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NOTE: The term ERB refers to the invention called an Endless Rain Barrel, a device that collects moisture from the surrounding air on a chilled stainless steel column.



CHAPTER 11 / A DIFFICULT DECISION

TOM, SUDDENLY unsure of how the villagers might react to the Skeeter dropping from the sky, asked his passenger what to expect.

"Tom. I sent a messenger on motorcycle out to Oombatu yesterday. If they have already arrived and informed the villagers of our coming we have nothing to fear. But if they have not... Many of our villages contain very superstitious people. They sometimes react with violence to the unknown."

Tom nodded in understanding. "You have motorcycles?"

"Motorcycle, Tom. Just one. Just as we have only a few vehicles all of which are in terrible disrepair. The motorcycle is actually what you call an all terrain vehicle. There is a narrow pathway kept cleared between each village and the capitol." He pointed below. "Ah. All is well. See the people down there waiving? We can make your additional trip around the area now."

He went on to explain that Magurro received one tank shipment of gasoline each month from a neighboring country, part of an agreement going back more than a dozen years. "Roughly five thousand liters."

"We must be careful in our use of the gasoline, but we only use our vehicles on special occasions. The majority of the fuel goes into our electrical generating station."

Tom sighted a good location for the Skeeter along with a second

location just 200 feet away where the ERB might be installed. He circled one more time around the village and then set the tiny helicopter down. Within seconds more than fifty villagers came into the clearing, waiting.

As he and the President alit from the craft, Tom noticed that the villagers all dipped their heads in respect for their national leader. After only seconds, they all raised their heads, their tired, smiling faces looking expectantly.

"This, Tom," Latumba said pointing at one of the oldest women in the group, "is Margat. She is the village leader. She is also the mother of my late wife."

Walking up to the woman he placed his hands on her shoulders, bowed his head forward until his forehead touched the top of her head, and spoke a few words in their native language, then said, "Margat. I come with this young man to help us all in our struggles. I hope we find you and your people well."

Stepping back, he looked into her eyes. She tilted her head to the side and replied, "We have lost another child this past few days. I hope that you and your white friend can help. We are near our end," she said with great sadness evident in her voice.

"Tom? Will you explain the function of your silver column to Margat, please?"

"Certainly! Ma'am? My company has created a machine that should be able to take small amounts of water out of the air, clean it so that it is pure and safe to drink, and then to let you take enough at a time to keep your people alive and healthy."

"Is this true," she asked, looking not at Tom but at the President.

"I believe this is true, Margat." He stated. "We have not been able to test it in the city, but Tom can have it here today and making water by..." he faltered, looking to Tom for information.

"Oh. By tonight, certainly," Tom stated. "It will take only a short time to set it up in that clearing over there," he said pointing toward the area he had spotted from above. "That is, if your will give us permission to use that area," he added, seeing a look of consternation cross her face.

"That area," she said, "is considered to be a location of thought and healing and happiness..." As if having a sudden happy thought herself, she looked up at Tom and said, "That should make it a place for your machine, a special place for a machine that will bring health and happiness to our village. You may place it there."

Following a few more minutes of conversation where Tom described in general details how the ERB would function, he and President Latumba took off and returned to the airport.

The ERB was fully encased in a harness that was soon attached to the bottom of the Skeeter. It was decided that trying to use the Skeeter to both transport the ERB as well as the team necessary to install it would

take too long. Therefore, the team would be transported to a location in the jungle less than a half-mile from the village and lowered using the winch system aboard the *Sky Queen*. That would be far enough away so that the jet lifters would not damage any of the nearby jungle. They could hike to the village.

Tom lifted off moments later with the ERB dangling beneath, and headed back toward the village. The bulk and weight of the ERB strained the Skeeter's lift and speed abilities, but he was able to make it to the village in about seventy-five minutes.

On the way, he had spotted the Flying Lab going by overhead and to the west. Tom had radioed them with his estimated time of arrival.

