

# OH, BOY



**QUANTUM  
LEAP**

*engine*



OH BOY

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Cover Art by <minds-i-view>

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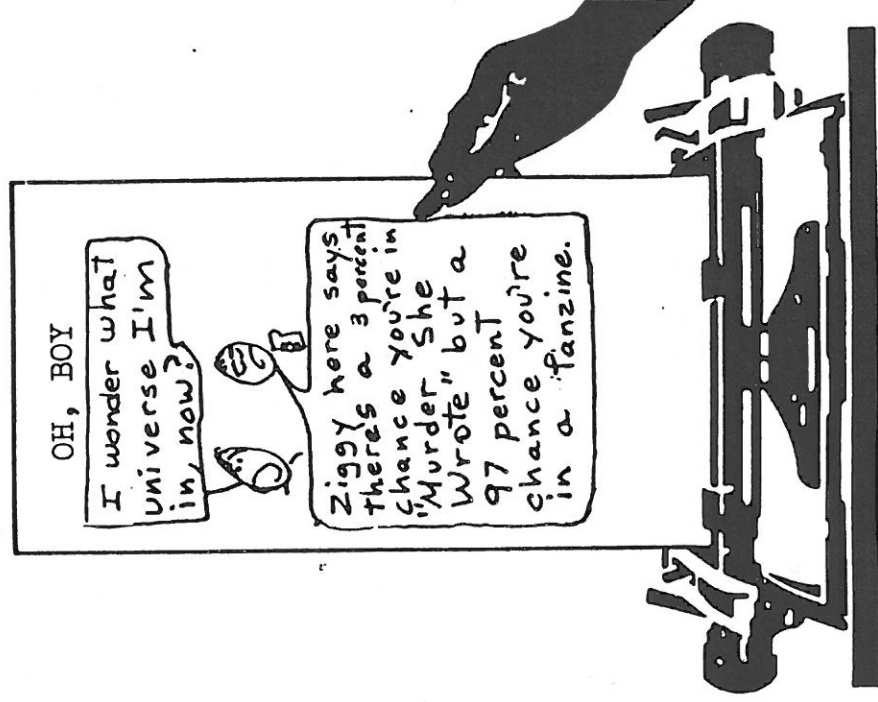
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## Obligatory Editorial

"So when we do this editorial thing?"

"At five am the day we have to send the zine to the publisher's."

"Ack, we can't wait that long, Sandy. Let's do it now."

"Sharon, don't be such a meganerd; live a little. Let's watch 'One Strobe Over the Line' again. We can work on this later."

"But, we've already watched it five times this week."

"Well, we could get out that hot story where Sam has an affair with one of Al's old girlfriends. You know, the one I'm writing with Amy."

"Sandy..."

"Yes, I know, we can't put it in OH, BOY, because it's a PG-13 rated zine, but it's so fun..."

"Sandy..."

"Alright, I'll be good, but you know, sometimes you take all the fun out of life. I hate it when you're in your Beckett mode. You win, we'll work on the editorial."

Please, write us to let us know what you think about our zine. In our next issue, we plan to print LOCs, so let your voice be heard. Also planned for OH, BOY II is the continuation of The Waiting Room as a regular feature. If you have a waiting room story you'd like to contribute, send it to us.

As you have guessed by now, we welcome your input and are actively seeking submissions of poetry, fiction and artwork. We want to have it out by this fall, so the deadline for submissions is August 1st. Our guidelines are simple: any length, well-written story, PG-13 rating, and within character and premise for Quantum Leap. If you have an IBM-PC compatible computer, we'll love you forever. Write us with queries:

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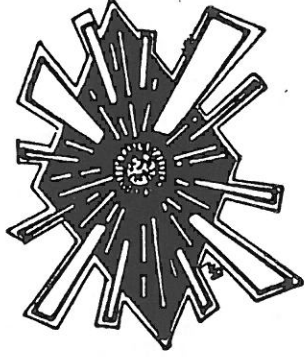
We'd like to thank all our contributors. Without your support, this leap would not have been nearly as satisfying. We especially would like to thank our artists for all of their beautiful work. <minds-i-view> really came through with the cover and illustrations for two stories. We already have a

promise for a cover for OH, BOY II that will knock your socks off: a gorgeous young Al and an equally gorgeous Sam.

