropped the power to idle. He called the tower and was told to continue to hold for another two minutes.

When their time came, they received a terse, *“Good to go! And, you will just miss Swift One coming in in seven minutes,”* message and the small plane headed down the runway. It was in the air quickly and they passed over the eastern wall of Enterprises at about three hundred feet.

Tom clicked his microphone on. “Enterprises tower. Please advise Swift One that Swift Two is in this aircraft and will return in three hours. In my haste to join the flyboy I sort of forgot to check out. Thanks!”

“Doing it now. Call in at fifteen minute intervals, please, with position information. Out.”

Tom switched them to the FAA control tower up the hill from Enterprises and checked them in for a looping route up to the Canadian border and as far to the east as the Maine-New Hampshire border and to the west into the far corner of New York State and the edge of Lake Erie.

As they neared fifteen thousand feet, the start point for their maneuvers, Tom switched on the special flight recorder provided by the FAA and pulled up the checklist of forty-seven different things they needed to accomplish.

Simple flight maneuvers such as left and right turns of various degrees and angles were at the top of the list. Each one went off without a hitch. A full three hundred sixty degree turn to the left and then similar right turn came next.

“This is about the point where a missile or someone like Octavia Whitcomb or even the deceased Black Cobra’s daughter would happen,” Bud said taking an all-around look out of the cockpit cover. With its 340-degree visibility it was easy to see around them.

There were only a trio of contrails in the distance to the north to be seen, none of them menacing.

Likewise, Tom could see nothing, but he tuned their forward-looking **RADAR** out to its maximum range.

“I’m spotting nothing coming this direction, flyboy. So, we seem to be good to continue.”

In between maneuvers, the two men talked about the *Yamato II* and what might be done to get her back down and ready for her next mission.

“I hope we can come up with something soon,” Tom told him, “because I really do want to go back to the Mariana Trench area where we lost that beautiful miniature sub and try to bring it home.”

“I always thought it was called the Marianas Trench. With the ‘s’ on the end.”

“It is known by both,” Tom stated. “Neither is more correct than the other because they both appeared about the same time in scientific and mapping literature. So, potato po-tah-to.”

“Well, for standardization I’m dropping the s and calling it the Mariana Trench from now on,” Bud said giving the inventor a grin.

By the end of the first full hour they had finished just more than half the maneuvers. Now, the sheet called for an altitude climb with rates listed for each minute. This meant starting from ground level so Bud dropped altitude and they headed back for Enterprises.

The original version of the plane had an operational ceiling of twenty-two thousand feet and a total ceiling of about nine hundred feet higher.

Bud performed a touch-and-go and they headed up again.

While they climbed, Tom used the stopwatch function of his watch and recorded their flight.

“Wow,” he exclaimed when they passed twenty-one thousand feet and were still heading up at about three hundred feet a minute.

In the end they reached twenty-three thousand two hundred feet before control began to have troubles and their climb rate was almost nothing.

As they headed back to fifteen thousand, where all the remaining

maneuvers would take place, Bud closed his eyes and felt what the plane was saying to him.

“That inner pilot telling you anything?” Tom asked.

“Hmmm. Everything is smooth and well-mannered, skipper. The fly-by-wire controls are as smooth as I’d expect. Did you notice the small cloud formation we ran through just east of Buffalo only minimally affected the turn we were in at the time?”

Tom admitted he had noticed it, but because it was so slight he’d not mentioned it at the time.

“The only place I felt anything was in the vertical stabilizer. It pulled just a little to the right for, oh, maybe two seconds until we passed out of the wind gust. Then, all smooth.” He smiled brightly. “This is even better behaved than the original *Commander*. Any ideas if Jake and the people at the Construction Company did anything different?”

With a shake of his head, Tom replied, “As far as I know the only two changes have more to do with the mounting of the engines. They are slightly indented into the wing tops now so a bit more aerodynamic. I’ll have to pull out the latest plans to see if that is it. Might also look at the wind tunnel results.”

They completed the FAA’s list before they passed Syracuse, New York so Tom okayed Bud for some minor acrobatics.

The pilot, loving this part of what he did, put them into a barrel roll followed by a loop and then a straight upward climb until they came close to stalling. As the nose came over Tom held his breath. It was the danger point in this maneuver because if the engines conked out, they would have difficulty pulling out of the resulting dive.

He needn’t have worried; his W-series engines didn’t even stutter as Bud applied a little power and then pulled the nose up.

Giving another of their scheduled calls, Tom was surprised when the tower asked them to head directly to the south.

“We, uhh, had a major power outage all over the Shopton area, and the FAA folks are unable to get their systems fully back on line. We’re on back-up generator. Ought to just be a half hour or so.”

“Okay, but why do you want us this far out of the area?” Tom asked. “We would like to come in and circle the area as far north as Thessaly and south to Pottsville unless they have a really good reason.”

He was not bothered by the change in flight plans, but because this was not a single, isolated incident. The greater Shopton area

had suffered five other significant electricity interruptions in the past seven months. Several had happened while the *Yamato II* was being constructed and then two more while Tom and his crew were traveling to and back from Neptune.

One such power outage happened the day after Bashalli had given birth, and the hospital's emergency generator had required two minutes to come up to full power. It was fortunate nobody had been in need of constant power, but the oxygen generator system had stopped for a few minutes. Luckily, that system fed into a pressure tank that had enough supply to last the facility a full thirty minutes.

"Uhh, Swift Two? I mean test Commander? You are cleared for your circle of the area. The FAA folks just didn't want you to get too low on fuel and not be able to get down to Albany. I had to explain that you had at least another two hours onboard."

"Our thanks. I wonder if they are listening in, and do they realize there is such a thing as visual flight rules? The weather's great and we can see for at least fifty miles up here and can land any time. Anyway, we're coming in for the big circle. Let us know when the FAA says it is okay to land."

That permission came before they even reached the Shopton area, so Bud headed them for the indicated north-to-south runway and brought them in to a feather-light touchdown.

Bud offered to pull the special recorder and get it ready to send to the FAA in Washington.

"I'll make a copy for us before I seal up their box," he stated.

It was standard practice to do this and meant the Enterprises' techs and engineers had full access to the same data in case there was anything that needed to be tended to.

There never was, at least not from a Swift aircraft.

Tom headed for the small electric runabout sitting near the closest hangar to make the nearly two-mile drive back to the office in a couple minutes.

Inside his head he was trying to get over being slightly angry with the FAA and the idea they wanted to keep him out of the area without another aircraft having declared a distress or mayday.

CHAPTER 2 /

GETTING YAMATO II BACK DOWN: ACT I

TOM HAD a discussion with his father regarding the power situation. They hashed over a lot of old things, but given the recent spate of interruptions, including what it might have meant had anyone been on an operating table, he felt the time had arrived to pose the question of why the area did not avail themselves of one of the nuclear reactors and generators the Swifts built.

“Before you tell me we’ve butted our heads against that wall too many times,” Tom told Damon, “I can’t see why, given our safety record, they can have problems with our burying a reactor into the south hills, shielding it even more than is ever going to be necessary, and then providing cheap power to the entire area.

Damon smiled and nodded. “Yes... and that we can do it so there will be no future outages that might mean life or death situations, but it is not the city as much as it is both the county and the state. The old school politicians of New York believe in hydroelectric power and not much else. That is why there are darned few wind farms that have ever been approved, little or no solar power in the way of large-scale organized farms, or, more importantly, any new reactors. They keep harping on the fact there are about ninety operating reactors in the country right now and yet the next group of three to be decommissioned is only a year off.”

“And then?” Tom was frustrated and his father could tell that. “After that, eleven more go cold in two years and suddenly our national electricity output is down by more than twelve percent. And, we small towns get the short end of the stick. It isn’t right; it isn’t fair, and it isn’t smart!”

Damon nodded with a slightly sad look on his face. “Normally I’d say we’ve beaten that *particular* metaphorical horse already, but I do think this recent outage might have many of the people we need to convince in a more, lets say, receptive mood. Tell you what. I’ll start things rolling and mostly because I believe I know who might become a champion for us. Okay?”

“Okay? *Okay?* Of course it’s okay, Dad. Heck, I sort of had a sudden dread that I was going to have to go to some dark chamber and have to answer to an inquisition about this. So, please do. And, if you want me there for either moral support or for added information, count me in.”

Damon chuckled. “Inquisition, huh? You should have been there

when I was trying to get Enterprises built or for the work I had to do in Washington to get permissions for the Citadel.” Now, he laughed and placed a hand on Tom’s shoulder.

“I would value anything you might have to offer, but I believe this first contact is a solo mission. Give me ten minutes to pull up some facts and figures and get with our Purchasing people to see what we can do in the way of deep discounts.”

Tom smiled at his father and turned to leave the office. On his way past Trent in the outer office he mentioned he was heading for the lab next door.

“If anyone needs me, I can be reached by phone or TeleVoc. Thanks”

Once in the lab and seated at his computer, Tom began to search for information on heavy lifting. It was a long shot, but there could be something that had an application to his problem. The search was made more difficult due to the need to lift, or lower, from outer space.

Four hours later he was no closer to a solution than he’d been at the start. It was now three in the afternoon and he decided he was hungry. Actually, his stomach had been announcing that fact for several hours, but he had ignored it. Now, however, it was insistent so he headed out of the lab and down the hall to Chow’s kitchen.

“Wahl, hey there, Tom,” the western chef greeted his young boss. “Ya missed the chicken cas-e-roll noodle lunch I brung yer dad, but I did keep a helpin’ in here just in case. It’ll take half a shake ta warm it up. Want it?”

“You bet. And, Chow? Thanks.”

In the nearly fourteen years they had known each other, they had become nearly as close as a father and son although both knew where to draw the line. Charles “Chow” Winkler had been a prairie and ranch cook most of his late teens and adult life, but had lost his job when the ranch he’d worked for about seven years in New Mexico closed down with the stroke and death of the owner.

It had only been by luck he’d happened upon the outer fence of the Citadel—the Swift’s nuclear facility in the western part of the state—in the nick of time to help rescue Tom and Bud from an air attack by a mystery assailant.

When it came time to head back to Shopton a couple weeks later Chow had approached Damon with an offer to come back with them and be their private chef. It was an offer Damon knew was a good one and so Chow had become the head chef at Enterprises and private cook for the Executive Staff.

“I can give ya the cas-e-roll plus yer choice o’ drinks. What’ll it be?”

Tom considered the question a moment before suggesting a tall glass of iced tea would be good.

“Comin’ right up. Where da ya want it?”

“Let’s set it up at my desk in the big lab, please.”

He headed back and moved a few papers to the side making room for his coming meal.

About three minutes later he heard the rattling wheel on Chow’s delivery cart coming down the hall followed by a light knock on the door and it opening.

“Heated it up a notch fer ya, ‘cause it was startin’ to get just below tepid. Anyway, the desk, right?”

“Yes, please. My stomach is telling me I need to get that inside me as quickly as possible or else it is going to scream at me. It smells wonderful,” he said as the plate was set in front of him. He picked up the fork and took a bite. “Ummmm. Just as good as I knew it would be. You’re the greatest, Chow!”

“Aw, shucks, Tom. It’s a pleasure ta cook fer people who appreciate it.”

Two more bites in and Tom looked at his friend. “So, how is the latest cookbook coming along?”

Chow took a seat on one of the stools by the lab table. “Pretty good all things considered. I still get a little flack from that Editor feller ‘bout my Texas twang and hows I want that in the books. But, that feller I have helpin’ me does an amazin’ job. Ever’thing looks like a real cook book and is organized and he even suggests a few ways ta say things so ever’body will understand. And, I got ta say thanks ta you fer helpin’ me decide which o’ the Enterprises recipes ta put in.”

This was the cook’s fourth book and though Tom wasn’t certain of the title he did know it featured a lot of the favorites of the personnel at Swift Enterprises.

The cook left him to his meal promising to come back in about ten minutes to clear things away.

When that time came, Tom had finished everything on his plate and was still a little hungry. Chow must have had an intuition about his younger friend and brought a plate with a berry pie for dessert.

“Brung ya a slice o’ my boysenberry pie, just like I know ya like. Dig in an’ I’ll wait here if ya don’t have any issue with that.”

“None at all, Chow. This is incredible. And, a little different. What did you add?”

“Little teeny bits o’ lemon zest. Brightens flavors up a bunch.”

Tom agreed and had the pie finished in a minute.

“So, what’re ya working on?” the cook asked as he gathered the last of Tom’s lunch dishes and the fork.

The inventor explained about the space ship, the *Yamato II*, and how he really needed to get it back down to Fearing Island or somewhere it could be used on the Earth.

“What I really need it for is to go down past Guam and try to find and bring home that little sub model Arv Hanson and Linda Ming and Hank build as a test bed for the *Yamato*. The problem is something that large and long is practically impossible to bring down in one piece. That’s why it went up in the five sections and was assembled up there.”

“And, ya cain’t take it apart and bring it back down the same way?” Chow asked.

“Unfortunately I never thought about that and it is now so completely welded together it would require cutting things apart and all the damage that would cause to do it.” Tom shrugged. “I think I might need to forget about it and leave it in orbit. I’m pretty sure it can be used again up there.”

“Could ya mebbe strap on a couple o’ repellertrons to it and fly it down?”

Tom knew the chef was trying to be helpful, but the sheer physics of something like that was... Tom stopped thinking about the impossible and began to consider what might be possible.

“You know something? That might be an idea I need to investigate. It would be tricky, and it needs to be something I can easily remove once we get the ship down, but that, Chow, might be the answer. Well done!”

“Ah, shucks, Tom. It’s just an idea an’ might not be all that good, but I thought I’d offer it up an’ see if’n thar’s any merit in it. If ya need any help or if ya just want your old hash slinger along ta feed you an’ any crew ya take, gimme a call.”

“Count on the invitation, Chow!”

He left the lab whistling an old country song about counting flowers on a wall.

Tom sat in silence for twenty-five minutes considering a repelatron solution to his problem. It would come down to two things: power and balance.

The power might be handled by trying to tap into the ship's reactor, but that would entail cutting a hole in the hull and that would forever compromise the integrity. He could always bring up an additional reactor or even a set of the nuclear power pods.

As he thought about it, he started making a few notes and performing some calculations.

If, he thought looking at one result, I take up four of the medium-sized pods and position them on four corners of a repelatron sling affair, those would power the system for at least an hour before they started to run down. That should be more than enough for a descent that should take less than twenty minutes!

With five sizes from which to choose, he might even move up to the next to largest pods. Those would give his repelatrons almost two hours of run time.

Since they would not be installed inside anything, the pods could be “borrowed” from the Citadel and then returned after use, or—and this was more likely—they would find other uses at Enterprises, the Construction Company or even the Swift MotorCar Company.

Tom decided he needed to talk to the Accounting department to see what, if any, was left over in the prepaid budget for the Neptune mission. This bringing home of the *Yamato* should be considered to be part of that mission. Of course, that also meant a trip to Legal to see if his assumption was legally defensible should any of the nearly one dozen countries raise a stink and demand their portion of anything left.

So, he left the lab heading for the southern end of the long Administration building, up the stairs to the top, or third, floor and into the Legal department doors seventy feet back down the hall.

“Is Jackson in?” he asked the receptionist at the front desk.

Giving Tom a smile, she nodded. “He sure is, Tom. But, at the moment he’s on a call to one of those nameless, soulless Government agencies reminding them they signed a contract for something or another we built, that they took delivery on, and now are sort of balking at making the final payment. Normally I wouldn’t tell just anybody that level of info, but what with this being your company and all...” She smiled again with a look in her eyes that told him she truly hoped she had not overstepped any boundaries.

“Glad to know about it. Before I hit him with a legal where do we stand, I’ll break the ice with a question about that. Uhhh, what is the thing we make, that they have, and we are being shorted on payment?”

“It’s some sort of guidance system for their latest series of unmanned drone reconnaissance jets. The only other thing I know is they are built over at the Construction Company.”

The inventor had to wait for about nine minutes but as soon as the light went off on her phone, she buzzed her manager and asked if he had a few minutes for Tom.

“Of course I do. Got something to tell him about, anyway. Send him in.”

Tom opened the door to Jackson Rimmer’s office and stepped inside.

“Before we get to my question, what’s this I heard over the intercom?”

Jackson leaned his six-foot, four-inch body forward. Along with a muscular frame that might give most professional football players a moment to consider attempting to tackle, he had perfected two things that also helped him in any legal actions. First, he could sound absolutely furious and nearly ballistic on the phone while sitting in his office with a calm smile on his face.

That alone had headed off many potential troubles with people who would sue a “deep pockets” company like the Swift’s without any real merit.

Second, he had perfected the ability to stare, seemingly endlessly without blinking, at any witness on a courtroom stand.

That had made most of the few who decided to go ahead with a lawsuit feel so uncomfortable and unsure of themselves, cases frequently were dismissed within minutes.

“Well,” he said placing his elbows on his desk, “I jut got off the phone with one of those assistant to a fifteenth under-under secretary of some minor department down in DC. His department ordered one hundred special guidance packages from us for an unmanned aircraft project starting more than fifteen months ago. We delivered five months early on the contract, had received only the first two of three payments, and they have been withholding the remainder now for four months.”

Tom nodded. “I may have heard dad saying something about that. So?”

“The so is, Mr. under-under-under tried to tell me they have not yet put anything inside an aircraft and yet they find the systems to be insufficient. When I pointed out that makes no sense, he sort of stuttered and put me on hold. I can only listen to an endless loop of a Johnny Cash wanna be—a husky-voiced woman by the way—singing *Burning Ring of Fire* for about one run through. I hung up

and called his boss who said the man I was speaking with had left for the day with some family emergency. When I told her about the lack of payment, she asked me to hold and I told her I would not. That sort of threw her for a moment before she told me she had to investigate the matter.”

Jackson sighed.

“I asked why she had no idea about things going on under her management and you might never guess this, but she had no answer for that. In the end I suggested a full payment within seven days or we would go back to the contract and bill them for a late payment totaling twenty percent of the original bill.”

“Did it work?”

“We’ll have the check couriered to us day after tomorrow. With a note of apology, or a sidestep with finger point, or something. So, what did you come to me with?”

Tom told him about the *Yamato* still sitting up in orbit and asked if the monies already paid to Enterprises, and assuming there was anything left, might be used to build the necessary system to bring the ship back to Earth.

“First,” the lawyer told him, “unless you already know this information, we need to check to see if there *are* any residual funds before we try to decide if we stand on firm ground that this, well, call it either a rescue mission of the final stage of the actual voyage and therefore can be paid for.”

He picked up his phone and dialed a number. “Elizabeth Saunders, please.” He smiled at Tom as he waited for the Director of Finance to come on the line, When she did he explained in very brief detail the nature of the call. He then looked back at Tom. “I’m on hold while she checks. Ought to be just a couple minutes.

It took about three minutes, but he listened and nodded a couple times, occasionally saying, “I see.” When the call ended and he hung up he had a smile on his face.

“If you can keep your expenses for this mission *conclusion* phase, as I believe we need call it, to just under seventeen million dollars, then there is that level of funds available to you. Does that get you anywhere in the ballpark?”

Tom smiled. He had computed the basic cost of a rudimentary sling and repelatron rig at fourteen million, but that assumed he needed to buy the power pods and not get them on either loan or be able to offset their cost by using them for something else.

“Great! And, you see this as truly a part of the full mission?”

“If you spent monies getting the parts of that ship up there,” and he pointed to the ceiling, “then the answer is yes. This is the opposite of what went up. A twist on Newton’s law about going up and coming down I’d say. But, I will ask you a question. Did this consortium of nations ever tell you they wanted equal shares coming back on anything not spent?”

Tom shook his head. “No. Nothing like that. The only thing some stated, and especially the Chinese, was they wanted their share of whatever methane diamonds we found and could bring back. I’m not certain about any other nation, but the United States has valued their three and a half pounds of them at just about the same as they paid for their share of the mission costs. Not that they are for sale. Not ours at least. China has been trying to find a buyer for theirs but so far, no dice.”

Now very curious, Jackson leaned farther forward. “Why is that?”

The inventor let out a small chuckle. “Because the theory about those diamonds is that they might evaporate at some point, and so nobody wants to spend tens of millions of dollars, or their nation’s equivalent, on what might be just a few cubic meters of methane gas at some point. Give them a couple years and if things hold together, they might be able to sell them. Just not today.”

Jackson counseled a quiet approach to spending the left over monies, and Tom left the office after assuring the legal expert he wanted to maintain as low a profile in getting the ship back down as possible.

By the time Tom got downstairs and to his lab he had formed a plan and basic design for the equipment necessary to get *Yamato II* down to the ground safely, and possibly even to act as its transport system to get it out to the Pacific Ocean where he wanted to put it to use.

He also knew he wanted and needed to talk with his father about his plans, but realized before heading to the shared office he needed some additional facts and figures.

And, a plan for what to do with the spaceship lowering rig once it had performed its planned task.

Bud was perched on his favorite stool when Tom opened the door.

“I thought I’d locked that door,” the inventor said by way of greeting.

Bud had a guilty grin on his face. “I sort of asked someone—a person who I shall not rat out—if I might borrow a spare key and

come in to wait for you. And,” he said reaching into his shirt pocket and pulling out the key, “here I am. So, I hear tell you are closer to bringing our little space sub back home and thought I’d wander by to see if I might give you my impressions, ideas, and two cent’s worth.”

“Your ideas are always welcome, flyboy, but I think you might be over valuing yourself. If Sandy were here she’d tell you I needed to give you back some change for that two cents.”

They both chuckled at the notion, but soon sobered.

“Really, I want to help if I can,” the flyer stated.

“Then, pull that stool over to the drafting table and take a look at what came to my mind just a few minutes ago,” Tom suggested as he took his own seat at the tilted table. He taped a piece of paper to the board and pulled out the flip-top holder with his set of more than a hundred colored pencils.

In moments he’d sketched something that looked like a four-poster bed but with a hammock slung underneath rather than a mattress.

Each corner, he explained, would hold a combination unit with a power pod and a repelatron. The repelatron would be able to swivel for steering, likely to about fifteen degrees from straight down. While the sides would be straight and stiff—Tom said Durastress I-beams would be his first thought—the ends would be made of a pliable material so it could cradle the fore and aft of the *Yamato*.

“Mounted on the outside of one side beam will be the control package,” Tom explained as he drew a box in the middle of the near side. “Control computer, data link and everything needed to maneuver the sling and its load down slowly and safely.”

Bud, knowing the limitations of the power pods and how they could expend their electricity before needing up to a full day to “recover,” asked about the time it would take.

“I believe we can expect up to two hours of runtime from size four pods, but I might need to downsize to size threes to fit into my budget. Threes will give us a good hour for a trip that should take a third to half of that.”

Tom added in his own head, *But, I’m really hoping I can stretch things to use the larger ones. I’d hate to get this down to a few hundred feet only to have it drop the rest of the way!*

CHAPTER 3 /

“WHAT HAVE WE HERE?”

TOM SPENT another week coming up with several alternatives to what he was calling the Recovery Sling. Each time he tried making significant changes to his basic “side-supported hammock” design he came to the conclusion they either were not needed, or were counter to what the rig was supposed to accomplish.

“And, that is, specifically?” his father asked as they met that Friday afternoon.

Tom looked a little lost when he answered, “The best design I’ve come up with is a sort of sling with solid sides that the *Yamato* will be set into, strapped down to the sides, and then it just lowers into the atmosphere and then to the ocean. The thing is, re-entry heat has to be kept to a minimum, so the maneuvers from out in geosynchronous orbit to the ocean, or to Fearing, will take about two hours and up to two hours and thirty minutes. Greater than one hour of flight time inside eighty miles. That rules out the mid-sized power pods. The next size up will give a margin of maybe fifteen minutes. Not a lot of leeway.”

They both knew it needed to have at least a thirty-minute window of additional time just in case something came up that was unexpected.

Like, some sort of high winds in the upper atmosphere that could shove them far off course.

“You do know the sub can operate in water, don't you? Damon asked with a small smile.

Tom nodded but his face said he had a question.

“And, by that I mean you don’t have to get it right to Fearing Island. You could set it into the Atlantic many, many miles away and navigate back to the base.”

“Or,” Tom said, “even out in the Pacific for that matter. I guess I’ve been thinking of Fearing as the solution so I can make some adjustments to the ship for a more terrestrial ocean environment.”

“Nothing you could do *on the fly*, so to speak?”

Tom had to think before he formed an answer. The ship was propelled through liquid by a variation on his original Jetmarine drives where the liquid was ingested at the front and heated by using the nuclear reactor coolant, until it was superheated thus causing it to jet out the back.

It was ready, short of a thorough check of its systems and integrity, with no signs of anything having gone wrong before. Sensors inside were keeping tabs on things, and he had even set up a camera relay showing the five major sections, all of which looked in perfect condition.

“I’m not entirely certain, Dad, but she might be ready to just drop in the water, get the reactor back in operation, charge all the batteries and do a systems’ check before we take her out for a fast sea trial. So, I might not really need to bring her down to Fearing. But,” and he held up a finger, “I want to do that just in case. I really don’t know how well the materials in the hull stood up to the Neptunian ocean and all that pressurized cold.”

Damon nodded. He knew he’d do no different from his son. It was something he had instilled in the young Tom. “A builder always checks his equipment before using it, no matter if it was a hour, a day or a year since the last time.”

He did have one thing to offer his son by way of advice.

“I might be looking at ways to shorten the time from orbit to the ground if I were in your position. Or, and here’s my two cents worth, bring it to a lower orbit for a day and give your power source a chance to rebuild to near full power before you come all the way down.”

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll look into that as soon as I get the Recovery Sling design more settled. Thanks for being here for me!”

Tom headed back to the lab down the hall and got back to looking over his sling design.

By the time Bud poked his head inside at around five, Tom had removed three of the cross bracing pieces that would need to be moved for submarine insertion and then reconnected, made the sides stiffer, and decided he needed assistance with the sling materials in between the sides. That was going to take a consultation with both Hank Sterling as well as the ladies of the Uniforms department. They would, after all, work together to make the design a reality.

“Don’t want to disturb an inventor in the throws of, umm, inventing, but you and Bash are coming over for dinner tonight and your darling sister insists I pry you out of whatever chair you might be stuck in and get you heading for home. Casual, semi-barbecue attire in case you are thinking over your clothing choices right now.”

Tom turned and smiled at his best friend of more than a dozen years and brother-in-law for about half of them.

“And, in case your wife has neglected to inform you, Bash and I

are meeting at your place in one hour. I even have my clothes in the next room.” He pointed to the door to the small apartment he and his father had used at various times when working too late to safely drive home.”

“Oh. And yes, Sandy did forget to mention that when she called me ten minutes ago. So, let’s assume she did and all she wanted me to do was remind you to go get cleaned up, dressed and to your car in the next—” he glanced at his smart watch and tapped it a few times, his face looking concerned.

“Well, darn it anyway. I spent a bundle on this thing and it is refusing to tell me even the time of day.” He tapped the face again and would have gone on doing so had Tom not stood up, stepped over and lifted the flyer’s arm.

“Tried this?” he asked pressing the single button on the opposite side from the “stem.”

“Ahhhh,” Bud said as the face came on telling him not just the time, but the phase of the moon, the current weather, and his exercise level for the day. “Yeah, that’s the secret, now that you’ve shown me what I read in the manual last night. Thanks! I wonder how to make it stop telling me I’m not active enough? Hmmm? Anyway, you are to be in your car in forty-one minutes and... I make it just twenty seconds. Mark!”

Tom patted his friend on the shoulder. “Come on over here and lend a quick eye before you scurry home to help Sandy with the inevitable last minute stuff that you and I both know almost never exists. My bet is she or the two of you scraped and cleaned to within an inch of sterile last night. Am I right?”

Giving a nod, Bud took the five steps over to the drafting board.

“Not there, flyboy. The computer. I already put it in the CAD system so I could turn it all around. See?”

Bud did. “A space sub hammock. Neat! So,” he said eyeing the image more carefully trying to see what Tom might see, “what’s the problem or issue or sang or any other Thesaurus word like that?”

“I guess it does look a bit like that, or, if you are into military history, I see it as an update on the old Army litter used to carry wounded soldiers off the battlefield. Not that the *Yamato* is injured, but the idea is similar. To top it all off, by setting the four repelatrons and power pods at the four corners, it will work to lift or lower the same way. Just, for this one, a computer handles things two humans might have. Things like checking balance and level and maintaining them all the way down and through probable high-speed winds in the upper atmosphere. And, it’s just that keeping me from putting a stake in the CAD ground and telling Hank and Jake

Aturian to build this.”

Bud could think of nothing to say so he just nodded and made a “Hmmm” sound.

Three minutes later neither could think of something to add to what had been stated, so Tom headed for the apartment while Bud said he’d see the inventor in about a half hour.

“I know the time to be there is thirty minutes away, but I’ll bet you’ve being good and promised Bash you’d get there early. Oh, and come hungry. Sandy bought four seriously huge rib eye steaks she tells me I absolutely *will not ruin...* or I sleep on the sofa for a month!”

Tom stopped in front of the computer monitor as he was ready to leave and spotted something he’d neglected to add. He was about to sit down when something inside told him he could not be “just a minute,” and that starting something right then was likely to add an hour to his departure. So, he jotted a quick note to check his TeleVoc log and left all the while dictating a series of his thoughts that would be transcribed by the computers operating the entire TeleVoc system and would be ready for him any time he desired.

It was a little something he’d added to the latest software for the company-wide system. So far, he and about three hundred employees were using it on a regular basis.

Before ending his “call,” he added a note to call Hank and Marjorie Morning-Eagle in Uniforms the next morning.

To Tom’s surprise, Bashalli was nearly five minutes late—or rather she arrived in time but five minutes after he did. She smiled and told them all that Anne Swift had arrived a little behind schedule. Since it was their nanny, Amanda’s, day and night off, Anne was happy to provide Grandma duty and watch the kids.

Little Anne, the third Swift baby, would get her formula, something she actually preferred. For some reason she drank it readily and after a good burping always fell asleep... and slept for as many as nine hours at a stretch.

At first it had bothered Bashalli who felt cheated until she realized it meant uninterrupted sleep for them all. Then she accepted it.

“Hello, all,” she said smiling brightly. “Sorry if I’m late.”

“Not at all, Bashi,” Sandy said giving her a hug. “For once the boys are both here and on time, so you and I might be forgiven if we stepped out for a half hour before coming back and helping with

dinner. But,” she said looking at Tom, “if brother dear managed to get here without you, or Bud, shoving him in the back, then at least he deserves a nice dinner. The lug, here,” and she hooked her thumb toward Bud, standing behind her, “is going to cook us the best steaks I could find in Shopton.”

Bashalli smiled again. “I, for one, am looking forward to this. I’ve been told by my Pediatrician that while Anne is healthy and happy, I looked ‘peeky’ to her and could use some iron in my diet. And, more protein. Steak is just what she, the doctor, has ordered!”

“And, a baked potato and perhaps some broccoli?” Sandy asked.

“As long as the potato has sour cream and chives and perhaps even some little bits of bacon, and the broccoli has mayonnaise?” Tom’s wife asked by way of a suggestion.

“Exactly what I have plus butter and some grated cheese for the potato if you are in the mood for a little extra calcium. And, fat.”

Bud, using a special probe that checked the absolute doneness of the steaks, outdid himself setting each plate down in front of its intended recipient. His and Tom’s were both medium rare, Bashalli’s was medium, and Sandy’s just a shade better done than that... but not so much it could be called medium well!

Over the meal and dessert and some wine on the patio after dinner, the foursome talked a little about Tom’s forthcoming try at bringing the *Yamato* back to Earth and also a little about what a desolate place the floor of the methane ocean on Neptune had been.

“At least you brought us back these incredible diamonds,” Sandy said fingering hers that had been set into a pendant. Bashalli had chosen to have hers set in a special ring she wore on her left middle finger.

“Yes, and I hope you both are sticking to dad’s order to not discuss the origin of them.”

Both women nodded solemnly. Originally a dictate from Harlan Ames, their safety might be placed in danger if criminals found out the gems had come from the far-away planet. As rarities on Earth, they were estimated to be worth about two hundred thousand dollars each!

While the sun headed down behind the western hills outside of Shopton, they sat back, satisfied with their meals and with their lives.

Then, the first of the season’s mosquitos came buzzing in, believing each of the adult was a prize dinner source, and they quickly abandoned the porch for the safety of indoors.

“I hate those things, and the worst part is Bud, my love and soul mate, rarely gets bothered by them!” Sandy declared.

“I keep telling you that you taste so good they can’t help but be attracted to you,” he told her before ducking to avoid getting one of the sofa side pillows to the side of his head.

“Well, I also get annoyed by them, but my mother tells me to take odorless garlic capsules. They’re good for the blood and also keep the worst of the bugs away,” Bashalli told her sister-in-law. “Here,” and she reached into her purse taking out a bottle of the gelatin capsules.

“And,” Sandy asked eyeing the three of them being offered in Bashalli’s hand, “they won’t make me smell like a really bad Italian kitchen?”

“No. I did mention they are odorless, didn’t I?”

“You did, but Bud once gave me a vitamin mix that included no-smell asparagus fibers.” She scrunched up her nose. “Didn’t work. The next morning I regretted that one. I’m really badly affected by asparagus.” She made another face.

“Well, these have never given me a bit of odor. Ask Tom.”

The inventor nodded. “She isn’t lying, San. And, they do work for her as far as the skeeters go. We can go back out in a half hour to test them.”

Before they headed to the back yard again, Sandy held her hand in front of her mouth, blew into it, and gave it a sniff.

“I’ll be,” she commented.

Outside, the capsules had some affect, just not a complete result for the blond. It took the mosquitos almost three minutes before one was brave enough, or hungry enough, to land on her. She swatted it, leaving a small smear of someone’s blood on her leg before running for the back door.

The next morning Tom retrieved his TeleVoc notes, wrote down the two calls he needed to make, and sat back trying to imagine the one change he’d come up with. Five minutes later he made his first call.

“Hank? Tom. I need you for a meeting this morning if possible. If not, then this afternoon. What’s your availability?”

“I have a check over at the Construction Company, then another one for a new jig I made for the MotorCar Company, and I’m back here as of ten-fifty or so. Will eleven work?”

Tom agreed it would be fine. “See you then.

His call to Uniforms got him to the woman he and many others fondly referred to as the Major. Running her department with military efficiency and exactitude, she got the very best work from her staff because they wanted to, rather than feeling forced to.

“Hello, Major. Can a fellow pry you out of your cozy hangar out there for an eleven o’clock meeting with Hank Sterling and me?”

“You gonna provide snacks? That’s my morning snack time.”

Tom chuckled. “Name it and if Chow can produce it, it’ll be here.”

“Chocolate old-fashioned doughnut?”

“I happen to know he keeps both chocolate and plain dough in his refrigerator for just such an occasion. One, two or three?”

She laughed. “I have to keep my girlish figure slim and trim, so just two, please.”

Tom also laughed. He knew she was a stocky woman of Native American descent and probably weighed as much as Tom and Bud combined, but in a six-foot-two-inch frame that spoke of muscles and not flab.

“Two it is. Drink?”

She asked for a decaffeinated coffee and said goodbye with the promise of being there at the appointed time.

The meeting started a few minutes early as both attendees got there by five minutes till.

Tom described the *Yamato II* for the Major’s benefit before launching into his need to bring the ship home.

He also showed them a 3D rendering of his sling design using the office’s 3D Telejector. After several oohs and ahhs from them both, he asked for their impressions.

Hank cleared his throat. “It looks an awful lot like an old medic’s litter,” he said. “Not that that’s a bad thing, but how will you keep the ship centered in there and not let it slip up or around or even out one end?”

Tom picked up a laser pointer and shone the bead at one end of the illustration.

“What I haven’t added are the small station-keeping repelatrions at the top of the sling. They will press on the hull of *Yamato* and keep it centered on the thing.”

Seeing Hank’s face as the man pondered something, Tom asked

what he was thinking.

“Well, and forgive me if you’ve thought of this, but why repelatrons? Why not small Attractatrons? They would appear to keep a good hold on the ship while the repelatrons might shove it up and off given a bad updraft.”

Tom stared at his chief engineer. “Umm, absolutely no answer to that other than I know they take a little more power than repelatrons. But,” he said not scrunching his brow in deep thought, “if I can find a sure fire way to get the ship down faster, then we’ll have that power. Now I need to go back and try a few simulations in the computer. But, in the meantime, and given that whether it is repela- or Attracta-what-ever, about how long to see this build?”

Hank offered, “The solid pieces can be built in one run for the sides and another for the pod holders. From me, three days from the time I get the final design.

The Major had been doodling on a notepad. She looked up and then at both men. “What? Me now? Okay. I realize this fabric sling is going to have to hold something along the lines of ninety-five tons of spaceship. And even then, I figure we need at least a thirty percent strength cushion over that for all those in non-normal cases.

“If I can get the folks over there at the Construction Company to provide me with... hmmm... maybe eighteen hundred square yards of Durastress fabric to build an eighty by two hundred foot sling then I can have that assembled in three days as well. But,” and she bit her lower lip, “Maybe I need to do a double thickness for that safety margin. What do you think, Hank?”

He grinned. “If Tom has the budget I’d like to see that double thickness sandwiching one of Kevlar. But, I know that would be as expensive as the Durastress fabric and that would come in at...” He looked at the Major. She gave them both a figure. Then, she said to double that and then increase that if the Kevlar was to be included.

Tom smiled. “Just so you both know, that is less than half the total funds I have available. So, if Hank’s stuff comes in at under seven hundred thousand, and I can get the power pods on long-term loan rather than having to buy them outright, we have a winning combination!”

Now, the engineer smiled. “Figure me in for under five hundred K,” he said. “More likely around four hundred fifty thousand.”

“Well then,” Tom said as he stood to leave them, “I have a design to finalize, a supplier out at the Citadel to beg a favor from, and then get back to you both with the final design. Any questions of comments?”

Neither spoke up so he left them to a discussion they began before he'd left the room.

Back at his desk, he found a package waiting for him. It bore the stamp of the Security department, which told him it had already been checked out for anything noxious or dangerous.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?" he asked out loud before sitting down and pulling the package closer.

There was a small piece of paper inside. On it, and written in a very precise handwriting, was a note. It said:

Thomas Swift
Swift Enterprises

Mr. Swift. While our government believed that we needed to be part of your adventure to Neptune, we never figured there would be any repayment of our funding. In point of fact, we have no method by which to absorb the value of the riches you have provided to us. The Neptune diamonds are both a fabulous gift as well as a difficulty for us.

That may be a difficult thing to understand. Let me try to explain.

Our Premier had declared that the three largest of the gems be placed inside an unbreachable clear container, bolted to a deeply sunk and almost uncuttable post within the main floor of our National Museum for all to enjoy but to never be touched or stolen.

But, short of trying to gain bids and increasing our nation's wealth by too large a factor, we cannot utilize the remaining stones.

And so, this package contains the residual gems and a request your company might provide both the case and the post for our use in return.

Please advise. No matter what, these gems may be distributed to the other nations, or—and this is our hope—your company might take advantage of them and their apparent value for both the creation and delivery of our needed items, and that you keep the remainder.

Most sincerely,

And, it was signed by the First Minister of the nation.

The case and post were easy. Clear tomasite for the case with a connection system only accessible from inside the case along with a Durastress beam with a self-setting anchor system.