Coming in over the village, Tom noticed that the installation team, led by Bud, had already made their way from the 'drop' site and were waiting with equipment and guy wires.

Tom hovered directly over the site and radioed Bud. "Ready down there?" he asked.

"Roger, Tom," Bud replied. "Lower away!"

It took only a few minutes to slowly lower the ERB into position. Fortunately, the villagers had long ago flattened the ground in this clearing, so there was no need to prepare the ground. It was perfectly level.

Tom kept the Skeeter hovering with the ERB attached while the team extended a lightweight ladder and attached the six guy wires that would ensure the ERB would stay upright even in a storm. These were quickly attached to a series of anchors that had been driven into the hard ground at the edge of the clearing. Each anchor was more than 15 feet long, self-seating and would take more than the power of the Skeeter to pull from the ground.

Finally, Tom flipped the switch that detached the harness and piloted the tiny copter to the main clearing where he and the President had landed earlier that day.

Margat and several older villagers approached him as he debarked from the craft.

"We bring you words of thanks, for that is all we can offer," she said. Indicating the others, she continued, "These are the elders of our village. I do not wish to sadden you, but I must have you understand that we are in great danger. If your machine can bring water to our village, we can survive. If not, then all of the elders will go out into the jungle where we will be no further burden to the small amounts of water our well provides."

Tom was aghast. He knew that Margat meant that the elders would die to make the meager supplies last longer for the younger villagers. He was now even more determined that he must succeed, that the ERB must make water enough to save all the villagers.

"Ma'am. You have my word that I will do everything in my power to make sure that *everyone*," he put great emphasis on that word, "everyone will live and prosper in your village."

Margat and the others looked at each other, then she spoke a single word... "Good!"

By the time Tom arrived at the ERB site, Bud was pacing around with a worried look on his face. "Tom," he said not looking the young inventor in the eyes. "It isn't working like back at Enterprises."

Tom's heart sank, until he noticed that the entire team had their faces turned away, several barely able to keep from laughing.

"Budworth Barclay! Tell the truth before I start crying," Tom said sternly.

"Okay, genius boy. It works even *better* than back home!"

The entire team cheered as Tom approached the control and status panel. Taking a look at the readouts he let out a yip of glee. "Wahoo! Seventeen percent higher yield than our tests back home. Those last minute changes really make a difference!"

He turned to Margat and the villagers explaining, "It works, ma'am." Pointing to the column, now wet and glistening, he continued, "that is water being removed from the air. Not enough for you to notice, but enough to slide down the column and for the purification process to begin. We should have enough water to test in about twenty minutes, and water to dispense for drinking in less than an hour."

A tear formed in the corner of the old woman's left eye. She bowed her head and in a low voice said, "If this is truly to be giving us water, then you must be in league with highest of beings. You give us water which is surely the same as giving us life!" With that, she turned from Tom and walked slowly out of the clearing. The others all left with her leaving Tom alone with the ERB.

Tom was struck dumb. Almost always humble, he could scarcely believe the woman's words and her sentiments.

Ten minutes later one of the assembly crew found him still standing and looking at the place where Margat had stood.

"Umm, Skipper? You okay?" he asked.

Almost as if coming out of a dream, Tom turned to look at the man. "Huh? Oh, yeah, Dave. I was just lost in thought for a minute."

"I wanted to take a water sample and give it a test. That all right with you?"

"Absolutely." Tom shook off the last mental cobwebs and helped the technician draw off a liter of the newly collected and purified water. The collection tank already had several gallons of water in it with more coming through the pipe from the antibacterial chamber.

Within minutes the technical showed Tom the results. "Absolutely pure

and ready to drink," Tom stated. "Go and get Margat and the village elders for me, please. I'm going to show them that they now have a continuous supply of fresh water."

Dave disappeared while Tom turned back to the ERB. He was just unfolding a collapsible drinking cup when the villagers began to arrive, Margat in the lead.