Also thanks to Sheila Paulson who gave us two wonderful stories so that we had to make the difficult decision of which to use for this issue and which to save for the next. (Since I'm an avid fan of Blakes 7, I twisted Sharon's arm and decided on The High Road Home, Sandy.)

Thanks to our husbands and children for their love and support. Can anyone but a fan's family deal with two crazed editors, oblivious to the rest of the world as they struggle with the computer (We've nicknamed it Ziggy, it's about as cooperative), or debate what kind of lover Al would be, (we had long and involved discussions on this subject!) and did we or did we not proof that last story?

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we'd like to thank Don Bellisario for creating such a wonderful universe in the first place and fighting like a tiger to keep it on the air and all the writers and producers for giving us such rich material and episodes to inspire our fannish minds. As for Scott Bakula and Dean Stockwell for making such fascinating characters live and breathe, what can we say but "Thanks and keep it up, guys!"



## THE WAITING ROOM

Young Sam

By Crystal Olson

The scents of fall were gone, swallowed up by the sharp smell of antiseptic. Groaning, he struggled to open his eyes. Where was he and what had happened?

Instead of blue sky overhead, panels of glaring lights were set into a white ceiling. A constricting band around his upper arm hindered him from moving as he tried to roll over. Frightened he jerked at it and the material came free with a coarse ripping sound. Immediately a high steady beep came from above him. Startled, he turned around and saw a flashing panel of lights set above the railed bed. It reminded him of a hospital, but it was not like any hospital bed he had ever seen.

Gasping, he scrambled off the bottom of the bed and stood poised for flight. What was he doing sleeping in this strange bed? Panic growing, he backed away from it as if it held some danger. He felt oddly shaky as if his muscles were weakened by some illness he didn't remember.

Hearing approaching footsteps from the adjoining room, he swiveled hastily to face the door. Blinking in surprise, he fell back a step at the sight of a middle aged man dressed in a white lab coat.

"Where am I?" he asked before the other man could speak. "How'd I get here? Have I been in an accident? Is this a hospital?"

The dark-haired man grinned. It was a nice grin, amiable and somehow reassuring. "You don't remember?"

Sam shook his head, eyeing the man warily. "The last thing I remember, I was cutting through the corn on my way home from school."

"Well, you're safe." Tucking his hands into his pockets, he regarded him. "You'll be going home soon."

"Where's my mom?"

"My turn first." The man gave him another disarming grin and a shrug. "What's your name?"

"Sam. Sam Beckett."

"Sam!" The man exclaimed, face lighting with such joy and

excitement that Sam fell back another wary step.

At the slight withdrawal, he tempered the delight with an obvious effort. "How old are you, Sam?"

"Sixteen," he answered cautiously. "Why?"

"Sixteen," the man repeated, his expression altering in a way the boy could not define. "When's your birthday?"

"August 8. Why?" Sam demanded, his eyes darting to the open doorway leading to the unknown adjourning room. "Who are you? What sort of place is this?"

"I'm Al," the man extended a hand Sam did not take. "I'm sort of the welcoming committee here."

"Where's here?" Sam asked, edging away from the older man. When Al made no effort to stop him, he slipped past him through the door.

The next room was also done in stark white. Ignoring it, Sam hurried to the far door, finding it locked. Turning to the quiet, watchful man who had followed him, he demanded, "Let me out of here! I want to go home."

"And you will," Al assured him. "Soon. You just can't go," he nodded at the locked door. "Out there."

"Why not? What's out there? How'd I get here? Why..."

Al shook his head, as if amused. "Full of questions, aren't you kid?"

Throwing him a glance, Sam hurried to the drapes and flung them open to reveal only wall and no window behind it. "Why aren't there any windows? What are you hiding?"