Both were within a day's work of creation and another day to

deliver. All he needed to do was get his father's okay and then arrange things.

Tom looked at the note and smiled.

No matter what, he would now have the funding to pay for the nuclear pods if it came to that.

The retrieval of the *Yamato II* was well and truly underway.

CHAPTER 4 /

PREP AND PLANNING

BOTH Damon and Jackson Rimmer in Legal agreed that Swift Enterprises could accept the gift—since it was freely offered by the legitimate government—use it as they saw fit, and provide the requested items including a team to go and install them.

Tom contacted the Minister who had signed the note and was overwhelmed by the emotional response and thanks the man gave him.

“You are lifting a huge and unwanted weight from our nation’s shoulders, and giving us a way to continue to feel we had a part in your magnificent adventure. Our government leaders will be most pleased.”

The only less-than-great news was the Citadel was fulfilling a large order from a South American country for the largest, high-output nuclear power pods and would not be in a position to build the size Tom needed for another three or four weeks.

It was an inconvenience, but the inventor realized that company profits came second only to employee safety, and that the old adage of a bird in the hand held true in this case.

He said to his contact out in New Mexico to put his order in for the next available slot and to please keep him informed.

“You can count on it, Tom. Uh, are you certain you can’t use the mid-sized ones? We have six of them in stock right now.”

“I’m fairly sure I need the extra output for this project, Winnie. Can’t tell you much, but they need to run all out for about ninety minutes.”

“Oh. Then, the answer is no. Normal load on the middies is good for all day, with partial rest at night, but not full load for more than... well, just not as long as you need with any safety margin. Sorry for the delay.”

“It really isn’t an issue. I still have a couple weeks to go before I need them. It’s just a good thing I checked now rather than waiting or I might have to put off using them. Have a great day.”

“You as well, Tom. I’ll see if anything can be done to accelerate the schedule,” she promised before hanging up.

After heading out from the office, Tom wandered over to the workshop of Hank Sterling. He was pleased to find Arv sitting with

in a chair having a cup of coffee with the company's chief engineer and pattern maker.

"What's the topic of discussion?" the inventor asked as he pulled over another stool. "Oh, and if you are discussing an overthrow of either Dad and me or the U.S. Government, perhaps I'd best tip-toe back out."

"Not a word of it," Hank assured him. "We were discussing what I believe you have come over to talk to us about, so here's what we have. As for the sides of the Recovery Sling, I'm picturing a triple rail of Durastress H-beams all tied together about every five feet with a two-foot-wide panel of the same material. All along the sides, front to back, the sling materials the Major will be coming up with will keep the two together. That way, the entire thing can be collapsed down for easier transport up."

"And, storage!" piped up Arv.

Tom smiled. "And, I've come up with a little notion I'd like to run past you two. As you both understand, the size of power pods means the amount of power, or the length of time, we have to run the lifters. Oh, and I've given in to the inevitability of using small Attractatrons to hold the *Yamato* inside and not repelatrons. Good call there, Hank, by the way. So, about the largest we can use uncontained and in the atmosphere are the size fours and those will only give us a combined hour and about a half."

"We're with you so far, Tom," Arv stated.

"Good. Because, here comes the radical idea. What if we pilot the ship down to a lower Earth orbit? Something in the eighty up to one hundred mile range. It was, by the way, based on a question from dad. That'll mean a lot less power needed to lower and control the bulk of the ship and if my mental calculations are close—I have to admit I came up with this on the walk over—we can get her down through the atmosphere in about fifty minutes. That includes a safe and slow and soft landing at Fearing. Now, ordinarily, I'd say let's go for the next size pods down, but I want that extra time."

The two other men nodded as they considered the new idea.

"Sounds like a typical Swift winner," Hank declared with Arv eagerly nodding his agreement.

They discussed both the design—with Arv pointing out how much more snug the space sub would fit if the side rails were shaped to follow her curved hull—for another hour before Tom excused himself.

"I have a few changes to make and that should take the rest of the afternoon. Look for things in the CAD files tomorrow morning."

When Tom got ready to leave late that afternoon, he had all the designs fixed or adapted and calculations for load, power, and timing based on five different orbital positions: 85 miles, 100 miles, 120 miles, 125 miles; and 150 miles.

He'd skipped several altitudes because of the known clutter of space junk at those heights. Even so, there were going to be hundreds of large and thousands of small pieces to plot out and plan to dodge.

That was where a very special agency of the U.S. Military—part of the Air Force—would come in handy. Simply provide them with your desired orbit and placement along that path, the time and date you will send something up or bring it down, and they could use their extensive computers to plot you a course and time to keep your spaceship, satellite, or whatever relatively safe.

At least from anything larger than about three inches. Smaller than that and even their ultra-sensitive RADAR and imaging could not detect something unless it was a flat side facing down, had sunlight reflected off it... at the exact time they were looking in that vicinity!

A few years earlier Tom had undertaken a mission to clear a lot of the debris from around areas where GPS satellites were or were about to be stationed. It used the *Challenger* and a giant collection funnel to scoop up the no longer wanted materials, even things as small as one-quarter-inch.

It worked for that purpose, but funding was never provided to Swift Enterprises to continue the operation and so the funnel had been retracted, furled and held together with a very large Durastress band, and abandoned in a geosynchronous orbit approximately five thousand miles from the old Outpost in Space.

It was still there although Tom had gone back up about five months after the parking and added navigation lights and a radio beacon to it just so his own travels beyond that orbit were not endangered.

Now, convinced that it would be best to try for the higher orbit of 150 miles, he did the numerous calculations and simulations to ensure he and the computers controlling things knew what to do when the time came.

He started the process with the Air Force's special "orbital junk" team.

He also figured that for increased safety, he might need to send the *Challenger* back up to attach the junk collector and use it to sweep the area just under the descending ship.

When word got out about that part of the mission, Deke Bodack, a one-time military air controller and now one of Enterprises full-time pilots volunteered... just before every other pilot in both the test pilot group and the operational pilots groups also said they would love to do it.

“Okay, Deke. You pick out a co-pilot that isn’t Bud, and then a two-person crew and the job is yours. Be ready in about three weeks.”

“Can I take the midget?” he asked with a sly grin.

Tom knew this was no slur on anyone but his loving reference to his wife, the former Stefanie Brooks, who had met and fallen in love with the veritable giant—all six-foot-five of him—practically on first sight.

Together, they had two children, a girl and a boy about the ages of Tom’s two older children, and both worked for the Swifts. As mentioned, he was a pilot and she worked at the MotorCar Company as their chief quality control person/manager.

The car company manager, Charlie Van deGroot was very generous in allowing her to accompany her husband on several trips per year and mostly because she was always days ahead of her work.

“Sure. Just tell her that she is not to try to climb me like she does you to thank me for this!” He grinned because they both knew Stefanie used her diminutive height to her advantage in nearly forcing herself on the men she admired and the one she loved. In the past Tom had found his arms full of Stefanie more times than he could remember, and even being the recipient of an unwanted kiss or five as she tried to show her gratitude or to cause embarrassment.

“The squirt has mellowed a bit,” Deke told his boss. “She understands she is not to overwhelm men as often as she used to. I can’t promise anything, though, when she hears she can come up with me. She really loves going up and even refuses to wear her gravity onesie so she can float around when nobody is looking.”

The garment he mentioned was a neck to ankle undergarment interwoven with special metallic fibers that reacted with a series of small emitters in the ceilings of most of the Swift spaceships that pressed them down to the tune of up to one full Earth gravity.

Without them, the forces, or lack of them, in low or microgravity allowed people to push lightly off the deck and to float.

Tom agreed it was okay for her to do what she wished as long as it did not include climbing into her husband’s lap at a crucial moment in the mission.

“Ah, Tom. You can’t think the munchkin would do something like— oh, wait. That’s exactly what she might do. I’ll have a word in her shell-like ear.”

Half an hour later there was a slight knock and a female voice asking if Tom was decent. “And, I hope the answer is no, ‘cause I’m coming in!” The door shot open and Stefanie practically flew in stopping just short of the inventor’s desk. With it firmly between the two of them, and her feeling it might be slightly unladylike to climb over it to get to him, she simply smiled sweetly.

“I want to thank you, most sincerely, for the opportunity to accompany the jolly pale giant up into space, Tom. And, he tells me I have to cut out the jump and smooch stuff while the actual operation is going on. Now, while *I* think I might have to do a lot of that when nothing else is happening, and mostly because having a couple children sort of curtails the opportunities to do that in the comfort of your own home, I shall behave.”

She came around with her right hand extended.

Tom reached out to shake it only to find that she yanked him forward and down and planted a great big wet kiss on his lips.

“Never said I’d behave down here!”

With that, she turned and skipped from the office leaving Tom flustered but smiling. He genuinely liked the woman who suffered—although she never used that word—from a form of dwarfism that had shortened her shins to only about seven inches, making her stand well under four-feet and six inches.

Her height had never been a problem in her eyes. And, she tolerated other people, to a point, before she would take them by the hand—even total strangers—and explain that she was not a freak and that if that is what they “saw” then it was *their* problem.

She made friends quickly, and nobody who really got to know her ever saw her as anything other than a petite woman with one of the best knowledge levels of volcanology in the Western Hemisphere.

When he managed to get seated again, Tom sat smiling for several moments.

By the time he recovered from another “Cyclone Stefanie,” he pulled up the final design of the Recovery Sling and made one last check of the newly-changed side rails. He added that design to one of the final *Yamato II* and spotted one place where the rails would not actually touch.

A call to Hank Sterling, normally so very careful about such things, answered his question.

“It’s a matter of strength, skipper. If we totally curved the rails in at that point, it would give us a weak area that *could* be shored up with some external bracing, but that would cause some atmospheric drag and the heating up of that area. This way we can add a Durastress bag of nitrogen to hold things tight and not have the drag. Is that okay?”

Tom laughed. “I should have gone with my first thought that you had this all in hand, Hank. Sorry for what might sound like a little doubt. I’m just so anxious for this to work so we can go down into the Mariana Trench and find that little sub model you and Arv and Linda Ming built.”

“It’s okay, Tom, I had to answer the same questions from Arv, Linda and even Jake Aturian over at the Construction Company. Talk to you later.”

In the coming week, Tom visited the Construction Company three times, the first visit to stand and watch as the side rails were first programmed into one of the two very large vacuu-former machines, then Hank and two other men pulled sixteen layers of various woven materials—from Durastress to Kevlar to Tyvek and even something called SpiderSilk—over the newly formed bumps and indentations in the bed. Then, a layer of heavy plastic was drawn over everything, the team used long-handled soft brushed to smooth things down, and a pinkish liquid polymer was released inside.

The layers were soon soaked with the liquid and the inventor watched as first a vacuum was created inside the sealed bed, causing tens of thousands of tiny bubbles to come out of the cloth materials, before it was released suddenly causing the liquid to slam into each and every available space between the various fibers.

Noticing the inventor, Hank came over. “This part will be out of the machine in two hours and in the oven for twenty. I want to make these extra strong so I’m doing each side separately and also one run just for the bracing pieces.”

“What about the pods for the power, repelatrons and also mounting for the Attractatrons?”

Hank smiled. Because of the overall height of the pods, they need to be made in three pieces then stacked and sealed together once the power units are inside. “Those and all other mounts will be in the final batch, five days from today. Then, we begin assembling. Uhh, when are those power pods coming, by the way?”

Tom shrugged. “They were supposed to be here today, but I got a message from the head of Shipping saying they were a day or two behind schedule and she’d get back to me tomorrow. So, I’d guess

we're looking at three days."

"That's okay. As I said, I won't begin assembly until five days out from today. They don't have to jump through hoops to get them here in a great big hurry."

"Still," Tom told him, "I'm going to find out the definitive delivery time from her tomorrow. Not certain what's going on out in New Mexico, but this marks the third delivery date they have had to move out in the past month."

When he was told of the delay, Damon was a little angry.

"I've told them to bring on three or more people in Production, but I can't get it through the Manager out there that the power pods are selling in record high numbers. He keeps telling me they have things in hand. I might have to go out there and light a small fire." He had a rueful grin as he said this, and Tom understood that it was exactly what his father did not wish to do, but would.

Further delays on deliveries to larger customers could not go on.

Damon stormed out of the office the following morning after his call to the manager out at the Citadel.

"Trent? I'm heading up to Tom's hideout. Only call me if it is a call from my wife, or a call of resignation from that moron."

With that, he walked around the corner and down the hall.

The place he was heading was the original control tower atop the three-story Administration building. Tom had commandeered it a few years after it had been replaced by the 10-story modern tower at the exact center of Enterprises.

Now, the triple-paned and tinted windows offered nearly complete silence, and a place to "get away" when needed.

And, as Damon climbed the final spiral set of stairs, he thought he desperately needed to get away!

Tom got the word from Trent about his father's location forty minutes later. He pondered heading up there, but decided to hold off for an hour.

By the time he did get up to the old tower, Damon was sitting there looking a little ashamed at his previous anger.

"I guess you heard I blew a gasket," he told Tom.

The younger Swift shrugged. "Not certain I would have reacted any other way if I'd known my order wasn't the first or only one

they've missed recently. Any idea what the problem is other than the personnel one?"

Damon shrugged. "No. And, I'm not at all certain why our plant manager out there is so against adding a couple positions. They certainly make us enough they can afford it. Even if they could not," he said with another shrug, "I believe I'd authorize a little extra funding to get us through the next year or even two of increasing orders."

They sat in silence for five minutes before Damon shoved himself into a stand.

"Got to go down and make the call I really do not want to make," he admitted.

He paused seeing Tom had an unspoken question.

"Go ahead. Ask," he prompted.

"Okay. Are you going to fire Arthur? I mean, he is a pretty good manager of the facility, just not a good taskmaster to drive Production. Perhaps, if you tell him he has a target to meet and that his job might be... ummm, *reassigned*? Yeah. It could be reassigned if he fails to meet your goals. And, I'm certain you won't set unreasonable goals, but ones we both know can be met."

Damon thought this over and had to agree.

"Okay. I'll tell him how disappointed we all are and that not only are commercial contracts at risk, our own internal projects—yours in particular—are about to suffer."

When they got down to the office, Damon asked Tom to remain outside.

"Or, in the lab next door. I'll come tell you the results."

Fifteen minutes later the older inventor came into the lab, his face downturned and his shoulders slumped. He took a seat on the small sofa in one corner of the large room and gathered his thoughts. When the time came, he explained things to Tom.

"Come and sit with me, Tom," he instructed, so son and father were soon both on the sofa.

Since Damon seemed to be contemplating what to say, Tom sat quietly.

"All right. Arthur Dunnigan has been with us since about the time you turned seventeen. He was not in on the initial building of the Citadel, but his expertise has been instrumental in its success. When I just spoke with him, he was close to a breakdown. It turns out his wife and their baby daughter had been involved in a terrible accident while visiting her parents in Boston two months ago. The

baby survived, barely, but he lost his wife.”

Tom’s felt his face go white at that, and the thought of losing Bashalli.

“The thing is, he kept this all to himself. It has been festering inside him and he has been spending a lot of his time stressing about the baby who is now at the grandparent’s home in Boston. He has only been out twice to see her and one of those was to bury his wife.” Damon sighed as tears welled up in his eyes.

“I told Arthur to take a couple months off and that we’d get things back into shape for his return. To that, I also called Jake Aturian and asked if he might go spend a couple weeks putting things back into a good schedule, contacting any customers who might be waiting and letting them know, and then helping find a temporary replacement. What do you think?” He turned to Tom with a hopeful smile.

Wiping away a tear of his own that threatened to spill down his face, Tom said he understood and would do whatever was needed in the situation.

“Did you want me to go down there?”

Now, his father shook his head. “No. You have that space sub to get back to Earth and that is your priority. These things are never fun but they are the sort of thing the CEO of any company must deal with. Oh, and Arthur told me your power pods are coming out this afternoon.”

This was going to mean the rescue mission could go ahead and be in the air only two days later than Tom had originally wanted. He could live with that.

CHAPTER 5 /

GETTING YAMATO II BACK DOWN: ACT II — or THE UNANTICIPATED DELAY

TOM'S POWER pods arrived just after four that afternoon with a short note from the Citadel manager filled with his apology for the delay but not any other explanation.

Knowing that facility operated two hours behind the clocks in Shopton, Tom sent him an email saying he now understood the situation, accepted the apology and would put the pods to very good use. He also wished the man well and said how saddened he had been on hearing of the family tragedy.

Arthur. I truly hope you can recover and come back. You are an important individual in this company, and your absence can be filled in the short term, but when and if you are able and want to, we will welcome you back, just at the time when it is right... for you!

Tom

The pods were checked by a team of experts and declared to be in full operational condition.

Both Tom and Damon had run, what at first appeared to be, afoul of the G-20 Nation's Committee for the Environment years earlier leading to Tom's creation of his EnvirOzone Revivicators. The then Chairwoman of the Committee was one of Damon's old university acquaintances, Penelope Clothiet-Warner. And, while diametrically opposed politically, they respected each other.

So, when called to a meeting with the committee, both Swifts had been unprepared to be blindsided with her demand they do more to protect the environment. It had been a strategy on her part that she knew would lead to the U.S. Government funding Tom's series of ozone layer and environment revitalizers, or "OzoNuts" as Bud called them.

The devices, giant helium-filled rings with air-scrubbing and ozone generating equipment had been at work over the South Pole for almost a decade, and the ozone layer down there was nearly eighty percent rebuilt.

So, it was with some trepidation Tom agreed to take a call from

Ms. Clothiet-Warner's replacement, a Bjorn Bjorngensen.

"How may I assist you today, sir?" he asked.

"Ah, direct and to the point," came the slightly accented voice. "No time for pleasantries and that is right and proper, Mr. Swift. I believe I am speaking with the younger rather than the elder Swift. Is this correct?"

"It is. I'm surprised by this call and have no idea what it might concern. Can you help me understand that, please?"

"Yes, I most certainly can. It is well known that you and your company took the... umm, I am afraid my English fails me now, but you took command of the recent mission to explore Neptune?"

"That is correct, and I believe you might have been looking for the phrase, 'took the reigns,' or 'took the lead.' We did and returned with more than the nations funding the mission requested. Is the information you need?"

"No. It is that our attention has come to find you are planning to bring that spaceship you flew to Neptune back down to the surface. Because this committee cannot be certain of the extent of dangerous organisms that could be clinging onto the ship, we cannot allow you to bring it back down until we are assured it has been thoroughly decontaminated. Do you understand our issue?"

"Frankly, no. To begin with, there are no organisms that are known to live in the vacuum of space. Then, there is the matter that we were immersed in a liquid that is far too cold for anything to live in. Nothing. If there were ever microorganisms or bacteria or anything on the surface of that ship, it would have come from the Earth as this is where the component parts were constructed. So, I say again, no I do not understand your concern or issue as you put it."

"I see. Well then, we might need to place a moratorium on any further space flights by your company. If you do not wish to follow our directives, then..."

Tom thought over the matter a moment before responding. "I believe that the United Nations has a specific directive and rule that no Earthly organization, company or government may forbid space flight by any acknowledged entity that can prove their ability to do so. The Swift companies have that proof. We have never had an accident. Can, for instance, the Swedish National Space Agency or the French National Centre for Space Studies, or the Norwegian SpaceAgency, or the—"

"Enough! Your point is taken. Nevertheless, until we are certain you will not bring anything deadly or dangerous back down, we

direct you to not do so.”

Damon had walked into the office in time for Tom to have placed the call on speakerphone. He had heard the last full minute of conversation. With a motion to Tom, he spoke for them both.

“Sir? This is Damon Swift. I am not certain of the supposed authority you are attempting to wield, but your call is being recorded and will be forwarded to the Government of the United States and to the Director General’s office of the United Nations. And so, unless you can quote your absolute authority, we reject your demand until such time as you can mount a mission into orbit and take samples, bring them back, culture them and prove there is anything dangerous on our ship. By the way, before you sputter and tell us that is impossible—which we *do* know—if anything might be dangerous, it would have already been spread throughout the returned samples distributed all over the globe to more than thirty nations and scientific organizations.

“Call them all and demand they immediately seal up those samples and provide you with empirical proof they have done so. Your alternative is to mount that mission in the next week before we go up and bring our space submarine back down. I can assure you that it will be thoroughly cleaned once at our base and all before it ever get placed in the water. It is now your turn to try to make further demands, hang up, or agree that we pose no problems.

“By the way, the Swifts have done far more than any other company or any nation to avoid contaminating the environment you seem to believe your committee members are solely responsible for. Your own nation uses a rocket propellant that is nearly three times more harmful to the air *we all breathe* than any other nation.”

There was a click on the line and Damon reached over and shut off the speakerphone.

“I think that either makes us wait for the full week to see if they actually send something up—in which case we send up a guard detail in the *Challenger*—or you send up the recovery equipment and bring the ship back to Fearing.”

Tom smiled at his father. While the older inventor had been far more direct that Tom might have been, he said the things on the younger Swift’s mind.

“Thanks, Dad. I guess we have Harlan and George Dilling keep a watch out for any activity saying they intend to send something up. And, if they do, I guess I wait to see what they try. But, my question is, how do we actively prevent them from touching or potentially harming the *Yamato*?”

Damon considered what might happen if any mission on behalf of the G-20 Committee did launch and the individuals attempted anything other than to take sample swabs. Finally, he turned to his desk before again facing his son.

“You know I hate weapons of all kinds. You also know I gave in on the e-guns issue. You know from personal experience they can disable a motor vehicle if set on high, but what are your thoughts on a larger version to disable a space vessel?”

Tom blanched picturing such an electrical charge hitting a space ship filled with explosive propellant.

“Uhh,” he stuttered, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. I agree we may need to disable, not... wait. Not disable, but rather *disrupt* any attempts to damage, hijack or to even come too close to the *Yamato*. We actually don’t have anything like that. I’d be afraid of blowing any ship up with a huge jolt of electricity.” Now he looked contemplative. “I wonder what I might do? Hmmm?”

Damon nodded and returned to something he had on his computer screen.

Finally, he looked back at Tom who was deep in thought.

“I hate to *disrupt* your train of thought, Son, but have you considered something as innocuous as a very large net to be tossed over their ship? It might not do anything to them other than to make them stop and think what could go wrong if they continue. It could certainly hold them inside their ship. I have, as you might recall from the robotic rhinoceros build, that very sticky goo I came up with. It doesn’t freeze so it might be usable in space.” He raised an eyebrow in question. “And, before you mention it, your Attractatron may be a good addition as well. Just in case something *unmanned* comes at you.”

Tom knew his father referred to a missile.

“Well, I’d have to look into that, but it’s a pretty good and non-lethal suggestion. Thanks, Dad!”

As he turned and left, an amusing mental image of a spaceship ensnared in a sticky net ejected from the rear end of a giant space spider came to the younger inventor’s mind. He left the office chuckling making his father wonder what might have caused that reaction to a very serious matter.

When Damon asked him about that reaction an hour later, Tom laughed and told him of the strange picture that had come to him.

“Okay, I can see that too, now,” Damon stated with a slight smile. “I’m hoping you can either make that happen or at least create something like that. After all, you’ve created large golden eggs for

people to dive to the depths of the oceans, a robotic crab for use with your Cosmotron Express, and even a flotilla of floating doughnuts. A spider shouldn't be too far off in the future. Right?"

Tom nodded and grinned. What he had been thinking about in the hour he was out of the office and walking around the meandering pathways between buildings in Enterprises' main cluster had been more along the lines of a cannon using possibly compressed gas, or a series of small rockets to drag a net out to another spaceship with a wide enough spacing to get round and then wrap up the offending vessel.

It would be far too much to create a set of locking connectors to line the edge of such a net and so it would be necessary for either using Damon's incredible sticky goo—or something that did the same in the icy vacuum of space—and then stick all parts of the net materials to itself.

For many such tries at creating something unique, he might turn to discussing it with Bud, but he was nearly certain the flyer would seize on the spider aspect and jump up and down until he convinced Tom to, "Build a spider!"

He did head over to the workshop of Hank Sterling to get the big engineer's input.

"Hmmm? Well, where I can see the intriguing aspects of a spider's hind end ejecting a net or web, my gut tells me your thoughts on a cannon of some sort are more in keeping with what can work. In fact... uhhh, give me a few minutes to look for something I have around here. Hang on."

He left the floor of the large workroom and headed not, as Tom might expect, to his office, but to a closet-sized storeroom. Over the following eight minutes he reached in and around the room pulling out box after box and moving some to a pile close to his feet and others far to his right and left sides. Then he moved a lot of the boxes outside the storage area.

When he'd practically emptied the room he looked at the four boxes in front of him before handing one to Tom and picking the others up and placing them back inside.

The inventor had been standing to the side by about twenty feet but came forward to take the first box.

"Need help carrying all four?"

"Sure. Let's get them up on the bench, but I think I already know which one has what I want to show you." He picked up two and Tom did likewise. Soon, Hank pulled one box closer and opened the top. He looked inside, smiled at his friend and young boss, and

pulled out what appeared to be a child's toy of a small mountain, a Tyrannosaurus Rex and a man standing next to what appeared to be an old cannon from a Spanish or British ship of the seventeen hundreds.

"Okay..." Tom said slowly with more than a hint of disbelief in his voice, "what am I seeing? A flash from your past?"

"Sort of. A couple years ago I was having a sort of flashback to a toy my folks bought me for my seventh or eighth birthday. I couldn't find one available, so I built this. But, I want you to watch what it does."

He set the mountain three feet away, the dinosaur to the right of it and slightly in front, and the man/cannon close to his position. He reached out and, to his surprise, when he flicked a switch on the dino's lower body, its eyes lit up red, the mouth opened and closed and a tiny speaker played sounds from a memory chip. Then, it began to move forward.

While this was happening, Hank pulled back on a lever on the right side of the cannon, swiveled that and the man until they were pointing at the dinosaur and pressed a button by the man's feet.

With a click and a snap, something shot from the cannon, spreading out as it traveled the three feet or thereabouts, so by the time it was nearly at the dino it had opened into more of a cone of thin netting four inches across.

It was what happened next that gave the inventor, and Hank, huge smiles.

The net center hit the dino while the entire outer edge of what Tom now saw was a circular webbing, wrapped around the beast and brought it down onto its side.

"Ha!" Hank shouted. "Gotcha!" he looked at Tom and then back at the toppled toy. "Try to outsmart the Web of Doom! That, by the way, skipper, was the rallying cry of the advertisements for the original. I may have enhanced the ability of the cannon a bit—or, a lot—but the principle of the thing is those tiny beads you can see all around the perimeter slide into grooves in the cannon's barrel that force them to start to spread out as soon as the catch is released."

Giving Hank another grin, Tom stated, "That would appear to be very effective. Do you think it would scale up, or do we need to also look into making the real world beads perhaps small solid propellant rocket motors or even nitrogen jets to get something perhaps a couple hundred feet across out, opened and around another spaceship?"

"Well, and I say this because I wasn't too sure you were serious

when you said you wanted to go spaceship hunting, I believe those areas, and for that size web, I'd put the number at about fifty delivery beads—or better still your solid rocket idea—that can spread things out along with adding some weight to those areas to make things wrap. Is a couple hundred feet going to be enough?"

"My thought is the ship we might see is likely to be under thirty feet long, maybe ten feet at its widest, and would have thrusters or attitude rockets to steer it, let it turn around and then de-orbit. Honestly, I don't believe we can keep them from firing their motor or motors, but I do not want them to be able to detach a capsule to return to the ground. I want them to believe they are wrapped up good and tight and will behave or they likely could be stranded."

"But," Hank inquired, "without deadly intent?"

Tom shrugged. "Yeah. I'll make things so the net or web only holds them tightly for twenty or so hours, long enough to strap them to the cargo platform of the *Goliath* and bring them to justice."

The engineer offered to create plans for a full-size version and to get them over for viewing in about one day.

When they arrived at six that same evening, and Tom was just getting ready to leave for the day, he had to sit down and take a look.

It was not as simplistic as the toy Hank showed him, but he had to admire the basic setup and functionality of the net-spewing cannon. At the basic level, it would hold a specially-folded and rolled bundle of netting that would go into a four-foot-wide opening. It was going to take the precision of a parachute folding expert to do things right, but Tom had every faith in the people at Enterprises who did just that.

It also was going to require a non-sticking paper or plastic layer to keep the goo from adhering the net to itself, but that was the easy part.

He was about to make a call to the Engineer to ask about the actual net and if it really could fit inside when he saw the short note at the bottom:

Skipper,

Yes, it will fit. The folding will place each layer's fibers between those of the adjacent layers, so it will take up a lot less space. Have a nice night. Now, go home!

Hank

With a chuckle, he saved the file out and headed for home and his family.

Bashalli was thrilled to see him. Bart was very happy to have his father home and told Tom he needed to ask about the difference between nuclear fission and fusion. That made Tom's eyes roll, but he said he would answer that after dinner.

Mary was happy but had been having so much fun taking care of her baby sister, Anne, that she acknowledged Tom with a smile and an air kiss in his direction before she went back to wiping the youngest Swift's face of something only she could see.

"Might I see you in the kitchen?" Bashalli asked. When he followed her into the room, she turned and launched herself into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist.

"The children might be happy to have daddy home, but mommy is in need of a long kiss and an even longer hug. Interested?" She smiled at him from about three-inches away.

They came back out five minutes later to find that Bart had herded Mary to her high chair and had picked Anne up and put her into her chair next to where Bashalli would sit.

"Baby's ready momma," he told her as he climbed into his chair and looked to see if food had magically appeared in the last few seconds.

It had not but Tom went back into the kitchen with his wife to get the solid foods for the two older children. Anne was still being fed by Bashalli and she finished quickly, was burped without any accompanying liquids coming back up, and sat quietly in her chair, drowsing while the others ate.

The kids all went to bed before eight and Tom and Bashalli sat in the living room talking about what the next steps for retrieving the *Yamato* might be.

"Hank had designed a giant kit's toy a few years ago and it can be made large enough to take care of any unwanted visitors or onlookers," he told her, described the dinosaur toy, and then also told her about the implied threat from the G-20 Chairman. "It ought to take care of anyone not wanting to play well with others," he assured her before describing the larger net cannon.

She was amazed by the concept but asked very little other than, "And, when do you go up there?"

"Hank says it will take four days to build the launcher and we have everything else ready, so with this being Wednesday, I think we go a week from today. Once we give the system a good ground based try. Should be back in less than a day!"

Tom wanted to try a test firing of the net capture system and knew it had to be on the ground as opposed to in space because up there it would be nigh on impossible to get things back into useful condition. At least, at Enterprises he could fire it at a stationary target without any of the sticky goo on it and then it could be coated, rolled again and put back inside the cannon with relative ease.

Hank and the Facilities manager had arranged to have an eight-foot wide, twenty-five-foot long pipe set up on large sawhorses so it was five feet off the ground and lying on its side for the test.

He'd opted to not try to add fins or a pointed nose section. Style was not as important as function.

In space, the shot might be taken from as far away as a thousand yards, but gravity on Earth meant they could only try this test from about one hundred yards.

Hank and Tom checked the device over discovering that one of the thrust modules—balls of about one-point-three inches diameter using a powerful, quick-burn rocket charge to send them out from the cannon barrel and at approximately fifteen degrees of spread—was not correctly centered in its groove. The fix was a matter of using a stick with a suction cup on the end to take hold of the errant sphere, pull it forward and then glide it back into the cannon in its right place.

“Think we're ready?” Tom asked.

“Short of another complete check to make certain I didn't mis-load anything else, I believe so.”

Tom shook his head. “Pretty sure that one ball wasn't a mis-load, but more it got dragged out of the groove that's just a few millimeters wider than the channel the net glides through as the entire pack was pushed inside. So, having said that, let's get the folks to stand behind us and give this a good shot.”

Two minutes later he determined everyone was at a safe distance—unless the net left the barrel and did a one hundred eighty degree backward turn and flew in the wrong direction—and Tom armed the device.

“... three... two... one... FIRE!”

With a great whoosh and a little smoke trailing behind each of the fifty-six power balls, the entire thing was over in two seconds.

Sitting askew on its sawhorses, the large pipe was completely encased in a net with two-inch gaps between the individual fibers.

“We have success!” cried Hank.

CHAPTER 6 /

GETTING YAMATO II BACK DOWN: FINALE

THE DAY dawned not nearly as bright nor as clear as the weather stations had predicted, at least for Shopton, but down on Fearing Island it was due to clear by 9:00 am.

Tom, Bud, Hank, Zimby Cox and Deke Bodack were waiting in the cafeteria at Fearing for the weather to clear before they would fly the giant *Goliath* ship into the air with the folded and tightly tied down Recovery Sling on its large cargo disc.

Already on board the *Challenger* and in orbit near the space submarine were Red Jones and Dwayne Dimmock, the two men who would bring *Goliath* back to the island while the others rigged the sling around *Yamato II* and then “flew” her down in *Challenger*.

“So,” Bud was saying, or possibly asking, “we bring her down as far as one hundred feet and then... uhhh, what? Put her in the water?”

Tom shook his head. “I wish it were that easy. In order to prevent at least one overzealous organization from trying to either block this mission or to try flying in with a force of people and equipment to keep us from, as they put it, ‘Completely and irrevocably contaminating the waters of this planet and causing untold death and destruction,’ we set *Yamato* down in a special cradle over closer to the rocket launch complex. Then, the sling settles to the ground for when we do take it to the water.”

The others looked at him nonplussed.

Finally, Zimby asked, “Are they completely insane, or just communicate like they are? That’s the biggest bunch of garbage I’ve ever heard!”

He might have said more but Tom held up a hand to stop it.

“Sorry. Perhaps if I told you the whole story?” He proceeded to tell them of the G-20 Environmental Committee and of their determination to not listen to facts, even from their own internal experts. He mentioned the one-time threat of a mounted mission to halt the de-orbiting of the ship that could include a space launch from probably Norway.

“So, in the hold we have a self-propelled capture net covered with a sticky goo that gets exposed as the net travels to anyone or ship trying to get in the way, or do any damage. Once it sticks we can haul whoever away and only release them once the *Yamato* is

safely down on the ground.

“However, dad feels that we must mollify those fanatics somehow, and not going straight from space to water seems to be one way. We will thoroughly clean and disinfect—publicly and live on the Internet—the ship before allowing it to sit in the sun for a full day.”

Bud snorted. “Waste of time, skipper. We all know there is no danger and that the sort of eco nuts who want this stopped aren’t considering all the samples we brought back that might have something on or in them.” He snorted a second time and rose to go get another cup of coffee.

The word came the weather was turning nearly perfect and would remain so for at least nine hours, so the crew climbed into a jeep and headed for the *Goliath’s* launch place.

Fifteen minutes later everyone reported readiness for takeoff.

Four minutes later the giant lifting ship left the ground, heading skyward at only a few hundred miles per hour for the initial fifty thousand feet before powering up through the upper atmosphere and their rendezvous with the space sub. To save them some time, it had been repositioned the previous evening by the *Challenger* and hung ready at the altitude of one hundred and fifty-one miles.

They needed to head to the east and play catch up to pick it up as the orbit would need to be reduced in time to drop straight down to Fearing Island some eighty minutes later.

As they neared the right altitude and were starting to overtake the other ship, Deke, on their sensor board, called out, “I’ve got a contact heading that way on an oblique course coming down from Europe. Uhh, we’ll get there first but they will pass by fifteen minutes later. Want me to call them?”

Tom nodded. “Put it though to my position,” he called from the small cockpit up front. “Oh, and someone get down to the storage hangar and get our little surprise net ready, please.”

“This is Tom Swift in the *Goliath*. We are heading to reclaim one of our other ships and see that you are on an intercept course. By international law, you have no right to either attempt to capture our property nor can you be allowed to interfere with our mission. Please respond as you also are advised to angle away from your present course.”

There was nothing but static on the channel. Tom signaled Deke to open a wide band of channels and then repeated his message.

Finally, a voice came back. “Swift ship. You are approaching a vessel determined to be a hazard to life on the Earth. You shall not

be allowed to take it back down. We work under the highest authority, so now you will turn and go away.”

“No, we will not. You do not have any actual authority other than from the head of a committee that also has no authority over this matter. Unless you have a United Nations’ charter and documentation specifically negating the ones we carry, you are about to be in violation of so many international laws, including ones relating to piracy in space, that you will be arrested upon landing. So, that is checkmate and you will now leave.”

When it became obvious the ship and her captain had no intention of leaving the area, and they were beginning to turn and slow to match the orbit of *Yamato II*, Tom called down to the hangar.

“Get the door opened and the launcher outside. It will self-attach to the cargo disc. Then, as soon as you can see that other ship, or if it gets to within three hundred yards of *Yamato*, fire the net. As long as you are close in your basic aiming, it will find the proper trajectory. Please wait for my signal.”

“Got it, skipper. And, we see them way out there on the panel of this launcher. Says they are fifty-six miles away. Everything is nearly ready. Give us three minutes...”

“Good. Stand by.”

Tom made one final call to the other ship with a warning they would be captured if they came too close.

Harsh laughter came over the radio along with several quite obscene words before the radio went dead.

“Net team? On their approach to within one-thousand feet, fire.”

Everyone held their breaths as it now became a waiting game to see if the other ship might attempt to ram the *Yamato*, fire some sort of missile at it, or try to take it in tow.

The other ship began to slow and to match the orbit, although they remained one mile off the port side. Then, with a few small jets of flame the ship began to side-slip closer. In moments it was within the range of the net launcher.

“This is your final warning, G-20 ship, or whoever you are. You have fifteen seconds to reverse your maneuver and begin to leave. If you do not, you face capture. You now have ten seconds.”

“They are not slowing down, skipper,” Deke stated.

“Net team, fire at will.”

Everyone saw the net bundle silently shoot off the platform below them. As it headed away it spread out and a very thin film—

the piece keeping the sticky goo from adhering everything into a large blob—stripped away and it headed for the incoming ship.

Obviously spotting something coming at them, the other ship let loose with three jets of flame and began to slow, but it was too little and too late.

The net hit them with the ship only a few yards from dead center. It quickly enveloped the ship and sealed to itself making a cocoon of fibers spaced only about two-inches apart around the entire ship.

Screaming obscenities, the radio came to life. Once the man at the radio ran out of things to fling at Tom, he screamed, “You can’t do this! You will face a tribunal that will shut your company down! I’ll personally rip your head off and feed it to your grandchildren!” The obscenities began anew.

Tom signaled for the radio to be switched to the Enterprises’ private channel. When Deke gave a thumbs up, Tom began his call.

He gave a basic report for the record and transmitted the video that had been taken starting when the other ship was fifty miles off up until the net capture. It included the obscenity-laced communication and threat to Tom’s life.

“We’re continuing to take video and record their radio signals. Please get that all to my father and Harlan ASAP. Also, connect me to the office of Senator Quintana in Washington. I’ll wait.”

Two minutes later the voice of the senator came on, “What’s this all about, Tom? I’m a little busy getting ready to introduce a new measure returning some funding to NASA for a probe they want to build to go out to study one of Jupiter’s larger moons the former administration shut down in their final two days in office.”

Tom told him of the other ship and the capture.

“You have my undivided attention. Play me the radio messages, please.”

When they were finished along with the most recent message beamed down from the ship to someplace in the northern area of Europe, Peter told Tom to stand by.