"Ma'am. We have water!" Tom showed her how the tap system worked and poured a full cup of water. He asked if she would like to be the first to taste it, but seeing a hint of mistrust in her eyes, he then suggested that he drink the first cup. She approved and he upended the cup drinking every drop.

Watching his face carefully, Margat suddenly smiled. "You are still alive! You must be making good water. I will now sample it, please."

Tom took out another cup and opened it. He let the woman operate the tap making sure she understood that it must be turned off completely between each amount dispensed. She understood and put the cup to her lips. Taking a small sip, her eyes grew large and round like saucers. She finished the cup of water, handed the empty container to Tom, and slowly collapsed to the ground at his feet.

Tom went white and was speechless. The villagers looked from the prostrate form of their village leader and back to Tom. He began to feel panic rising in his throat. What had happened? Why had the woman collapsed? He knew he couldn't run. If this was something he had caused, he would take responsibility.

With an almost girlish giggle, Margat sat up and pointed at Tom.

"Ha!" she said. "I have startled you. Yes?"

"W-w-w-well," Tom stammered, "you sure did. You are all right, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes. I am old, tired and weak, but I am better right now than I was a minute ago. Your water device had made me so. I was overcome with great joy."

Tom took a box of the collapsible cups from Dave and began handing them out to the villagers. As they each received a cup, Dave and another technician showed them how to unfold and refold the cups for future use.

Proudly, Margat then showed each of them how to turn on the flow of the water to fill their cups. Several times she raised her voice at someone who didn't quite understand that the tap must be manually turned off to preserve the precious resource.

Each villager took a tentative sip of the water and then practically gulped down the rest of their glasses.

Tom explained to Margat that the machine needed about a full day in order to totally fill the tank and that they might run out before each villager had their first taste, but the ERB successfully stayed just ahead of

the demand finally running dry just as the second to last person filled their cup. Seeing that the water had stopped flowing before he had turned the tap off, the man gladly shared his cup with the last person, a very old man who had hung back from the others until the end.

"You will all be able to start having more cups in about four hours," Tom told the crowd of villagers.

"How much this produce in water, mister Tom," one of the village teenagers asked.

"Enough for each person to have as many as ten cups per day," he replied. "Plus water to properly wash food and to use in cooking as well. Any extra can be put in containers for your goats and chickens to drink."

Now it was Margat's turn to be speechless. She muttered her thanks to Tom almost bringing the youth to tears as her emotions poured out in the relief she felt at this wonderful news.

"With this, perhaps we will not all die. Many are already sick from lack of water. The young are given more than the old, as is proper, but even we ancient ones feel the clawing thirst every day! Your gift of life is like that *of a god!*"

CHAPTER 12 / INVASION!

TOM WAS speechless. He had become accustomed to having praise heaped on his inventions, but he tried to dissociate himself from the success of his endeavors. He was always embarrassed in the face of personal praise, but this declaration from the village leader stunned him.

"M-m-ma-Margat," he stammered unsure of what to say. "This is just a big piece of equipment. It isn't anything strange or mysterious or sent from the heavens."

Margat placed a hand on his forearm, smiling. "Young Tom, I see embarrassment in your face. I am sorry to have put it there. Perhaps I misspoke. I should have said that your gift of this machine will allow the gods to make up their own minds whether to let us live on. We have you to thank for giving *them* the opportunity to allow us a longer existence." She gave him a sly wink and turned away.

Tom stayed in the clearing for another half hour thinking over what Margat had said. He understood that the inventions from Swift Enterprises had been responsible for many good things around the world but he had never come face-to-face with the fact that he and the Enterprises team could be responsible for actually saving people he knew and could touch.

Tom roused himself and went to find the rest of the installation team. He shook hands with each and thanked them. Bud and Hank suggested that one of them remain behind for a few hours but that everyone else could head back to the city. He returned to the Skeeter and was soon flying back.