Shrugging, Al moved into the room. "Look, kiddo, you can waste time asking me a lot of questions I can't answer," he said patiently. "Or you can let me tell you what I can tell you."

"Why can't you answer my questions?" Sam snapped.

The older man sighed, tucking one hand into his pocket. "That's a question, Sam." Though his voice was even, Sam detected a strong note of amusement.

"Okay," he agreed reluctantly. "Tell me."

"Okay," Al grinned. "First of all, nobody's going to hurt you. I can't tell you where you are, except that it is a safe

place." He gave Sam a sharp glance but the boy remained silent.

As if surprised at the silence, he continued. "We need you to stay in these rooms," he lifted a hand to forestall the question. "I can't tell you why other than it's important.

Al went on. "We'll ask you some questions and if you co-operate with us, it makes life easier for everyone and we can get you home faster. But if you don't want to talk," he shrugged, "That's okay, too. We won't force you."

Sam began to speak but Al cut him off. "That's all I can tell you right now. So," he gestured easily, "Are you hungry?"

Suddenly aware he felt as if he hadn't eaten for a week, Sam nodded. "I'm starving."

"I bet you are," Al answered cryptically. "I'll send some folks in. You tell them what you want and they'll get it. There'll be another person or two; a doctor, people like that."

"I don't need a doctor," Sam protested.

"I know," Al agreed. "It's just usual checkup stuff. Make sure you're okay, and keep you okay, that kind of thing. If you need anything, ask."

"But," Sam said as if remembering something important. "I've got to get out of here. We play Bentlyville on Friday."

"Bentlyville?" Al repeated.

"Yeah," Sam said. "Basketball. If we can beat Bentlyville, we have a chance at the playoffs."

"Ah," Al appeared to sincerely consider this. "Think you can beat 'em?"

"Maybe," Sam shrugged. "We can give it a good try. I've got to be home by Friday."

"Okay," Al nodded. "We'll give it a shot." He crossed the room to the door, reaching for the knob.

"Where are you going?"

Al turned. "To talk to someone about getting you home. I'll be back later. Bye, Sam." The door, which Sam knew to have been locked, opened at his touch. "You hang in there."

With that, he left the room, giving Sam only a quick glimpse of non-descript corridor beyond it. When he was alone, Sam



turned in a slow circle, taking in his sterile surroundings. There seemed to be precious few clues.

"Oh, boy," he sighed in thoughtful trepidation and went to inspect the door more closely.

\* \* \*

Gooshi and Darcie, the project physician turned when Al entered the main control room. "Well?" Darcie asked expectantly.

Al tucked his hands in his pockets, "You won't believe who it is."

"Who?" Gooshi asked curiously.

"Sam!" the observer exclaimed.

"Sam who?"

"Our Sam," he cut across their exclamations of surprise.

"And he's 16 years old."

"Sam," Darcie repeated, sinking into a chair next to Gooshi. "How's he taking it?"

"He's scared, and curious as hell," the observer answered. "I'm going to see how Sam...I mean our Sam...is taking this. You watch the kid like a hawk while I'm gone."

"But," Gooshi protested. "This is Sam, Al. Can't..."

"Exactly," Al warned. "Because it's him. Standard Operative Procedures plus extra security. From what little I've seen, he survived the leap with little or no gaps in memory."

"That makes sense," Darcie mused. "He's leaped into his own body, his own brain, the organic pathways fit."

"Right. So he's smart as a whip and he wants out of the waiting room, bad." Al headed to the door, talking as he went. "I'm going to the imaging chamber. Gooshi, run some programs on this. He mentioned a big basketball game Friday. That may be a good place to start."

Before the door, he turned to fix them both with a stern gaze. "Watch what you say and watch him. Got it?" They both nodded, Gooshi reluctantly, Darcie thoughtfully. "Good," Al said satisfied, and continued on his way.

\* \* \*

Sam paced the room restlessly. He had eaten as much as he wanted and the food was pretty good. Not as good as his mom's cooking, but better than what he got at school. They brought him books--none of them were published later than September 1969. He had checked with an insatiable drive to collect all the clues he could about his situation.