“I need to get to the new Vice President and ask him if you have the right to leave them up there as pirates, or if you need to allow them to come back on their own. For my money, they ought to rot up there.” He softened his tone, and added, “But, I know that isn’t the way you do these things. Hold on for five minutes or so.”

When he did come back it was to ask whether Tom might capture the other ship, tie it to the *Goliath’s* deck, and bring it down to someplace like the air base outside of Washington.

“V.P. Preston wants them taken into custody where they will face space piracy charges along with whoever is at that cockamamie committee in Germany.”

Tom agreed it was possible, but cautioned, “We have no idea if they have any weapons or a self-destruct. Can you get to the G-20 and find out? I don’t want them near us if they might decide to end this violently.”

While they waited Tom decided to go ahead with deploying the sling and getting *Yamato* ready to go down. As it was, it would be one additional orbit since this episode with the other ship had them far too along their route to safely start on time.

Because of the way Hank had constructed the sling affair, it only had to be released from *Goliath’s* cargo deck and remotely maneuvered under the space sub all the time unfolding and starting up its internal systems.

Half an hour later the *Yamato* was snugly in the sling and the Attractatrons had it pinned inside. All maneuvering and other systems reported complete readiness to go, so Tom gave the order that the ship and its recovery equipment be readied to start when the perfect orbital moment came.

“Before that, let’s get her a hundred miles away from here and another thirty miles lower just in case of any shenanigans by our unwanted visitors.”

The move was accomplished accompanied by even more threats and invectives from the captive spaceship’s captain. He also attempted to send a call of distress down to his base, but Tom foresaw this and set up a radio interruption field in the vicinity that meant it barely traveled to the *Goliath’s* receivers.

Peter Quintana came back on the radio about eleven minutes after their last conversation.

“Okay, Tom, and whatever crew is listening in up there, and that includes your pirates! Yes, they are now officially declared to be pirates of duly registered and properly owned space-going equipment and as such are to be treated as prisoners of the United States of America.”

He described what the Vice President and the Attorney General of the United States had told him about international law and how the ship currently inside the sticky net was in violation of at least nine laws forbidding such approach and attempted physical contact with the property of others. Pete told Tom to do whatever was necessary to either bring the ship or at least its crew down for immediate incarceration.

“If you have to, disable that ship so it can never be used for any space mission in the future. If we get any push back from this committee, we will contact the German authorities and have them arrested as accomplices in this act of attempted piracy.”

Tom thought things over before asking, “Does anyone associated with the rocket and its probable launch site have anything to say?”

Peter’s laugh came over the radio. “Sure. They are saying they have no idea how such a thing might have happened. That all of their rockets—and we know of two they have—are accounted for but refuse to allow anyone to come in to see both of them. My guess is they are, at the very least, complicit in this. So, any idea what you are going to do?”

With an inward sigh, Tom told him he did not. Still uncertain if there was anything to explode over in, around or near the other ship, he told Peter he was going to back off and follow the *Yamato* down until it had been lowered into the cradle on Fearing.

“For whomever is listening, I’ll be back tomorrow and I hope you are in a more cooperative mood.”

Tom set the computers in motion coordinating the drop from their current orbit to a lower and lower one, eventually to slow the Recovery Sling to the point where everything could be taken down to the planet below with no troubles from heat buildup.

“After that, and assuming the other ship does not declare an actual emergency, I’ll come back up with the *Challenger* and tow them into a lower orbit before I give them the choice of a push down and release them, or to have *Goliath* come back up and strap them onto the cargo deck. I seriously doubt they have enough fuel reserves to do anything but stabilize and then separate their crew capsule from the rest of the ship and parachute down. Assuming they *can* detach and parachute. I think I’ll ensure they come down over a bare part of the U.S. Give me an hour and I’ll tell you where to send the police.”

He cut the connection and told his crew to get *Goliath* heading back down.

“Besides, the *Yamato* has just left orbit and will be touching down in about forty minutes. We ought to be there to welcome her home.”

When the giant ship touched down the radio in the Recovery Sling was reporting it was now over the middle of Texas and would be continuing down until it was over Fearing twenty-seven minutes later.

Yamato II, snug in its repelatron-powered sling, came down

within two seconds of the anticipated touchdown and settled into the cradle only helped slightly—a misalignment of some 2-inches—by a team of men and women with long-handled pusher sticks.

Tom got on the radio with his father to discuss the situation up in orbit.

“I’d advise against the push and drop scenario, Son. They might be reckless enough, or desperate enough, to go ahead and crash that ship into some place with people. I suggest taking the *Goliath* back up, towing them at about a mile away from you until you are close to re-entry then reel them in—and keep them cocooned, please—to the deck and then come down as fast as you dare. According to Pete, they are expecting you at Andrew’s Air Force Joint Base with touchdown right between their two main runways. I believe he mentioned having a heavy lift crane ready to take them off. Then, you skedaddle back to Fearing and have fun with that space sub.”

Before taking back off, Tom requested a mile-long Durastress cable to be brought to the giant ship. This he had attached to several of the high-strength hold down points and coiled up with a grappling hook at the other end. This was attached to a small pressure bottle of nitrogen gas that would shoot it over to the net and hopefully snag it along with its cargo of the other ship.

Goliath lifted thirty-nine minutes after touching down and headed quickly back into space.

As they closed in on the other ship, Tom opened the broadband hailing frequencies in time to hear the last of a tirade directed to the people who had sent them up.

“...miserable criminals. Either come save us before we die or I’ll let that Tom Swift know all about your plans to hijack his ship!”

Indicating that Red should open the call, he responded with, “That is very interesting. And, this is *that* Tom Swift. While I realize it was at my order you are in this captured state, you do have to admit, and seemed to have just been doing so, that others sent you up here. So, I have a deal to make with you. Listening?”

Cautiously, the other man said, “Yes-s-s. What is your deal?”

“Not a deal, but an agreement between the captains of two ships here in the deadly vacuum of space. If you agree to just sit nice and tight, we will bring you down with us. This will be based on your agreement to eject any explosive devices you might be carrying. That is everything from rocket-propelled grenades to missiles to explosive packs meant to be attached to my ship in hopes of destroying it. Oh, and any guns you might have aboard. Do we have an agreement?”

There was a fifty-second pause. "Okay." The man sounded completely defeated and also a little scared at his potential fate. "Umm, we do have two RPG launchers with ten rounds over here along with three limpet mines. Our orders were to blow the ship apart unless we could get onboard and take it over. We carry no guns, knives or other weapons." Another pause. "So, wrapped up like this, how can we get rid of them?"

Tom signaled Red to turn off the outgoing signal. "Let them stew a minute or two. I need a couple volunteers, outfitted with fully charged e-guns, to go over and use the solvent to dissolve enough of the strands to let them open their main hatch. Then, you get the heck back here before we tell them to open up."

Bud and Zimby both shot their hands into the air.

"Okay," the inventor told them. "Go get suited up and let me know when you are in the airlock."

With a nod to Red, Tom spoke to the other ship. "We are working on a solution to releasing just your hatch. The one we see about fifteen feet, or five meters, beneath the point of the nose of your ship. Nobody from your ship is to be anywhere near that hatch which we believe is an airlock. Nobody! Not until I am certain my people are all inside my ship. Fail to obey that and I'll just give your ship a shove downward where it will tumble into the atmosphere, break up and everything likely will burn to nothing. Do you understand me, Captain?"

"Yes, I understand," came a very weary voice. "I and my two man crew will sit here waiting for your call. Once it comes, what do we do?"

Tom gave him the three steps to follow, had the man repeat them, and said to stand by for about ten minutes.

When Bud and Zimby got to the ship, it had rotated slowly so the view port was facing away from *Goliath*. That suited them, and Tom, just fine as it hid them from the other crew.

They quickly decided which strands to dissolve, ones that would allow the hatch to open a third of the way but not give full egress to anything bigger than a large shoebox, and then jetted back to *Goliath* as quickly as they could.

When Tom gave the other man the order to get rid of everything, their airlock opened slowly and all the items that had been mentioned were shoved through the opening.

As they drifted away, Tom radioed them to stand by to be taken under tow.

"We will get us all away from here before we take you onto our

cargo platform. You are to all remain aboard your ship. I hope for your sake you have a well behaved crew as any attempt to leave your ship before we all touch down will be met with immediate detachment and you will be left to fall to Earth. I am not generally a vindictive man, but I am angry enough to spit and you are the handiest target right now.”

The other captain said they were strapping in and would remain so until told to come out.

Thirty minutes later they were both many miles from the site of the discarded weapons and the process of bringing the other ship in and getting it strapped down began.

Within the hour, and about the same time they arrived over Lexington, Kentucky everything was ready.

With no notification to the other ship, Tom gave the order to begin their descent. The combined ships came down entering the airspace of West Virginia and then Virginia before coming down to ninety thousand feet and requesting clearance for landing.

Things must have been set in motion by the Senator or possibly even the Vice President because they were told to come down to thirty thousand and from there to contact Andrews Control.

“You have priority landing, Swift vessel!”

And, just eight minutes later the *Goliath* with its cargo touched down in the grassy area between the base’s pair of north-south runways.

Waiting on the cross taxiway were two large cranes on dozens of wheel each. They trundled forward coming to a halt at the front and aft ends of the captured raider. Behind them came a dozen utility vehicles with at least three times that many armed men and women.

Half an hour after that, *Goliath* lifted off to the thanks of the base commander.

“Swift ship? Many thanks. These jokers are about to find out what U.S. military hospitality is all about. We’ll get word to you through channels as to the disposition of them and that ship. Unless, that is, you want it?”

Tom chuckled. “Not really, sir. We’ve left your people just enough of the solvent to get them out, but if you want to put it on display we can ship you more to spray on. Oh, and please don’t make their stay with you too comfortable. Thank you for your service!”

CHAPTER 7 /

FOR OUR NEXT TRICK, THE NEW FLYNG SUB

BUD WANDERED into Tom's underground lab the morning after they came back from rescuing the *Yamato*. In all it had been a great success with the power pods retaining more than fifty-two percent of their power as everything touched down on Fearing Island.

"So, tell me, Professor," he began even before he fully walked through the door of the quiet space, "could we have done that with the smaller pods, and when do we pack up and head down to find that miniature space sub we lost south of Guam?"

He meant the fifteen-foot-long test vessel *Arv*, Hank, Linda Ming and a couple others had hand built to test both the viability of Tom's design as well as to see if it could handle the harsh stresses of plying under and through a liquid with enough pressure to collapse nearly all Earthly submersibles.

Unfortunately, a freak fifty-seven knot downward rush of icy cold water coming down from the shelf just south of Guam and down into the depths of the Mariana Trench had forced the seacopter Tom and his small test team were in one way, while swirling and shoving the miniature the other way tearing the connecting cable apart.

When signals were lost the sub had gone through a systems shut down and ended up drifting slowly to the bottom.

Before they had left the area Tom promised to go back to find it and bring it home. He hoped it had not been subjected to another current and moved too far away; it had no locator beacon.

"A possibly but very tight on the pods question, then about three weeks if all goes well," Tom told his friend. "We do need to bleed out and totally clean out the remaining methane from the tanks and then do a little rework to turn part of those into ballast tanks. The rest might need to be replaced by a buoyancy neutral foam because we certainly do not need all that dead weight when we want to come back up!"

"Here, here!" Bud said with a smile. "But, on a serious note, why didn't we let it loose in space? Also, if I may be allowed another one, sir, those little arms at the front might have been okay, or at least so-so, on Neptune, but how are we going to get hold of the mini sub?"

"That, Bud, is a great question. The methane one, that is. I

suppose I didn't want a cloud of it floating around up there where it would be attracted to our atmosphere and cause more greenhouse gases. But you are right in that I should have let it out, slowly as we came back into Earth orbit."

Bud snorted. "Right. And your mindset was all about the ship and not about Bash and the baby that was coming a little earlier than you wanted her to. Right?"

Tom blushed. The truth was he had practically left the space sub before it was even settled into orbital position so the *Challenger* could whisk him to Enterprises and then a Whirling Duck helicopter took him to Shopton General where he made it to the delivery room with about three minutes to spare.

He had promised her he'd be there and he was making her almost happy enough to not feel the pain of delivery. Almost.

"Okay, You got me there, but the arm thing is one I have been trying to work on even before you came it. Want to take a look?"

"Sure!"

Tom turned his CAD monitor around so Bud could see the drawing he'd been working with. It showed what the flyer believed might be the very front of the larger space submarine with a cutout of about thirty percent of the nose.

"My plan is to have the Fearing Island team cut her open and put in a garage."

Bud nodded a few times and then whipped his head up to stare at his brother-in-law.

"And, no, Bud. I am not crazy. You see, in the front of the *Yamato* we have all that space that is just that... space. I intend to have a sort of boxy bit added with watertight doors in front. We find the *SeaKing*, move up to it, open the doors outside and slide the sub in. Then, close the outer doors, blast the water out with the former air from inside, and we have one captured miniature submarine!"

Now, the flyer grinned as he understood what was going to go on.

He still had a question. "Well then, what do we do if the little sub-lette is stuck nose down in the mud? Do we have the ability to scoop it up somehow, or do we just try to run over it enough times to get it inside?"

Now, Tom stared at his friend and then at the design.

"You know, Bud? I guess we do need something to sort of help things along. Any suggestions?"

Bud pondered the request a moment. "Do the Attractatrons work

underwater?”

Tom shook his head.

“Oh. Scratch *that* gathering brainstorm. How about the existing arms? Can they be made longer with better grippers?”

“Maybe. I’m going to need to play with things. So that three week time I gave you, make it three-and-a-half weeks!”

“Okay. Other than you and me, who else is going?”

Tom chuckled. “Whoa there, pardner, as Chow would tell you. I haven’t gotten quite that far yet. At a guess, Zimby, Hank and another two or three ought to be fine, but it now depends on what else I need to add to the *Yamato* to make her capable of bringing in our lost friend.”

Bud left the inventor a few moments later to head over to Communications to see his wife, Sandy, leaving Tom sitting and thinking about other items or capabilities he might have missed.

His original intent and thoughts had been to launch *Yamato II* into the ocean, pilot her at top speed down to and through the Panama Canal, and to travel out to Guam from which point he’d mount a short mission—or two or even three if necessary—to locate and bring back the minisub.

Now he wondered if it might be necessary to fly the *Sky Queen* or even the *Super Queen* out beforehand and have a supply base from which to operate.

He already knew the joint Air Force/Navy base at the top of Guam would allow him and his team to set up shop, so to speak, for several weeks if needed.

His previous trip had included a meeting with the base commander who told him as much.

“Yeah,” the man told him. “We all know the raw deal you all got from the Loonauai government changeover and would love to have you sort of in their back yard showing them what they are missing out on.” He’d even hinted at the possibility of Tom moving the launch facility up to Guam where they might take advantage of the older Navy airfield now unused.

Tom had smiled at that notion but secretly worried about appearing to be bullying the small island country. In the end, Damon had told him the government of Loonauai had rebuffed any thoughts of allowing the Swifts or even the Western world to use the fully capable but now mostly derelict spaceport as recently as three months earlier.

“I think it would be a marvelous idea to let the Loonauai folks

hear about this and hopefully figure out they could have still been an active part of technology and earning money for their people, Son. You take that Commander up on his offer. As for setting up a rocket base there, I think we no longer need that, but let him know we appreciate the idea and will keep it in mind.”

Tom agreed and made a call to the Guam base commander’s office.

“He is off island in Hawaii at a PacFleet meeting, Mr. Swift,” the young female voice told him, “but I am certain he will not *just* be calling in about three hours from now, he will be delighted and will have accommodations arranged for your team. May I tell him how many people you might be bringing?”

“My basic crew will number seven or eight but I might bring down a support jet with five or six others. Don’t worry about them; the jet I have in mind has accommodations for them. In fact, I might just have the rest of my crew in there at night, but it will be nice to have access to the base.”

She promised to pass that along.

By the end of the following day Tom was happy with the progress being made on the *Yamato*. She had been brought down to Earth and set in a special cradle next to one of the vehicle assembly buildings so she could be worked on out of the water.

The outside cleanup had been first on the list of things to do and samples taken showed no organisms other than a few picked up on the descent and from the air around Fearing.

He and Hank had flown down that morning to see the work and to lend a hand if needed.

A tanker truck had already siphoned off the methane in her tanks and it was being readied for transfer to the holding tank set in the ground at the far western side of the island. A small crew suited in protective gear had been working to spray the insides of the two tanks with a solution that would neutralize the rest before that was suctioned up and disposed of by burning it.

By the time they finished the next day the tanks would be like-new clean.

They both spotted that the nose section was opened and the small arms removed. Sitting nearby were the components and the wall panels for the “garage” Tom wanted built inside. These included a new and special flat and wide ballast tank to sit under the floor of that space to provide additional lift to the nose of the submarine to keep things level once the minisub was inside.

It wasn't that the *SeaKing* was all that heavy; it was just that *Yamato* had been built to be perfectly balanced without its weight and the rest of the new equipment inside.

"I will have the new arms finished on Tuesday," the engineer assured him, "and installed two days later. They will extend out another seven feet or a foot past the mid point of the little submarine and have the power to lift it off the ocean floor and haul it inside. That includes the ability to roll it side-to-side if *SeaKing* has stuck into the silt down there."

Tom grinned. He recalled their mission to recover several sunken nuclear submarines years earlier where that suction had almost kept one or more of the hulks from being able to be lifted.

"Great, Hank. Thanks for adding that. Want to look inside or did you get enough of that on the Neptune trip?"

Giving his younger boss a shrug, Hank swept his right arm out pointing to the *Yamato*. "Let's go see if anything changed on its own."

This made the inventor chuckle until he remembered the ship had been left in high orbit for more than a month and a half, untended and mostly unwatched.

The two men entered through the airlock hatch that was still fully functional as the nuclear reactor had only been placed in very low idle and not shut down. The ship might not be able to fully energize, but there was power for the outer and inner doors.

Inside, the lighting was at about half normal, but it was enough to remind them just how strikingly beautiful the interior was, or at least the interior in this upper level of the sleeping and recreation section of the ship.

The doors to the individual rooms were all closed, except for the one Tom had used. He tried to recall if he'd shut it and remembered he'd been in such a hurry he had barely said goodbye to the crew before racing down to be with his wife.

Pointing at the door, Tom admitted, "I guess the captain is supposed to be the one to show his crew how to properly leave the ship."

Hank laughed. "Yeah, and there was nothing on your mind then. One of us should have closed that, but truth be told I think we all were ready to get out of the ship and back on solid ground. Solid *Earth* ground!"

Tom walked over and pulled the door shut after glancing inside only to see that his bunk was a mess. This had him rolling his eyes at how lax he'd been in those final hours of their Neptune trip.

The next forward section, command and control, was pristine other than an old coffee cup at the pilot's station. They bypassed looking at anything in the room as they moved forward to look into the nose section where the forthcoming storage garage for the *SeaKing* was about to be constructed.

The bright sunlight streaming in through the open nose made them both blink several times and it still took a moment for their eyes to get used to the brighter light.

"Hey, skipper!" greeted a man Tom recognized as part of the submersibles assembly management group.

"Hey back at you, Dougal," he returned to the large Irishman who had been with the Swifts since about a month after Fearing opened. "How are we doing?"

"Ahead of schedule, but that's pretty much because Hank there had everything sent out we need and it's just waiting for getting put together and this beauty sealed back up. I'd say another five days and not the nine we have scheduled."

Tom told him that was better than he'd hoped for, and he and Hank stepped out of the nose and down the short ramp that had been installed to make bringing new components inside easier.

After lunch with the base manager, they headed for Shopton discussing the next steps.

"Well," the engineer stated, "other than a couple test flights of the Recovery Sling, one with and one without a load, I'd say we're about ready to get that back down to Fearing and prep for the flight to Guam." It had been taken back to Enterprises after its first use for some minor changes.

"Then, I'd best get things ready and get the crew picked out."

Tom already knew who would be going and barring any illness or other emergency, everyone was ready to go in a week's time.

When he arrived home late that afternoon, Bashalli asked if things were going well.

"They are. This is Tuesday and we ought to be ready to go next Tuesday or Wednesday. All we need now are some flight approvals from the FAA to traverse the country with our huge load. Jackson Rimmer and his number two man are handling that for me. Ought to be just a small formality."

He told her again what the mission was going to accomplish and asked her—for the third time—whether she wanted to come along.

This time instead of outright saying no, she seemed to be thinking about it.

"Hmmm? Do you think there is some way for you to drop me and

maybe even Bart off in Hawaii? I mean, I loved our vacation together in that resort on the Big Island and I think he would love swimming in their lagoon.” She looked at him hopefully before her face changed and she looked sad.

“I just remembered he’s in school and won’t have a break for another month or more. I can’t take him away from his studies right now. So, I will remain home with them and Amanda.”

Tom walked to her and took her in a hug. “Our wonderful nanny can watch the kids, all three of them if you leave enough milk in the freezer for her, you know.”

She let out a long sigh. “Yes, I know, but I will only have enough time to leave about six days of milk and if I know anything about you and your little trips, if you say it will be a week, I plan on you being gone two. It is like when you say you are just going to read a journal for five minutes and come to bed. I know that means at least a half hour in Tom time.” Now, she smiled up at him. “It is okay.

By Friday things were looking as if there would be no troubles. The FAA had given provisional approval to the flights: “Just as long as they occur over unpopulated or lightly-populated areas and take place at an altitude of exactly sixteen thousand feet and only between the hours of midnight and five a.m.”

He had drawn out a map of the planned route and submitted it to them along with his estimates of speeds and times.

“Looks like we can make it in two parts,” he told his father. “We can easily get to the Citadel on night one, layover there and then get out over the Pacific Ocean the next night.

“Plan on having about one hundred fifty very curious employees out there wanting to get a good look at both your sling and its cargo,” Damon warned him with a smile.

On Sunday the Recovery Sling was flown—at night—back to Fearing and set down next to the cradle on which the ready-to-go *Yamato II* sat. Monday saw the two heavy lifting cranes come over and pick the submarine up before setting it down in the sling.

That afternoon, Tom and Hank—Bud and the rest of the crew would come the next mid day—took up the remote control in a whirling duck helicopter and brought the sling into the air.

A set of sensors were positioned all around the perimeter of the sling and inside the sub to check for balance. It was within two-inches of being perfectly centered, and that was well within the five-inches of leeway the inventor knew they had. He would, once they had things back on the ground, have the *Yamato* slightly moved so it would be perfect.

The fly in the ointment came late Monday evening when a call from the FAA came in alerting Tom that he would need to hold off for up to a month due to a safety issue raised by someone.

“Tell us who raised that issue and what it is—and we want the complete report, letter or recording of what you received—and we will either agree or disagree. If we do not agree we can take our cargo to the south and not over U.S. soil. But, be advised that the President and U.S. Senator Peter Quintana will be notified.”

The man on the other end of the call asked to be allowed to place Tom on hold. As he did, Tom used his TeleVoc to set up a call to Jackson Rimmer. When the lawyer answered he was told of the FAA problem.

“Tom, you just go ahead with your plans, I’ll get this handled.”

The FAA man came back on the line. “Uhh, Mr. Swift? It seems we have a small situation that is far out of my ability to address. It would appear this is an international complaint that—”

“Okay. I will stop you right there. If it comes from either an anonymous source or from a Bjorn Bjornjensen from the G-20 Committee for the Environment, then it is a bogus claim. They have tried to pirate the cargo we are transporting under several illegal means even sending ship into space to try to take it from us. Our lawyers will be, or they are right now, contacting your offices with references to an injunction issued against that body and that man or anyone representing him or the organization as a whole. I am only telling you this as a courtesy and not to try to get you to assist us. That is going to occur above you and if necessary, by Presidential decree. So, unless you have anything else, or a really good question, I have many things to do to get ready for our flight.”

He waited a few seconds and when there was nothing from the other end, he said a simple, “Goodbye, then,” and hung up.

Less than five minutes later Tom’s TeleVoc pin *pinged* him. It announced the caller as Jackson Rimmer.

“Yes, Jackson. News?”

“Why, however did you guess that, Tom? Of course I bear news of the nicest kind. The FAA head lady was pulled from a luncheon she was having with, and I quote, ‘Some very influential friends and business entities,’ end quote, by a call from a Federal Judge, the one who issued our injunction. She was informed that any further delays caused by that G-20 fool, his minions or anyone else trying to state there was trouble brewing or death and destruction is to be recorded and reported immediately, and then ignored. You are free to lift when you wish. Uh, it might be nice to stick with the approved flight path and times, though.”

Tom thanked him and tapped the pin to cut the connection.

When Bud and the crew arrived it was with two special additions. Sandy Swift-Barclay was the first person out of the *Sky Queen* followed by Bashalli Swift. Both women walked straight to Tom with Bashalli giving him a big hug and a long kiss, and Sandy hugging her brother.

“I hear from Bud that you suggested Bashi and I come along. Too bad I can’t go but I’m darned if I can figure why your wife isn’t jumping at the chance.” She looked at her sister-in-law with great curiosity.

“It is because I have responsibilities at home and at work. Speaking of work, Tom, I just heard this morning I am being given the assistant manager job at the agency. Clarice Thompson, who’s had it since before I went to work there, is leaving to move to Jamaica with her husband and kids. So,” and she shrugged, “they seem to believe that my four days a week will be enough to take over from her.” She smiled and let out a little squeal of glee when Tom picked her up, swung her around and gave her another kiss.

“Well, I guess Bashi is going to have to give you good news all the time, huh?” Sandy asked.

Turning to face the blond, Bashalli stated, “I do not. Tom and I hug and kiss all the time. Even in front of my parents who have come to the conclusion we are going to be this way for a long time and no amount of tutting or clearing of throats is going to change that!”

Nine hours later, as midnight approached, final hugs and teary kisses were exchanged and the crew entered the *Sky Queen*. She would be accompanying the Recovery Sling and *Yamato* all the way to Guam.

As the giant jet, the repelatron-powered Recovery Sling and its cargo lifted off, Bud turned to Tom asking him what sounded like a vital question.

“Okay, so if we only had something like ninety minutes to get the ship and the sling back to Earth, how in the world are we going to fly out to New Mexico, and then all the way over the ocean?”

Tom smiled.

“Because we are not relying on just the power pods on the four corners out there,” he said pointing to the sling a few degrees off their right side and a quarter mile ahead. “We are now safely tapped into the ship’s nuclear reactor and all that great energy it puts out.

Down here it was possible to run a special connection outside through one of the old collection ports and still seal the integrity of the ship. So, we have more than enough power!”

Bud sat back looking smug. “Figured it was something like that!”

CHAPTER 8 /

A LOVELY DAY FOR A JAUNT THROUGH THE AIR, THEN...

AS THE two flying vehicles headed to a point just south of Birmingham, Alabama, at which point they would turn slightly to the left and head for the small town of Philadelphia, Mississippi—before another slight right turn and flight through the top corner of Louisiana and into Texas—Tom asked Bud to take the controls.

“With the greatest of pleasure, skipper,” the flyer said as all command functions were transferred to his right seat. “You going to take a little nap? You look like you’ve been up since, oh... what was it? Five this past morning!”

Tom shook his head. “Not yet. I’ve got to go back and check the status of all systems on that sling and the ship. Keep a good watch out for our flying partner, and I’ll have Zimby come up to keep you company. Just keep to the track and I’ll likely be in my room before we get much past Bonita, Louisiana. Have me pulled out of bed before we either get to the point south of Fort Worth, or three-fifteen. See you in a few.”

Before the inventor could leave, Bud countered with, “How about I let you stay in the rack until we pass into New Mexico. Still plenty of time to wake up, have a cup of coffee, and take command before we all head down about the time we pass south of Causey, New Mexico?”

Tom looked at his best friend and nodded. “Sure, Another half hour will help, but no arguments when I tell you to hit the sheets on the rest of the trip, Okay?”

Bud held up a Boy Scouts’ salute. “Swear!”

Tom went back to the room that held the SuperSight equipment and also a terminal where he could check on the *Yamato* and the Recovery Sling.

Both showed nothing but green lights and numbers exactly where they needed to be.

A small shudder went through his body as he realized this was about the point when something bad happened to ruin his day. Like Bud weeks before, his mind flashed to Octavia Whitcomb and her hatred and attempts at killing him, but she was dead. As was her husband. And, the woman who had been the daughter of the Black Cobra.

Plus several others who had tried to kill the inventor.

The only problem was that just when he believed some enemy would never come back to haunt him, up another one would pop as if by magic.

It was not a comfortable position to be in over the years, but he knew he would drive himself crazy if he dwelt on the possibilities that probably would never happen.

The inventor made a final check of the balance and made a minute correction. He nodded in satisfaction over how smoothly this first leg of the trip was going.

Giving the monitor one final look over, he headed back to the small cabin he usually occupied on long flights or missions. Magnetically held to a metal back section of the small set of drawers was a picture of Bashalli standing in front of a flowering tree in their back yard, a huge smile on her face and her eyes twinkling.

It was his favorite photo of her. He quietly told her he loved her.

That photo had been the day they moved into the brand new house after coming home from their honeymoon.

Blowing her a soft kiss he stripped off his pants and striped shirt replacing it with a large T-shirt he favored for sleep and climbed into his bunk.

His mind seemed to try to center of the possible bad things but his weariness took over and within about two minutes he was sound asleep.

“Skipper? Time to rise and sort of shine. Bud sends his regards and this coffee and says to tell you we are about to cross above Santa Fe in ten minutes. I guess that’s where you wanted to get up.”

Tom stretched and yawned before clearing his throat.

“Uh, thanks, Zimby. Give me a minute and I’ll be heading up. Just want to wash my face and brush my teeth.”

“I’ll tell Bud to expect you in five then?”

“Yeah.”

He got to the cockpit in four minutes and placed his right hand on the flyer’s left shoulder.

“Here to relieve you, Bud. I’ll assume the Recovery Sling is behaving and we are right on track?”

“Yep! Couldn’t have been smoother except for the little fly by of a National Guard Reserve jet out of Cannon AFB twenty minutes ago

who demanded to know why we were not squawking IFF. We *were*, by the way, and it turns out he was doing an early morning touch-and-go flight when his RADAR detected us. Seems to be a problem in his cockpit and he apologized once I threatened to report him to those famous *proper authorities*.” He made finger quotes when he said the final two words.

Tom grinned in the dim red light of the cockpit. “No other problems?”

“None. In fact our little pilot friend came back on five minutes later with another apology. His techs had checked his jet and found a blown circuit breaker. So, no harm and no foul, and I’m about to burst so take over and let me get to the bathroom!”

The inventor slid into his seat as Bud hustled down the upper corridor to the stairs going down.

After a good scan of the monitor and instruments, Tom made a new adjustment to both the Recovery Sling and the *Sky Queen’s* direction and leaned back to enjoy his coffee.

Thirty minutes later they approached the Citadel’s airfield. With no active air control, Tom had radioed their intentions and timing twenty minutes earlier and had receiving permission to come into the property.

“We’ll have the drones pulled back for you, skipper,” the woman at the radio assured him.

Tom set the *Queen* into hover while he guided the sling to a landing next to the single hangar where the installation’s Toad jet was kept. It was also the place where his earliest aircraft, the misnamed (or prematurely named) nuclear hyperplane had been assembled for its first real tests.

After making certain the sling’s two sides had settled to the ground he set the *Queen* to the side by a hundred feet before shutting her systems off.

Damon had been correct in that just about everyone at the station wanted to come out to see what was sitting in the strange hammock-like vehicle even at the very early hour. After telling the first nine people who came over what it was and what they were going to do, Tom begged off any more and headed for the main office.

Arthur Dunnigan had taken Damon’s advice and was on a leave of absence. While he was gone Barker Leon, his second-in-command was covering in the office. He was also outside.

Tom told him to expect them to remain at the Citadel until midnight.

“The FAA is limiting our over land travel times.”

Leon had nothing to say that was complimentary of the FAA. They had been a thorn in the side of the station early on and continued to make periodic dictates regarding the security drones and wanted the Swifts to relinquish the protected airspace over the location that forced most east-west traffic to divert about two degrees or about a one-minute time differential in a straight route.

“You, of course, have run of the place, but I do need to make certain you’ve left enough room between your wing and the runway for our supply jet to come in at one this afternoon.”

Tom promised to ensure that was so and left.

When they took off that night, all crew members had slept for at least seven hours and were rested and ready to go. As before Tom and Bud took the cockpit duties where they would be relieved by Zimby and Hank in seven hours or about the time they were a thousand miles out over the Pacific after passing over the California coast seven miles north of Ventura.

Everything was going so well that Tom suggested to his other pair of pilots, Red Jones and Deke Bodack, they might as well plan on taking the pair of ships all the way to Hawaii once their shift began.

“That’ll put you both in the seats for eight hours, but after that I plan to limit each of us to six hours all the way to Guam. Okay?”

“Sure”

“Absolutely, Tom. Count on us.”

Tom was awake as they passed south of the Hawaiian Islands and was preparing to take his time at the controls an hour later when Zimby reported there might be an anomaly in the Recovery Sling.

“It isn’t reporting anything, skipper, but I’m certain I saw it tip to the port side twice in the last half hour. Want me to turn us around and head back to Oahu?”

“Hang on until I get up there.”

When he entered the cockpit and leaned down to see out the front, Tom immediately spotted the problem. The sling appeared to have slipped slightly around the bottom of the *Yamato*. Instead of being exactly centered, now the submarine looked to be nearly twenty percent off that point and to the left or port side.

“What’s the nearest land with an airport?” he inquired.

“Well, behind us is Oahu by about four hundred and seventy-four miles straight back and there is a tiny spot in the ocean called

Johnson's Atoll that is four hundred and sixty miles ahead with a three degree port adjustment. Not much info on that place other than it has a single field and used to be home of the U.S. chemical weapons destruction facility. That's closed. Where do you want to go?"

Tom thought for two seconds. "I'd rather go straight than try a one-eighty turn now, so onward, Zimby. Give me three minutes to do a complete status check and then I'll take over."

He walked briskly to the other room and sat down at the monitor station.

Yamato was reporting a slight starboard roll but all systems were right on the money.

The Recovery Sling, on the other hand, was reporting a reduction in the repelatron in the forward left corner. It was down by nearly twenty percent.

"No wonder the thing is rolling a little," he muttered as he sought to reset a few controls. A minute later he gave up and headed back forward.

"Ready to relieve you, Zim," he declared. "Who will be sitting right seat with me?"

"That would be our own Deke Bodack, skipper. He napped while we transited this far. He's coming now but had a call from that wife of his to take." They both grinned knowing the pilot's spouse, Stefanie Brooks-Bodack, was a very demonstrative woman who thought nothing of jumping into Tom's arms to bestow a kiss on his lips by way of a friendly greeting.

"Sorry I'm late, but you know the squirt..." Deke stated entering the cockpit. He referred to his wife's diminutive size of under five feet while he came in at over six-feet five inches.

Tom had already slid into the left seat and as Zimby climbed out of the other one, Deke sort of folded himself down and slipped into that position.

After apprising them both of the rest of the flight status, Zimby left Tom to explain the forthcoming unscheduled landing.

"So, get on the radio and give them a call, Deke," Tom requested. "They should be monitoring all normal mid-ocean channels."

Deke tried for four minutes to raise someone but only received back some static intermixed with what sounded like Morse Code.

"Not sure what that's all about," he said. "Too much static to pick up more than a few letters. O, S and D."

Tom was slowing the speed for both craft to a sedate three

hundred knots as he tested the ability of the sling to descend on command. That seemed to be okay, so he took them both down to two thousand feet as they moved closer to the small spot in the Pacific his charts showed at being just over one square mile in size.

The runway ran most of the length and came in at about four thousand feet. That would be no issue as both aircraft would land vertically.

“Deke? Take a look through this information and tell me if there is anything to be wary of, please.”

“Right.” Four minutes later the tall pilot turned to Tom. “Umm, skipper. There might be a small issue. The airfield is closed. As is permanently. As is the entire base. If we land we’ll be on our own. My guess is that static is covering up a permanent radio signal telling all aircraft in the vicinity just that. Sorry, guys and gals, but we are not open for business!”

“Well, if it is still there nobody can grouse if we use it for a declared emergency. Hang on...” and Tom switched the jet’s radio to a special frequency.

“This is the Swift Enterprises jet, *Sky Queen*, designated Swift Two, declaring Pan Pan. We are accompanying a robotic flying platform that is having equipment problems. We intend to set down on the closest airfield, that being Johnson’s Atoll. Again, we declare Pan Pan with an equipment problem. There is no need to send help as we believe we have the means and supplies to fix the problem, but cannot do so in the air. Over.”

“Ummm, Swift Two? This is Oahu Area Control. We hear your Pan Pan but advise you the airfield is closed on Johnson’s Atoll. Can you return to Oahu?”

“Negative. Unable to achieve a complete turn at this time. Atoll is our best hope. The FAA should have alerted you about this flight listed as Recovery Flight Alpha by my company.”

“Yeah, Swift Two. I have that now. Okay... uh... because of an agreement with the U.S. military we need to scramble a small flight out to check your status and to see that you arrive safely. Can you circle for one hour before heading in?”

“Negative. Refer to my precious ‘we cannot turn around’ statement of a minute ago, please. We welcome anyone who comes for a flyby of us once we are on the ground. However, due to the nature of our problem, we must insist that no jet or other aircraft pass within two thousand feet of the robot flying vessel next to us if we are still in the air and one thousand feet if on the ground.”

“Understood. Continue on your present course for one hundred

miles then come slightly left to new heading two-two-zero. Your contact is intermittent but we have you at two thousand feet. Is this correct?"

"Yes, Oahu, it is. We intend to remain at this altitude until within visual of Atoll then will descend at achievable rate to land near the runway. If that is it, I have some tricky flying to do."

"Roger that. You are granted self-control for remainder of trip and your landing. Call if status changes. Good luck! Out."

About one hour later, and after Tom had advised his crew as well as his father back at Enterprises, the tiny spot in the Pacific came into view. Even using the jet's SuperSight, the atoll was small and was dominated by the single runway.

As they came in lower and neared the landing point, everybody looking outside could see there were nearly no buildings left and in many places basic service roads had disintegrated and there was a large part of the runway that had fallen into such disrepair it could not be used for traditional landings.

But, that was okay with Tom. It meant they could still set down vertically with very little likelihood any jets coming out from Hawaii could touch down safely.

Along the runway and taxiway were large painted X markers indicating the closed status. The surrounding water was beautifully blue and calm, and the plants around their intended landing point were not moving. That would help with a successful touchdown.

With the Recovery Sling and *Yamato* settling down first, Tom brought the *Sky Queen* in next to it. Of course with no cradle to keep the ship upright, only the four corner pods extended down far enough to keep the submarine from falling over.

"Let's get outside and see if we can shore the sub upright," Tom called out to the crew. They would find most of the necessary props back in the hangar.

When he and Deke got outside, Bud greeted them with a rather grim grin.

"Not the sort of place to give you instant warm and fuzzy feelings," he stated looking around.

"Yeah," Deke added. "What with all the buildings gone this place is spookier than an old ghost town. At least in one of those there are old buildings left around."

"And, ghosts." Bud pointed to the southern area of the island. "Hey, look. Over there. Buildings! Let's go look."