The *Sky Queen's* crew was to spend an enjoyable evening at the home of the president. Chow had secretly arranged to provide a large supply of foodstuffs for the official cook to use in preparing their feast. He had heard that there was usually just enough food to go around for the country's people without any extra to export.

The African chef had looked closely at the boxes of steaks, potatoes, tomatoes, fresh fruits and vegetables for some time. But she was most curious about the whole pineapples that Chow had added at the last moment. Her eyes went wide at the sight of the tropical fruit. Chow asked to use one of her knives and showed her how to peel away the outer rind exposing the tart and sweet inner flesh.

He could tell that she was unsure of the flavor having never had anything like it, but that she was pondering the possibilities. Like any good cook, she would figure out how to use this new fruit.

Chow left her alone and headed back to the airport arriving just as the crew had been getting ready to go to the president's home. He quickly changed into one of his more subdued western shirts — primarily gold and brown with a coyote and cacti motif.

The evening proved to be both relaxing and educational as the president and Felix regaled the Americans with humorous and historical stories and anecdotes. Chow, a veteran story teller, amazed the Africans with stories of the Texas plains and his life on the range before hooking up with Tom and his father.

Later, as they sat eating, Tom remarked, "Threw in a few tall ones, didn't you, old timer?"

"Wahl, shucks, Tom. Cain't tell a story and stick to all the facts!"

President Latumba turned to Tom saying, "This is indeed a time to celebrate. With your wonderful water devices my people can be free to return to their lives without fear that they will die during the next wave of heat. To you," he said raising a glass filled with a local beverage made from a guava-like fruit and the sap of a plant that grew wild around the capitol city, "I say thank you! Thank you a thousand times."

The Enterprises crew all cheered the president's toast and sampled their drinks. They were universally deemed to be delicious.

The food was brought to the table by several young girls under the watchful eye of the chef. She inspected each plate as it was brought by her, frequently arranging a piece of meat or a piece of vegetable with a pair of sticks she used like chopsticks.

Everyone ate heartily. President Latumba declared that the meat —

prime rib provided by Chow — that had been seared and then stewed in flavorful broth was among the best he had tasted in several years.

When Chow asked if he had tasted much beef the president laughed. "Yes, Chow. I have spent many years in European nations and once in the United States. But in those days I was a poor student so my experience was mainly with beef burgers. Once, with cheese. Marvelous!"

The group laughed at this declaration.

"So, Tom, what are your plans? Can you remain here for more days?"

"President Latumba... I would be happy to do so, but I have so many things I must accomplish back home including building and delivering the rest of the ERBs to your villages."

The remainder of the evening was spent in pleasant discussions punctuated by a savory dessert that was topped with tiny roasted bits of pineapple. The chef hovered in the background trying to determine if she had succeeded in using the unfamiliar fruit properly.

Chow got up and approached the woman. Smiling at her he wrapped his big arms around her and gave her a gentle squeeze. "Ma'am? You can join up with my ole chuck wagon any day you care to. Best use of an old piney-apple I ever did taste!"

Near midnight Tom thanked the president for his hospitality and excused himself and the crew saying that they needed to get an early start the following morning.

After a good night's sleep the crew had a sausage and baked eggs breakfast and then prepared for departure. All of the equipment that had been moved out of the *Sky Queen* during their stay was re-stowed. The Kangaroo Kub and Skeeter were moved back in and lashed down. Finally, the hanger doors were closed and sealed.

Tom walked up to Felix who had been sitting on a chair just outside of his combination airport terminal and house.

Tom shook the man's hand and thanked him for his assistance during their stay. He could see that the man wished to ask or say something, so he prompted him. "Is there anything you need from us before we go?"

Shyly looking down toward his feet, Felix muttered, "I would like to fly, please."

Slightly shocked, Tom asked the man if he had ever been up in an airplane.

Felix shook his head. "I have worked here at the airport and have seen a few different planes, but I have never been up in the air."