None of it made any sense, from the weird diagnostic bed that looked as if it came directly from Star Trek to the non-descript white coveralls that everyone but Al wore.

He had said little to anyone, preferring to watch and analyze the situation before he jumped into it. It was a skill he had perfected early. He'd known this feeling of alienation before in his own environment when his abilities set him apart from others, but then he had found more clues on how to proceed.

These people at times treated him as if they knew him, but were afraid to say so, and at other times as if he were a curious subject in an experiment he could not comprehend.

The first man he had met, Al, had visited him a couple more times. Each time he seemed progressively more concerned about something.

Considering, he narrowed his eyes and regarded the door. Whenever he had a visitor, the door was locked for him, but it opened for them. He had been able to detect nothing they did to unlock it. They all just walked up to the door and said "Bye, Sam," and walked...

Elated, he grinned. That had to be it; a voice lock. He had read enough science fiction to have heard of them.

Getting up, he hurried to the door and tried it again. Locked. Drawing a deep breath, he steadied himself. There was no reason to expect it to open for his voice, they probably only put certain people into the controls. But it was worth a try. "Bye, Sam," he said, and tried the knob. It turned easily and he grinned. Free! Cautiously, he pulled open the door and checked to see if the corridor was clear. Hastily he slipped out the door. He'd better move. Probably, he was being watched and he didn't want to be locked back away before he had a chance to find a way out. With relief, he left the white barren room behind him.

\* \* \*

Concerned, Al stepped out of the imaging chamber. He had expected Sam to be difficult about this, but he had thought the other man would listen to reason a little more than he had.

Tucking his hand link into his pocket he headed down the hall. He would go see the kid, maybe bribe Mike to run to town and bring back pizza. They had Pizza Huts in 69, didn't they? He'd have to check, he thought, drawing out the handlink. There could not be any screw ups with this one. It would have to be original crust for sure.

The doors to main con swished open and Gooshi and Darcie stepped out. Glancing up at their faces, he did a double take, warned by their expressions. They looked like guilty children. Dropping the link to his side he fixed them with a suspicious gaze. "What?"

Exchanging glances, they looked reluctant to answer and he scowled, repeating more loudly. "What?"

Darcie answered, "The kid's gone, Al."

"Gone?" he snapped. "What do you mean, gone?! I told you to watch him."

"We did," Gooshi said in her defense. "We watched him walk up to the door, say 'Bye, Sam,' turn the knob and walk right out." He swallowed at the observer's expression. "By the time we got there, he was gone."

"The voice lock." Al struck his forehead with his hand. "Should have known he'd figure it out."

"We didn't think of taking out Sam's voice key," Darcie admitted.

"Aah," Al growled in disgust. "We'd better find him quick. Has anybody picked him up on camera?"

Again Darcie and Gooshi exchanged glances before the computer programmer answered. "We're searching room to room because...uh, well, monitors are out."

"Out?" Al snapped. "Half a million for security and they're out?"

"Only the internal monitors," Darcie answered. "Sam..."

Throwing up his hands in disgust, Al stomped away. "I told you to watch him. Now, we've got a young Einstein running loose in a top secret time travel project." Darcie and Gooshi turned to watch the angry observer stride away, waving his hands expressively as he went. "We could all disappear," he extended hand above his head to snap his fingers. "Like that!"

Darcie shot a sidelong glance at Gooshi. "Well, I think he took that pretty well," she said hesitantly.

"Yeah," Gooshi replied glumly. "But just wait till he finds out that Sam's seen the accelerator."

\* \* \*

Cautiously, Sam slipped down brightly lit corridors, always prevented from reaching an outside entrance by groups of searchers. As strong as his drive to escape was, he found himself intrigued by the glimpses he snatched before pursuit pushed him on in his flight.

There had been one room in particular in which he would have liked to have lingered. It was vast, and nearly circular in shape, ringed about with two oddly bisected lines. Before he could inspect it further, he had heard pursuit and hurried out into the corridor again.