Tom shook his head. "That would be a big no, flyboy. Those are

likely to be the leftover chemical weapon storage buildings. I'd hate to have anyone come down with something just because of curiosity. Later, once we get the repairs or adjustments taken care of maybe we may take the atomicar and do a fly around. Just, not now."

The actual repairs were more by way of a replacement for one of the controller boards in the right front power and repelatron pod. It was running far too high and that was overpowering the one on the opposite side that was running normally.

An hour later as Tom was closing up the repaired pod a flight of three fighter jets streaked low over the island and down the nearby runway.

The vortexes coming from them blew everyone around and threatened to knock over the sling. Luckily, Tom had already set it to low power to support the submarine inside.

Tom shouted out an oath and raced into the jet, up the stairs and to the cockpit.

Grabbing the radio headset he yelled, "Stand off! Military flight over Johnson's Atoll, you are ordered to stand off. Your flight nearly knocked our cargo over and that would cost the U.S. Government tens of millions if it gets damaged. Do you hear me?"

The radio crackled to life.

"Don't know who you are, but you are ordered to evacuate this island right now! And, you don't order the United States National Guard to do anything. Got it?"

Tom counted to ten to try to calm himself.

"Whoever you are, this is Tom Swift and we are on a sanctioned mission to deliver a deep sea submersible to Guam. The President of the United States knows about this, the Federal Aviation Administration knows about this, and we declared Pan Pan a couple hours ago to Oahu Control. They know about it. Just because you haven't taken the time to read the brief doesn't mean we are not supposed to be here. Now, call your flights off and either depart the area or stand off a few miles until we are ready to leave. That ought to be in about two more hours."

There was silence on the radio and Tom could see the three jets now circling several miles out to sea. A moment later, the speaker came back to life.

"Uhh, sorry for the misunderstanding, Mr. Swift. We just got confirmation of your permissions. Nobody told us about you. We, that is our Commander, have told this flight to return to base. Again, sorry."

With that the radio went dead and Tom believed it would not come back on with further calls.

Tom switched channels and called Enterprises to report the overflights.

“They might have very well tipped things over if we hadn’t managed to get the repairs finished a few minutes before they showed up,” he told his father.

Damon tried to calm his son by saying, “We both know the military often shoots first and asks where they are and who they have shot later, Son. I’ll be on the phone to Pete Quintana in a few minutes. For now, just put that behind you and get yourself and the sub ready to head on down to Guam. One question, though. Once you get there are you going to set the sub in the water or try to keep her upright on dry land?”

“Well, I’ve been in contact with the base commander and he tells me they have cleared a place for the *Yamato* next to the main quay wall down at the old Apra Harbor Navy Base. They’ve got it back running now that a certain large Asian nation is trying to puff their chest out and be a bully.”

The older naval base had closed and its personnel moved for nearly a decade when Congress declared they were not a good use of military funding, but had been reopened earlier in the year at about twice the cost as would have been spent had they remained open all that time.

With nearly fifty feet of water under the surface at the dock, the place Tom would set *Yamato* was about perfect for their use.

After ending the call with a promise from the senior Swift to contact Tom as soon as he knew anything, the inventor headed outside to get things ready for their continuation of the trip.

“Sorry, Bud, but we are in need of getting started so no slow air tour. We will, however, head up a few minutes before the sling comes to join us and take some very detailed high-quality video of everything so we can look at it later. Might make a nice present for our friend, the Senator from New Mexico as well.”

Fifty minutes later, the Recovery Sling had been tested and found to be operating as near to perfect as possible, the *Queen* had lifted off and taken a visual tour of the small Atoll, and the pair of aircraft were climbing to the southwest and the completing of their trip to Guam.

CHAPTER 9 /

GUAM, WE ARE HERE

THE REST of the trip was uneventful. Tom set the Recovery Sling with the *Yamato* down on the now disused Naval Airfield to the south of the main base, leaving the sling in standby mode until he could inspect the actual water site.

They brought along a portable laser measuring device to check the depth of the water. Since it was a half hour before low tide he would get a very good idea of the least amount of sea water under the *Yamato*. Markings on the cement of the quay would say how high it got.

He, Bud and Hank took the atomicar over from the airfield and landed in the parking lot of the closest building to the pier, a long building housing the Naval Base Guam Operations offices.

Tom stepped inside the main doors and asked if he might speak to the officer in charge.

“Are you Mr. Swift?” the young Ensign asked.

When Tom nodded to her, she smiled. “Well then, the Captain has asked that you and up to three of your team members join him at the Officer’s Club. Here’s a map showing where that is. Or, if you wish I can arrange a car.”

Tom told her that would not be necessary as they brought their own. After thanking her, he rejoined the other two outside.

“We have been invited to have anything from drinks to food to just conversation with the head man. Come on.”

It turned out the club building was just a few hundred yards away, so they walked.

“Well, if it isn’t Tom Swift and friends?” Captain Max Goodwell greeted the trio. “Welcome to the new old Guam Naval base. At least we can offer you some water down here and not like the flat nothingness of the air base up north. Come. Sit. Enjoy.” He introduced his three officer companions.

Tom shook the Navy man’s offered hand and said they would be happy to join him and the other three officers at the table.

“I was trying to describe what I know of your reasons for being down here again, Tom. I probably didn’t do your mission justice. Can you share with us or should I have kept my big mouth shut?”

Tom smiled. He liked the straightforward manner of the Navy

man.

“Well, basically we lost the small test submarine we brought here last fall down in the Trench. We got pushed one way and it got tugged the other and our control tether broke. So, we have one moderately expensive miniature down there, somewhere, that we hope to locate and bring home. I suppose you want to know about what we have set down over at the airfield?”

The others nodded their heads.

“Okay, we brought down the full-size version of that missing sub. It is the one we flew out to Neptune and studied the depths of that planet’s methane ocean. Once we get her into the water this afternoon you are invited to come aboard for a quick tour. I’ll need to limit it to just you four if that is possible.” He looked at their host.

The Captain nodded at him. “Of course I may have troubles keeping a bunch of sailors from getting close enough to watch you lower that into the water. Uhh, do you need me to arrange for the heavy lifting cranes to come over for that?”

Tom described the Recover Sling telling them it was capable of settling into the water and they lifting back off as soon as it had been moved from under the *Yamato*.

“Wait,” a man with Commander’s insignia on his collar points said with great curiosity registering on his face. “Is that like that great Japanese animated space-faring submarine, the *Yamato*?”

Now, Tom, Hank and Bud all grinned and nodded.

“Yep,” Bud exclaimed. “The skipper here thought it looks enough like the sub used in the remake a decade or so back that he wanted to pay homage to it with the name.”

“Except,” Tom reminded his friend, “this one is the *Yamato II*.”

Once they left the club to head back for final preparations for the lift, Bud asked Tom, “I thought there was a problem using water for a lift point... but then how could we have flown all the way out here over the ocean. Right? I withdraw my uneducated question.”

The rest of the crew had things ready and had been waiting for Tom and the other two to come back. Someone had arranged for a small food truck to come out with cold drinks and some sandwiches, so when Bud saw they were already eating he looked at Tom. “Gee, the things you miss when you go do the right thing on coming to a Navy base.”

Zimby pulled three big hero-style sandwiches from behind his back and tossed them to the newly arrived trio.

“Red said we’d get in trouble if we didn’t get you something.

Besides, if you had already eaten, the rest of us would have divvied these up and just been a bit more full!”

“Where’s our own chuck wagon master?” Bud inquired.

“Chow? Inside grousing about how he could have fixed us something better. I told him it would not do to insult the hospitality of our hosts and he sort of clomped off.”

After sitting for a couple minutes the team rose and headed for the Recovery Sling for a chance to give Tom a final check.

He used the remote control panel that had been brought out of the *Sky Queen* to test the lift—success—and the balance—nearly spot on—of everything.

“Okay. It’s just a bit far to walk this over so if Bud will drive me over in the atomicar, the rest of you can join us in the *Queen*. I have permission for you to set her down on the old concrete pad for one of their supply buildings. There’s ample room for three *Queens* there so park her and walk across the road and to the northeast and the long building. Our set down spot is on the other side of that building.”

“You can’t really miss it,” Bud said with a mischievous look. “It’ll be the building with the giant submarine hanging in a hammock behind it!”

Ten minutes later with another lift and maneuver test, Tom asked that the atomicar be rolled out and then the rest of the crew could take off for their new parking spot.

“We’ll be five minutes behind you at most,” he told them.

The *Sky Queen* part of the crew was just getting to the pier when *Yamato*, hanging snug inside the Recovery Sling, came over the building.

Tom put the sling into a hover fifty feet over the water as he and Bud set down and climbed from the atomicar.

“Looks kinda peaceful hanging up there,” Bud commented.

“Looks like something that could drop and squish a bunch of very nice people from New York if power shuts off,” Zimby stated as he came over to the two men controlling the sling.

Tom chuckled and set the controls to move the sling and cargo over so it was hovering above the water.

“Feel more comfy, Zim?” he asked giving his friend and company pilot a nod. “It isn’t as if it is going to drop from the sky now that we have it all the way here. In fact...” and the sling began to slowly lower until the bottom was just eleven feet above the water, or level with the top of the quay wall.

The sound of many hands clapping could be heard from behind them. As Tom and the others turned, about twenty officers and enlisted men came out of double doors set in the center of the long building.

“Hey there, Captain and all you others,” Tom greeted them as he set the controls to hold everything right were it was. “Come to watch the official launch of our *Yamato II* into Pacific waters?”

“Do you mean Earthly waters, Mr. Swift,” one junior officer inquired.

“Nope. She had a couple good sea trials in the Atlantic before we strapped her into that sling affair just to shake her down. Of course, if any of you followed our mission to Neptune you will already know we dove nearly three times deeper than the Mariana Trench and into nearly pure liquid Methane.”

“A little seawater is nothing!” Bud quipped.

Hank snorted and added, “A little *methane* was mostly nothing if you discount having it freeze up inside the drive units. Fat chance of that happening in this nice, warm salty brine.”

Tom addressed the Navy people. “We will be setting her down in the water in about five minutes unless you need to make any inspection of the hull. I have to warn you that the flying sling it is inside can’t easily be moved around. It is sort of like a pliable and flyable dry dock, but we’ll do what we can to make you folks happy.”

The Captain smiled. “Just knowing we have you here and will be even a small part of this submarine rescue is doing wonders for this little base. You are putting us back on the map and I’ve been told we are going to get some new funding starting in October to fix this place up. Now, this is sort of a secret I ask you all to keep, but we are going to get a new mini-fleet of about nine ships and some submarines. We used to have a nice if very old tender here, the *Proteus*. A submarine tender. Many of us likely shave with her recycled steel these days. She’s gone now but a new tender, the third of the same name, the *USS Dixie* is coming out of her final fit and trials at Pearl Harbor and should be here in another couple of weeks.”

Tom assured him there would be no “loose lips” regarding anything that might come in the future.

“Do you have anything you want to see before she gets wet?”

“No, but I do want to take you up on your earlier offer of a tour inside if that is still on the table.”

“Of course.” Tom looked at the people outside with the base commander. “We can fit this group in if we divide you all into two

smaller groups. Uhh, no more, please? So,” and he turned back to look at the sling and its cargo one more time, “it is time to set her down.”

After suggesting everyone stand back just in case, Tom carefully checked the position—and adjusted it an additional four feet out over the water—before beginning the very slow descent.

Hank asked if he should jump over and make a final check.

“If you can do that without falling into the water, then sure.”

The beefy engineer took a five step walk back from the edge of the pier and waited for the sling to lower its cargo enough so it would be a straight across leap.

The bottom of the Recovery Sling touched the water and sank slightly. By the time the bottom of the sling was fifteen feet under water the *Yamato* was close to floating on its own buoyancy, and that was when Hank ran forward and took his leap.

He'd timed things so his right foot left the pier and his left foot shoved off the outer rail of the sling launching him forward enough to clear the edge of the submarine. He had to bend down and grab onto a small safety railing that ran the length of the upper hull so he could get his feet under him.

But, with a small wave to the assembled crowd, he reached over to the upper hatch—normally an emergency escape hatch—and pressed his thumb against the waterproof membrane covering the print reader. With a click and a small *beep* signal, the hatch rose on its forward-facing hinges until it was vertical.

Hank stepped inside and down the ladder that ended in another hatch completing the airlock.

On the pier, Tom and the others watched as the upper hatch closed.

“What's he doing inside?” the Captain asked.

“He is going send out the fore and aft mooring lines first, then to check the instruments that will say if the sub is showing watertight conditions before he comes back out and does a walk around of the hull checking for clearances,” the inventor answered.

Sure enough, a pair of braided cables shot out from the bow and stern of the sub and onto the dock where a couple sailors grabbed them and wrapped the lines around large cleats. Two minutes later the upper hatch rose again and Hank popped his head up. “Looking great!” he reported as he eased himself up and out, closing the hatch behind him.

Five minutes later he gave a thumbs up and Tom started

lowering the sling even more.

“The submarine will begin to float on its own in another two feet,” he told his audience, “and then I will slide the sling assembly forward and away from bow. After that, I land the sling over at the end of the pier, temporarily, and we can extend your gangway over to the main airlock hatch and head inside.”

The twenty-six men and women entered in groups of six, the maximum the airlock was designed to accommodate. When the final group was inside, Tom smiled to himself watching the reaction of the Navy people.

To an individual they were transfixed by the almost science fiction spaceship space and appearance of things. Even in this upper living quarters level, there was nothing even the five submariners in the group recognized as being what was to be found in U.S. Navy submarines. Along both walls were the doors of the individual bedrooms for the crew. Several tables were in the middle area and a spiral staircase was to be seen on the opposite wall.

Tom asked half of them to remain upstairs while he took the others down.

“Hank will give you the same basic tour but it’ll take me a couple minutes to get this group out of your way.”

He headed down with Bud at the end of the line. They came out into the dining, recreation and exercise area of the ship. At nearly twenty-five feet wide and forty feet long, it looked and felt huge to people used to being cramped in naval vessels.

“This is the general purpose area where we eat and relax. Behind this section,” he pointed to the rear hatch, “are the two sections housing our fuel, drive and nuclear reactor.” He explained that on the Neptune trip the “fuel” had been liquid methane used in the powerful plasma rockets that drove them out and back.

Next, he took them to the aft section.

“I can’t take you to the reactor section. Not because of anything bad or dangerous; it is just that there are several company top secret things back there. Anybody based on a sub will understand that. However, this section holds the electronics and mechanisms for our main in-liquid drives. There are three of them for this ship.”

He described the general function of the modified Jetmarine drives without telling them some Navy submarines were using a variation of that same drive system.

They were stunned at the technology evident back in this section. They were even more stunned as they passed the second group and headed forward to the control room.

“It’s like the bridge of a starship!” one woman said in a stage whisper.

Bud grinned and stepped forward. “Well, ma’am. It is a starship, or at least a spaceship. We didn’t drag it out to Neptune; we flew it there!”

Tom explained some of the basic functions that were controlled from this room. He even let them sit in the Captain’s chair near the rear of the space and sitting on a 10-inch platform.

“We’ve got one more section in front. Recently we refitted it with a sort of storage garage for the little sub we hope to rescue and take home. It did have a lot of the sampling equipment for what we eventually found on Neptune up there previously.”

Everyone looked at the room and left in awe of what Tom and Swift Enterprises had created and must have done on that almost unfathomable mission.

Back on the pier they were joined by Hank and Zimby and the group they had taken inside about seven minutes later.

Captain Goodwell suggested that if the others had any questions, now was the time and they should, “Make it quick!”

Tom gladly answered the three that came before he thanked them for their interest and the help the Navy was providing.

“I hope we might all get together once I succeed and come back to this wonderful base,” he told them.

When everybody had gone and the crew was inside prepping the *Yamato* for her trip out the next morning, Tom turned to Bud. “After being cooped up in her for weeks I thought the walls were closing in on their own. Now, she looks larger than I remember even on first coming inside.”

Bud grinned and nodded. “Right. Sort of like most things we fly or dive in. It’s a matter of how long you have to look at those walls and the people inside with you. Don’t worry. It is the same size as before except for having less room up front.”

“That we can see, flyboy. Same amount up there just there are now some walls we never had before. So, let’s do a systems’ check and get the *Sky Queen* back over to the airfield.”

“With the sling?” Hank asked walking over to them.

“Right. We’ll bring that back the same way we got it over here; manually and controlled from the atomicar.”

The checks took about an hour and Tom was happy to find there was nothing out of place or off the mark as far as what was supposed to do what. As they all left the submarine, the inventor

had a satisfied look on his face.

Tom was invited to have dinner with the Captain that evening. The invitation was for all his team, but they all told him to go without them.

“It’s been a long several days and I want to hit the sack as early as possible,” Bud told him.

Knowing it would be politically best if at least he showed up, Tom flew the atomicar over to the Officer's Club where he found the Captain and his wife waiting at a table.

“I was just betting my wife that only you or possibly you and Bud would come tonight. I guess you have a lot of things still to do, so if you want to cut this short, let me know. This is, by the way, Monica, my wife of these past seventeen years.”

Tom shook her hand and took a seat just across from the Captain.

“Not so much to do as get back some of the sleep we have all missed out on.” He told them of the FAA’s insistence at the midnight to five flight times. Both agreed that had been ridiculous until he told them of the interference and attempt at pirating the ship in orbit.

“That’s... well that’s downright criminal!” Monica stated. “Who would do such a thing?”

Tom shrugged. He did not want to bring up any names or the G-20 Environment Committee seemingly behind it.

“We still are not certain who was in charge of their mission as they have so far refused to leave their ship even though they are on a military base back home with no hopes of taking off again. The Air Force feeds them and has sent a doctor to check on their welfare a couple times.” He shrugged again.

They had a nice dinner with Tom opting for local favorite of a coconut curry white fish and the Captain and his wife ordering the strip steak.

Tom begged off from dessert and thanked his hosts telling the Captain he intended on putting to sea just about eight in the morning.

“Wish I could be going with you, Tom, but I’m sure you don’t want a fifth wheel along. Besides, unless you are going out by day and back here by night I seriously doubt Monica would allow it!”

* * * * *

At 7:50 a small team of sailors appeared on the pier with orders to help cast off all lines.

Tom appeared through the upper hatch thanking them.

“With the Commander’s compliments, sir, we are here to get you off on your trip. Just tell us what to do.”

Tom responded with the instructions, “Just cast off the fore line, wait fifteen seconds and then the aft one. They will be automatically drawn inside. When we come back, assuming any of you are around, those same lines will shoot out with enough slack to get about twenty feet across the pier. Thanks, men! Hold on...”

He disappeared a moment before coming back up with the order for the forward line.

Tom had decided to use the small maneuvering jets in the nose and aft end of the sub for moving to the side and had them outfitted with pressure cylinders of nitrogen.

The nose moved away from the quay at the same time the aft line was cast off and drawn inside.

“Give me five percent starboard drive until we get the nose around another twenty degrees,” he ordered as he closed the hatch and headed down and forward.

Like the very well behaved machine the ship was, the nose was soon moving around until Tom asked for the port drive to be brought up to that same level.

He was leaving the drive on the bottom of the sub in a closed state until they cleared the shallower waters of the bay.

In minutes they came around to enter the narrow exit channel between the submarine portion of the base and the concrete quay twelve hundred feet to their left where the base’s floating dry dock was located. After that they made a series of turns to the exit outside the breakwater.

Seven minutes after casting off they were leaving the island heading almost due south where they would pass the southern point of Guam, Cocos Lagoon, twenty minutes later.

The *Yamato II* was on its way toward the precipitous drop off down into the Mariana Trench.

CHAPTER 10 /

DIVE, DIVE, DIVE

YAMATO II traveled on the surface for the first ten miles of her trip before Tom asked Zimby, who was sitting at the pilot's station, to take them under.

"I think just like on Neptune we need to do the dive thing in ever deeper tests. Take us down to fifty feet over the top, please."

The first test went very well with all stations reporting things were tight and running as designed. Because the jetmarine drives worked better in the thinner water than Neptune's slushy methane, they were traveling about fifteen percent faster for any given power setting.

From the Sensors and Systems station to the right of the pilot's panel, Bud told them all, "All pressures show absolutely normal. Drives one, two and three are running smooth and quiet. Oh, and I can here some surface traffic to the direct east of us running at about fifteen knots. Sounds like a couple freighters. They appear to be running parallel to each other coming this general direction."

"Good. How soon until they are over us or at CPA?"

"Closest Point of Approach will be one point two miles to the north—well, actually on a zero-one-two bearing—in thirty-two minutes, fifteen seconds."

"Are we still making ten knots?"

"We are, Tom."

"Are they heading into Guam?"

"From their course I'd have to guess they are either going to make a final course change to about zero-three-five in a few minutes to head into the Guam port, or if they do not they will pass south of Guam by five miles and could be heading almost anywhere to the east. Hawaii is nearly on their current course."

"Hmmm. Let's open our spacing bit. Zim? Bring us to fifteen knots and take us down to one-fifty. Also adjust course to two-one-zero. That'll get us to the point very near where we dropped over the edge before."

Ten minute later they were at their new course and speed and depth and Tom was looking over the shoulder of Bud who was monitoring surface shipping.

"What's that?" he asked pointing at a tiny dot very slightly to the

north of the two large cargo ships.

“Could be anything from a lifeboat to a small boat. They could be holding a man overboard drill. I’ll keep an eye on it.”

Tom patted the man on his shoulder and headed for his chair but barely got his right foot on the platform before Bud called out.

“Skipper? Whatever that is just broke off and is heading around the stern of the farther ship at pretty high speed. I’m potting thirty-five knots. Now it is passing aft of the second ship and is heading this general direction. Not straight at us, but within fifteen degrees.”

Tom sat down and made a series of orders.

“I want us down to six hundred feet as fast as we can get there, change course to due west, two-seven-zero and slow us to two knots. I want us as quiet as we can get and still be moving.”

As his orders were being carried out the inventor formed another plan.

“Small change everyone. Run us at top speed away to due west for half an hour. During that time I want us to ease up to two hundred feet and on my command we come back up with just our digital periscope on the surface. I want an actual picture of what that boat might be. Plus,” and he turned to Red who was on the communications board, “get back to Enterprises and have them turn the newest spy satellite in our vicinity. Now it isn’t being used to look at southern China and that maniac ex-patriot Frenchman, Lacrobat, we might as well use its high resolution capabilities to get a good overhead look.”

The call went to Damon Swift who promised to have the satellite oriented and pointed nearly straight down from its orbital position within ten minutes.

“Position of us and that boat?”

“We’re fifty miles west of Guam and twelve miles south. The two tankers have changed course and are heading into the harbor, but the little speedboat is six miles out and coming this direction. We’re running slow and as quiet as can be so I don’t understand how they are homing in on us.”

Tom had a bad feeling and a notion. He picked up his headset.

“Tom to crew. We seem to have an unknown contact out there that acts like they know where we are. I can only think of a couple ways that might happen and one of them is we have a tracking bug in *Yamato*. Or, rather, it is more likely to be outside. We are turning away from the incoming contact and putting fifty miles between us before we surface. At that point I want three people outside in

Hydrolung suits with safety tethers attached. Give the topside a good visual sweep and anything you find that doesn't belong bring it in and get it in a tomasite box."

Five minutes later the volunteers reported they were suited and ready and just entering the upper airlock.

"We three can squeeze in," Art Wiltessa reported. "We're shoving the water out in prep for popping out the top like one of those spring snakes in a fake can of candy."

Four minutes and fifty seconds later Tom gave them the go-ahead to go outside.

"We have the image of that other boat just at the horizon, and it seems to be coming in at forty knots, so you all have three minutes. I hope someone remembered to bring some heavy cutters."

"Roger that, skipper. I'm covering the aft area and haven't found —" he stopped. "Oh, yes I have. Sleek little box strapped to the emergency railing just at the back end of our raised observation room. It has no lights on it and I can't see if it shows any indication of been booby-trapped. Want me to cut it loose?"

Tom thought quickly. "No. I'm coming up with a cover to wrap that in. Tomasite wrap and some plastic ties. If I'm right, that will stop their signal. You other two, back inside and Art, you get close to the hatch."

Tom came out without a hydrolung suit a minute later. Sticking from his back pocket was a thick bag Art knew was made of heavy tomasite fibers interwoven with Durastress fibers. Not the most pliable of combinations, but strong enough to both block radio signals and contain any small explosive charge that might go off when signal was lost.

Kneeling close to the suspected tracking device, he slid the bag down and under the device before bringing the top up and twisted it closed. One of his plastic ties came out and he was about to cinch it down when Bud came out and over to him carrying something small that Tom recognized.

"Don't put your loop around the rail. Just seal that bag but not before you let me put this cable guillotine around their strap. We can cut it once we are underwater and up to enough speed to carry it behind us before it conceivably goes *boom!*"

Seconds later the two men headed for the hatch and were down inside with the door closed shortly after that.

"Dive, dive, dive!" Tom radioed to the control room. "Make thirty knots due south and head down to five hundred feet."

By the time he and Bud got forward the submarine was nearing the two hundred foot depth and was surging forward at Tom's requested speed.

"Say when," Bud reminded him.

Tom made a huffing sound through his nose, but nodded. "I might have wanted to study that, but let's assume it is a nasty little device and cut it loose. Go for it, Bud."

The flyer had a small box with a single button in his right hand. He depressed the button and held his breath.

Three seconds later there was a rumble sound from the stern and the ship bucked up a little.

"I think that says our nosy friends up there do not have good intentions."

"You're right, Bud. Now we need to get some good pictures of them and perhaps see if they head back for one of those tankers."

Hank cleared his throat. "Or, skipper, they might be heading back to the Navy base. You do have to admit that is the likely place the device was attached. Like, when we were doing the tours?"

Tom shook his head. "I don't want to believe someone did that right under our noses. But, it does need to be reported to the base commander. Do we have a good satellite image of that boat?"

Red called over. "Sure do. And, you're not going to like it but it has all the earmarks of those Russian fast patrol boats your dad and his Surface Effect Jets encountered over near Norway."

As they all watched the satellite feed it was clear the small boat was trying to locate their signal box, and was not being successful. After a few minutes they headed out to where *Yamato* had been when they lost the signal and could be seen patrolling around in great circles trying to pick anything up.

Bud snickered. "How great would it be if we had a few of that mini-torpedoes you made back when we were building that NOAA base in Florida? We could sneak up under them and send one up to give them a really good knock on their bottom!"

Seeing that Tom was not smiling at the idea, Bud was about to apologize when the inventor said, "That's exactly what we need to do. I probably never told anyone other than Hank that we did add six little launching tubes up in the central intake area on our top deck. I figured them to be good for emergencies but they can do exactly what flyboy here said. And, at top speed they'll knock really hard, maybe enough to have whoever they are heading for the horizon as fast as they can."

“Or,” Red stated trying to be the voice of reason, “they might drop depth charges or even launch their own torpedoes. We don’t know.”

Tom nodded. “Right. So we maneuver directly under them, send them a reminder about their vulnerability, and leave the area quickly and quietly. I believe they could only detect us via that box and not from any noises we make.”

With a hull of tomasite it would be impossible for a torpedo to home in magnetically, and with their nearly silent operation a sound-homing device was also very unlikely to find them. The only thing to worry about was a chance drop of an explosive device that exploded within a few feet of them.

Even at that, Tom was fairly certain that any non-nuclear device would not breach the hull of the *Yamato II*.

A radio call came in from the Swift’s Private Ear Radio network. It was Damon. “Tom and crew? We just received word from the State Department that your shadow boat is an unregistered military craft believed to have originated in China. Here’s the really unfortunate thing. They also believe it came out shadowing those two Chinese freighters from the southernmost tip of the nation. Meaning, in case that hasn’t set in, from the area formerly controlled by that former French megalomaniac, Lacrobat!”

Tom had donned his headset. “But, he’s dead. Right?”

“That is State’s understanding. His enclave of ex-patriots, now mostly too old to be in control of their own bodies much less their military, has attracted some pretty nasty individuals over the years. Remember, Tom, that Lindsey Everton imposter that, uhh, did the hit and crash with Bashalli when she was pregnant with Bart.”

Tom well recalled what had been an almost instant death for his wife and unborn child that he reversed by using a time anomaly his father had forbid him to experiment with on humans. He’d managed to go back in time and injure the attacking woman who barely scraped Bashalli then died in the resulting crash that saved Bashalli and Bart.

“Right,” he answered. “So, what do we do about them?” He told his father about the idea of slamming one of their small non-explosive torpedoes up into the hull to try to send a message.

“I truly doubt they will take the hint and move off, Son. I’ve got Trent contacting our favorite Admiral to see if he can arrange for a ship to come out from Guam and sort of move the small boat on. Failing that it is up to the Navy to determine if they need to board or even sink that boat.”

Tom could hear the distaste in his father's voice at the thought of deadly force being used.

"Okay. So, do we hang around here long enough to knock on their hull or go ahead with our first deep dive?"

Between them it was decided to hold off on both the upward torpedo as well as the dive for a few hours or until Damon had definitive word on the Navy's intentions. It came less than twenty minutes later.

"Tom? Admiral Hopkins has authorized a Navy P-3 flight from the air base at the north end of Guam. They took off about three minute ago and report they will be overhead that boat in fifteen minutes. Unfortunately, what with China not playing well with others in the oceans around that area, the Navy takes a zero tolerance to any attacks, so if they are fired on, they will drop a torpedo or two." Damon sighed. "Let's hope those on that boat are smart enough to not provoke anything."

When Tom had not heard anything a half hour later he initiated a call to Enterprises.

"Well, the word came through that boat did, indeed, fire a small missile at the Navy plane. They missed... the Navy did not. They dropped one torpedo that took the entire bow off that boat and it sank in seconds. On a swing around they dropped a large life raft and at last report at least nine men were inside it with arms raised over their heads."

Tom sighed and hoped the crew had only been nine strong. To his father he asked, "So, do we go down now?"

"You do, but I have a nasty suspicion this is not a single and uncoordinated situation. Beware of any other submersible contacts. We know their subs are noisy when underway, but just about the most silent thing underwater when sitting in wait. The Admiral gave me a signature frequency to listen for and I'll give you that before we sign off. It indicates one or more of their torpedoes have been primed and the outer hatch or hatches are open. If you hear that, the prescribed action is to get nose on and dive under their bow. Evidently, their torpedoes are unable to cope with that maneuver and self-destruct if launched."

He gave Tom the detailed signature information and signed off with a wish for a successful, and safe, trip.

Tom made a ship-wide announcement about the boat and also about the possibility of one or more submarines in the area.

"I want all stations to triple check readiness and report up to me in five minutes or less. After that we dive."

Right on time, the *Yamato* dipped her nose five degrees, came up to twenty knots speed and began stage one of her deep descent. This time it would be to one thousand feet and a turn toward the south and the Mariana Trench.

The first part of this dive went well and might have continued except for the discovery of a widely-spaced field of mines seemingly just sitting, unanchored, at the eight hundred foot level and right in their way.

“Are those what I think they are?” Bud asked as he brought them to a halt more than a thousand feet away from the closest one.

“They seem to be mines, and they do not look all that old to me,” Red announced on looking at his close-up monitor. “Fact is, they are far too shiny and modern-looking to be leftovers from World War Two. Also, too deep for that time and the state of subs. So, nope, I’d say we have a recent seeding here and unknown for what purpose.”

“What do you want to do, Tom?” Bud asked.

After a moment of thought, the inventor replied, “I think we need to turn one direction—let’s make that to our port—and follow this line of mines to see how far the field extends, always, of course, keeping a good watch in front of us. Then, we reverse and see how far it goes back the other direction.”

“And, finally we see how deep it goes?” Red asked. “By that, I mean not their depth but how far to the east this field is located.”

“Yes. We will do exactly that and then see what is under this field. If it is very thin cables, we have to see how they are anchored. Then we notify the Navy and see if they can come sweep this field and get rid of it. I’d hate for a friendly submarine to run into any of those.” He pointed to the seven visible mines on the front monitor.

Tom asked that the ship be backed away by another five hundred feet. When they neared that point he called out, “Port drive into slow reverse and starboard drive ahead two-thirds.”

The tail swung to the right and the bow to the left until he had all drives shut down.

“Give me a split monitor up there,” he said pointing to the front of the control room and the twenty-four feet of screen. “Show ahead of us on the left and the field on the right. Ahead one-quarter on all drives; hold us at eight knots and be ready to steer out of the way of anything coming in front of us.”

They traveled two miles until they passed the southern end of the

minefield. Tom had them continue another thousand yards before asking for a turn to the left.

“We’ll reverse course and head for the northern end.”

When they arrived at the far end they’d determined the field extended two miles. Now, it was time to see how far to the west it went.

That proved to be another mile.

“So, in all I think we can report to the Navy they have ninety-eight or maybe one hundred mines out here at eight hundred to nine hundred feet. We also need to tell them how deep this goes, so let’s blow some ballast and sink in place. For starters, five hundred feet farther down, please.

At that depth Tom had the sub turn to face the minefield. There were no mines that deep so he asked that they blow enough ballast to rise to eleven hundred feet. It wasn’t until about eleven hundred fifty feet they could detect any more mines.

Again, the ship went as far to the south and north as it took to find where the mines stopped.

“Let’s get to the surface and call the Navy,” he ordered.

Once topside, the radioman, Mike Jayston, connected with Guam and the Naval base.

“Yes, *Yamato*. This is Captain Goodwell. What have you got, and I’ll assume word got to you about that attack boat?”

Tom told him the last news he had—the life raft drop—and then reported the minefield.

“As far as we could tell those mines are strung together with very thin cables but not anchored to the sea floor, sir. Plus, they look amazingly clean and new to have been there long.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. Those two freighters that hid that attack boat? We boarded them and took their crews into custody. At the aft end of one of them was a launching system for mine laying, and inside were another two hundred mines, all strung together like the ones you encountered. Neither ship had a valid registry so all we can tell from satellite tracking is they likely came from a port in southeast China seven to nine days ago.”

Tom gave the officer the bad news about the tracking device that had been attached to the *Yamato*.

There was silence from the other end for nearly half a minute before Captain Goodwell came back. “Sorry. I was just contacting our security people and giving them the names of the three sailors I only barely know who were out there that day. Two of them do not

work in the Admin office building next to where you were setting into the harbor.

“I’ll arrange to have our one-and-only sweeper sent out to that field. Do you believe they might be close enough to cause a domino effect if we explode one of them?”

“Actually, unless you can shoo any sea life from the area I’d hate to have you set them all off, sir.”

“Oh... agreed. Well then, we might need to tease them upward enough to get an unmanned submersible down to cut them apart. That is not your problem. I do want to thank you on behalf of the U.S. Navy and our submarine fleet for plotting that minefield. You might just have saved a hundred or more lives.”

He mentioned that one or more U.S. subs might traverse that area in the coming weeks.

Tom signed off.

“Okay, now we finally go down to see if we can find our little submarine,” Tom announced to the crew.

Six hours later and as the sun was about to go down over the horizon, *Yamato II* prepared to sink beneath the waves on its trip downward to see if they might spot the *SeaKing* and bring her back to the surface.

“We are about to head down to where only a trio of men have been, at least successfully. With luck this will be a short mission. With more luck we may spot that sunken Chinese submarine and be able to bring back some proof about how and why she sank with all hands. So, and I mean it this time, *dive, dive, dive!*”

CHAPTER 11 /

TOM AND THE (NEW) FAT MAN

ON THE way to their dive point, the *Yamato* had passed over an undersea mountain range running from southeast of Guam almost to the actual drop off.

To call the descent into the depths a drop off was a misnomer. In actuality it was a steep slope of some forty miles, or about a third longer than Guam. But, it did head down into the inky depths fairly quickly.

When they passed two thousand feet the water around them was so dark Tom ordered the undersea aqualamps turned on. These lights worked on wavelengths that neither humans nor any other animal or sea life could detect, and were only visible due to a special coating Enterprises—and Fearing Island—used on camera lenses, windows and other methods for viewing what was around their craft.

Yamato had been outfitted with both the lights and lenses/windows before their Neptune trip and had been the only way for anyone to see anything deep under the methane ocean of that planet.

Now, the lights illuminated what was around them out for about twenty miles. And, within the first ten miles it appeared to be almost noontime daylight outside.

“That’s some desolate slope,” Bud commented as they passed three thousand feet, “all except for that sunken fishing trawler.” He pointed at a seventy-foot boat with half of its port side ripped away. “Somebody look up the *Happy Hooker* out of Rota, please.”

A moment later, Hank called over, “She was lost five years ago in a storm and collided with an oil tanker out of India called the *Varun Nai Maharani*. No, wait. She was a liquid propane carrier. Limped into Guam and ran aground inside the breakwater. She was repaired and left harbor ten days later and only then reported the trawler. Her captain was arrested and airlifted four hundred miles southwest of Hawaii and charged with dereliction at sea. Uhh, nobody from the trawler was ever found.”

It was sad news for the crew and Tom suggested they get a little closer and zoom in their cameras to see if there was any sign of the former crew.

There was not, but he wasn’t surprised. Saddened to be sure, but

nothing about the sea surprised him anymore.

They continued their downward travels as soon as Tom noted in the ship's log the exact position and depth of the wreck.

An hour later he took a break heading for his room.

"Keep a lookout for anything not what you'd expect," he requested of Red who had the next four-hour watch in the "big chair."

"Will do, Tom. Have a nice rest."

Chow met him as he came out of the hatch and into the center section of the ship.

"Fix ya anythin', Tom? I got some fresh chicken salad and some smashed taters. Or, I can fix ya just about anythin' else ya want." He looked hopefully at the inventor.

"I'm pretty bushed right now, Chow, but a small sandwich of that chicken salad sounds like I could eat it before I fall asleep. Got any really soft bread so I don't have to chew a lot?" He grinned at the older man.

"How 'bout some of that egg bread I make back at home. Nice and takes ta a little warming up right nice."

"Sold!" Tom declared and sat down at one of the two tables outside Chow's small galley.

Two minutes later the chef set a plate and a glass of milk in front of him. "Didn't make it too big fer ya. Eat and hit yer rack."

Tom smiled his thanks and took the first bite. As he chewed he realized just how hungry he really was and that overrode his desire to close his eyes and nod off.

A minute later he licked his fingers, thanked the old chuck wagon cook, and ambled to the stairs to go up to his room.

He no more got his shirt off and a t-shirt put on than he sat down, laid down, and fell into a deep sleep.

Bud was gently shaking Tom's left shoulder. "Skipper? Time to rise, shine, eat, do your potty thing and take over up front. Need a cup of coffee delivered?" He was grinning as Tom rolled over and looked into his face.

"No," he answered after clearing his throat to get his voice working. "I'll be up in ten minutes."

"Oh, take your time. It's at least twelve minutes to change of shift!"

The flyer left with Tom now getting into a sitting position. It was the last position he recalled not even remembering tipping over and placing his head on his pillow. He'd been *that* tired.

Just like eight hours earlier, Chow was standing in his galley as the inventor came back down and headed for the coffee urn.

"Buddy boy told me you'd be down in a jiffy, so I got one o' them sausage, cheese and egg san'wiches ya like in the microwave. If'n ya can wait twenty-seconds I'll bring it out. Sit and sip a little o' that cup o' joe ya got." It was both an invitation and an order that Tom gratefully acknowledged with a smile and a nod.