"Would the president mind if you took a short flight with us? I would be happy to go see him and ask for permission."

Tom sensed that Felix was struggling under the weight of whether asking the president for permission to leave his beloved airport for personal reasons was more important than his burning desire to soar up

among the sky he had been looking at and dreaming about his entire life.

Tom put a hand on Felix's shoulder and said, "I believe that you cannot truly appreciate the job you do down here unless you experience flying up there." He pointed skyward and Felix's eyes followed Tom's finger.

Tom hiked the several blocks to the president's residence hoping that he would not be waking the president. He knocked on the door. President Latumba answered the door himself. He smiled at Tom. "Good morning, Tom. Are you prepared to depart now?"

Tom said that they were ready, but added that he wanted to take Felix up for a short flight before they all flew back to the U.S. Laughing, the president agreed.

"It is about time that Felix was able to realize his life-long dream. For giving him that pleasure I personally thank you."

Tom warmly shook the older man's hand and walked back to the airport.

Felix was pacing back and forth biting his fingernails. He looked up with both expectation and a little fear as Tom approached.

"It's all set, Felix. Up we go!"

Clapping his hands like a small child, Felix practically ran to the hatch on the side of the Flying Lab. Once inside he allowed Tom to lead the way to the cockpit. Tom let him sit in the co-pilot's seat but warned him not to touch any of the controls until Tom said it was okay.

The *Queen* soared skyward moments later. At an altitude of 15,000 feet Tom suggested that Felix take a look out the window. The man looked out and then down. He quickly turned to Tom saying, "It is so big down there. Does it get bigger as we go higher?"

Tom chuckled. "Well, Felix, it seems bigger because you can see farther the higher we go."

Felix seemed to understand the concept. "I wish to go higher to see bigger, please."

"Next stop, sporting goods and appliances!" Bud said from his position standing behind them. With that, the *Sky Queen* resumed its upward journey with Felix looking out the window in absolute awe.

As they rose to a new altitude of 50,000 feet Tom explained the basic function of the control yoke and the foot pedals. He asked if Felix would like to try a brief stint as the pilot, and the happy African man readily agreed.

Within just a few moments he seemed comfortable enough for Tom to suggest a slow turn. Tom told him the proper steps then Felix repeated the steps involved and Tom agreed that he was correct. He maneuvered the giant jet easily through a 180 degree turn. Steadying the aircraft on its new course he asked if they could travel faster.

Tom said, "Just hold onto the yoke. I'll give her more throttle." With

that the plane shot forward and they were soon traveling at near the speed of sound. Felix was enthralled by the quickly-shifting scenery below. Twenty minutes later he returned control to Tom and thanked him again and again.

Tom slowed the jet and turned back toward the capitol city.

"Skipper," came a call from Zimby Cox who was manning the radar and communications board. I'm seeing a group of fast-moving aircraft heading into the airport. Must be military. Are they expecting someone?"

Felix denied any knowledge of an impending military visit.

Tom was suddenly worried. He took the great ship up to an altitude of 70,00 feet and then turned the controls over to Bud. Felix gave up his cherished seat to Arv.

Finally reaching the airspace above the small city Tom sat down at the SuperSight scope. This was a combination optical and computer-enhanced telescope system. At 70,000 feet it could bring into sharp focus an area as wide as six city blocks as if seen from 800 feet, or narrow down to an area the size of a typical living room as if seen from a height of less than 40 feet.

The picture was displayed on a 40-inch high definition monitor above the control board.

A movement at the front of the airport building caught everyone's attention first as Tom aimed the scope at the terminal building. The presidential vehicle that Tom and his team had been carried in on their previous visit pulled up and a single individual in a flight suit climbed out. Tom zoomed in on the man in time to watch him look all around and then into the sky. He had no military insignia on his flight suit, but Tom could see a holster attached to the right side of the suit.