Now, slipping past double doors, he jumped, thoroughly startled when they swished open. When he leaped back, the doors closed. Looking down the empty corridors, he heard voices around the corner. Cautiously, he stepped forward again, and the doors opened once more. He walked though and the doors shut behind him. Wow, he thought, just like on Star Trek. The door must have been triggered to open by some sensor he hadn't seen.

But the view into the empty room quelled any thought of the mechanism of the doors. Complex consoles, neatly ordered with softly glowing lights and touch pad controls curved invitingly about the far wall.

Drawn, Sam stepped into the room. "Oh, boy," he breathed advancing across a gleaming tile floor to the tempting array of lights and controls.

The consoles were barely waist high, banked upward against the wall to allow the maximum use of space. Above them was a curved window that revealed the fascinating circular room he'd been in earlier.

Enraptured, he ran a hand over the leather back of a chair as he inspected the intricate controls arrayed before a video terminal. Casting a glance to either side he saw other, less complex keyboards before two other, smaller terminals.

But it was the main control that so tantalized him and he brought his full attention back to it. Lifting a tentative hand, he was about to stroke it softly when he heard voices in the hall behind him.

Starting, he was suddenly aware again of where he was and looked for escape. There was only one door he could see other than the one through which he'd entered and he headed for it at a quiet run.

Ducking into it, he found it to be a bathroom and was oddly reassured by the mundane porcelain features after the high tech array he'd seen. Easing the door nearly closed, he peered through the crack.

Gooshi, the little man he'd met earlier, and Darcie, the red-haired doctor entered. Although they were deep in conversation and did not glance his way, Sam drew back a little.

Their conversation was low and intense and he could not make out their words. Then, there was a third voice--an oddly familiar male voice. Pressing close to the door, he dared to open it a bit further.

Darcie and Gooshi were still the only people he could see. Gooshi was sitting in the center chair, fingers flying over the keyboard while the woman leaned over his shoulder. Occasionally the male voice would reply to a question on their part, but Sam could not locate its source.

Pressing close, he strained to hear, but the room was too large and he was too far away to hear what they said over the soft hum of machinery. At last, still deep in conversation, the two left the room, and Sam cautiously poked his head around the door.

Seeing no mysterious third person, he came back out into the room. Irresistibly drawn, he went back to the main computer terminal. "Wow," he breathed, eyes traveling in awe over the console. "This is better than Star Trek."

Tempted by a thought, he cast a glance over his shoulder. He almost expected Mr. Spock to appear and castigate him for messing with his computers. He was alone, and he could hear no one approaching. Sliding into the chair, he placed one hand on either side of the keyboard. Why not? What would it hurt?

"Computer," he said in the dry, commanding tone the Vulcan computer expert always used. "I require information."

"Yes, Sam," came the unexpected answer and the boy yelped as if he'd been bitten. Snatching his hands off the console, he scrambled from the chair to put it between him and the computer.

Eyes wide, he regarded the screen, which was now lit softly. "How do...how do you know my name?" he asked when he could speak.

"Voice analysis is within acceptable parameters to identify you as Sam Beckett," came the answer and Sam recognized the voice with a shock. It was his dad's voice--or close to it--and it was the voice he had heard earlier. Eyes narrowing, Sam decided to experiment. "So tell me who I am."

"Is this a rhetorical, metaphysical question or a true request for information?" Sam would have sworn there was a trace of testiness in the tone. A computer with an ego--wow!

"A...a real question," he answered, a bit intimidated.

"Voice analysis indicates you are Dr. Samuel Beckett, director and originator of the Quantum Leap project. Born August 8, 1953 in Elk Ridge Indiana to John and Thelma Beckett, you are forty-two years old..."

At the boy's strangled sound of surprise, the computer paused. "Yes, Sam?"

Gripping the chair, Sam swallowed hard, trying to chose between all the questions the information had triggered. "What...sort of doctor am I?"