He ate the sandwich in about three large bites and picked up his small plate taking it to Chow. "Thanks, old-timer. Great as usual and just what I wanted. Umm, any chance of one of those cherry turnovers we had the night before we hit Guam?"

Chow smiled and winked. "Knew ya'd want anther o' them so I held a couple back from the rest o' the crew. I'll just tell 'em it was the last one, an' then you tell 'em it was a little stale. That oughta keep 'em from begging fer one!"

"It's a deal."

"Then, I'll bring it forward in five minutes. Give ya a chance ta get the story from Hank and get settled. Take a fill up o' that coffee afore ya go," he suggested.

Opening the control room door, Tom stepped into the room in time to watch Hank jump up pointing at the monitor. On it was a sort of shelf and on that was most of an old-fashioned diesel submarine. Until they got a little closer it was not certain to what country it had belonged.

"Is that what I think it is?" he demanded. Then, seeing Tom he pointed again. "Does that look like a half a submarine?" he asked.

Tom stepped closer and asked for the zoom to be employed.

"Yes, it does, but it isn't anything very new. I'd say a World War Two relic. There are supposed to be about four-dozen U.S. subs sunk in the Pacific. Let's see if we can get a name."

Ten minutes later, and using a special filter, Tom determined the submarine's hull number was 215.

"That would make it the USS *Growler*," Bud said from the sensor station where he had just looked up sunken World War Two subs. "Except, she was supposed to have been torpedoed in the South China Sea. November of 1944 according to this listing. That'd make it west of the Philippines. Wow!"

"Well," Tom commented, "if she was torpedoed over there she

made it quite a way out to here. I wonder if she was trying for Guam and just ran out of time?”

Nobody could answer that so Tom made another notation in the log about the find. It would be reported once they were on the surface again. He also had an electronic photo added to the file showing the gaping hole just forward of her stern planes. It was a torpedo hole, to be certain, but as he reviewed the file a moment later he saw why there was some debate whether she'd been hit by a Japanese torpedo... or one of her own that malfunctioned and circled around. The entry had not set off the explosive charge.

On the rest of their descent they spotted no fewer than four other wrecks, none of which appeared to have been military in nature. Each one was photographed and cataloged.

“Those notations will give the maritime authorities some good information,” Hank stated before he headed for his sleep time.

“I only hope we have as good a success rate when it comes to our own little sub,” Bud said a moment later.

Just as on Neptune, Tom wanted to make their dives slow and steady with some resting time and time to check the entire ship.

Each stop—about every two thousand feet—took half an hour and every one of them showed the *Yamato* to be in peak condition.

Twenty hours later Slim Davis, now manning the SONAR and sensors called out, “I’ve got the bottom in sight, Red. Should someone go wake up the skipper?”

“Yep! Mike? Your not getting anything on that radio so you go. Tell him it isn’t a huge hurry but we do have SONAR contact and it’ll be another hour or more before we are in position to touch down. Visual is dropping so no direct sighting yet.”

Their radioman got up and left the control room. He had to wait at the bottom of the stairs to allow Chow to come down.

“Been sleeping, Chow?” he asked.

The chef nodded and yawned. “Yeah. Got ta lay the old noggin’ down every once in a while. Both Tom and his pa, and Doc Simpson o’ course, tell me I got ta take better care o’ myself after havin’ that tiny heart attack. ‘Cides, Wanda’d kill me if I came back dead!”

That last comment didn’t hit Mike until he got to the top of the circular stairs, and then he let out a little bark of laughter.

Down in his galley kitchen Chow let a small smile cross his lips.

Tom entered the control room four minutes later, He’d just finished getting dressed and was wiping the shave foam from his face when Mike knocked on his door.

“I hear tell we are coming to within visual range of the bottom. Anything interesting?”

Slim shook his head. “Not much unless you like the sort of gray silt that is also about that same shade as the regolith on the Moon. Or, a clean elephant.”

That made the inventor grin. He well knew that shade of boring gray. Even way out on Neptune, the bottom of the methane ocean had been gray and mostly featureless.

The scene on the downward-facing camera was as brightly lit as he expected it might be, given the depth and thickness of the icy water outside, but other than a few bits of bone—probably long dead whales that had drifted over the edge of the trench and finally ended up down here—there was mostly nothing.

“Looks a lot like we never left old Neptune,” Bud quipped as he stepped inside the big room.

Everyone already there agreed.

After a few minutes Tom snapped out of his reverie and suggested they try to track the *SeaKing* miniature of their own *Yamato*.

“From what my readout is showing me, this is within a quarter mile of where the cable snapped and we lost her. Do we have any good idea of underwater currents?”

Slim replied, “They seem to vary by both depth and position. Right now I’m registering a three knot drift on about a three-two-five course. That is, of course, almost back into the cliff. A thousand feet higher up it was a two-five-three direction and five hundred feet above that, one-seven-nine.”

“Please send me everything you have from the depth our seacopter was when that freak opposite flow hit us and we lost the sub. I’m going to try to figure out a likely direction to go. Always assuming these currents are either steady or... well, steady. If they aren’t we are going to have a lot of trouble finding what we came for.”

It took the inventor nearly three hours to come up with a trio of scenarios for potential locations and he double-checked them

During that time the *Yamato* had come to a halt within one hundred feet of the bottom.

“I’m showing the closest possibility to be four hundred miles away and on a heading of one-nine-seven. Let’s go see what we have, but first I want a position marker dropped right here since that is our reference point.”

A minute later the small and heavy device had been released where it partially buried its lower half in the silt. It was unlikely it would move unless a greater than fifty knot current hit it.

Yamato turned to its new heading and began to move forward. Tom was as anxious as the rest of the control room crew but he asked to hold their speed to about fifteen knots for the first half hour. When that time had passed and nothing different had been encountered he had the speed raised to twenty knots, or about 50% of what they were capable of at this crushing and icy depth.

“We need to keep a good lookout for anything along the way, but I believe it’ll take about two plus hours to get to point alpha. We’ve gotten off schedule a little so if anybody needs a break or wants to get some sleep, let’s call the next shift up early.”

Only Slim, who had been at his station seven hours, raised his hand. “I can come back in a couple hours, skipper, but both my ears and my eyes are feeling a bit strained right now. Sorry.”

Tom looked at the man as if he’d suggested hiring an assassin to get rid of parking enforcement officer—something just about everyone had considered at some point.

“Ridiculous. No apology is needed here. Call you replacement and get out of here! Nothing to be sorry about. Nothing.”

Deke Bodack was up next and had been unable to sleep very well, so he eagerly came forward to spell the tired man.

By the point two hours had passed, most of the rest of the crew in the control room were replaced. Tom headed for a good wipe down and a nap. But, an hour later, he was awakened by Red.

“Got something you need to see, skipper. Not a big surprise other than it is about the only exciting thing down here. Don’t get yourself all ready to take over the chair; we all just think this is something you will want to see.”

Tom pulled on a fresh shirt and followed Red from the room.

He was immediately surprised on walking into the room.

On the big screen up front was a gray and slightly twisted hull of a submarine. It was a nuclear type and most definitely not of U.S. origin and neither was it a Russian submarine.

“Doesn’t look like a missile carrier, Tom,” Bud said from the pilot’s station. “No flat deck or hatches behind the sail area.”

Tom had to agree, but it took another half hour of research before he wanted to smack himself in the forehead. Quickly he looked up details of the lost Chinese submarine.

“Okay. I have it,” he told everyone. That is apparently a Shang-

One class or Type 093 Chinese submarine. That matches the known specs of the sub they lost trying to get down here. Assuming the details are correct, she had the name of *Hull 406*, the second in that series. No note on any non-numerical name. Launched originally in about 2001, mothballed eighteen years later and the retrofitted over a one-year period for this dive.”

He looked back up from his screen at the hulk below them.

“Let’s just hope they took out, or did not put back in, any of the nuclear-tipped torpedoes they supposedly carried a half dozen of. Are we getting any radiation readings?”

“None.”

“Good, but here’s a troubling thing. There were actually a few missile tubes on these— no, wait. There were missiles like our cruise missiles carried in those tubes. I think we need to go out and get a better look at both the damage they sustained, get some pictures to send to both our State Department and to China verifying the sub’s fate, and then see if we can look inside. I really do not cherish that, but if anyone goes out, I go.”

“With your faithful non-Native American companion, *kemosabe!*” Bud declared.

“Okay, with mother Bud along for the ride.”

Bud was smirking knowing they did not have anything in the diving suit range capable of this great depth. “Too bad we actually can’t go out then, isn’t it?”

Tom looked at his friend. “And, why not? After all, I arranged to have two very special deep diving suits built and packed up front.”

The flyer let out a groan and then asked to be let in on the truth about the suits.

“Well, you will fondly recall our old Fat Man suits. Golden eggs capable of at least half this depth? We sold about three hundred of the Mark III version before shutting production down. I sort of had the folks on Fearing build a new and improved and very digital version capable of this great depth and pressure. Same sort of Humpty Dumpty shape and arm and legs, but with a double-thick hull and a few other tricks and upgrades. They are in the nose garage right now just waiting for two intrepid deep sea explorers to go climb in and swim down. Interested?”

Eleven minutes later Bud had been checked out on the controls, which were basically what was there before but all on a single wraparound monitor panel.

Giving a signal to the control room, they waited for the water to

flood into the forward space. Because it as so cold and so thick, this took eight minutes.

When the front doors opened outward Tom was the first to step forward with Bud on his heels. They reached the drop off and stepped forward allowing the slightly negative buoyancy take them deeper until their “feet” touched the bottom.

“I’ve got a foot of sinkage,” Bud reported that matched what Tom was experiencing.

“Give the system one percent of additional buoyancy and see what that does. I think it might be best to keep the feet on the actual ground down here and not rely on floating everywhere. I’m seeing a four knot current right now.”

“Got that as well, And, the suggestion of the smidgen of air in the ballast tank is working. Good call, skipper.”

Their forward cameras and the coated lenses let them see in about a ninety-degree cone ahead, but it was quite dark outside that area.

Together, they arrived at the stricken submarine in four minutes. Tom told Bud to wait while he rose to check out the actual vessel name.

“Yep, flyboy. *Hull 406*, and one of her sail planes is ripped off leaving a hole where it used to be.” Coming back down for a moment.”

As he reset his ballast he heard a cry from Bud.

“Something just hit the left arm of the suit and it’s reporting a jam. What’ll I do, Tom? It kind of spun me around.”

“Do you see anything?”

“No”

“Okay. Assuming you still can float that thing, head back to the *Yamato*. I want to take one look inside and get some pictures and will join you in five minutes. Promise!”

As Bud rose and soon reported he’d reached the nose of their sub and was going inside, Tom moved to his left and got several photos plus some live video of the starboard side of the sub. It was lying slightly on its port side and he could not see any damage over there, but there was significant tearing on this side indicating in had imploded.

Tom looked at the broken hull of the Chinese submarine. It had been imploded just behind the sail and had a torn gash of some ninety feet back from that. The entire inside was exposed to the harsh pressure and icy cold at the bottom of the trench.

He rose and reached the side of what had been the control room. In there, on a brass plaque, was what he believed to be the given submarine name.

Although he could not read the actual Chinese characters, he had suit's computer take a photo and do a translation of its name:

يحتل بليرتك ش ا ف.

It translated into *Enduring Exploration*. The plaque also gave a date of its re-commissioning of 25/12/25... Christmas day.

Too bad it never lived up to that name, he thought to himself as he checked his readouts to see that everything was still fine within the Fat Man suit.

As he was getting ready to tell Zimby he was going to swim closer, he found himself swiftly falling down and face forward. He hit the bottom and his harness held firm keeping him from slamming into the control panel. It still hurt.

Something had hit Tom right in the back of his Fat Man suit and thrown him thirty feet down and hard on his face!

CHAPTER 12 /

“WHAT WAS THAT!?”

LETTING OUT both a cry of anguish and an oath, the inventor lay prone, his forward camera buried in the gray silt of the ocean bottom, both his arms pinned to the sides of the Fat Man.

“What the heck was that?” Zimby’s voice came over his suit’s speaker. “Are you okay, Tom? Answer me!” The last was a shout.

“I—I don’t know,” Tom said as he tried getting the suit’s arm in front of him so he might push himself upright. He was only marginally successful. “Something hit me. Did you spot anything coming in on SONAR?”

“Not a thing, skipper. Are you okay?”

Tom looked at his readouts. Everything seemed to be functioning so he answered, “Looks like it, but I’m face down. Let me try to get upright. If that fails I’ll need someone else out here to help me. Is Bud all right?”

“Yeah. Except his suit has a torn right arm at the elbow joint. He swears he didn’t touch anything. You don’t think whatever hit you, hit him earlier, do you? He says he got spun around.”

Tom thought a moment. “I know I got hit by something, but as I prop myself up a little I can’t see anything on the floor here. Are you certain there was nothing you spotted on the sensors?”

“We’re running a third check, but it doesn’t look like anything was outside with you. Uhh, Slim says he’ll come out in Bud’s suit. It holds the pressure but it is a one-arm suit for the time being.”

“No. Hang on a second. I think I can use the ballast to get me coming up. Unless my arms are both out of commission, I can get inside if you’ll have the front open for me.”

He rocked he shell as much as the tight restraints allowed as he touched the **Ballast Blow** control on the monitor. Highly compressed nitrogen hissed loudly into the two side tanks shoving the almost equally compressed water out. Seconds later he shut that function off as the suit lifted and began tilting back to an upright position.

Tom carefully tested his ability to navigate the Fat Man and found it to be in good working order.

“Okay,” he let those in the submarine above him know, “I’m coming up and will be there in three minutes. Except...” he paused,

“Now I think about it I want to take a little look around to see if I can find what that was. It can’t be coincidence that both Bud’s and my Fat Mans got hit.”

Bud’s nervous voice came over his speaker. “Uhh, Tom? Please keep within full sight of us. You had been in the shadow of the lights and that Chinese sub when you were attacked. I think I was as well which might got to explaining why nothing was detected.”

“Sure, Bud. I’m now out of the shadow and will stay up here fifty feet above the floor and only move around maybe a hundred feet. Keep a good eye on both me and the surroundings, please.”

The inventor looked over his suit’s outside sensors spotting nothing other than the bulk of the sunken submarine near him and the *Yamato* above. Some fifteen miles to the north were the slopes going up from the trench but they were too far away to register.

The suit spun back around to face the *406*. He was now even with the long implosion gash and with his lights pointed into the interior could see no signs of any crew.

He wondered about this until it came to him. If they had sunk much higher up there might be scavengers to take the bodies away before the wreck settled to the ocean floor. But, down here with nothing, not even traces of the sort of bacteria that might eat away at human remains, it was a very large mystery.

“And,” he muttered, “even if they got eaten, where are the clothes? The boots? Hmmm.”

“I’m moving closer to get a little better look inside but I promise to stay out,” he radioed back.

At fifteen feet he got a sudden chill as he sensed something behind him. Not wanting to spin around and cause whatever it might be, and was probably nothing, to react unfavorably he reached out and switched the view to his rear camera.

Something was disappearing in the great distance, or so he believed until it disappeared. It had not been inside to cone of light from the aqualamps so it had been indistinct at best.

“Did you see anything down behind me?” he asked.

“Uhh, no, skipper,” came Slim’s puzzled voice. “What was it?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know, but I felt... well, something behind me and as I switched the camera view it was racing away and was out of my visibility range in about half a second. I’m sending the video to you right now. Enlarge it and tell me if you see anything, please.”

Four minutes later Slim called back. “Okay. While we think we

see something, and I have to tell you at that distance it must be about thirty feet across, it could be some species of ray fish. But, the computers say there is nothing out there. SONAR has no contact and even as large as we can blow that image up, none of us recognize what it might be. Pretty hazy and indistinct. Sorry, Tom. Bud wants to know if you are coming back now.”

“Not right now, I want to get some good video of the interior of that sub, and at a better angle that we can from *Yamato*, so the experts back home, and in China, can see what happened and the severity and violence of it. Tell mother I’ll be back inside of ten minutes.”

As Slim answered, “Okay,” Tom could hear the others in the control room laughing and Bud’s voice starting to protest being called “Mother.”

Next, Tom scooted forward another five feet and began high-resolution recording of what he could see. The implosion had opened the sub quite a way to the back, just not much to the front, but all three of the interior levels were now exposed to some degree.

It appeared the hull tear started about even with the deck of the upper full-length level. In that area the deck plates had been crushed by the forces and now sat curled back and about fifteen feet inside the inner hull.

The level below that showed decks shoved into the sub by about eight or nine feet at the center of the rip, and the lowest level seemed to be scrunched in starting about four feet.

He moved the Fat Man to the left and then the right trying to see inside as much of the crippled submarine as possible. Nowhere did he detect any sign there had been a living soul inside.

I wonder if the Chinese sent this down unmanned and were trying to fool the world with their supposedly leaked story about the missing sub, Tom thought.

With his undersea lights turned up as bright as they could go he got a lot of video of the sub’s interior from various angles and the curious lack of anything other than the dead equipment. After ten minutes he decided he had enough unless he wanted to try going inside, but the suit was just a bit too large for that so he backed up to get an end-to-end shot of the entire submarine.

As Tom rose to return to *Yamato*, he gave one final glance at the upper portion of the submarine. He began to blink and in the fraction of a second before his eyes closed and reopened, his mind registered something. It had looked for all the world like some sort of face. Blue, wrinkly and very large compared to a human face. But as soon as his eyes returned to their open position, it was gone!

“Uh, guys? I’m coming in and I want to tell you something, but I don’t want anyone to check my pulse, feel my forehead or make a surreptitious call to Doc Simpson. Be in the forward lock in two minutes.”

When the water had been pressed out and Tom opened the inner hatch, five faces, including Chow’s, were looking at him with concern.

He climbed from the Fat Man suit and stood on the deck looking back at them.

“Uh, Tom?” It was the cook’s very worried voice. “Are ya sure yer okey doke? It’s just that ya sounded all sort o’ spooky a few minutes ago.” Tom smiled at them all. “Okay, fine. Here’s my wrist, I’ll lean forward so someone can feel my forehead, and if you all just give me a few minutes to get something to drink and use the bathroom, I’ll try to convince you I’m not going crazy?”

None of them came forward but they parted to allow him to go through the rear hatch, through the control room and out that back hatch.

“My guess,” Bud told them, “is that Tom spotted something out there. Something like what broke my suit’s arm, shoved him over and down, and we all kind of saw on the video footage. Let’s give him the benefit of any doubt and listen before we say anything about it being impossible. Okay?”

“Sure.”

“Yeah.”

“Absolutely!”

And, a couple other responses came before they all headed for the control room and tightened down the hatch.

“Okay,” Tom said turning to face his friends a couple minutes later, “I admit this is really strange, but I believe some of the things happening lately bear this idea out. I have to admit I was no longer recording anything as I rose to come back up here, but I swear to you I believe... *believe*, mind you, that I spotted something peeking above the Chinese sub down there at me.” He paused to see how this was being accepted.

“I have to say that I did not catch the Fat Man arm on anything and that we all know it is pretty damaged,” Bud said in support of his friend.

The others were pondering their individual thoughts and said nothing.

Finally, Hank stated, “We all saw something leaving the area of

our underwater lights at top speed, and even if we could not see it clearly enough down here, there *was* something there. Right? I mean, we have the few frames of video of it in case anybody want to see it again.”

The others nodded reluctantly, but nobody asked to review that video.

“What could it be?” Mike asked causing the others to nod in agreement it would have been their first question as well.

Tom had to sit down in the command chair. He’d started to become a little dizzy. “Well, since there have only been two successful expeditions down here we may have to admit we don’t know a lot about what might be living at this depth. Just because no one has seen anything alive does not mean there is nothing alive here. Remember that the Baltimore Aquarium brought up fish from very deep that nobody ever had seen except on unmanned diving footage. Now, they are viewed by a thousand people a day! They were perfectly adapted to their deep living region and would perish if that special tank was not kept at that very high pressure.”

Everyone thought this over for a few minutes before Chow cleared his throat.

“We ain’t gettin’ nowhere all a-standin’ around. Let me go fix some san’wiches an’ hot cocoa and if’n Tom here will okay just sittin’ in the other room, we can talk more about it. For one, I’m gettin tired o’ standing all day an’ I gotta sit.”

So saying, he left the control room.

“Well, if Chow says to head back and sit, we head back and sit, I guess,” Tom told the others.

“I can stay up here and keep a watch out for anything coming closer,” offered Mike.

“I’ll have Red come up and keep watch with you,” Bud said before heading back.

With the six now sitting at one of the tables in the center section, Bud brought up a point. “Has anyone taken a good look at my suit’s arm? There might be some sort of flesh or whatever in that ripped off area we can test.”

“Are you suggesting we might get some DNA?” Slim asked.

“Well, that always assumes whatever hit me and Tom before zooming off or peeking over the sub has any DNA,” the flyer answered. “But, isn’t it possible to at least see if there is anything that is or was living?”

Tom nodded. “Right. I suggest that Hank and Slim attend to

that. I'm feeling a delayed result from being dumped on my face. My sternum and neck are both getting sore, and I think I need to lie down a little."

Tom fell asleep and by the time he awoke, it was almost five hours later. He got up, splashed a little water on his face and ran a damp washcloth over his hair.

He looked at his slightly bloodshot eyes and shook his head, which hurt so he decided to not do it again. He was tired and could not figure out what it might be. Reluctantly, he glanced at his bed before leaving the room and heading downstairs.

Chow, seemingly always in his galley, turned at the sound of footsteps and smiled before looking suddenly alarmed.

"You okay, son?" he asked his young boss. "Ya look all beat up and sorta sickly like a horse that's been rode really hard and put away while it's still hot and wet from sweatin'."

The inventor lowered himself onto one of the nearby chairs.

"I'm feeling pretty ragged, Chow. Not sure what's the matter with me."

The cook came over and sat next to him. "If'n ya want ta know what I think, then I'll tell ya you ought ta call Doc and let him know. He'll likely tell ya ta come home, and ya know we can do that. This trip ta find that little sub ain't worth yer health. What'd yer wife and kids think?"

Tom nodded his head and felt a twinge in his neck.

"You might be right, old-timer. I must have hit the deck harder than I thought. Might have a case of whiplash given the pain in the back of my neck. Let me go tell the crew we may need to head topside. Be right back."

He got up and the room spun around his head.

Before he could hit the floor, Chow had grabbed him and lowered him gently to the deck

When he woke again, Tom was looking into a bright light. He blinked and tried to move his right hand up to shield his eyes, but another hand gently grabbed his and kept it away.

"You have to let me see if you have a concussion, Tom," the voice of Greg Simpson stated.

"Is that you, Doc? How the heck did you get down here?"

“It is me, Tom, and as to the down here thing, you are *up* here, as in Guam, and inside the *Sky Queen*. As soon as Hank got the submarine to within three thousand feet of the surface he radioed for help and your father sent me down here pronto in the *Super Queen*. In the meantime, the *Sky Queen* came out and picked you up, and at my direction you were sedated. I hear you took a pretty good, or bad, tumble down at the bottom of the Mariana Trench.

“Your chest is testament to that and to the effectiveness of the restraints inside your diving suit. You’ve got a bad bruise over the sternum and I want to get the jet’s SimpsonScope under you to check, but my bet is you have a bad crack down the middle that is going to need some heavy bandages and pain killers.”

He made a “Just a minute” sign with his right index finger and disappeared from Tom’s narrowed view. Within seconds he was back and slipping the bottom plate to the special viewing device under Tom’s back.

“Just lay still and give me two minutes to diagnose things. I’m hoping that you don’t have anything internally wrong.”

“Did anyone tell you about my neck?”

Doc looked surprised. “No. Is it bothering you?”

Tom told the medico about how he’d woken up very sore across the lower part of his neck and that he may have passed out from the pain.

Doc finished looking at his chest declaring there was a hairline fracture of the upper seventy percent of the sternum but nothing that was dangerous.

“Let’s see that neck before I give you a pain shot,” he told Tom as he eased the plate out from the inventor’s back and slid it under his neck.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “And, no. It isn’t whiplash. You cracked one of the vertebrae below the connection point with the skull. Third one down. I’m afraid I’m going to have to give you another small scar, skipper. And, get you back home for a recuperation period. Maybe a month.”

Tom sighed. It would be nice to be home with Bash and the kids, but he also dreaded her reaction to him getting injured... yet again!

“Can you do the operation here or do we go home and I get to spend a day or two in the hospital?”

“Good question. Now, if this were maybe ten years ago and I did not have this incredible look-inside-the-inventor tool, it would be a slow, smooth and long trip across the ocean and then into Shopton

General or perhaps down to Boston. But, along with a good military presence, the Air Force base up north has a very nice hospital and a neurologist I happen to know who can do this little fix using nothing more than a sharp scalpel, a little of that bone putty you put in me a couple years ago, a couple stitches, and probably a day of bed rest. Then, we go home and you grouse and plot revenge and your return trip. Hank tells me the *Yamato* will be fine.”

“But, we had a saboteur leave a tracking device on—” and Tom tried to sit up.

Doc pressed down on his chest with only enough force to remind the inventor he was injured. Tom stopped trying. “Nope. The person who did that was caught while you were underwater. I’ll call Hank and let him tell you about that. Hang on...”

A minute later Hank’s large shadow crossed Tom’s face and he leaned over, grinning. “Back from sleepy land? Good. Doc tells me you might like to know about the tracker. Okay, I can see the excitement in your eyes, so here’s the story.”

He told of how, when they had lowered the *Yamato* into the water and went inside to check, a young man had eased himself over to the deck and attached the device with the plastic ties Bud’s guillotine device had severed.

“Luckily, a young Third Class Petty Officer in the Admin building looked out in time to see him jump back to the dock. She didn’t think anything of it at the time, but when the Captain began the investigation, she came forward. The man was a local wearing a stolen uniform and was traced back to the business that does a lot of the washing and dry cleaning for the dress uniforms they rarely wear around here.”

Tom slowly nodded. “So, he’s in custody?”

Hank’s look said it was more serious than that.

“Do I want to hear about it?”

“No. Just understand it happened, will never happen again, and concentrate of getting yourself better. And, the Navy is looking for a new dry cleaners.”

An hour later Tom had been taken by military ambulance to the northern end of the island and was in a small private room in the base’s hospital. He could hear voices coming from down the hall and recognized one of them.

“I’m telling you, Greg, had I known you had that giant jet here I’d have suggested flying Mr. Swift up and not subjecting him to the horrible roads we have on Guam. Oh, I see our patient is awake.”

The two doctors were standing at Tom's open door.

"I slept most of the way," Tom told them as they came in to give him a short exam before the operation.

Once again, the SimpsonScope was used and the other doctor, a Commander Paul Samuelson, said it looked to be cut and dried.

"We will go in just at the hairline, snake a couple small instruments down two inches and get you repaired in about an hour. If you have any snapshots you need developing we can have those ready once you wake up." He grinned and so did Tom.

"So, the scar is going to be kind of hidden?"

"If you let your hair grow about a half inch nobody other than someone you want to play with your hair will ever see it!"

That would please Bashalli as she had been trying to get the inventor to grow his hair a little longer for several years.

Tom was sitting up in his bed when Bud, Hank and Zimby dropped in six hours later.

"How ya doing, skipper," the big engineer asked.

"I feel much better, but I'm tired and hungry. They don't let you eat anything before an operation, and they are darned stingy with the food for the first twelve hours afterward. But, Doc tells me he and the Commander who did the operation will sneak something in to me in about a half hour. I hear that steak is a specialty in the military. The Commander tells me it is great, but Doc tells me it is World War One surplus meat so not to be surprised if it is less that delectable."

His visitors remained until the food tray had been delivered by a nurse who was scowling.

"I'm not at all sure why I was *ordered* to bring this to you, whoever you are. All I know is you aren't Air Force, not Navy and you don't look like a Marine. But, orders are orders. Press your call button when you're finished."

As she tried to get around Hank and Bud who now blocked the door, the flyer leaned in and whispered something to her that made her eyes flash wide and she left after muttering, "Sorry, sir!"

"What the heck did you say?" Tom asked.

"I just told her you are Atlantic Fleet Admiral Hopkins' son and that you only go by an alternate name so nobody gives you special treatment, and that she ought to not tell anyone who you really are."

In spite of how tired, hungry and, now, bored Tom was, he

grinned.

CHAPTER 13 /

“WHEN DO WE GO BACK?”

THE *Sky Queen* touched down at Enterprises two days later. Tom had spent the trip reclining in the lounge because Doc had officially de-certified him for flying duties until he'd had at least a week of rest.

To Tom that meant he *could* go into work as long as he sat; to Doc and Bashalli it meant he would stay at home and enjoy his family and get actual rest.

It wasn't a great situation, but his own father called on his TeleVoc pin to say that it might still be used for communication, but he was going to be intercepted at either of the gates at Enterprises—or the main gate at the Construction Company or the MotorCar Company—and told he could not come in until cleared by Doc and his father.

“Understand, Son, this might have been a crippling accident for you and you can't take chances. Besides, it won't be too long before we all want to get rid of you and send you back to Guam! Anyway, you are no spring chicken any longer and those old bones of yours are getting a little less resilient. My guess is that with each minor injury, you are discovering you can't jump right back up and *not* hurt for a few days. Take the time to be with your wife and kids gracefully, is my advice.”

“Gee, thanks, Dad,” he responded morosely but knew his father was smiling and would let Tom in if it were for an important reason.

“So, you rest, get plenty of hugs and kisses from your pretty wife, and also get Bart—and you both—ready for his almost inevitable shove up the education ladder at the end of this school year and into third grade or the fourth next year instead of just the second grade. That child reminds me so much of you when you were young that it is kind of scary. Love you, Son.”

“I love you, too, Dad.”

The first two days of Tom's “week in exile,” as he thought of it, passed slowly, at home, other than the time he spent in his small office trying to design things that might come in handy when they all went back to the Mariana Trench.

Things such as an enhanced video system capable of faster speeds than the 120-frames per second system they had at present.

Plus, he wanted more light going out farther so he worked on a way to enhance the underwater aqualamps. It entailed not much more than adding a special high-powered capacitor he'd designed years earlier for his Plasma Headlights.

With that added to the basic emitter—or actually now there would be a trio of them in the single “bulb”—the computer told him it would likely double the range at the deep depth and nearly triple it at down to five thousand feet of water. After that the viscosity of the water made it difficult for the light frequency waves to travel at the speed of light.

As for the camera, he doubled the speed and added notes to develop a new tuning program to sharpen what was brought in.

By the beginning of day three, he was going a little stir crazy and called his father to ask for permission to come in.

“Just for an hour or two to do some things on the big computer I can't do from home,” he promised.

Permission, reluctantly given, made the younger Swift very happy.

“Tom,” Trent began excitedly as the young inventor passed his desk a little later that morning, “you will never guess who we are going to host this afternoon.” He looked at Tom hopefully.

Tom smiled. “If I am never going to guess, I suppose you ought to tell me before you burst with excitement. Is it the King of England? The Lord High Mayor of Singapore? Anybody I've heard of?”

Slightly embarrassed by his almost outburst, the secretary said, “No. But, it is the Vice President. His people called twenty minutes ago to say he was flying out of Washington at noon and would land here about one-fifty. They also said he has stated the desire to remain overnight and to tour all our facilities up here. And,” he said looking like he was foreseeing a question, “I did call Harlan Ames' office and they verified that it was a legitimate call. Even Senator Quintana verified it you your father.”

Tom, finally, looked a little excited by the prospect of the visit. After the debacle of the previous two Vice Presidents of the United States, and both of their disdains for technology in general and the Swifts—for no apparent reason—in particular, when the outgoing President had stated he believed both his successor and the new VP were very good men who understood technology, it had been well received by both Tom and Damon.

“Great. Thanks for the heads up. I'll assume dad is getting ready?”

“Yes. He is in there trying to straighten the various models on the shelves. Go and help him, or stop him from aimlessly puttering, and suggest they look just fine. I believe he is a little nervous.”

When he walked into the office, Tom laughed. “Trying to clean up the room before mom gets home?” he asked.

Damon turned to face his son with a guilty grin and a shrug. “Maybe.”

Together they checked the office and at least Tom found nothing out of place nor “dusty or all fingerprinted” as his father described things.

Two hours later they headed in Damon’s sedan for the civilian terminal where the VP’s jet was due to pull up to in ten minutes.

Both their TeleVocs kept them advised of status and seven minutes later they could see the modernized 757-style aircraft approaching.

When it seemed to be a minute from touchdown, all the lights in the terminal building suddenly went dark as did the visible landing lights outside. The approaching jet veered to the left and headed higher as if it was performing a go-around.

Emergency power to the terminal building came back on within half a minute and both men watched as the jet made a wide circle around the area. As it neared the southern point, all electricity seemed to come back on line and a company-wide announcement came over the outdoor PA system.

“Power has been restored. If you have any injuries to report, please do so over TeleVocs asking for ‘Emergency Services.’ Any damages to be reported to Facilities.”

It repeated once more before Damon received a TeleVoc’d message.

“The Vice President’s jet will touch down in ninety seconds.”

When the man came down the stairs, led by six Secret Service agent with drawn weapons, Damon stepped forward only to be waved back by the lead agent.

“Oh, for goodness sake, Agent Todd. Stop this tomfoolery and let me go say hello to the Swifts!”

It was not a request; it was an order from the second-highest serving man in the nation.

He pushed past the agents and came over to Damon and Tom.

“Vice President Preston. What a pleasure to see you again, and sorry for the power outage. This area has been suffering a lot of

them this past year.”

“Hello, Damon and hello to you, Tom. It is a pleasure to meet the younger inventor at last.” He strongly shook both their hands before scowling. “I can’t tell you how many kittens our pilots and these agents,” he hooked a thumb over his shoulder at the men behind him who were only now holstering their weapons, “had when we got so close the runway and all the power went out down here. I do believe thoughts of Armageddon and some terrible terrorist attack must have surged through the lot of them. Well, so you’ve been having power outages? Do you know why, and let’s get into your car and to your office if we may.”

Damon led the way and the three were soon in the sedan with Tom in the back quickly joined by one of the agents, Agent Todd. Three had tried to climb in with the first one telling him to get out, but the V.P. told the agent to, “Stuff that idea. He is more important that any of you are around this facility. I’m certain Mr. Swift is having a van sent for you all, but why don’t you go have a nice time inside that terminal building. Perhaps one of you can identify that beautiful golden satellite I see hanging inside.”

Agent Todd looked like he was going to say something, but stopped.

Tom grinned at the man whispering, “Sorry, but I’m the owner’s son. We’ll get your other men over to the Admin building in a little bit.”

Todd grumbled but said nothing.

Once in the office, Vice President Preston walked around admiring the models and miniatures of many of Tom and Damon’s major inventions.

“If you will pardon the mild oath, but a damned great collection of impressive things on those shelves. I’ve read up on many of them over the years, even before I got this shiny new position. As Governor of Washington State I had to be up on all the technological comings and going. So,” and he headed for the conference area, “tell me about these power outages.”

Damon began and Tom helped fill in a lot of information, including the local government and even the New York State government refusing to allow the Swifts to build a non-interruptible power station in the area.

“Nuclear?”

“Yes.”

“But, don’t you have something like that inside your company walls?”

Both Swifts shook their heads.

“We’ve tried to get permissions, but short of building one illegally, we’ve been stymied, I’m afraid,” Tom stated.

V. P. Preston snorted and stood up. “Well, I’m going to go back tomorrow and kick some political butt and get you that permission. Why... the very idea that a bunch of chowder-headed low-life politicians nearly cost me my life in a fiery crash all because they won’t okay a better electricity infrastructure is... *unforgivable!*” He grinned and sat back down. “At least, that’s the basic premise of my angry speech to the House tomorrow afternoon.”

After Trent brought in a cup of green tea for the politician, and he had sipped it while they continued to talk, the three men rose and began the tour.

A complete drive around of Enterprises, with stops in two of the construction buildings and a visit up to the Control Tower, was followed by heading through the tunnel to the MotorCar Company. The sight of the compact production lines turning out a great number of cars impressed the Vice president. The final stop was the original Construction Company.

By the time they sat down in the Executive dining room and Chow had served them plates of roasted lamb chops—double thick cuts with garlic and mint encrusting them—the man from DC was nearly delirious with delight at what he’d been shown.

As he contemplated which of the meaty morels he’d attack first, he looked across the table at the Swifts.

“You do know I am known for avoiding platitudes, correct?”

They nodded.

“Well, I must tell you what you probably know, but bear with me. In one tiny spot in this very broad and tall nation, you have the very best of the very best our homegrown industry has to offer. But, you have something more. Something much greater. Know what that is?” he asked as he sank his teeth into the chop he held in his fingers.

Tom ventured an answer. “Well, we have sort of a different way to do things. Ways to match the best people with the tasks. And ways to keep costs down. Like that, sir?”

Swallowing, the V.P. nodded, but said, “It’s a lot more than that. Nowhere we went today seemed to have been primed to be on their very best behavior. The people I saw and met were all just getting on with their jobs and seem to love it. There was nothing phony put on for the benefit of the big wig. Honest work from honest people who honestly appear to be doing what they want to do and love to

do.”

After taking another bite, he added, “Hell—heck, even my Secret Service agents enjoyed what we all saw! However, here is one huge thing setting Swift Enterprises *et al* apart. You do not hire and fire at the whim of the next or last contract. That drives me crazy about several industries out where I come from, and all over for that matter.”

They discussed a few ideas the politician had for helping, and how the Swifts might assist in a steering committee of politicians like the Swift's favorite Senator, Peter Quintana.

“Not asking for any answer now, or even a big commitment, just a brain picking or two, if you will,” he stated with a smile.

Tom was tired so he said his good night before Chow brought out dessert and headed for home. Protocols for the safety of the VP were not as strict as with the President, and so when the offer of two of the guest houses up the hill—and once the Secret Service had been informed about the all-hours Marine guards—they were thrilled, so Damon ended the evening by driving their guest and two of his agents up in his own sedan while a Swift van brought the others and their small luggage.

The following morning at a brief breakfast before he needed to depart, Vice President Preston reiterated that he was going to make a lot of noise over the electricity situation.

“For here, obviously, Tom and Damon, but also for a lot of other smaller towns and cities. You all deserve to have a good, reliable and clean source of power. And,” he began as he was turning toward his jet, but turned back to face them, “I spent an hour last night looking up the safety records of your Citadel and all the nuclear power stations you’ve built and your power pod devices and find you have an exemplary and completely safe record. By gosh, that is going to count for something if I have anything to say about it.

“And, it so happens that I do as one of my primary charters of this office I hold is to bring the infrastructure of this nation up to world class standards!”

He warmly shook their hands and departed, his official jet racing down on of the nearby runways three minutes after it began to taxi.

“Well, that was both an honor and a surprise,” Damon stated.

“Yep. He’s such a nice change from the past two men in that position, and I really hope his statement to get this area consistent power comes true.”

“Now, you head back home and get on with your recovery. That is an order from the head of the company.”

Tom gave a mock salute and grinned. "Message received, sir."

* * * * *

Six days went past, during which Tom spent one full day in bed; the official visit had overtaxed him and set his recuperation back slightly. But, Doc declared him to be nearly mended before a week had passed after the V.P.'s visit.

"So, when are we going back down?" Bud asked as he sat on his favorite stool in the large lab in the Administration building.