Everyone around the display reared back as the man seemed to be looking directly up into their eyes. Tom quickly realized that this was just due to the extreme magnification provided by the scope. The man soon looked away and at other areas of the sky. It appeared that he had totally missed seeing the *Sky Queen* after all.

Tom pulled back the view as the man walked through the airport building and out onto the airfield. As Tom repositioned his scope all aboard the *Sky Queen* could see the six older French Mirage III aircraft sitting right where the *Sky Queen* had been an hour earlier. Bearing no markings, they were painted in camouflage colors.

The man motioned to the five other pilots standing in a group near the fighter jets, and they all gathered together in front of one of the MIGs. As he spoke he motioned up pointing directly up and toward the hovering *Sky Queen*.

A cold shiver ran down Tom's spine as he saw one of the pilots pull a pair of compact binoculars out of a pocket in his suit and use them to look up.

"Looks like we've been spotted, gang. Time to put a bit of airspace between us and them. Hank? Radio back home and see if they can report this to the State Department."

Tom returned to the cockpit and piloted the *Sky Queen* back along their original track at top speed. Ten minutes later, Hank related his conversation with the US authorities. "Since we don't have official status here, we are supposed to stay clear of any trouble and come home."

Tom groaned.

"Unless," Hank continued, "we believe that the situation changes and it becomes safe for us to approach Magurro."

Everyone let out a little cheer. Tom again reversed their course and headed back toward the capitol. In moments a radar report showed that the six unknown aircraft had taken off and had headed at a fairly low altitude almost directly to the south. They were soon passing out of Magurro airspace. An hour later Tom was assured that they were not anywhere to be seen and would probably not return to Magurro suddenly, so he took the *Sky Queen* back to the capitol city and soon landed on the beaten-up tarmac.

As Tom and Hank lowered themselves to the ground through the belly hatch a man, bloodied and staggering came out of the building. It was a man they knew to be the president's personal driver.

"Bud!" Tom yelled. Turning to the hatch he called up, "Get Doc Simpson down here, pronto! We have injured!"

He and Hank ran to the injured man and supported him between them, walking him over to the shade of the *Queen* and propping him up against one of her wheels. Within seconds the young medico dropped down from the hatch then reached back up and grabbed his medical bag. He knelt down and began attending to his wounds.

"Looks like he took a beating from those thugs. Here is an obvious rifle butt strike," he said indicating a gash on the man's forehead. He broke open a self-freezing pack and applied it to the man's head wound causing him to flinch with pain.

"Just relax," Tom said as the man tried to get up. "Let Doc fix you up and then you can tell us what happened."

Felix came tumbling out of the *Sky Queen*. "My god! Raffie! What did they do to you? Is President Latumba injured?"

A look of mixed fear and anger flashed over the wounded African's face. "No," he croaked. "I must tell our Tom Swift that these are very bad men who came. The president asked me to listen to the radio while you were gone. They called on the radio to tell me they were having problems..." he coughed several times, then continued, "...said they had a fire on board. Wanted an emergency landing. I didn't know. Oh..." he moaned, "I just didn't know that they were General Abu Ramsay's men."

"Abu Ramsay," Tom asked.

Felix stated, "A very bad man who took over the part of our former nation to the east. Spends all his money on military equipment. He has left us alone until now because we have nothing he could want!" Felix winced in sympathy as Doc Simpson applied an anesthetic ointment to the wound on his friend's forehead. In seconds, the pain had obviously disappeared as Raffie first looked confused and then pleased. Raffie continued his story.

He told Tom that the jets had landed and that uniformed men got out, most of them running into the little airport building. One had hit him in the head without any warning when he had demanded to know what they wanted. He said that the men then split up, most heading back out to their planes but that two had left through the front door and had stolen the airport motorcycle.

Only the leader had returned and then all of the aircraft had taken off.

Felix said he feared for the safety of their president and begged Tom to go see if he was okay. Tom agreed immediately.

"Hank, you come with me but first will you ask Bud and Art to join us. Issue e-guns for everyone, too."

The group left the airport several minutes later. Although the invaders had obviously tried to immobilize the president's vehicle by smashing the ignition, Art put a skill he had gained as a teenager to use and soon had 'hot-wired' the ignition. The trip to the president's residence took only a few minutes.

As Tom jumped out and approached the front door it opened to reveal President Latumba. He had a strained smile on his face and began shifting his eyes over his shoulder. He mouthed the word 'help' and Tom immediately knew that the president was in danger. Tom motioned behind his back to his companions that they should move away from the door. Glancing slightly to each side to ensure their positions, Tom said, "President Latumba. I have come to see if you are all right. May I come in, please?"

A gun suddenly appeared around the president's right side, and the man holding it came out from behind his hostage. "Oh, yes. Please do come in and join us," he sneered in a heavy African accent.

"Who are you," Tom demanded standing his ground. "Why are you here?"

"Our glorious ruler has declared that this territory should be taken back until such time as we can verify that it has nothing of further value to us. This, I personally think, is a waste of time. This so-called little nation of Magurro has never had anything and never will!" He laughed viscously. "Perhaps it would be best if we simply burned it to the ground!"

"And you expect to hold the entire country hostage with your one little gun?" Tom asked.

The man looked puzzled for a moment. Then he replied, "Of course not,

you young fool. We have taken over the pitiful airport and even now my fellow freedom fighters are taking over the city," he boasted.

"Umm... would that be the other men who flew out of here an hour or so ago?"

"What do you mean?" the man demanded. Stopping to think a moment he added, "And where did you come from? We have the airport secured. The only road has been blockaded and we surround this residence!" His voice became shrill and his eyes began darting back and forth.

Tom knew that the man was unbalanced but could not determine how far to push him lest he injure his hostage.

"Your comrades took off in your jets more than an hour ago. They left nobody behind except you. You are all alone now. Give up. Give me the gun and we will see that you get help."

The man suddenly raised the gun that had begun sagging and pointed to at Tom. In an instant, President Latumba brought his right elbow down onto the man's wrist, then jabbed it violently into the man's ribs. Stepping aside he allowed Tom to rush past and administer a solid uppercut to the man's jaw knocking their would-be attacker unconscious.

Tom's team rushed in and tied the man up while Tom and the president sat down in an adjoining room to talk. "Mr. President. We saw that your driver had been attacked. Then we find you were a hostage. What happened here?"

The president told Tom of the occurrences of the past several hours, beginning with the recent airport invasion and providing Tom with more information about General Abu Ramsay. He concluded with, "I believe that I must ask for military assistance from the United Nations now. We have no ability to ward off even the slightest of attacks as you have seen."

"I agree. Since we don't carry any weapons to help you fight off an invasion from outsiders such as this General Abu Ramsay it would be best if a security force could be stationed here for the time being. I'll go back to the *Sky Queen* and radio your desires back to the United States. I would like to have you accompany us both for your safety as well as to have our doctor check you over."

President Latumba was more concerned once he saw his wounded driver that he was in his own health. "I am unharmed, only inconvenienced," he declared.

While the others attended to the injured man, Tom had a thought and returned to the control deck of the Flying Lab. He knew that they had seen six aircraft on the ground and six pilots, but that meant that the man they had in custody had to come from somewhere. But where, Tom mused.

He sat down at the SuperScope and opened the saved video file. By carefully maneuvering the picture around and enhancing various areas he suddenly saw what it was they had all previously missed.

One of the Mirages, presumably the leader's, was a one-seat model and the others were all two-seat models. That meant five extra men. He went back to the cockpit and looked out at the airfield. Something caught his eye. He picked up a pair of binoculars and trained them on the object. He felt the blood rush out of his face. Five flight helmets sitting in a small pile!

That meant that five people hadn't departed with the jets. Take away their prisoner and that left...

Oh-oh!