"Doc says he'll clear me in five or six days and then only as long as I agree to not go outside the ship for the first ten days. Of course, I'm hoping we are not down there for that long, so I am having Zimby, Hank and even Art Wiltessa checked out on the new Fat Man controls. Deke wants to try his hand, but he is about an inch too tall for comfort."

Bud grinned. "At least I won't have to shoulder all the diving responsibility by myself! Whenever you are ready to go, I'll be there."

Tom nodded and smiled. He was just as anxious to go, but he still had a few things that needed doing. Chief among them were creating five replacement signal/radio buoys to be sent to the surface either tethered for real-time communications, or unattached in case of an accident or delay in what he kept telling both Bashalli and his father would be a *ten-day mission*. In total.

"I will be one day going out getting a couple new things installed and one day coming back and then eight days underwater at the very most. If we find the little submarine sooner I do not intend to hang around. We already found that Chinese submarine and other than trying to park the *Yamato* nose-to-side and getting a little more detailed video, we'll be coming up once *SeaKing* is inside and tied down."

When he said this to his wife that evening, she smiled, nodded and placed her right hand on his chest.

"Okay. I will give you up to three weeks to come home, Tom. I do know you and I know a week to you goes past without so much as a blink of your beautiful blue eyes. But, I want those eyes—and the rest of you—home within twenty-one days, or I want to come down to that Guam island and drag you back here. Understood?"

She was still smiling but Tom realized she was completely serious about this trip.

She had not taken to the idea he had cracked a vertebrae at all well and nearly demanded he never go that deep under the ocean again. But, she did not place that demand and knew it would not be

a wise declaration on her part.

Bashalli did call her father-in-law and ask him just how safe Tom and the rest of the crew would be.

Damon had lightly chuckled and answered he as honestly as he could. “Bashi? How safe is Tom any time? How safe when he is walking down the street and any cars with inattentive drivers are heading his way? How safe is he, or Bud or anybody, in the air when there are hundreds... thousands of things that might go wrong, *but do not?* Tom is as safe as you or I am, other than the occasional bad person trying to harm him. And, so far—fingers crossed—he’s managed to avoid anything that might take him from us.

“Tom will get over this spirit of adventure *some* day. I finally did... well almost did. You just need to remind yourself that you still love him and will be there for him whether he is in his chair in your living room, in your arms in your bedroom, or out in space.”

She’d blushed to herself at the mention of any of their intimate life but knew Damon was speaking from his heart and to hers.

“I know, father Swift, and I do love him so much, but I have known my husband, your son, for more than a decade. I loved him for who he was and now love him even more for who he is. So, I will still remind him he needs to shorten these... umm, trips but I will no longer nag him or say anything to upset him. I swear!”

“My wonderful daughter-in-law... I love you and want you to know I am here for you any time, day or night. You are as important to me as my own daughter!”

Bashalli could barely choke out a thank you and say goodbye before the emotions she was feeling made her begin sobbing.

Tom, just coming out of his home office, rushed to her side. “What, Bash? What’s wrong?” He was terrified she was having some dire health issue or that one of her parents had just died.

“I am just so happy, Tom,” she got out before flinging herself into his arms.

It was not until about a half hour later she collected herself, went upstairs after promising him it was happy crying, and washed her face that she told him about the phone call.

Once she explained the nearly total joy she had experienced at Damon’s words, Tom smiled, kissed her gently and nodded.

“Yeah. Dad and mom both think of you as one of their own, you know. I love you; they love you; Sandy and Bud love you and that makes you about the most loved woman in Shopton. And, next time you are going to fall to the floor sobbing, let a fellow know it is okay

to just let you cry it out. I nearly called for an ambulance you couldn't get anything other than tears out."

Tom remained close to her the rest of that day and most of the next, but begged to be allowed to go to work for a half day on his eighth day of recovery.

"The neck is feeling fine and I haven't had a pain pill since day two, Doc," he explained to the medico when his father told him to go to the Dispensary first and his desk later.

"Okay, then hop, gently, onto the exam table and let me get the 'scope under the neck. That'll tell me more than you will." He grinned but was serious about both the exam and the slight accusation. In the past Tom had shrugged off pain just so he could do whatever work he considered to be more important.

But, this time he was right. The crack was healing very well and the bone cement used was starting to show signs of being infiltrated by real bone cells.

"All right, skipper. You are hereby cleared for work and for your forthcoming flight to the South Pacific and trip under the sea. I wish I could come along, but I have to cover for Debbie who is just heading back to finish her second year in med school. That girl, by the way, is amazing and I'll bet you a doughnut to a dollar she finishes up at the top of her class and four months early!"

The *Sky Queen* was outfitted with everything needed to upgrade the submarine once they got back to the island.

A team of four technicians necessary for the quick work came along; they would be returning to Enterprises the day after *Yamato* slipped beneath the waves, and the giant jet would make the best possible speed to get them home and come back.

When they took off it was ten minutes late... after both Bashalli and Sandy refused to let go of their husbands.

Even Zimby's new girlfriend was hesitant to release him.

But, take off they did and flew to the west arriving in Guam less than eleven hours later.

"Where the heck is *Yamato*?" Tom nearly shrieked as they flew over the Navy base.

Where the submarine was supposed to be tied up, there was nothing visible other than the water next to the dock!

CHAPTER 14 /

PLANNING ON SUCCESS; ACCEPTING WHAT MIGHT BE

TOM WAS about to yell when the radio came to life.

“Swift jet? This is Captain Goodwell. Just wanted to let you know before any small cows are had we had your submarine moved over to sit in the shadow of our brand new tender.”

The inventor keyed his microphone. “That is one huge relief and, yes, cows or kittens were about to be had over here. Uhhh, may I ask what prompted the move, sir?”

“Yes, and hello, Tom. We had a small issue with snoops that included several flybys of jets coming from the direction of the Philippines along with at least five of the crew from those Chinese freighters who temporarily escaped and were spotted heading for the front gate. The sub part of the base has a different gate. So, I had a tug come grab your *Yamato* pronto and hustle her over to the tender. Sorry for the near scare. If you like, I can have her pulled back over here?”

With a small chuckle, Tom answered, “No. As long as our flying car isn’t too much for base security there to handle, we’ll fly right to the parking lot over by the sub. Ummm, do we need a code word or a special pass?”

“Not after I call them. As for landing spots, there is plenty of room between the large building there and *Dixie*, so I’ll arrange for you to set down there. That ought to shock the tube sailors!”

Hank laughed. He knew the surface sailors had several unflattering terms for submariners, and vice versa.

“Oh, and Tom? Your sub is actually between *Dixie* and the dock. I thought that would provide a good deal of shadows and protection from anything trying to sneak into our harbor. Drop by the offices if you get a chance before heading out. If you can’t, I hope you and your entire crew will be my guests for a dinner when you all get back.”

Tom thanked the commander of the base and said they were in a little hurry so they would land at the old airstrip and fly over shortly. The intent was to take off within minutes.

“Hmmm. Well, I’ll arrange for the tugs to go over and ease the big ship away so you can get out. Might take an hour or two. Sorry for the delay.”

“Not at all, sir. In fact, I was just reminded via a small whisper

that we have a few hours of work to accomplish, so let's say we head out about eight tomorrow morning. Is that okay."

The Navy man agreed it would be better but still offered to get them free as soon as possible.

When the atomic car was pulled from the hangar of the Flying Lab, Tom had as much of the new equipment loaded in it and still leave room for one driver and one passenger. Within fifteen minutes Bud, Zimby and their first of what would be three loads of equipment and another of personnel took off.

When Bud came back forty minutes later he told Tom the sailors from the new Navy tender ship had all wanted to lend a hand in order to get a little look inside.

"I told them to get their A/V guy over with a camera and I'd give the crew a brief tour. He turned out to be a she, and a really good looker to boot. I hope Sandy never sees that video because I believe I might have flirted with her just a little. And, don't worry," he hastened to add seeing a small look of alarm on his friend's face, "she promised a single ship-wide showing and then the video will be deleted. So, no Internet appearances."

Tom got out on the fifth trip over; he stopped in his tracks looking in awe at the ultra-modern Navy ship before him. It was almost as if this new addition to the line of USS *Dixie* ships had been specially designed to compliment the futuristic look of Tom's *Yamato II*. Unlike earlier tender ships, this *Dixie* was built lower to the water by about a dozen feet at the main deck. As she was intended to only be at sea when moving between home ports, this was not an issue.

It did make the overall height of the ship perhaps fifteen feet shorter and that, along with the more rounded edges on the sides, the nose and the tail, gave her a sleek appearance.

A man in crisp tan working uniform with the silver oak leaf of a Commander came down the long gangplank that passed directly over *Yamato*.

With his right hand extended he introduced himself as Commander Richard Richards.

"Folks call me D.R. or Double R," he explained with a smile.

Tom shook the offered hand and commented on the appearance of the *Dixie*.

"She's a very modern ship, sir. I hope to have an opportunity to get a brief tour of her."

"Then, I'll trade you; one of yours for one of mine. And, I'll toss

in dinner tonight in the officers Wardroom.” He raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll need to see how quickly my crew and I can get the several equipment pieces onboard and installed, but I’d like that. Thanks.”

The officer held up his right hand, waved it at someone behind him and held up all five fingers.

“I’ll have a five man work detail down here in sixty seconds. In looking over your stack of things, I believe we can get that inside and to whatever part of the boat they go in under ten minutes. If, that is, it is okay my men come aboard.”

“Oh, absolutely. I will need to have my people point out the best and safest carrying spots for a couple but for the most part they are pretty simple, just slightly heavy and a pair of them have to be angled just so to get inside and then again into the aft of the ship—err, boat—for installation. If you might spare a couple of your Electronics Technicians to assist in connecting things up I believe we can have the old stuff ready to come off within an hour. I’d appreciate the help a second time getting the older pieces off.”

It was arranged and Tom stood back with the Commander and watched as the Navy personnel swarmed out and over to the dock and then reset their gangway so they could take things over to *Yamato*.

Within a few minutes of disappearing inside, several of the Navy men, and one young woman, reappeared at the airlock outer hatch.

When the last of the goods had been transferred, Tom stepped over on the shortened gangway and entered the ship. Before he disappeared he turned and made a “Come on” motion to the officer.

“Oh, I get to come over, too? I didn’t lift a finger other than to press our announcing circuits and say about twenty words.” As he stepped over and entered the airlock, he smiled at Tom. “Actually, I had one of my Petty Officers key the 1-MC system for me. Do I still get to come aboard?”

“Certainly! Let’s head up to the nose first and we can tour all the way to the back.”

The stark interior of the nose section made the officer curious.

“Uhhh... that control room we stepped through is something out of this world, but this looks like a typical empty space on one of our surface ships.”

Tom explained about it having been the main storage area for the samples from Neptune and how the box affair in the front was their large water lock and hopefully would come back up filled with the *SeaKing*.

The control room was not turned on yet, so Tom briefly energized each area and explained the various stations before they headed back to the center section and both the downstairs and the upstairs.

The Commander had to stop and catch his breath when they finally reached the rear, reactor, section.

“I was the Nuclear Propulsion Officer on my first three ships and two subs. That is really your reactor?” he asked pointing at the seven-foot-wide ball sitting on some sort of very low pedestal.

Tom nodded and grinned. “It is based on the reactors my father designed and built for our nuclear research center in New Mexico,” he said.

“And, that has sufficient shielding?”

“It does, and then some. Possibly an overkill of sixty percent but we wanted to be absolutely certain.”

He described how the tremendous heat from the reactor was circulated out to super-heat a glycol and ethanol solution that not only kept the reactor at a safer, lower temperature, it also created the Jetmarine drive effect.

Seeing the Commander’s small grin, Tom had to ask, “And, were you on one of the submarines that got outfitted with the Navy’s version of my drive?”

Commander Richards made a “Shhhhh” motion with his right index finger against his lips, but he nodded knowingly.

A few seconds later Hank came into the space with three sailors each sporting a nuclear rating patch on their left upper arms.

“Just showing these nuke rates what *we* have so they can see what we build is superior to anything mass produced for the fleet. Umm, with apologies to the Commander here. Of course,” he said with a grin, “we can’t be allowed to see what they have because... well, because they might think we will laugh, or something.”

“Now Hank. Let’s not try to shame them for something beyond their ability to show us.”

The Commander nodded. “Right. Besides which we do not currently have a sub on our port side. And, we are not a nuke ship; we are jet turbine powered. Just you folks over here to starboard. Not that we could give you this detailed of a tour...” and he left the rest unspoken.

After he and his small team left the submarine, Tom, Hank and Bud set to installing the new camera system while Zimby, Red and one of their propulsion techs swapped out one of the Jetmarine

drive heat exchangers. The original one, and Tom realized it was the first of the three that had frozen up and failed on Neptune, had an intermittent fault that meant it did not heat the incoming water enough to provide for full thrust. Perhaps eighty-eight percent, but Tom wanted everything working at optimal efficiency.

Tom took up the *Dixie's* CO's offer to have dinner in the Wardroom that evening. The *Yamato* would not put out to sea until the following morning anyway, so with all the work finished, and the tech crew winging their way back home, he felt it would be a good thing for the crew to relax.

Chow had wandered up to the ship and had a chat with the Chief Steward, the man in charge of cooking for the nine officers of the ship. Nobody other than those two knew what they spoke of, but Chow had a sort of smug, knowing look when they all changed and trooped across their short gangplank and up the stairs and gangplank of the tender.

All other officers besides the Captain and his Executive Officer and the ship's Operations officer ate earlier so there would be ample room at the table for Tom and crew.

With one exception.

"Wahl, it looks kinda like yer one place settin' short, so I'll just mosey into the kitchen up here an' the one fer the crew below and eat with the crew o' this here ship," Chow proclaimed as he headed for the door into the passageway.

"He needn't have done that," the Captain stated. "We could have our extra chair brought out for him. Can you call him back?"

Tom nodded before he shook his head. "Chow is about the most loyal man I know, and with the sort of people these men are, that's saying a lot, but he doesn't seem to feel comfortable in more formal situations or where discussions of our technology are found. In fact, I believe he prefers spending his time with the regulars, or in this case with your crew."

The inventor wondered what the chef had in mind but that was partially answered when he and the Chief Steward came back in eight minutes later with the salad course for their meal.

It was something Tom loved... a fresh mixed greens salad with tomatoes and cucumbers with beautifully seared scallops all around it and a balsamic dressing lightly applied.

The Commander and his other officers were surprised, nicely so, by this, but were nearly bowled over by the dinner of thinly sliced pieces of steak with butter roasted potatoes and roasted Brussels sprouts with bacon pieces and minced onion and garlic.

“Is this how you eat on your sub?” the bemused X.O. asked.

“Not often, but back home Chow is our Executive Chef and he certainly keeps us well fed.”

“Well, I haven’t had a better meal since I was in Chicago at a top-rated steak house,” the Operations Officer declared.

The others agreed.

It wasn’t until a muffled cheering could be heard coming from at least one deck below them that the ship’s Captain got up and went to the door.

“What’s going on?” he inquired of a young female sailor who was rushing past.

“I-uhh think that’s because the man they brought up here, I mean the chef, of course, sir. But he’s made the most remarkable meal I’ve had since I was about ten. It isn’t like regular Navy chow. Golly!” and she rushed away only to return a few seconds later to beg his pardon for unintended disrespect.

When he finally sat back down he looked at Tom.

“Now, if your chef has ruined Navy food for my crew, I’ll... well, I’ll... awww, heck. I will have to thank him and ask for his recipes.”

Everyone in the room laughed.

When they finally left the ship and headed into the sub, Chow told his young boss he’d given the Chief Steward and the First Class Petty Officer responsible for all the non officer foods copies of his latest two cookbooks.

“Autographed like an’ all!” he boasted.

Everyone was up in the morning about six. This meant they all could feel the rocking of the sub as something topside was happening that made a series of waves.

Tom had the forward monitor energized and the topside camera array turned on.

“Oh,” he said with a smile. “That’s just the *Dixie* being pulled away so we can move out. I guess we ought to not keep them waiting too long. All crew,” he said picking up his headset and keying the microphone, “prepare to leave port in fifteen minutes. I just need to check to see we have people on the docks to untie us.”

As he headed back and upstairs to the one-man top hatch, his head popped out in time to see four sailors standing ready.

“Anytime you are ready to go, Captain,” the man who seemed to be in charge called over. “We’ve just slacked the lines off from the *Dixie*, sir.”

“Great.” Tom gave him the basic procedure for releasing the aft line first and then the forward one before standing back allowing the cables to be drawn into the submarine.

“With my compliments to you men and to the Captain, if you can give me two minutes to get back inside you can start to cast us off.”

The *Yamato* had spent most of the journey south to the drop off at about fifty feet underwater, but Tom wanted to contact Shopton and his father before they headed down. He conferred with his crew on whether to head to the surface, or to make the call by raising one of the communication buoys.

“My suggestion,” Red counseled, “is to remain down here and send that small buoy up. Far less chance of anybody on a satellite or a high-altitude flying vehicle of seeing us and knowing about where we are going to head down. Uhhh, is there any way to disguise the buoy in case someone is looking for something that small—” but he tailed off with a shake of his head. “What the heck am I saying, skipper? The water appears deep blue or gray from altitude and the buoy is dark gray. Forget I said anything.”

With a grin, Tom replied, “No, Red. Any suggestions you might have or comments are welcome.”

The buoy was readied, run through a test suite of applications, and then sent to the surface trailing its lead—a woven sheath of high strength Durastress around the trio of wires necessary to operate it—behind.

Tom had decided to use the PER for all his contacts, and knew it was about the most secure form of communication out there. It might not be strictly necessary but it had the advantage of working quite well at least in less than five thousand feet of ocean. He was connected with Damon in the big office.

After telling the older Swift of the intent to submerge and travel back down to the bottom of the trench as soon as the buoy had been retrieved, his father said he had something important to tell him.

“Son? I’m sure you remember Wes Norris at the FBI. Well, he just called me with some disturbing news. As we both know, the old Outpost is now mostly a civilian place these days. We get right of visitation with only a few hours of notice.”

Slowly, Tom responded with, “Right...”

“Well, I’ll get to the point. He says one of the... let’s call him a scientist for now... visiting was spotted and overheard by the station assistant manger who called down to report him. He and one of the others up there were overheard discussing your find deep in the

Mariana Trench. Something along the lines of, 'If I can get one or two of those to show around the world, I'll make millions!' That is what she reported."

The younger Swift thought a moment. "So, what do we know about this so-called scientist?"

"A man with a rather bad reputation. Several countries refuse to allow him inside their national borders. He has been seen capturing rare and unique species before and when chased he has no problems with dumping his load, often to the death of those poor creatures." He paused a second. "I'd hate to think he might capture one of your mysterious aquatic creatures."

"Me too. The question is, how the heck did he hear about them? We communicate on the PER system."

Tom could not see his father who was shaking his head with a rueful look on his face but could imagine it. "The unfortunate thing is that it is transmitted up to our own satellites and then to the Outpost. From there it is sent down or up. Norris believes this man, Norkis, is Lithuanian by birth and then made his riches, some seven billion US dollars equivalent, in arms dealing out of South Africa. One of the 'I serve both sides with equal ill intent' sorts. Now he evidently indulges himself by taking trips up to our old Outpost, so-called safaris in Africa, India and even unauthorized trips into remote parts of western China on his attempts to gather animals to show people and make money."

Tom sighed. He hated people like this Norkis.

"And, he interpreted the sketchy info I sent to mean there are some sea creatures to be had? Is there anything we can do? Anything I can do?"

"Just be prepared to have his finding some submarine and trying to get down to the bottom of the Trench. My guess is he has such an overriding urge to get down there he will forget all the dangers, Just, be safe, Son."

After asking his father to hold for a moment, Tom made a ship-wide announcement about the potential for them having a visitor trying to spot something they had barely spotted themselves on the previous, abbreviated trip.

"Do you really think there are things... creatures down there, skipper?" Red asked via intercom from drive room. "That video you got barely shows anything solid and identifiable. And how the heck does this crackpot think he's going to find anything we can't?" Tom relayed this to his father.

"I don't know, Son, but it might be up to whether he can find a

submarine, probably a nuclear powered one he can buy or steal, and *that* may not be totally beyond him, then find out exactly where you have been when you all spotted these creatures. Personally, I'd like to have him stopped before he can try to get down there, but until he does something illegal, he cannot be arrested."

Tom told his father he didn't want to believe the worst, but he had to believe that success for his opponent was just as possible as it is for him. But, he stopped and pondered that. *Did* he want to find and... "study them." Or, did he want to let them be and just come back with a little video?

No, he thought. *Bringing back video of these creatures, if they were actually denizens of this deep realm, would spark interest or greed in others.*

"It's a good thing I never transmitted the video to you. Luckily it remains here on the *Yamato* and not out there in the world of people like this Norkis!"

Damon whole-heartedly agreed. "Not until you come home will I ask to see those frames. So, tell me what you hope to accomplish other than bringing home your little sub."

"All I can think I want I plan to have a successful trip down, a short search, and a smooth recovery. What I will have to accept is... well, not coming home with the *SeaKing*."

The radio buoy was drawn down and into its storage bay and the ship got ready for its dive into the Mariana Trench.

Five minutes later the ballast was blown, enough water taken in to cause them to head downward, and *Yamato II* began to drop slowly into the darkness below.

It was ten hours later as they approached the midway point of the bottom when Tom got ready to head back for a lengthy rest break. He paused and looked to Mike who was manning the sensors panel.

"Do we have a good position on that marker buoy we left on the bottom?"

Mike tapped a few places on his panel and then slowly turned around.

"Ummm, not sure how to say this, skipper, but the marker down there is... gone!"

CHAPTER 15 /

WE ARE HERE (AGAIN) TRENCH

AS *Yamato* plunged deeper and deeper, the light around them had dimmed until Tom ordered the aqualamps turned on. Suddenly, it was nearly as bright as day in front of the sub.

Above, and down to a couple thousand feet in depth, there had been plenty of life to be found all over the nearby slope, just not much natural light to illuminate it. Tom and a few of the crew recognized several of the fish and plants as having been part of the deep sea exhibit in Baltimore.

Now, with Tom resting, Hank had taken the command seat.

“Isn’t it amazing how Mother Nature decided that since there is little light down deep to show anything off, there is very little color to anything other than an occasional sort of deep gray green?” Hank mused standing behind and leaning on the command chair he was currently “occupying.” He was looking at the monitor at the front of the control room showing the downward slope heading into the Mariana Trench.

Bud, turning in his seat at the controls, smiled. “This was one of the things that was so stark and so, well, boring about the couple of times the skipper and I have used the hydrolung suits to scoot across the Atlantic. Like a never ending desert or even the straight couple hundred miles of I-5 in the middle of California.”

“At least I hear they made a few curves out there just to keep people from falling asleep,” Zimby quipped.

“A nice splash of color in all that gray outside might be... uhhhh, nice,” Bud said. “And, when you are down here in just a thin suit, even a well heated one, this sort of sight gives me the chills.”

“Swing us around facing out for a little, Bud,” Hank ordered. “We need the better light out there for a while.”

In moments *Yamato II* was facing away from the slope that sat about a mile to her stern. After fifteen minutes of spotting nothing more exciting than a few odd sharks and a trio of fierce-looking fangtooth fish—at only a half-foot in length and apparently more tooth than body, they looked dangerous but were timid when faced with something they could not chomp on and get inside their mouth.

“Come back around, please.”

As they returned to facing into the slope that was now less than a

half mile distant, a number of octopi, a two-inch type of shrimp that lived all the way down to within about a thousand feet of the bottom of the trench, and some sorts of fish—like the anglerfish—capable of producing their own light to lure prey could be seen near solid ground.

There was also, Hank noted and not for the first time, a lot of other living matter in the water. Even some clearly no longer living things. But, unlike Neptune there were things such as krill, plankton, fish, and other creatures to be seen. Most of it seemed suspended in the water while some of the larger pieces had a distinctive downward flow.

“Hey, guys. We have a nosy visitor out there on our port side,” Bud called out as he spotted a whale keeping time with them as they both sank farther down. Soon, though, the cetacean lost interest and with a couple flicks of its massive tail disappeared back toward the surface.

“And, with a dismissive wave back at us, there goes our last possible air-breathing new friend on our way down to pick up an old friend, the *SeaKing*,” toasted Hank with a raise of his right hand, pretending he had a glass in it.

“To the once and future, we hope, King!” Bud raised his right arm before bringing it down to make a slight correction to back them away from the slope.

Several hours later Tom returned to the room and took over after receiving a nearly nothing-to-report update from Hank.

“Alright, time to kick this sub a little, Bud,” he stated as he sat down. “Before whoever is coming forward to relieve you gets here, turn us sideways to the slope and put us on a one hundred feet per minute with two degree down plane dive. Also, please maneuver us a mile farther to the south. Thanks!”

Although the submarine didn't have traditional bow or stern diving planes, she did have small attitude drives fore and aft to provide the same functions.

Yamato backed away from the slope and slowly spun on its axis before the flyer tilted the nose down and gave the drives a little more power.

That really meant just adding more superheated coolant to the exchange tubes inside the three drives thus heating up and forcing out additional water from the rear of each drive.

“We’re out at the new position and heading down at a hundred feet per minute, two degrees down plane. And, with that I spot Red Jones coming in to take my place. Anything else before I head for

sleepyville?”

Tom grinned and shook his head. “Happy dreams, little Bud.”

All remained quiet as they sank through 16,000 then 17,000 and all the way down to 19,000 feet. As they got lower and lower, the amount and variety of sea life thinned out dramatically until there was none to be seen even in the brightness of the ship’s aqualamps.

By the time they had been heading down for more than ninety minutes, they were passing 19,000 feet, about half of the way to the bottom.

“Okay,” Tom said standing up and stretching. “We know we can take a lot of pressure so let’s double our descent rate and try to get to the bottom before any of us fall asleep at the controls.”

Moments later they were increasing their distance from the surface at double the previous rate.

“Seventy percent of the way down,” came Mike Jayston’s call when they reached that point.

Two more hours stretched past before anyone noticed something odd outside.

“Uhhhh...” Bud began from his position now at the command seat after his rest, “what is *that*?” He was pointing to a small blip of light blue at the far reaches of their aqualamps range.

As the others tried to discern the image, Bud asked the camera be zoomed in as much as possible.

“Not much to give you, Bud,” Zimby stated from the sensors station, “but maybe I can tease a little more contrast and focus... there!”

The blue part of the image had only grown perhaps five percent, but it was clearer than before.

In an instant, the blue... what could they have been? Anyway, split into three pieces and they seemed to turn around and depart the area at high speed leaving behind four very puzzled men in a futuristic submarine.

Bud got his voice back before the others. “Okay, guys. Jaws back up and mouths closed. Somebody tell me those weren’t several of the blue things Tom spotted last time down here? Please?” He seemed to be asking to be told he was seeing things.

Nobody spoke.

Finally, Mike said *almost* too low for the others to hear, “Those are not anything supposed to be down here. This is too deep for anything that size and nothing that can zoom around like it is jet-

propelled!”

“Ditto,” Zimby said with an emphatic nod.

“Oh,” Mike said startled. “Did I say that out loud?”

Bud nodded. “You did and you only gave voice to what I believe we are all thinking. Somebody go wake the skipper up and tell him we have another sort of sighting. Tell him if he wants to stay in his bunk, it’ll hold. They’re gone. At least, for now.”

“I’ll go git Tom,” came the gravely voice of Chow. Nobody had noticed when he came into the control room, so Bud asked him a question.

“Did you get up here in time to see what we think we saw?”

“Yep. Shore did, an’ I cain’t think we’re all seein’ ghosts or havin’ some hal-u-cee-nation. I’ll git Tom.”

When the inventor came forward three minutes later he was trying to wipe sleep from his eyes and stifle a yawn.

“Chow tells me we may have another sighting of those blue creatures. I’d love to find out they’re a kind of deep-swimming whale or a ray of some sort. Show me what you recorded.”

At the end of the nearly two-minute video the inventor was leaning on the arm of the command seat, blinking. “That’s not a hallucination, as Chow told me it *could* be. That is an actual sighting of three creatures—or what looks to be a trio of them—nobody has ever mentioned or written about living in any sea or ocean. And, I’m not one for guessing, but I’d have to hazard a thought those are *not* the sort of sea creatures some sailors of old thought to be mermaids. Boy, how I wish we had something to get a perspective on to see how large those might be.”

“Big enough to break the arm on my Fat Man’s and give yours a hard shove,” Zimby commented.

He asked the current pilot to head in the direction the creatures had disappeared. “We’ll get to within visual of the down slope in about twenty minutes, Tom. Want us closer than that?”

“About by half, Bud.” He yawned again. “I’m going to grab a coffee and an energy bar and will be back in five minutes.”

Nothing was spotted in the next hour so Tom said he’d go back and try for another short nap before taking over in two hours.

By the time he came back, nothing more had been spotted of their *visitors*. So, he ordered them to gain back the distance he’d had Bud close to the slope before heading back down at their previous rate.

“Did anyone try to figure out how fast they might be traveling?”

Mike spoke up. “Assuming they are at max aqualamp range, even with these new and improved ones, it seems they can get up to about seventy knots... even through that ice soup!”

Several of the men in the control room let out appreciative whistles.

Fifteen minutes later a pair of the blue creatures could barely be discerned at the limits of their light, far ahead of the sub. They must have detected the lights and soon were back out of range. After looking at the large screen for several seconds Tom seemed to come out of his own deep thoughts.

He said to take the sub after them at top speed. “Have the propulsion guys turn on our Barclay Solutions.”

Those were the extra tubes at the intake of each Jetmarine drive that preheated the liquid assuring it could travel into and through the drives at a warmer than ambient temperature letting them move about five knots faster. The system had kept them moving—most of the time—when at depth on Neptune. The name came about because it had been Bud who offhandedly suggested them before the trip.

Tom got up, stretched and stepped down from the command platform.

“You heading back, skipper?” Bud asked.

“Just going to get something to eat if Chow is awake and willing to feed me. I’ll come back if you need me or in a half hour if we spot nothing else.”

With nothing to track—SONAR never did register a contact out there—and the sub not having been outfitted with Tom’s Aquatomic Tracker, which still might not pick up anything in water this close to freezing, their search had to be entirely visual. There were no sightings in the ensuing thirty minutes before Tom reappeared.

“Nothing?” he asked coming back into the room.

“Nope. Not a thing. It’s as if they disappeared once they got outside our aqualamps’ range. Everything else is running smooth and we are currently about a mile above the bottom,” Bud reported to both his friend and to Red Jones who had come in with the inventor to relieve him at the pilot’s station.

Bud slipped out and Red got into the seat and officially took over the controls. “Orders, Skipper?”

Tom sighed. He was tired of the possible cat-and-mouse hunt. “Let’s head to within one hundred feet of the bottom and then get

us back to the *Hull 406*. I'd like to restart our search for *SeaKing* from there. I sort of don't recall a lot of the search after I got shoved and injured."

Thirty-five minutes later Red said they were nearing the bottom.

"Okay. Level off at one hundred feet. How are we doing for getting back to the *406*?"

"About five miles, and dead ahead, Tom."

Tom rubbed his hands together and spoke more to the screen than to his crew. "Okay, Mariana, you old sea witch of a trench, we've come back. Now, give us back our mini-sub!"

Hull 406—the erstwhile *Enduring Exploration*—was still there appearing to have not moved even an inch. From within the safety of the *Yamato*, Tom ordered them to come down and a little closer so the forward lights could flood the interior.

As the living sub swung around to face the dead one, the aqualamps blazed their light inside. At a distance of just eighty feet, this meant there was so much light no shadows could be seen behind or under anything. In other words, everything inside was visible.

It was only in these exceptionally well-lit conditions they got their first glimpses of the remains inside the boat. They were not from anything living, but mostly were a few articles of outer clothing, uniform caps, writing and charting instruments and even two ceramic beverage mugs in gimbaled holders.

Nothing else not bolted down—equipment and furniture—was to be seen. Even the periscope hung at a precarious angle likely caused by the immediate influx of high-pressure water. No human remains, no sign there had been a human crew inside except for those few clothing remnants, appeared on the three visible decks.

"Would all the bodies and other stuff have fallen out as it sank here?" Mike asked.

"Anything is possible. Now, that doesn't mean one or more of the crew might not have been briefly protected in either the foremost compartments or those aft of the reactor and drive spaces," Tom told the others, "but I do not feel particularly like going back out into the water for a look. If any bodies are in there I am not anxious to find them. I also do not believe it prudent to send anybody else, so this ends our investigation of the *Hull 406*. May her crew, assuming there was one, rest here."

He turned to face Red. Without realizing he was doing so, Tom

had stepped forward and closer to the front monitors.

“Red. Pull us back a couple hundred feet and swing us to a new course. I see from the previous log we headed two-three-seven from here the last time.”

“Um, Tom?” the older, red-haired man asked. “How about accounting for any additional drift by the *SeaKing*?”

Tom smiled and nodded. “A good point. While I was on my last break I reran all three of the drift simulations. The least we will have to adjust is about a half mile from any original end point. Maximum is a mile and a tenth. I would like to factor in current local conditions, so I suppose we go to those original points spots and make our adjustments.”

At the end of just eighty-two minutes they reached the first original end point. As everybody believed, there was nothing other than the great expanse of gray silt to be seen.

“Okay. From here it might have drifted, or been dragged along, on an average course or three-one-nine. Turn us to that heading and ahead at seven knots. Zimby? Get the SONAR pinging out active once a minute, please. Report any returns other than ambient seafloor.”

“Right.”

They came across nothing within their lamp range on this course and for a half mile further than the simulations indicated.

“Fine,” the inventor began consulting his notes, “from here we can either head back to the 406 or, and I believe this is what I want to do, get us on a new course of zero-six-six for nineteen miles. It gets us fairly close to the bottom of the slope, and is the second most likely point to which the mini may have traveled. We’ll adjust from that point.”

This way proved to be another fruitless search line.

“Give us a three-sixty slow spin, please.”

When the ship had completed the spin Tom asked to continue until they were around to course two-nine-eight.

“This takes us along the base of the slope. One-point-one miles is where it might have headed from here. Let’s go pretty slow at three knots.”

Every five minutes he had Zimby give them any active and passive SONAR information.

“Just seeing the wall to our starboard side and what might be a small bump out about a mile and a third ahead. Like the slope sticks out a couple hundred extra feet.”

Six minutes later Red shouted, "Got a track out there, Tom!"

Sure enough, there were signs of something about three feet wide having been dragged along in the silt. It appeared to be relatively new because it stood out in fair sharpness compared to the surrounding seafloor.

"Slow us to one knot."

"Roger, skipper. Fifteen seconds to new speed."

"Well, I'll be da—" Tom began.

With no fore-notice, *Yamato* spun hard to port and her nose headed down at a sharp angle.

"Something feels like it grabbed the front of the ship and is shoving it down!" Red called out. "Tom! *I'm not sure I can hold her!*"

CHAPTER 16 /

SWIRLING WATERS AND OTHER TROUBLES

YAMATO WAS caught in a strong and fast current, just like the one that had caused them to lose the *SeaKing* in the first place, but this was nearly twenty miles further to the west. Down it swept along the face of the slope—extending out some one thousand feet at the edge of which *Yamato* bucked and spun as the pilot tried to gain control.

The submarine had been three hundred feet above the floor and ended up with its nose scraping a foot or two into the silt before Red got it back up using the bow jets and had ample power going to the drives to force their way out of the whirling eddy of thick water getting them to a point he could halt the sub more than a mile away.

“Whew! We seem to be okay,” he announced. “Did you see what was on the screen ahead of us, Tom as we got hit?”

The inventor nodded. It had been a bit of a shock to see what appeared to be a veritable forest of underwater plants and possibly more than a few coral spires in the distance. Some had almost looked fern-like but that could have been the relative distance and the difficulty is seeing things that far from the submarine.

“Let’s spin around right here, and slowly, before we creep forward about a thousand feet. If we don’t encounter rough water there, go another thousand... and another. First sign that water swirl, get us out *fast!*”

“I don’t need to be told twice, Tom. Permission to react and not wait for anything from you?”

Tom grinned. “Of course, Red. Take us around and use your judgement and instincts.”

“A little bit forward, and then around, is where we’re heading right now, skipper.”

As they maneuvered Tom asked Zimby if he could see or hear anything on his sensors.

“Well, I’m seeing what might be a dip out there *nearly* in the direction we were heading; I am guessing we passed over it in our haste. I also see an echo of something above us on the slope that looks like it could be a cave or something. It’s centered where that swirling water was coming from.”

The four men up front all looked at each other in puzzlement. Could the swiftly moving water not be natural? If that was the case,

was this some sort of weapon directed at them, or possibly one set to trap anyone venturing down this far? By who?

Could it have been set by the Chinese team before their accident? Tom wondered. If so, why and what did they hope to accomplish... or, did they get caught in their own whirling snare?

He immediately realized they had their implosion several miles higher up so they would not be responsible. Anything in a cave or indent would need to have been installed.

Unless Tom and his crew could locate the source of the powerful water and see for themselves, there was no way to guess at the truth.

Damon had been reviewing a printed scientific journal, so he was incredibly surprised when his computer monitor, which had been in screensaver mode displaying pictures of his own children when they were young as well as Tom and Bashall's three kids, suddenly flared up into full brightness and displayed his home screen. This was almost immediately replaced by a white screen with typing that started to appear character-by-character as if it were being entered in real time.

He leaned forward and looked at what was appearing.

Hello, venerable father of the genius boy. Mr. Swift, I / we are known to your son, and likely both to you and Harlan Ames, as Collections, or Your Tax Dollars at Work (YTDW). Forgive the intrusion today, but we have some vital information for Tom and know he is in the briny deep. THIS IS IMPORTANT!

There is trouble brewing from a source that *was* up in space, but has recently returned to Terra Firma and may become Terror Oceanus!

And, yes, we know you are in front of your computer now. If you will, please respond and we can discuss this danger.

Damon considered what to answer.

Yes, I am here and listening, or at least reading. If this has to do with a former visitor to our old Outpost who spread money around to get secret info, we know some of the very basic issues, but I would really appreciate additional info. Can you provide that?

Yes. To both. A very rich and heretofore moderately unknown man from South Africa, before his citizenship was stripped, has taken to wanting what Tom's found. We do know he bribed someone up there, but do not know what he "bought." If Tom is involved, it is sure to be what my granny would call "a corker!" We are curious.

This man's name is Oclutus Norkis and he is on a shopping spree in search of a small nuke sub—we believe he intends to chase after Tom for whatever is down there. We do not believe his intentions are good.

Do you have details you can / are willing to share?

Tom has found something even I know very little about. Nor have I had the chance to see. But, he is of opinion it is imperative it not ever be revealed. By no one!

What is Norkis's status on his purchase(s)?

Unsure, but believe he has a line on what he seeks. Please tell Tom to be ULTRA careful and we will be back to you when we know more.

Thank you. Tom says he can never

raise you when he want to.

Same for me?

There was no answer; Damon really had not expected there would be one. Collections came and went as *they* pleased.

Picking up his phone he placed a call to George Dilling in Communications.

“George? Is there still too much icy and thick water down where Tom is to get anything through? Even on the PER?” It was the first time since the Neptune trip the Private Ear Radio system had failed to get signals through.

“Yeah. The slush spreads signals out so much the PER refuses to send or receive with any length of stability. We’re trying about every fifteen minutes to get something through. We still receive the scheduled data blips so we know they are okay, but voice is being stymied for now. Anything for me to send if we do raise them?”

Damon told his friend of the basic warning without revealing the source.

“I’ll be sure to pass that on first before calling you and making the connection,” he promised.

The *Yamato* had crept forward again and received no rushing water even at the distance of three hundred feet. Tom asked that they be backed away from the slope and turned to port until she was broadside to it. Perhaps they might feel some of the water force that way? Five minutes went by and still without any sign of the former problem so he asked they be aligned nose pointing back to the slope so most of her sensors could be swung up the uprising. They approached to within five hundred feet without being hit by the water gusts, so the inventor wanted to do a full search for the source.

“Are you seeing anything or hearing anything?” Tom asked.

Zimby shook his head as he slid one side of his headphones up and off his right ear. “Nothing. Not even a hint of noise... except... wait.” He repositioned the headphones back tightly on his ears. “There is something I’m getting... barely. Really slight but *almost* mechanical? Not certain.” He paused and listened another minute. “Can we get the drives shut off or do we need them to hold position?”

“How long?”

“One, maybe two minutes or until we really need them. I may

almost have something up the slope a few thousand feet.”

Tom told Red to shut down their propulsion and made an announcement to the crew.

“We are going to go silent, shades of old submarine movies. So, nobody make any noise, please. Sorry if that means you have to turn off your stove, Chow, but not even pot stirring. We need up to five minutes of silence. Thanks everyone!”

One, then two and finally three minutes passed before Zimby pulled his headphones from his head and set them down.

“Okay. Yes, to everybody’s question. There *is* something making a mechanical noise up there.” He pointed to the ceiling of the room. “Maybe four thousand feet up. Teased about fifteen seconds of pretty good audio. Listen.” He turned around and flicked a switch before sliding a finger up the audio control.

Over the eight-channel speaker system they heard a low rumbling mixed with a slow whirring sound. Tom had him play the piece three times before saying anything.

“I’m hearing mechanical sounds. Like, maybe, a sort of centrifugal pump of some kind. Play that one more time, please.”

After it had finished, the others nodded and smiled.

“Yeah. Now I’m hearing it, skipper,” Red stated. “Uh, Zimby? Do we have anything in the computers that might be close to that sound?”

The pilot scrunched up his face, but set about typing several things into his computers. Within a minute he said, “Gotcha! Yes. Both to Red and Tom, who would have asked me for that. Listen to this...” and he poked at a portion of his monitor. The noise coming from their speakers was louder and obviously not muffled by more than three-quarters mile of icy slush, but it was almost a match.

Tom grinned. “Zimby, please take a big pat on the back out of our petty cash fund. You hit that nail on the head, as they say. Please overlap the two and have the computer do a comparison and contrast.”

It required ninety-six seconds, but the monitor in front of the sensors and SONAR man flashed a green LED.

“A match to within sixteen percent given the muffling from the water. Now what?”

“Now,” Tom said slowly as he was thinking what might be the best course of action, “we get our drives back on line, tilt our nose up and head for that noisemaker.”

He made a new announcement making certain to tell their chef he was free to do whatever he needed to do.

At their depth and with the ambient pressure on the hull needing to be slowly relieved, it took an hour and seventeen minutes to get up to the depth the noises came from. As they pulled closer to the slope, the noise seemed to diminish, almost as if someone were monitoring their presence and was turning their pump off.

“Hmmm? All stop and then back us away a mile, please.”

The sub came to a halt and began moving backwards. When they were three thousand feet away from the slope, the noise began to increase as the pump evidently was started up again.

“Can we get enough light on that area to see anything?”

“Trying, Tom. It’s not much but there is something... uh, something blue and gray and *staring this way*...”

They could all see what looked like a face on their screen... a face they had seen before. It pulled back into the shadowy interior of what must be a cave and the pump started to wind down.

“Well, at least we know whatever those beings are, they are smart enough to know our being here and turning on the lights means we’ve detected them. I’d love to play a game of peek-a-boo, I see you with whatever is out there, but who knows what else they might have in that cave other than the pump or pumps.”

“Are you thinking they might have some sort of weapon, Tom?” This came from Mike Jayston who was still monitoring the communications panel even though they currently had no contact with the outside world.

With a curt nod, Tom replied, “Could be. Could actually be anything, or nothing. But, I hope I am not the only one in here to conclude those beings are intelligent, or at the very least, have a high level of animal cunning.”

“Yeah,” Zimby said, “and technology!”

Tom had the aqualamps turned off and the sub backed away another thousand feet.

The pumps did not turn on again for the next hour so he ordered them to return to the bottom and scout around for any signs of water flowing downward.

It took over an hour before they made a close circular search of a two-mile-wide area. They found nothing and came back close to the slope.

He was about to suggest they head away from the area when the pump noises came back.

Minutes later the sub was touched—not precisely *hit*, but nudged—by a downward stream of water. It was gentle and made him smile.

“Somebody is telling us they know we are here, know we’ve sussed them out, and are telling us either it is okay, or to move along and not bother them. Because we really can’t know their intentions I’m all for moving along... for now. That was nowhere close to the big force of water that shoved down hard on us before. So, I have to conclude they have control over how much water it pumps, and when. Perhaps, even what direction.” He raised a curious eyebrow. “Let’s stand off a mile for now.”

Before heading out Tom wanted to get a good nap in and also contact his father. He had one of the transmission buoys raised, which took six hours, during which he and Bud slept. Hank, who would be their backup also headed for his room from the kitchen where he and Chow had been having a discussion about whether chilies were all peppers, or not.

Tom woke five hours later, shaved and wiped his body down before putting on a clean shirt, and headed for the control room.

A buoy had made it to the surface and a connection had already been made, originating with Enterprises.

“Tom, it’s dad. I have been in contact with Collections. Nearly eleven hours ago. Curious people. They called me because they know you are down there. I’m so glad you came up high enough to get a signal through.”

“We’re still down at the bottom, Dad, but a signal buoy is up topside. So, what did my mysterious acquaintances have to say?”

Damon filled him in on the Oclutus Norkis situation and the possible threat from another submarine.

“We do not know his actual intent, or the capabilities of this other nuclear submarine, and your friends *did* use the word, ‘nuclear,’ in their description. I could only find references to a small U.S. sub that has long since been dismantled, but the Tax Dollars people want me to warn you to be, quote, ‘Ultra cautious.’ End quote. So, promise me you will?”

“Of course I will. Can you prepare to take a recording for Bash?”

Fifteen minutes later his message having been received and recorded with the promise to share it with her right away, Tom told his father about the sighting of the strange plant-like growths and the intense swirling waters.

“I don’t like either of those. Neither seems... well, natural for where you are. All I can tell you is to keep safe, Son.”

After Tom signed off, he had the buoy retrieved as quickly as

possible. Down it came and within forty-six minutes outside contact had dwindled to almost nothing.

In the meantime, Damon received another message from Collections:

**Before Genius Boy gets too far down
can you tell him we have word that
the Norkis man did, emphasize that
word, DID, buy an old small nuke sub.
It is based on old US design now gone.
He is likely on his way to Trench area
and cannot have good intentions.**

**Thank you. Tom might be too deep again,
but promises to be back in contact soon.
Hold on while I check...**

Communications verified the radio connection with the submarine was no longer active.

Tom is not on the radio now.

Nuts!

And, that was it. The screen blanked out and returned to the normal Home screen. The older inventor sat looking at it, fingertips steepled under his nose, deep in thought for five minutes.

Yamato returned to a new heading and began moving due west, away from the area of the downward flowing water, at ten knots. Tom had them go on a slightly southern course and they soon skirted the lower area of the unexpected plants.

He knew they would be back to investigate them later.

The farther they headed toward Asia, the more slight changes happened on the ocean floor. At first it was slight ripples within the layer of silt. None was greater than about eight inches, and most of them were only three inches.

They indicated an ongoing movement of water, and this deep that ought to be impossible. The *Yamato's* crew knew otherwise having been caught in the down rush of water at least twice.

Tom had them pause so some video of the rippled silt could be taken and a small measuring rod was placed outside by the new front arms so some sense of scale would be shown.

“Bring the stick back in,” the inventor requested, “then let’s move ahead another five miles keeping an eye out for the *SeaKing* or any traces of it. If we get nothing, I’m all for going back and looking more closely at those growing things we found.”

The other thing was they came to within one mile of the very deepest part of the trench, Challenger Deep. They were just fifty feet above that point.

“We will go down there on our way back,” the inventor promised.

As they moved onward they also rose to about two hundred feet above the bottom. This had been found to give their lights about the farthest coverage and their cameras and computer the best possible resolution.

Fifteen hours later and with Tom, Bud, Red and Zimby back in the control room, they returned to the western boundary of the undersea plants.

“From in here we really can’t see a reason why they are out there,” he admitted to his team. “So, I am all for investigating and collecting some samples. We might not study them now, but someone will just about wet themselves for the chance to see those samples.

“Get a couple of the others up here. We’re going outside.”

CHAPTER 17 /

STRANGE BEINGS FROM A DISTANT PLANET...

THE FRONT hatch of their large water lock and storage bay opened allowing three golden-colored eggs to waddle to the edge and launch themselves into the icy water. As they began sinking toward the silt a hundred feet below, a blond head turned to look out his bubble-domed upper viewport.

“Let’s pause a dozen or so feet above that muck until I go down and see how deep, and probably how sticky it is.”

“Or,” Hank suggested, “you do like the good captain of a ship that you and let one of your men do that while you remain hovering above and in command. Nobody wants you to get stuck, and if Bud or I do, that still leaves you free to go back to *Yamato* and figure out how to free me. Us. Okay?”

Bud piped up with, “That goes without adding it is what your father usually demands, skipper. Now, I know you are sitting there in your comfy seat, face all scrunched and thinking, ‘Hey! I’m an adult and can make my own decisions,’ but you really don’t want us ratting you out to your pop, do you?”

In spite of the fact that is just about precisely what the inventor had been thinking, he had to laugh.

“Remind me once dad retires and I have to take over to write into your employee folder that you are sometimes a real pain, flyboy!”

“Sure, Tom. Unless I have taken another job with an employer who appreciates my mother henning!”

“Won’t happen, Bud. Sandy won’t let you go anywhere without her, and she has already told our mother she will be in Shopton forever, or until she gets tired of it.”

All three men, knowing the sassy blond woman, laughed.

After a little more discussion it was decided—by Tom—and agreed to—reluctantly by the other two—for the three of them to head to the bottom and cautiously move forward as a group.

“As soon as we get to within a hundred yards of the edge of that field I’ll hang back,” the inventor promised.

Three deep diving suits reached the bottom, remaining five feet above it so they would not unduly stir up a cloud of the powdery dirt.

Tom, Bud and Hank moved across the silt using their Fat Man hydro-drives. Basically a newer treatment of the drives used in the inventor's Hydrolung suits, the four drives spaced near the top hatch/tomaquartz view bubble and the lower quarter of the of the golden eggs could get the suits up to about four knots in relatively shallow water. Down this deep, and as cold as the water was, two knots was at the upper limit.

However, they *were* moving.

"There sure is a lot of plant life out there," Bud said sounding amazed.

"Yeah, and it'll take you and me many hours to explore that," Hank admitted.

"Unless..." the third member of the trio ventured. Bud and Hank knew they would not win this argument so they gave in.

Tom suggested Hank skirt to the left of the field of plants, because that is what he now thought them to really be, while Bud took the right.

"I'll head right down the middle and get above them a few feet and maybe even try to grab a small snippet. Good thing I installed samples bins in these new suits. Imagine having to carry something like we had to do in the old days!"

The three chuckled. Time and technology had improved what most people initially believed to be near perfection. Even through three revisions.

Tom spotted nothing on the suit's passive SONAR screen other than the sea floor and, as he turned, the slope over on the other side of Bud.

"Either of you feel the slight swirl of that vortex over by the slope or out farther? I'm getting nothing in here."

Hank reported he did not, while Bud—closer to the slope by perhaps five hundred feet, responded, "Yeah. A bit. Not too much for this jolly old egg to handle, but it buffets me every few seconds. The suit seems to be compensating nicely."

Tom, who had been moving along about twenty feet above the surface, stopped moving forward and lowered his suit down between about a dozen of the taller plants. He set his forward camera on the top of one of them and increased the zoom. Seconds later he was staring in wonder at the incredibly intricate system of stems and wispy bits reminiscent of the leafy parts of some types of underwater plants.

Plants that he recalled never appeared deeper than a few

hundred feet.

This was seriously going to set the world of oceanography on its collective ear.

Every five minutes the trio compared notes on what they were examining. For the most part they were seeing the same sort of plant life, however Bud mentioned he'd seen, and sampled, something with a decidedly light orange tinge to it.

"At least as lit up by the aqualamp. Maybe it reacts differently than the others. Anyway, I've got about an inch of it in my middle sample case. Oh, and I sampled the local water around it before and after snipping it off. No change, so I haven't loosed some terrible toxin to incapacitate us."

They had all been taking water samples and having the built-in spectrometer analyze the results before releasing it back and recording the results. So far, there was nothing to indicate anything other than highly saturated salt water in a near ice state.

"Bud may have hit the color jackpot, but I found a small version of these sea ferns just five inches tall and got it all, very spindly root system and everything, to bring home. How about you, skipper?" Hank inquired.

Tom reported basically he had what Hank had but had been more interested in probing the darkness ahead and seeing how far he might be able to spot anything.

"I've got a half dozen water and silt samples I'll take back. That's likely to be enough."

Tom turned so he was facing back toward the hovering *Yamato*. He gave a wave with the suit's right arm earning them a fast blink of the forward lights.

Bud told them, "I did get a hint of one of the blue faces a couple minutes back, but it ducked down into what turns out to be a small trench heading toward you, Hank. It was gone by the time I got there thirty seconds later so chances are it may have passed you unnoticed."

"No, I saw nothing," the engineer reported. "That trench you have, unless it is about nine inches deep, it peters out over here. Do you have anything in the middle, skipper?"

"To Bud's side I see the trench and it's about two feet deep, it then dips down fifty feet away and appears to be some sort of overhang for a bit, but by the time it gets twenty feet closer to you Hank, it gets very shallow. It must get deeper a way out because it looks to be two inches at the most over there."

Bud agreed to start at the slope edge and travel along the trench until he reached the opposite side.

When he completed his trip twenty minutes later he reported that where he'd been was about the deepest, but that he'd found a few spots that appeared as if someone or something had been dragged along.

“Think that might be our *SeaKing*?” he asked.

The inventor shook his head inside his *Fat Man* so neither of the others could see him. After a moment, and receiving no response, he realize why.

“Oh, sorry. Forgot you can't see me. It might be, but it doesn't really look like it. For one, where I saw it, the trench was too wide and I think too old. As in years old and not months. However, and I am grinning right now, anything is possible down here.” His left arm swept out and around indicating the “impossible” field of plant life.

Ten minutes later the decided to head back to the sub for a rest and to recharge the suits.

As they exited the front lock, Tom had his tomaquartz dome up and moved back. He took a deep breath savoring the relatively fresh air.

“Did we all change the CO₂ scrubbers in the suits?” he asked the other as they also opened their hatches.

Bud looked at Hank who looked back and they both looked at Tom.

“I didn't think about that,” the engineer admitted. My panel says the big canister is okay, and should have five more hours of useable life. How about yours, Bud?”

“Yep. Mine shows the same thing. Tom?”

“So does mine,” he answered suspicion creeping into his voice. “Let's get these laid down and the canisters pulled and checked.”

When they each reached into the interior and disconnected the auto battery-sized air scrubbers, all three had their bright red warning LEDs lit.

“Oh-oh!”

Damon had been home and back to work twice since his last communication with Collections. So, he was not shocked to see his screen bright white with very large type asking:

YOU THERE, MR. S?

Sitting down he tapped the SPACE bar and then began typing.

I am now. Do you have more info for either me or Tom?

“Yes. We forgot you are on normal human time and not the sort of hours we keep. I guess we could have tried you at home this morning... but that is not important. Pardon.

Word has reached that the Norkis man bought a nuke sub, as we believed, that is a copy of the old U.S. NR-1, but has a dangerous difference.

Torpedoes! Not big or power-filled, but not what we want our favorite Tom to get involved with. We cannot find out if they are totally conventional, or if they are... not.

As in a very nasty NOT.

We have tried to reach Tom, but cannot as I guess you also are unable to.

Do not like to admit this, but YTD are not seemingly fully at work. We are stumped, stymied, and more than slightly perplexed.

Ideas?

I have been trying every 1/4 hour with nothing going out. Or, no acknowledgement it gets there. We are receiving data back but highly compressed. At least we know they are OK.

Do you have anything more?

“Yes. He has small crew due to lack of size inside. Takes at least 5 up to perhaps 10 to operate. We think

he has maximum crew onboard. Also, he was in a real hurry in China, so our source does not believe he fully understands what he has. Ditto how to drive it right.

Finally, for now, this little tube is painfully slow and their reactor was supposed to have been decommed 3 years ago, but was NOT, so it has very little fuel.

Warnings might be moot?

Thank you and I guess you are gone?

The lack on any answer told him what he already surmised.

He sat back trying to decide what, if anything, he might do about the situation.

For one of the first times in his life, Damon Swift was totally unsure of what to even contemplate.

An even more thorough check of the three suits showed they had been tampered with, and not expertly. Just under or behind what might cover the mischief.

“Could that had happened when the sub was sitting alone in Guam?” Red asked after Tom related the problems.

Tom took a deep breath in through his nose and allowed it to blow out in a great huff.

“It is entirely possible. But, that would say someone was able to gain entrance to *Yamato* while it was locked and secured behind our electronic locks.” He sat down in the command chair and put his right elbow on his right knee and his chin in his hand.

“Doing your impression of The Thinker?” Bud quipped as he came back in from taking a bathroom break.

Red motioned the flyer to come over to the side and filled him in on Tom’s thoughts. Bud’s face went from mildly amused to one of being startled and then sad.

“Oh.” He looked over to Tom. “Sorry, Tom.”

But, the inventor was not listening to anything other than the thoughts going on in his head.

Bud slipped back forward into the front room where one of the two techs they'd brought along was inside one of the suits with only his legs, from the knees down, still outside.

Stepping forward so he might be heard, Bud cleared his throat and asked, "How many things are you finding, Barry?" He had recognized the bright red tennis shoes the man always wore.

Barry wriggled back and out, sitting on the deck. Clutched in his hand was a five-wire jumper cable with alligator clips on each of the ends. In the middle was a small box, maybe an inch square.

The flyers slumped forward and he let out a voluble sigh at seeing a device he absolutely knew did not belong inside a Fat Man suit.

"We need to go tell the skipper where you found that and what it was attached to. Then, you need to see if the same thing is inside the other two suits. Damn!" he swore, something Bud rarely ever did.

Once Tom had been shown the device and told how it had been attached, he gently took it from Barry and told Bud to take the command chair.

"I'm going back to the tables by the kitchen and see what is inside this."

Bud shook his head. "What if it is booby trapped? How about heading back to the drive room and grabbing a small tomasite container?"

Tom shook his head slowly, "We don't have anything that is both a solid and lets anyone get their hands inside. And, nothing with waldoes. I never considered we would need them."

The inventor thought things over for half a minute before looking back at his best friend. "We do have some Durastress and Tyvek gloves back there, Fingers to armpit size. Those and we also have clear tomasite goggles. I ought to be okay."

"What about your upper body?" came a question from Red at the pilot's controls. "Do we carry anything like a full upper body apron?"

Tom shook his head. "No, not that. Wait! I'll do it using the Fat Man this came out of," he turned to Barry and added, "that is if this is all that was inside and you are pretty sure the suit is cleared out."

"I couldn't find anything else other than that jumper thing in all three suits. I checked behind the monitor and inside the electronics—that had two leads going inside through a small hole someone drilled. I patched that with SwiftSet epoxy, by the way. Nothing other than the wires and that box under the seat. Ditto nothing

behind. About the only thing I didn't get to was to reach under the CO2 scrubber bay and down to the very bottom of the suit. Want me to go do that before you climb in?"

Tom was shaking his head while Bud, Red and Zimby were nodding. The inventor saw this and grinned. "I guess the motion to finish the inspection is moved and carried. Sure, Barry. Go check."

When the tech came back into the control room five minutes later he reported there was another small box that was stuck firmly to the bottom of the shell of the suit Tom had been using.

"And, only in that one suit. I tried to pry it off until it hit me that if it contains something explosive, it might go off if I did that. I really don't know what to do, Tom."

"I believe we can flood the bottom of the shell with more SwiftSet unless we can figure a way to remove it safely. It has a good helping of Durastress fibers in it, and sets in a couple minutes. That should contain anything small. Uhh, how large was that other box?"

"About two inches by two inches and a half inch thick. Maybe big enough for a charge of some plastic explosive that could very seriously hurt someone, but not enough to blow out a hole in the shell." He looked very curious about this.

"Sure," Tom responded, "but with enough explosive pressure force to incapacitate or possibly kill whoever is inside." He stood up. "I need to go feel that box."

"Be careful, Tom," Bud warned him. "We'll stand by."

"You'll stand in here and I'll move the suit into the forward lock and close the door." He sounded definite so nobody argued with him.

He used a winch to get the suit back upright on its feet before climbing the short ladder kept for entry and slid into the suit. Without closing the upper hatch, the inventor activated the controls and walked the suit into the forward lock, turning and closing the door behind him. Once inside he used a similar winch to lower the suit back to a prone position so he could get inside without having to go upside down.

Five minutes later he emerged from the lock and held up the small box Barry had discovered. Sticking out from one side was what looked like a small antenna

"How did you get that up?"

Tom smiled and shrugged. "I kept shoving my fingers under it until the sticky tape gave up."

Bud looked at the box. "So, how does that work?"

“I believe that would get a signal from the smaller box and jumpers and set the thing off. Maybe a timer in that octopus of wires. I don’t know, but I can see the four screws I need to remove on the bottom. It will be too fine detailed work to let t he suit’s hands do, so everyone go back into the control room and let me handle this. Also, and before I start fiddling with this, go bring me that tomasite box, please.”

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Barry raced from the room, returning in less than a minute with the one-foot-square sealable box along with an electronic stethoscope. “Thought you might be able to use the listener.” He handed them to Tom and the others followed him out of the forward section.

“Thanks. Good idea,” Tom called out before the hatch closed.

Carefully, and after setting things on the deck and siting down, Tom took his small multi-sized screwdriver out and eased the first screw out. He listened to the box, and hearing nothing removed the one in the opposite corner. Again, there was no indication of anything going on inside.

Screw three came out and he slipped a flat blade from his set under the cover and lifted the edge a millimeter.

Nothing.

The last screw came out and he opened the box. As he suspected, it contained a small receiver—which he disconnected using his handkerchief to avoid adding any fingerprints and set aside—along with a few wires and what looked to be about an ounce of a putty-like explosive.

Everything went into the tomasite box and it was sealed shut.

“That one is clear,” he announced on opening the hatch to the control room. “Did you find anything like that in the other suits?”

Barry shook his head. “No. Just the jumpers. What do you think that means?”

“I have no idea, but after you give them all one last check and get the scrubbers replaced, run a systems check. I think Bud, Hank and I deserve a little rest break before heading back out.”

* * * * *

The three suits checked out clean and working correctly, so before the three men got into the suits he asked Red to raise the radio buoy and let Enterprises, and his father and especially Harlan Ames, about the jumpers and the one explosive device.

“It’ll take a couple hours to raise the thing and we should be back in three or so. If anyone needs to talk to me, let them know when I’ll be available.”

The three men left *Yamato* five minutes later and headed down and back toward the plant area.

This time it was decided that Bud and Hank would keep about four hundred feet apart and Tom would move back and forth between them.

Everything went just fine with no new discoveries for an hour. As they came close to the far end of the area, Tom and Hank were standing in the silt looking at another of the slightly orange plants.

“What do you think planted this?” Hank asked.

“Strange beings from another planet is my guess,” Bud quipped over their sonaphone.

“Maybe,” Tom responded, “but we probably will never know.”

He let out a yell as something dropped over and around him.

“What the—?” Hank cursed over the underwater communications system as the two men and their Fat Man suits were swept over on their sides and they began to be dragged. As both of them were now face down and their lights in the silt, neither Tom nor Hank had any idea what was happening to them!

Even with the fairly high speed at which their captor was traveling, Tom managed to get one of his pantographic arms slightly under the front of his suit. He pushed as hard as he, or the suit, could.

In seconds his light was uncovered and he found himself just a few yards from a giant and very determined-looking face. The shock was too much for the exhausted man and his eyes slammed shut as *darkness overtook him.*

CAPTURED

A RELATIVELY weak but steady light—Tom’s brain flashed the word *bioluminescence* for a second as he opened his eyes—illuminated the inside of what appeared to be a dry cave. Surrounding him and Hank’s suits were five gigantic creatures, all a fairly uniform blue-gray and each one appearing to be some type of ray fish of some kind never seen nor cataloged before. The two men spun about at the same instant and had the impression the creatures were not a danger to them.

Tom believed the smallest of them to be nearly fifteen feet from tip of one “wing” to the tip of the other. The largest had to be ten feet wider and maybe five feet “taller.”

* * * * *

Bud, faster of the three to react and farther away, had jetted backward when he spotted the creatures and doused his lights at the first sighting of the creatures. For some reason, none of them seemed to be bothered about his slight departure and were closing in on Tom and Hank.

Their wings—or flippers as the inventor decided they might be—were outstretched and other than directly overhead there was soon no route not covered. Even looking up, Tom spotted another three of them floating it to form a shield above by fewer than thirty feet.

“Hank,” he said over their underwater sonaphone, “I think we are not going to get away from them, so don’t even try. Bud, slowly back away and try to make it back to the sub. We’ll let you know what’s going on in a moment.”

“Roger,” came the flyer’s whispered voice.

At the start of Tom’s first words to Hank the creatures reacted by turning their heads to the side before several of them looked at one another. It was almost as if they could hear the disguised communications.

Bud watched as one of them pointed to the Fat Man suits and then to its head. He was about to tell Tom this but decided if they could hear Tom and Hank, they would certainly hear him and might come try to take him captive.

Tom had seen this and stated, “I think they communicate on a sonic level like our sonaphones or SONAR. Just a guess, but if you look at them, Hank, as I speak, they are reacting a little.”

“Yeah, and luckily it doesn’t appear they are reacting badly to it. Maybe something in our favor?”

“Try moving apart a bit and then you say something to me.”

Hank let his suit be carried to the right, and before the creatures moved in to stop him, he called over, “So, they don’t like me moving away.”

This caused most of the creature’s heads to turn to look in the direction of Hank’s suit.

“I guess that proves that,” Tom stated and their captor’s glances switched back to him.

The *Yamato*’s crew had watched in horror and six of the creatures snuck up behind at least two of the Fat Man suits while another four or more hovered above just out of the aqualamps cone of light. A heavy, and weighted net dropped swiftly over the suits pinning the two down.

Red recognized Tom and Hank’s voices and conclude that the other suit standing some five hundred feet to the south was Bud.

When Bud’s whispered communication was heard, and his suit began to slowly back away, Re arranged for the sub to sink slowly down to the silt so Bud could jet inside.

Everyone in the control room overheard the conversation between the captive men so they were not entirely in the dark.

“At least they both sound uninjured,” Zimby stated.

“Sure, but they certainly aren’t free to move away or come back. So, if the skipper were here and that was one of us out there with Hank, what would he do?”

Mike raised a hand. “I’d get that buoy topside and call Enterprises ASAP. Mr. Swift needs to be brought into this and make a decision. He’d do what Tom would do.”

“Right. How long before it rises enough?”

“Maybe thirty-five minutes. I’ll start trying at ten thousand feet and see if we can get the signal out.”

He managed to raise Enterprises via the PER just forty-one minutes later.

“Roger, *Yamato*. We’ve boosted the signal repeaters on all the satellites above your position. Let me bring Mr. Swift in one this.”

“Can you also get Harlan Ames, please. Same conversation,” Red radioed.

Three minutes later a pair of clicks told him that both men were on the line.

“Son?” Damon’s voice asked.

Red told them both that Tom and Hank were outside the sub and had evidently been captured.

“We need to be careful of what we say, Red. So, having said that what are the chances of recovering them soon?”

“Still working on that angle, Damon. But, Harlan, here’s something for you to chew on.”

He told the two men in Shopton about the unauthorized jumpers in the three Fat Man suits and the explosive box under the seat of the one Tom had been using.

Harlan let out an oath that was transmitted to the submarine.

“My words exactly,” Red exclaimed. “So, we have the explosives and the jumpers. Unfortunately one of our techs handled things, but Tom said he tried to keep his fingerprints off. We have them all in a tomasite box to bring back.”

With a heavy sigh, the Security man said, “Okay. At least that’s something. I wish you had the ability to send us the fingerprints.”

Zimby cleared his throat. “Red. I saw something once on TV about using another fine power to raise prints and then cellophane tape to lift them. Maybe Chow can whip us of a fine powder from flour and some charcoal I know we have back in the air filtration compartment.”

The big pilot nodded and Zimby raced from the room.

“Harlan, we might just be able to do that. I’ll keep the buoy floating to the surface and try to get a scan of what we lift to you. Did you need a fresh set of exclusion prints from Barry?”

“No. As long as we know it was only him and possibly whoever planted those, and you lift at least one really good print, we’ll see if we have any matches. I hope not, but it wouldn’t be the first time!”

Zimby came back with a dark gray powder and the box ten minutes later.

“Chow had some very fine cake flour and he used that along with a couple ounces of the charcoal that was in the used bin to whirl up this. And, I found a light bristle brush in the Supplies locker. Who gets to do the dusting?”

“I’d say if you saw it, you do it,” came back the answer.

Seven minutes later the three octopus wire sets yielded nothing other than the one set he was certain would be Barry’s, and then

nothing on the outside of the larger box. However, imprinted in the explosive were a couple prints that were clear enough to make out with the naked eye.

He dusted them and was about to press tape onto them when it hit him he might ruin the prints. So, he took out his small camera—he was never certain when he might need to get a picture of something—and got several very good close-ups of the prints.

These he downloaded to the sub's computers and sent to Harlan.

An hour later they received the good and bad news.

“Those are not an employee's prints at any of our facilities. The problem and bad news is, we have no idea whose they could be. But, I'm sending them to the FBI. If this person is a known individual, they should get back within the next day. Now, go rescue Tom.”

The creature looming over Tom and Hank used its right flipper to point to a portion of the wet sand inside the most open part of the cave they had been herded to after climbing out from their Fat Man suits. That, alone, caused a lot of glanced back and forth between the blue creatures before this largest one did something to make it clear it was accepted. It reached over and nudged the inventor, gently, in that direction it was pointing.

“Looks like he wants to show us something,” the beefy engineer said.

“Yeah,” Tom agreed moving slowly in the indicated direction. I believe you are right.”

Seconds later the large, blue-gray creature halted and lowered itself down nearly to the floor. Then, to the surprise of the two men, it began using the very tip of its flipper as a drawing tool pressing into the sand and starting to draw... something.

“Uhh,” Hank stammered, “isn't that a lot like our solar system?”

Tom looked at the drawing and it dawned on him that must be exactly what this was. Soon, the being had drawn an arc like an orbit around the inner two “planets at what Tom believed would indicate the real planet's distances from the central orb, the Sun.

Finally, with a look over at the men and evidently interpreting their nods and smiles as a positive sigh, the being tapped the third small circle.

Tom said, “Yes,” and he spread his arms out indicating all around them before pointing at the floor. “The Earth.” He next moved forward and pointed closely at the third planet. “Earth,” he repeated.

The creature straightened up a moment before pointing at the Earth before leaning down and adding the other planets, including most probably Pluto and a couple very small indicators of other potential minor and distant planets. It then moved over some thirty feet before adding three more mini representations of solar systems.

After clearing his throat to get the creature's attention, Tom ticked off on his fingers while pointing at the new pictures, "One, two, three. Three solar systems." He pointed at the first, larger drawing. "Our..." and he pointed to himself and Hank, "solar system."

Now he pointed to the farthest image, and then the creature. "Your solar system?"

The blue giant seemed to be considering whether this made any sense before reaching over, tapping the third system out and then tapping his chest area.

"Looks like these folks are from a solar system that is out, what? Three more systems beyond ours?" Hank guesses. "And, if our system is accurate as to time, that puts their system toward the galaxy center by that many systems... okay. I'm stumped. Where would that make their home system?"

Tom shrugged. "There are easily sixty or more systems within twenty-five of so light years of Earth. If the indicated direction is right or close, then the other two in between might be Alpha Centauri and Proxima Centauri, making that one something I can't pull the name of right now." He shrugged. "It could be Barnard's Star or Lurman 16, but they are not anywhere close to lined up like that." He paused and looked thoughtful. "Or, could that be B-Centaurus, or what some call Alpha Centauri B? I wonder how we can ever find out?"

Hank cleared his throat. "One thing is possible," he said looking shocked, "is these fellows are not from around these parts!"

Tom slowly shook his head. "No. If they are really representing they come from outside our solar system, that would make them our second set of visitors, but my guess is they've been around here a lot longer than our departed Space Friends or even their so-called Masters."

"Unless, they are those so-called masters?"

It was definitely something to think about.

Finally, Tom asked the key question on his mind. "Do we both think these are beings, intelligent beings, from another planet? Another solar system? Beings who traveled here at some point in

the past and... just stayed here?”

The engineer nodded. “I guess so. And that brings up the question of what do we call them? ‘Those creatures’ is getting repetitive.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. Since we are considered to be humanoids, as would any bipedal being similar to us we might ever discover, why don’t we call our new friends *Aquanoids*? I think Bud might approve if we use an intervening capital letter N in there.”

Hank mulled the name over in his mind. With a wide grin he agreed.

“AquaNoids it is!” He waved his fingers in the direction of the one that seemed to be in command.

To both human’s surprise, the AquaNoid wriggled the end of its left flipper, looking like an attempt to mimic the motion.

“Mimicking me, or learning something?” Hank asked.

For about ten minutes Tom tried different motions, ones he felt the AquaNoids would be capable of reproducing. After the first few he attempted to attach some meaning to the motions.

For instance when he raised one foot and placed it ahead of the other, he actually moved forward. He did the same with the other foot. Then, as one flipper came up as sort of a warning, he did the same in reverse.

The creatures in front of him must have been discussing this as both men felt more than heard something very high pitched.

Then, the leader used his lower flipper to perform basically the same motions moving forward and then back, however he nearly overbalanced on the reverse so two of his fellow AquaNoids reached quickly over to steady... him?

Bud had made his way back, moving as slowly as he dared, to *Yamato* and had entered through the front lock. It required nearly an hour to do so. Inside and out of his suit he carefully plugged it into the power supply so it would be fully charged if and when needed before heading into the control room to report what had happened.

“Yeah, we saw a lot of that. I even recorded it,” Zimby stated. “Let’s hope we get them back soon so they can both enjoy watching man’s first contact with a totally unknown type of life.”

Red filled the pilot in on the communications with Enterprises and how Zimby was back in the community room getting fingerprints.

“Okay, then let’s see about maneuvering around and out of sight

of those creatures. I'd say lights off and we move as stealthily as possible!"

At the end of a couple hours Tom finally sat down on the wet muck of the cave. He was tired and he was hungry. Hank joined him a moment later but not before walking, slowly, to his Fat Man suit and pulling out one of the ration bags kept behind the operator's head.

The lead AquaNoid watched carefully before making one of their very high-pitched noises and motioning the others to move away. He, however, remained to watch.

With a small chuckle, Hank asked if Tom thought the creatures believed they might be doing something to relieve themselves. "Giving us privacy?"

Tom grinned and shook his head. "No idea, Hank. None."

The big Engineer tore open the vacuum-sealed bag and handed Tom one of the two containers of a nourishing liquid. They pulled off the sealing tabs and drank it down.

Seeing the look on their host's face, Tom held his container up. The blue creature shuffled forward and looked closely at the semi-soft bag. Tom slowly turned it around so all sides could be examined. The creature used its right flipper to take hold around it and pull it from the inventor's hand.

Other came back and they all looked it over carefully, with one—probably trying to show its bravery—flicked a tongue-like appendage from its mouth and gave the top a lick.

This caused several minutes of conversation at the end of which Tom had a headache. His sense of hearing went higher than most people's so the squealing sounds pierced into his brain.

The container was returned and Hank's taken for examination. As this was going on, Tom slid over to his suit and pulled out another rations bag. This time, and after making certain the AquaNoids were watching, he pulled the tab, took only a sip, and held it up to them.

Slowly, almost like a dog being handed a treat it is not entirely certain about, the leader reached out to touch the container. As it seemingly felt the same as the empty one, it took it, gingerly, from Tom's fingers and brought it toward its face.

Again, the tongue licked out and across the top. It moved the container away and stared at it before bringing it back and taking another lick.

Tom tried to mime that the creature ought to drink some, but that only got him a stare for about ten seconds. Then, he mimed pouring a small amount in his hand and licking it.

The AquaNoid's head turned to the side as if it was considering this. Another brief conversation was held and the smallest of the creatures came slowly forward. It held one flipper tip out and Tom saw it was turned vertical, so he showed both creatures how to orient the hand/flipper to capture some of the liquid.

The larger one had problems turning his flipper to the side so Tom reached out with a hopeful look on his face. The big AquaNoid looked at the inventor, then at his smaller companion and then to the container. It reached over and Tom took it, stepping to within range of the smaller one.

He carefully tipped about a half teaspoon onto the flipper and the creature brought it towards its face. It seemed to ponder the liquid for too long and the larger one made a noise that almost forced Tom and Hank to cover their ears.

The smaller one took a lick. A sort of excitement made an appearance on its face and it lapped up the rest of the liquid. Then, it held the flipper back out and obvious sign it wanted to have more.

Over the next half hour Tom and Hank doled out two of their containers, and all the eleven visible AquaNoids tried it.

The liquid was a hit and the creatures went into a conference, far enough away so their high-pitched sounds did not inconvenience the humans, and soon three of them disappeared around a corner.

“Well, they seemed to like it. Either that,” Hank commented wryly, “or they’ve gone out to get something to hit us with.”

As Damon sat and fretted about what to tell Anne, his screen came to life.

Mr. Swift? It's us again. We need to have you tell your crew down there nix on any further discussion on captures or any other info about what might be down there.

You and they please word things indicating Tom and the other man are trapped in an underwater cave-in. We are working with the Outpost's Security man to take the bad

**radio operator into custody
but need at least two hours.**

**Understood. You're not afraid
your communications with me will
be intercepted?**

**Not particularly as we have
found we are unhackable. Sort
of like your own system but
without going up into space.**

**Oh, and word has reached
that Norkis may now be in the
area. Can't tell how, but is
on good authority.**

**Are you aware of Tom's current
predicament?**

**Yes, but can do nothing from
this end. Keep us advised!**

Damon called Communications and asked if they still had contact with the *Yamato*.

"We do. Want to be hooked up?"

"Please." When Red answered the radio call, the inventor filled him in on the other submarine.

"Keep a lookout, although they have a crush depth of only about ten thousand feet. Better than most subs, but I doubt they can get to you. They do have torpedoes and I'd say to listen carefully for those sounds." He then told Red about communicating Tom and Hank's predicament in the *cave-in*.

Red Jones was an intelligent man and picked up on the subtext of that message.

"Right, Damon. They are still sealed in but with plenty of air for a couple days. I'll let you know."

* * * * *

Inside the cave the two men were feeling tired and Tom guessed it was from the great pressure of the water outside, some of which was being mitigated somehow, but it was wearing them down quickly.

He attempted to mime laying his head down and closing his eyes, but this was not understood by the creatures.

Out of a little desperation, the inventor lay prone on the sand and turned his head away from the AquaNoids. This must have registered with them as he heard them shuffle out of the area.

“Well, they’ve gone and about time,” Hand stated. I really need to get out of this adult diaper we wear when in these suits. If you’ll excuse me?” and he climbed into his Fat Man.

By the time he came back out, Tom was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 19 /

IMPASSE AND UNDERSTANDING AND DEATH

"DO YOU really believe they understood that?" Hank asked as Tom pulled his upper body out from his Fat Man suit. The engineer helped him ease it to the ground and then stepped back.

The two men had managed to get a few hours alone for some rest and now the inventor had climbed back inside his Fat Man trying to use the sonaphone communication system to "talk" with the AquaNoids.

The idea had come to Tom as they rested. "If they communicate in sounds almost too high for us to hear, why not give our own sonaphones a try?"

Hank could think of no good reason not to. So, when they came back out to the room with the pool of water where their suits lay, Tom had eased into his and partially got the top dome closed before several of the blue creatures raced in to try to halt any escape attempt. He had held out both of the suit's hands and spoke into the microphone, "Friends," before pointing at them and then to Hank.

The beings stopped coming at him and cocked their heads.

That had started the dialog.

Now, Tom had climbed back out and was standing with his engineer waiting for some sort of verdict.

They looked at their hosts and could see they were conferring about something. High up, at the top range of Tom's hearing range, were various squeals and pips. Some were fairly benign and a few were real eye-popping screeches. The AquaNoids seemed to have come to some sort of conclusion and the noises ceased.

A moment later, the largest of them came over and did something totally unexpected. It picked the Fat Man suit up and set it on its feet. Next, and to Hank's almost panic, it carefully picked Tom up and set his feet inside.

"I think they want me to get inside and... and then... what?" Tom told him. A sudden thought occurred to him. "Hank! I'll bet they want me to get the suit in the water so the sonar wave communications travel correctly." Facing the creature that had placed him inside, Tom pointed to his mouth and then to the suit before finally the water inside the cavern.

In rapid succession he made a mouth-to-suit-to-water motion before pointing to the creatures.

This caused another consultation between the creatures before the large one repeated as much of the motions as its physiology allowed.

Tom smiled and nodded before repeating the motions ending up with him pointing at his own ears.

"I think they like that, skipper!"

What Tom and his team could not know was at the same time the inventor was coming to some sort of understanding with the AquaNoids, Oclutus Norkis had not just secured a small nuclear submarine from China and was in the area, he was on his way down. It was a formerly secret submarine built using stolen plans for a U.S. Navy submarine, the NR-1.

At 147 feet in length and capable of carrying a crew of up to thirteen men, and none of them in any sort of comfort, China's version had been built to exceed the original's depth rating of just over 3,000 feet. It could, when pressed, triple that depth and remain submerged with a ten-man crew for as many as four weeks, and that suited Norkis.

"Plenty of time to capture what I want to show folks," he'd said to the man brokering the deal. That man had narrowed his eyes and glanced at his associate. Both were thinking, "Foolish Westerners!"

The price had been a steal at just about a million dollars U.S., and was warmly welcomed by both sides. By Norkis for him getting a private nuclear submarine and China for getting rid of something they were going to need to fully decommission, remove the fuel and reactor from, and then dispose of at an estimated cost of ten times what Norkis paid.

With the world carefully watching their every move so far as nuclear vessels was concerned, they could not just take it out to the South China Sea and scuttle it! Not even at the island base they had built years earlier to cover their old dumping grounds.

Oclutus Norkis had been bothered by the lack of private space or showering facilities and only one barely adequate toilet, but he felt this trip and what he would bring back would make all that personal discomfort seem worthwhile by comparison.

Norkis and his handpicked crew of nine others left the seaport harbor of Shantou where it had been in storage and headed out into the Pacific.

Originally named the *Xiǎo Móshù Shī*, or *Little Magician*, and now renamed the *Oclutus One*, the sub was not a speedy vessel at about 5 knots on the surface. It only got into the area of the Trench

six days after Tom and crew submerged for their second try at retrieving the *SeaKing*. Even at that it needed to be towed by a freighter heading in that direction, which had cost Norkis one hundred thousand dollars.

Terrribly reactive to the will of the sea, the entire crew was close to mutiny from seasickness when Norkis announced they were going to submerge.

A half-hearted cheer went through the little sub and all preparations, at least those found in the official diving manual for the submarine, were made.

With four small geysers of air and water shooting into the air from the front and back of the hull, *Oclutus One* began settling into the water.

The crew had submerged six times on the way out, mostly for practice but also for the lessening of the wave motion it brought. The crew were determined to earn the rather high fees they were all being paid for this trip and looked forward to returning quickly to South Africa, Iran, and Qatar and their families.

There were several things they, and indeed, *Oclutus Norkis*, did not know of understand about their submarine. Which was unfortunate.

The first was this small sub would never be able to take onboard even one of the creatures. There was no point of reference in the intercepted message he'd paid handsomely for showing their relative size. Norkis had a vague notion they could be forced down through the crew hatch and into the one room he could partially flood without causing the sub to sink.

The next thing was the reactor was a little finicky and its heat exchanger system was suffering from what might be termed, constipation. The seawater to be drawn in and circulated around the coolant piping was not working at full capacity. It really was just in infestation of a rather hardy sea algae that had decided the lining of the exchanger was a very nice place to attach and grow and had been doing so for years. This blocked about half the water flow through the system. So, the reactor ran somewhat hot and that meant the small sub was hot inside.

With the sub relying on a small amount of this cold water to keep the interior at a reasonable temperature, the men were suffering.

The most serious of these oversights or misunderstandings or faults—call them what you liked—was *Oclutus Norkis* could not read a chart to save his life and was under the mistaken belief the measurement of “10,000” units of ocean over the trench was *10,000 feet* and therefore only slightly more than their rated maximum

depth.

It was actually 10,000 *meters*!

There were some differences between the Chinese version of the sub and the original U.S. one. Chief among these, and something Norkis was very interested in, were the four torpedo tubes up front (the Chinese version) that featured small torpedoes that used very pure hydrogen peroxide to spin the counter-rotating propellers.

Norkis knew Tom Swift and his submarine were down there and his intent was to not bother with mere interference or to try to race the other sub to where the creatures could be found; immediately on locating the sub he would send a spread of torpedoes out to destroy the inventor and his submarine.

Here is where two more misunderstandings came out not in his favor.

One: The *Yamato II* was made of materials that the torpedoes could not home in on, and;

Two: Even if they did, the small explosive charge in each weapon was not sufficient to puncture the *Yamato's* hull. They were meant to blow holes in the sides of fishing trawlers from other nations they always believed to be spy ships!

Four hours later and only at a depth of 2,872 feet, Norkis ordered the upper pair of torpedo tubes be opened when the rather unsophisticated SONAR onboard detected another sub in the area. Thinking it *had* to be Tom Swift, Norkis smugly believed he could get rid of his opponent early on in the battle.

“What direction is that submarine?”

“To our south, sir.”

Here is where one final misunderstanding about the vessel around him and the torpedoes she carried came into play.

Because of the explosive nature of the propellant, the sub had a system that constantly circulated the nearly pure H₂O₂ out of each torpedo and through a chiller before returning it to the fuel system. Unfortunately, the system was ill-maintained and was not doing its job thus making the fuel very volatile!

Working or not, it was necessary to disconnect the tubes manually from each torpedo before an intended launch. It was in the manual that was entirely in Chinese characters so Norkis had ignored it. On the side of each tube was a diagram of a hand turning a nearby valve and then pulling down the lever next to it.

This was also ignored.

The tubes did not get disconnected.

The first torpedo was sent the **FIRE** command and it started its propellers as a blast of compressed air shoved the weapon forward and out into the water.

The connectors ripped off the aft end of the torpedo and high-pressure seawater intermixed with the propellant and blew the back of the weapon off before it was fully outside. This caused a chain reaction that... well, in the end the submarine that had been Norkis's ideal way of making many millions of dollars, lost the front third of the hull and the inrush of water crushed everyone inside.

Nobody inside even had a chance to regret coming on the adventure.

For a split second Oclutus Norkis was getting very angry with the Chinese! Then, he was far beyond caring.

* * * * *

The Japanese submarine Norkis' people heard was actually outside the range of the torpedoes fired by the smaller submarine and was travelling just a hundred feet underwater and eleven miles to the north.

Her sonarman yanked his headphones from his head, and shouted "*Kusō*." His Captain turned, eyes narrowed at the impolite outburst and curse, but he said nothing. Even with the great depth and distance between them, the explosion had been heard, and felt, through their hull.

"Make a notation of that," he ordered before turning back to studying their navigation chart.

* * * * *

"What was that noise?" Bud asked as the SONAR, currently on the control room speakers, let out a small, muffled *boom* sound.

"Not sure, Bud. Some whales make booming noises, but that sounded sort of... well... more non-living if you get my drift."

"You know, Red, I think I do but that would not be possible, at least not in the way of the *Hull 406* we've already looked over. Oh, well. Keep an ear out for any other strange noises. Let's move back to that area with the strange undersea plants of twig things. The skipper and Hank have to be around there."

* * * * *

Over the following twenty hours, Tom used his suit and a version of the translator he had developed for his space Friends' visit and recorded the sonic sounds made by his new acquaintances, he also added what he believed the English translation might approximate.

He managed to make it clear to the blue creatures he and Hank

were near exhaustion and required sleep so the creatures herded them into a small alcove where the men lay down and were soon unaware of anything around them.

Tom awoke to a horrible smell and a slight prodding from a very soft flipper. He nudged Hank and they sat up. Before them, sitting on what appeared to be dried seaweed, was a combination of some sort of plant life, likely to have come from the small forest outside, mixed with something raw and smelly.

“I know what that is, skipper. That is some raw fish from the ones we saw in the small pond at the entry to this cave. Some sort of tuna they have been farming, I think, and they eat. No fire so raw.” He wrinkled his nose, but being hungry and from a Scandinavian family, he was used to things like lutefisk, or a raw and slightly spoiled whitefish.

He dug in. It took Tom a minute to get his stomach ready, but soon he was eating with, if not gusto, at least without wincing or gagging.

He stopped with a couple bites remaining, a look of wonder spreading across his face.

“Think I know why they have those water pumps at various spots along the slope.”

Hank was licking his fingers. “Oh?”

“These fish do not live down here, right?”

“Yeah...”

“So, my thought is they use their water pumps to blow them deeper and deeper, then capture them before the depth ruptures them and put them in the pen... uhh, pond. Then, they have a ready source of protein to go with their plants and algae.”

The men finished their meal and took a couple of the body wipes from their Fat Man suits to clean up a little.

“I’m no longer smelling as fresh as a daisy,” Hank remarked as he got a whiff of his own underarm.

“Welcome to my club,” responded the inventor with a wry sort of grim. “So, what do you believe is on the agenda?”

Hank looked at the entrance of their alcove and spotted two of the AquaNoids lurking outside. “I think they might like a bit more conversation. Do you believe you are making yourself understood? I know you’ve already said you are getting about one in five words, or sounds, and the rest are only wild guesses.”

Tom nodded. “Right. But, the more we add to the translator, and the more they try and we try, I think I am getting the hang of what

they want to tell us.”

“Oh. That being?”

“They come from a long way away from this planet, like that solar system drawing they made, and they have been here possibly as long as four hundred years. They do have a rudimentary written language that includes some mathematics, and if I read the squiggles in the sand right, and they actually are pointing at Neptune for reference to orbital time, they indicate it is somewhere about three orbits of our big, old blue friend out there since they came to Earth.”

“We both know the exclamation Bud would make, so I’ll just say, wow. Umm, that is something like a hundred sixty years times three?”

“One-sixty-five, give or take and that means more than four hundred sixty years ago.”

They stood in silence as more of the creatures shuffled into the alcove.

“Why didn’t they go home?”

“I hope to find that out, but I think they simply like it here. They figured out how to use water to force things from higher up down so they can eat, and I know they shy away from any direct light, so my belief is their home planet and sun do not provide a lot of light, or warmth.”

Tom pointed at the entry and moved a step closer. The AquaNoids wiggled back and allowed him and Hank to pass, all of them heading for the pool of water closer to the entrance.

Once there, Tom climbed into his Fat Man and waddled into the water, soon submerging until just his tomaquartz dome and hatch were above the surface.

Three of the blue creatures joined him and they began going back over many of the sounds Tom already had heard and been able to figure a few out.

Four hours later, he had a *Eureka!* moment and bobbed up, popping his hatch and calling out to Hank.

“I’ve got it! I figured out their syntax and suddenly a lot of things they are saying to me make a lot more sense. Not everything and not entirely, but by golly, we’re actually talking!”

“And, are they from another solar system?”

“They sure are. Got here when we thought and just stayed because of all the available fish, then figured out how to grow other things down here. Their ship was dismantled to make the dozen or

so pumps they have and to do something to regulate the air pressure in these caves. And power everything. Gee I wish we could stay here and get to know them!”

In *Yamato*, Bud and the others in the control room had been overhearing the occasional word or partial sentence coming from Tom.

“At least we know the skipper is alive. Sounds like he’s trying to talk to the natives. What am I saying?” Zimby asked. “We’re the sort of natives, at least Earthly natives. They are supposedly space tourists who I’m guessing now have moved in down here.”

“Can we send something out to him?” Bud asked.

“Sure, but whether he hears it or not is up for debate. I suppose we can at least try.”

“Do it, then. Send the following: ‘Skipper, we’re out here. When can you both come back?’

“That should do it.”

The message went out, four times, before Zimby cut the outgoing and sat waiting.

Tom returned to the surface again to tell Hank he’d just received a call from their sub. “They’re waiting for us. How do you thing our hosts will take to me answering them?”

“What more can they do, Tom. They already have us and I seriously doubt they can capture the *Yamato* before Red or the others zoom away. I say, go for it.”

He pulled back underwater and made a call to the sub.

“It’s Tom. We are okay and meeting new friends. Safe, dry and fed. it might take another day or two before we can really talk to them, so pop a buoy, call dad and tell him we’ll be a few days late coming home. He’ll know what to do. Oh, they want my attention so I have to go. Later!”

He returned his attention to the AquaNoids who were standing or reclining nearby as if waiting to continue.

“Don’t they ever sleep?” Hank wondered aloud.

“Possibly not,” the inventor responded. “Or, if they do maybe it is like the sleep sharks experience. Their bodies move along so oxygenated water flows across their gills, but they are in a state of rest. Our new friends must have some sort of gills inside, or something that allows them to stay outside for long periods of time,

but the fact they have this air-filled cave system says they tolerate or even need to be out of the water some of the time. Perhaps they are like lungfish that can survive in both environments?”

Tom suggested that Hank take a try at communicating with the AquaNoids, so the big engineer climbed into Tom’s suit—with the translator—and walked into the water.

The first thing happening was he received a recorded message from the *Yamato*.

“Tom or Hank? Mr. Swift says to info gather and then see if you can get out. Make certain, if possible, your friends know you are not going to tell their secret. Call if you get this. Repeating message... Tom or Hank?—”

“Yamato, it’s Hank. Got the message. We might be able to get out in about five or so hours. Skipper is learning their language so he can tell them we wish them peace and no more visitations. Now, I have to start talking to them myself. Hank, out.”

For more than three hours Hank added a few sound/word combinations to the translator’s memory. He tried to get a few concepts to the blue creatures such as keeping their secret and the need to leave.

He wasn’t certain they understood until he got back out. Tom was waiting with a big grin on his face.

“The AquaNoids want us to get ready to leave, Hank. They do understand us a bit more than we do them, and they understand we must go soon.”

After bidding their hosts farewell, and with Tom sending them message they would not be revealed to the world above, the two men in their Fat Man diving suits began to leave the large cave system and dwelling of the AquaNoids.

They had come in with their aqualamps off, but now they faced away from their new friends, the lamps were on.

“Skipper... look!” Hank nearly shouted as he pointed into a dark alcove to their left.

Tom looked and then looked more closely, finally stepping forward and reaching out his right hand.

In the darkness, dry and shiny, was the *SeaKing!*

CHAPTER 20 /

TO BREATHE THE AIR AND SEE THE SUN

BECAUSE IT was going to take them many hours to decompress after their time in the caves of the AquaNoids, Tom decided to spend that time in the front garage of *Yamato* checking over the *SeaKing*.

With Hank in the same waiting period, after the two men took a two hour nap—needed more than either man expected—Tom made a radio call and was quickly connected with Bashalli.

“Why did you not call me four days ago, Tom? We had set a schedule and I was scared something happened to you.”

Tom felt guilty. “Go talk to dad. He’ll fill you in on my comings and goings when we should have been talking. We have had very little contact with anyone because of the depth and I had some very important, kind of mission critical, things he needed to know. I’m surprised to hear he wasn’t keeping you in the loop.”

He heard her giggle a little. “Okay. The truth is he told me you had some troubles with a cave down there and getting your little submarine out. Sandy and I had to drive into Enterprises for a meeting with him the day before yesterday. She told me to make you worry. I will have a talk with your sister about this. Now, I am in the loop and you are off the hook!”

She told him to come home soon, and he promised that as soon as they got to the surface they would get to Guam as quickly as they could.

“We’ll have to make a short stop in Hawaii to check things, but will come home as fast as we can,” he declared.

Once the call was completed he and Hank set to the task of getting into the miniature sub at the same time. It was a tight squeeze, but they made it.

There had been a slight infiltration of water—a gallon or so—that was sitting in the very bottom of the sub. None of it appeared to have touched wiring or anything other than the inside of the hull, so it was wiped up and the area cleaned of any residual salt.

A thorough electronics check, once the main circuit breakers had been reset so power could travel from the power pod into the systems of the miniature, showed all but one green light. That red one was indicating the main circuit breaker Tom had just reset was faulty.

As if to prove this fact, all power shut off again a few seconds later.

“I guess that’s the *SeaKing*’s way of telling us we let things sit as they are until we get back to Enterprises,” the inventor stated.

Hank, with an agreeing nod of his head, eased his upper torso back out and went over to the wall where both men had been provided with blankets and pillows. He rested his back against the wall, pulled the blanket up over his chest and put the pillow behind his head.

Tom joined him and five minutes later both were snoring lightly.

* * * * *

Bud called forward to them hours later saying that Harlan was on the radio.

“Send it to my Fat Man, please. We can’t come out for another two hours.”

“Tom? We are all so happy you and Hank got out of that cave-in. No need to discuss any of *that* now, but I do have more to report about your sabotage of the diving suits. It turns out that one of the crew of that Tender in Guam is, or was, in the employ of a North Korean man you have tangentially run into trouble with. Used to work with the daughter of the Black Cobra. Anyway, turns out he was one of the work crew that came aboard, only he hid out and didn’t leave until after you all went over for dinner. He practically bragged about how easily it had been to remain behind and that he could have put a bomb under your command chair if he’d wanted to.”

“Please tell me he is in custody now.”

“Oh, yes! He is in custody now, Tom. He tried to take his own life but was stopped and is in a straightjacket in the Guam military jail up at the Air Force base. Evidently it is much stronger, and no doubt a lot less nice, than the one on the Navy base. Just thought you’d be happy to know he’s out of circulation. Now, all I have to do is see what someone can do about the man in North Korea!”

* * * * *

Tom arranged for a weighted net to be dropped approximately where the cave was. He had it filled with as many of the nutrient gel packs—about twenty in all—from their supplies along with a small sharp pair of scissors he hoped would allow them to open the packs.

“Nice of you to send them a hostess gift,” Bud quipped.

* * * * *

“I never realized the sun and the fresh air could be so... so...” Bud

was at a loss for words as he and Tom stood on the topside of the *Yamato*. They had opened the top hatch four minutes earlier. With all their ship-wide decompressions accomplished they had reached the surface just nine minutes before.

“So wonderful? So delicious? So, now we get back inside and call our wives?”

Bud laughed. “Yep! Come on.”

Both men slipped down into the *Yamato*, closing the top hatch above them before heading for the radio station in the control room. There, Bud swept an arm down low telling Tom, as Captain, it was his prerogative to make the call first.

“Nope. You go ahead, Bud. I owe you and Sandy that pleasure. Just tell her to not call Bash as I am right on your heels for that honor.”

Zimby moved to the side leaving the seat open for whoever was going to make the call.

“I do have to admit I called Enterprises and told them we are back on the surface, and that the mission was a success.” Looking only slightly guilty over this admission, he added, “There was a repeating message from your dad, skipper, asking for immediate contact once we came back up.”

Tom grinned and clapped the pilot on his right shoulder. “Not a problem, Zim. In fact, I’m glad you did. I just hope you told him the next few calls will be to wives and the crew’s significant others before I give him a good rundown of what happened.”

“Yep. Plus, I said nothing about what we found other than we have the *SeaKing* in our nose.”

Bud had taken the seat during this exchange and was waiting for the others to move away.

“Hey, Enterprises. Can you get Sandy Swift-Barclay on the line? It’s Bud.”

“Just who the heck do you think is standing right here waiting for you?” a female voice he recognized as his wife’s asked.

“My hope is this is you, sweetheart, and not one of the techs doing a darned good impression of you. This isn’t Keith Woeltje, is it?”

Sandy said a rather rude word before adding, “No, my precious. *it is me... I. Whatever.* So, did you all come up dry and healthy?”

Without mentioning any of the taboo subjects he gave her a one-minute rundown of the three dives and the eventual location of the small sub.

“She had drifted along the bottom nearly fourteen miles,” he said, “only leaving a trail we could see and follow about a third of the time. Guess she had enough buoyancy to sort of hop around down there. In the end she somehow got caught inside a small cave. Without a lot of luck we’d have completely missed her.”

Knowing others needed the radio, and that he could not tell her everything yet, Bud and Sandy agreed to catch up better when the crew returned to Guam.

“And, do we have an idea when that might be?” she inquired, sounding like she was about to cry from happiness.

“Tom tells me we head back to Guam in an hour at top speed and get there by two this afternoon, Guam time. We have to debrief the Navy there tonight and get a night’s sleep. Then we hook up to the sling and fly it home over the next twenty-three hours. I ought to be at your door by, ummm, I guess that would be about an hour before we leave there, international date line and all. So, it’s Wednesday and I’ll be in your arms on Wednesday.”

After exchanging thoughts of love, he asked her to turn the radio over to the duty tech and for Bashalli to be called.

Tom spent his ten minutes telling her he was fine, that he loved her and the children, and also gave her the approximate time of arrival at Fearing island.

“When I talk to him, I’ll tell dad to bring you and Sandy and whoever can come out for our touchdown. Gosh, but I love you, Bash. I have to go, but I really, really love you!”

“And, I love you so much I almost hurts, Tom. Please come home quickly.”

The time came for Tom’s call to Damon Swift and he pulled out his tablet computer on which he’d taken about fifteen screens of notes.

After hearing about the trip, including the discovery of another lost submarine on the way back to the surface, presumed to be that of Oclutus Norkis, Damon said he had some news.

“For starters, I’m guessing that other sub was fairly small.” Tom admitted it had been. Damon told his son it likely had been holding the renegade scientist—along with a small crew—and his plans to capture one or more rare sea creatures. “It all fits with what your Collections person told me.

“Secondly, you will recall our visit from the Vice President?” Tom acknowledged he obviously remembered that. “Fine. Then you also

recall his statement about the power situation up here and in other places all around the country. The surprise power cut we experienced as his jet was touching down ended up not being an isolated incident. Two weeks later as you were heading into the Mariana Trench, Air Force One with the President and eighty others was about fifty feet from touchdown in Boise, Idaho.

“They did get their rear wheels on the ground, but had to go full power and emergency take off before the end of the runway when all landing lights and radio comms with the tower went out.”

“Wow. Nothing bad happened, did it? We haven’t heard anything about that from our Navy friends.”

“Only that before he left the aircraft sixty minutes later and over in Portland, Oregon, he had drafted and sent out an Executive Order stating that the program presented to Congress by the V.P. has to be put into action in as little time as is possible. That included mentioning the Citadel and our reactors as being the safest and fastest nuclear power solution available.

“We’ve received more than a dozen and a half requests for on-site visits and discussions about our systems from eleven states.”

“Including New York?”

“Specifically including our state and even our county. Both the President and V. P. Preston mentioned Shopton as a particularly bad location in need of immediate fixing.”

They spoke of a few other things before Tom said he really needed to get some sleep before they arrived in Hawaii where the *Yamato* and her Recovery Sling would remain for one final one-hour check out and re-balancing—if required—prior to heading for Fearing to be met by Damon and Anne, along with Bashalli and the three children, Amanda, and Sandy Swift-Barclay.

“Anything else before I let you go?”

“I guess I do have one last question,” Tom admitted. “What is going to happen to those three men we captured in the Norwegian spacecraft? I mean, they can’t stay at the base outside Washington forever. Right?”

Damon laughed. “No, they can most certainly not stay. In fact, I had them released and transported back to Norway more than two weeks ago right after you left again. They did not want to go so the Air Force brought in a Marine detachment with a set of those jaws of life fire departments use and pried the hatch off their ship.”

He told a tale of the captain of that ship who had refused to come out even when threatened with being starved out. The man insisted he and his small crew were political prisoners and as such

demanded to receive both an amnesty for any transgressions, they also demanded to be given political asylum because of what he termed, "...the likelihood I and my men will be tortured to find out the secrets of that damnable ship of the Swifts!"

Tom chuckled when his father mentioned the U.S. State Department had pondered that request for less than two minutes before sending word it had been denied. The Marines arrived within the hour.

"The truth is that Norway wants to just have them disappear back into civilian life. It seems they are all three moderately senior officers in their Air Force and volunteered for the failed mission. So, no torture but also no comfortable retirement for them."

All Tom could do was shake his head. To him their mission was one of a fool's errand and should never have been forced to happen. He secretly wondered if the G-20 Chairman would be brought to task for his attempted piracy of the *Yamato II*.

Then, he decided to ask.

"I received a call from my old friend, Penelope Clothiet-Warner who tells me she has been asked to resume her duties, and she also sends her regrets for the incident. Her predecessor is starting the beginnings of a long time in prison."

"I suppose that's something. Are you happy she's back?"

Damon nodded "Yes. But, that is secondary to the message she left for you. Care to hear it?"

"Sure."

"Here goes: 'Tom, this is Penelope Clothiet-Warner. By now my guess is Damon had told you I am back. I realize you likely still believe I blindsided you back before you put up your incredible ozone replenishing devices, and for that perception I apologize and admit culpability. However, I did it that way so you and your father could get the U.S. Government paying for your work. So, please accept my apology for giving a wrong impression.'

'I have anguished over that for years.'

'Also, please accept my congratulations for your having been to Neptune, brought back such a treasure trove of scientific samples and data. And, as I understand it you have retrieved your ship and are currently under the ocean. Perhaps in the future I might find the time and money to entice you to taking on a couple retrieval missions deep under the oceans? Anyway, my gratitude for what you and your father and all of your companies do.'

"That's about it."

Tom gave a contented sigh before asking, "Should I call her and tell her I bear no ill will?"

Damon shook his head. "No. I told her you are not the sort to bear a grudge, so let's just hope we either do not need her to intercede in anything in the future, or that if she comes to us, it will be with something we can all enjoy."

The reunion in Hawaii at the former Air Force base next to the international airport in Honolulu was warm and early on the part of all involved. Unbeknownst to most of the crew, their significant others and even children were brought out in the *Super Queen*.

Damon had made the decision to not keep family members waiting even the extra two days for the reunion with the *Yamato* crew so everyone headed for Hawaii a day ahead of the anticipated arrival.

A replacement crew for the *Sky Queen* also arrived and would be escorting *Yamato* back to Fearing Island where it would reside.

On the trip over the Pacific Tom received a message from his mysterious Collections:

**Do not reply, just know how
incredibly pleased we are. Great
to know the cave-in did not do
you in. More, someday, later.**

It made Tom grin to know that even the elusive and all-knowing YTDW group knew when to keep their big mouths shut!

Before Tom could leave to go home to Bashalli and the kids, three days later, Damon took him aside and asked for the younger man's assessment of the strange beings deep in the ocean. "Now that you've had more time to relax and contemplate things."

"Well, you have all the basic stuff and the videos we managed to get, but I guess you really mean what do we do about them. Right?"

His father nodded.

Taking a deep breath, Tom told him his feelings.

"They are fairly benign as long as they remain under the deep cover of the Marianas Trench. Even *they* are intelligent enough to not try coming to the surface very often, and only then when it is so dark nobody would ever spot them. I'd really hate to see them discovered through our fault. They have been our peaceful neighbors for centuries, and I hope they remain that for centuries to

come. They have no plans I could discover to leave and go home. They really like it here.”

Damon nodded. “Good. So we are agreed they are not to be mentioned in public ever. I’ll give orders to archive all videos and other materials pertaining to them. That leaves us with a small problem. What do we say about your mission, then?”

Tom smiled. He pulled out his tablet computer and handed it to his father. “See if this makes sense to you,” he said pointing to a file the older man brought up.

Swift Enterprises announces the successful retrieval mission of a “lost” test submarine, plus information about another mission by another entity.

Tom Swift, son of inventor Damon Swift—who is the owner of Swift Enterprises, the Swift MotorCar Company, the Swift Construction Company, and other business concerns—headed a seven man mission into the deepest portion of the known oceans of the world, the Mariana Trench, which is alternately known as the Marianas Trench, between the eleventh of May and the twenty-third of the same month.

“We needed to bring back a small, fifteen-foot-long test submarine lost prior to our Neptune travels during an unexpected underwater current of some fifty knots in speed. It was lost in November of last year and could have remained on the ocean floor indefinitely, but the Swift companies do not leave anything just sitting around. There was never a chance of pollution, but if we drop it, we pick it up,” stated the younger Swift on return from his mission.

The accompanying trio of photographs show how bleak the floor of the Pacific Ocean at a depth of nearly 39,000 feet or 7.3 miles located to the south of the island nation of Guam actually appears. For reference, the illumination used was a total of 40,000 watts provided by 20 individual lights running between 2,700K to 5,200k (Kelvin) with the furthestmost object visible at a range of approximately 327 feet from the camera lens.

“It is very gray and nearly featureless,” Tom stated upon his return. “We found no signs of anything that could be classified, not even plant or coral life. It is just too darned deep and icy to support anything.”

More information followed including a link to several video clips that might be useful for television news organizations. The first two were fairly generic with the third one being of the ripped-open Chinese submarine.

The text ended with:

The mission was a complete success with our miniature submarine being located on the third dive, brought onboard the larger submarine (the *Yamato II*—the same space-going submarine we used on the Neptune trip) sent to bring it back, and quickly transported to the Swift's Atlantic Ocean island submarine and rocket base known as Fearing Island.

“Unfortunately,” Tom Swift stated, “the other part of this mission was to determine what may have occurred in the Chinese submarine that attempted to dive to this great depth several years ago. We found that sub, ruptured along her starboard side and totally open to the water. We placed a memorial wreath on the upper hull to honor those who perished in that mission.”

Adding to the level of sadness was the reported loss of another small submarine and its ten-man crew. The owner, Oclutus Norkis—most recently of South Africa—was on a private expedition deep inside the Mariana Trench when his vessel apparently lost power and sank to a depth it could not withstand. All her crew are believed to have perished. No reason for his attempt at following the Swift expedition was ever given.

On an unrelated note, Swift Enterprises has been awarded a license to design, build and operate a new power station for the benefit of the entire Shopton area. Once complete and online it will provide uninterrupted electricity to the entire area around and near the Lake Carlopa area. As many as twenty new stations will likely follow in locations to be determined and in the coming 20 months.

Damon smiled grimly and handed the tablet back to Tom.

“Great article—other than the Norkis tragedy—and if you keep that standard of writing up, George Dilling is going to get jealous. Ask him to add the standard hash above and below that and get it sent out.” He started to turn away, but looked at Tom.

“Did you ever find out what happened to that position marker you said disappeared?”

Tom nodded. “Yeah. The AquaNoids took it and shoved it deep inside the old *Hull 406* behind the reactor so the shielding blocks the signal from all except a fairly narrow angle. Oh well, it'll now mark the sub's final resting place.”

“I see. And, what wonderful new adventure is percolating in that head of yours?”

Tom grinned and shrugged. “After I reassure my wife and kids I am still among the living I might try to see if I can make any advancements in a couple of my earlier inventions,” he said.

There was no way he could know that within weeks he would be preparing for a new trip into outer space and an encounter with a wandering planet from far outside the known or even estimated solar system when he would travel to a starless planet... one that conceivably had been wandering the galaxy for millions of years.

<•>—< End of Story >—<•>

This has been book 27 in the ***New TOM SWIFT Invention Series***.
Read them all, and look forward to the next books, also listed here:

- {1} TOM SWIFT and His EvirOzone Revivicator
- {2} TOM SWIFT and His QuieTurbine SkyLiner
- {3} TOM SWIFT and the Transcontinental BulleTrain
- {4} TOM SWIFT and His Oceanic SubLimator
- {5} TOM SWIFT and His Cyclonic Eradicator
- {6} TOM SWIFT: Galactic Ambassador
- {7} TOM SWIFT and the Paradox Planet
- {8} TOM SWIFT and the Galaxy Ghosts
- {9} TOM SWIFT and His Martian TerraVironment
- {10} TOM SWIFT and His Tectonic Interrupter
- {11} TOM SWIFT and the AntiInferno Suppressor
- {12} TOM SWIFT and the High Space L-Evator
- {13} TOM SWIFT and the IntraEarth Invaders
- {14} TOM SWIFT and the Coupe of Invisibility
- {15} TOM SWIFT and the Yesterday Machine
- {16} TOM SWIFT and the Reconstructed Planet
- {17} TOM SWIFT and His NanoSurgery Brigade
- {18} TOM SWIFT and His ThermoIon Jetpack
- {19} TOM SWIFT and the Atlantean HydroWay
- {20} TOM SWIFT and the Electricity Vampires
- {21} TOM SWIFT and the Solar Chaser
- {22} TOM SWIFT and His SeaSpace HydroFarm
- {23} TOM SWIFT and the Martian Moon Re-placement
- {24} TOM SWIFT and the Venusian InvulnoSuit
- {25} TOM SWIFT and the HoverCity
- {26} TOM SWIFT and the SubNeptunian Circumnavigation
- {27} TOM SWIFT and the Marianas AquaNoids
- {28} TOM SWIFT and the Starless Planet (late 2019)
- {29} TOM SWIFT and His HyperSonic SpacePlane (2019)
- {30} TOM SWIFT and His Space Friends Return (possible title-2020)
- {31} TOM SWIFT and the Bride of the Aztec Mummy of Doom (a joke?)

*And, he has co-written a quartet of novels starring Tom Swift as he takes on the rescue of a secret slave colony on the Moon. Called the **Tom Swift Lunar Saga**, it includes:*

- *Tom Swift and His Space Battering Ram*
- *Tom Swift and the Cometary Reclamation*
- *Tom Swift and the Lunar Volcano*
- *Tom Swift and the Killing Moon*

Collections of novellas, many dealing with some of the individual characters in the novels and/or the lesser known inventions coming from the mind of Tom Swift may be found in:

- *Enterprising Characters*
- *Swift-ly With Style*
- *The Spirit of Enterprises*
- *Enterprises Extras*
- *Tom Swift's Pocket Book of Inventions*
- *Tom Swift's Another Pocket—More Inventions*
- *A Newer Pocketbook of Swift Inventions*
- *Tom Swift's A Fourth Pocket of Inventions*
- *Tom's 5th Symphony of Swift Inventions*
- *Ten Tom's: A Collection of Invention Shorts*
- *The Operator's Guide to the Fat Man Diving Suit*

In addition to the teen/adult Tom Swift stories he also has a book of stories about young pre-teen Tomas he starts to find his way into the world of inventions:

- *The Young Tom Swift Stories*

Tom's father, Damon, stars in his own series of novellas and several novels. The collections include:

- *The Wonderful Damon in Oz*
- *Damon Swift Invents...*
- *The Duly Deputized Rhino and Other Stories*
- *Yes... It's Another Damon Book!*
- *A Pair of Rather Long Short Stories*
- *Damon Swift in Flight*

And, the Damon novels that tell the early tales of Damon Swift and his rather impressive business empire:

- Damon Swift and the CosmoSoar
- Damon Swift and the Citadel
- Damon Swift's Greatest Enterprises

then, a long-*ish* novella of how Tom Swift met Bud Barclay and Chow:

- Damon Swift and the Citadel 2: A Bud and Chow Story

Tom's mother, Anne Swift starts in her own series of medical mysteries, *The Anne Swift: Microbial Detective* series contain novellas about her secret FBI work. There are three collections in this series plus a biographical novel about how it all began:

- Anne Swift: Making the Molecular Biological Detective

...Check out and download this little freebie, a short story—600 words—written for a contest back in 2011:

- *Tom Swift and the Frictionless Elf*

Find it at:

<http://tomswiftfanfiction.thehudsons.com/TS-Yahoo/TS-Elf.pdf>

Mr. Hudson has also written a couple of strange novellas that are available as Kindle ebooks. None are serious and were only written to amuse the author. Even so, he decided to share them. **Do not** expect life-changing literature for \$.99 (US) each:

- *The Fiendish Bucket List of Dr. Fu Manchu*
- *Drew Nance: Up On The Housetop, Click, Click, Bang!*
- *Drew Nance: The Massive Mart Murder Mystery*

Fu Manchu's story is included in a trio of short stories starring Fu, Sandy Swift, and Tom and Bud (and Sandy and Bashalli and a bad guy named Mousie):

- *A Trio of Shorts: Three Short Stories in One Medium-Length Book*

And a collection of odds and ends (also a 99¢ Kindle book):

- *Don't Write Fan Fiction Until You Grow Up, and other short stories too short to sell individually*

Along with Chow Winkler, Mr. Hudson has written several cookbooks. The first and second shorter ones are part of two of the short character collections. Numbers three and four are standalone books:

- Chow Winkler's Three-Wheel Chuck Wagon
- Chow Winkler's Wide Open Range

You might enjoy Thomas Hudson's first foray into the world of Romance novels. He wrote this as part of a bet with a fellow author that they both could not complete a romance story even if given ninety days. He did it in nineteen: *

- The Love of Skunk

Finally (for now) on a dare, he wrote a strange story about a young girl with both a physical and emotional difference to 99.99999% of people out there. It is an adult autobiography/biography and features her life story starting when she was a young teen.

This is NOT a Tom Swift story in any way, shape or form!

- *The Life of BI: Complete*

* Which is about fifteen days more than Barbara Cartland, Queen of Romance Novels, spent on any one book!

Everything above may be found on Amazon.com in paperbound as well as Kindle editions, and many of this author's works can be purchased as Nook books from BarnesAndNoble.com and from:

www.lulu.com/spotlight/tedwardfoxatyahoocotcom

<•>—< End of Book >—<•>