"You hold six doctorates," came the even reply. "Quantum physics, medicine..."

Six doctorates! Sam felt the color drain from his face. How could any of this be? Stunned, he lifted a hand to his face and felt the faint stubble of a five o'clock shadow. It was a man's face, not that of a sixteen year-old.

"Ancient languages..." the computer continued. It wasn't his dad's voice, Sam realized with deepening shock. It was his own voice, but older, matured.

Wheeling, he fled to the bathroom, shoving open the door in a single minded purpose. Skidding to a stop, he stared at the face in the mirror.

It was his face. His face--but old. There was even a lock of white hair spilling across his forehead. Eyes wide in shock, he stared at the white faced, wide-eyed stranger in the mirror. Dimly, he was aware his fingers ached from gripping the cool porcelain sink and that there were footsteps drawing near in the room beyond him. But he could not turn, could not move, though he had begun to tremble.

\* \* \*

Al's reaction to finding the missing Sam was mixed; he was relieved to find him safe, and angry that the sixteen year-old

had lead them all on a merry chase around the project. Pausing in the doorway, he opened his mouth to chastise the recalcitrant youth when Sam turned from the mirror to look with devastated eyes at Al.

"Do I have amnesia?" He looked back at the mirror. "That would explain it. I've hit my head and lost the last twenty-five years."

"No, you don't have amnesia," Al said quietly, all anger gone at the sight of the boy's anguish. "His voice got progressively louder. I have white hair." His voice got

"But, I'm old. I have white hair." His voice got progressively louder. "How do you explain that?"

"I can't explain it, Sam."

Sam took a threatening step toward the shorter man, his voice trembling with rising emotion. "I want to know where I am, why I'm here, and I want to know now!" Unshed tears of frustration, fear and anger glistened in his eyes.

"I can't...."

"Let me out of here!" panicked, Sam shoved the man out of the doorway.

Taken by surprise, Al staggered back into the room and against the console before he caught his balance. Shocked at the effect his strong, adult body had on the smaller man, Sam jerked to a stop in the middle of the control room.

"I'm sorry," he said, dismayed, tears spilling down his cheeks. "I didn't...". He shrugged helplessly as Al pushed himself upright. "I didn't mean..." Unable to finish his sentence, he took another step toward the door. "Take it easy."

"It's okay, kid," Al answered soothingly. "There's really nothing to be scared of here."

Sam drew a deep, shuddering breath and lifted a hand to brush away his tears. Al continued, "Whether you know it or not you and I are friends...will be friends. I wouldn't lie to you. You can believe that at least."

A bit calmer, Sam said, "Ziggy says I'm forty-two. How can I be forty-two?"

Ziggy?" Al asked, shocked. "You've been talking to Ziggy? How'd you get..." He struck his head with his palm. "That's a stupid question. You just went up and said hello, didn't you? He'd answer you."

"He has my voice." Sam's eyes were still wide, but not as frightened.

"Well, not exactly. He has the voice of the Sam you will be in twenty-five years. It's difficult to explain."

"Try me. I find I can understand most things if I try."

"I bet you do. Cocky little thing aren't you?" Al considered the teenager who looked much calmer. "Are you hungry? Would you like some pizza?"

"I guess I could eat," Sam answered reluctantly.

"Okay, how about we go back to the waiting room and I order some pizza and we can sit down and talk?"

"Sounds good to me. I have lots of questions."

"I just bet you do," Al sighed.

\* \* \*

"Let me get this straight. This is 1995 and my future self is leaping around in time, into other people's bodies, fixing things that went wrong the first time?"

"You got it."

"So, what's he fixing in my life?"

Al looked away, not willing to face the boy. "Well, Ziggy really isn't positive, but he thinks, you are there to win the basketball game on Friday night so that your coach goes on to coach a professional team, and two of your teammates get athletic scholarships and go on to be a doctor and lawyer."

"Hey, that's great," Sam exclaimed. He stopped and looked closer at Al. "There's something else, isn't there?"

Al cursed under his breath. Sam had always known when he was hiding something. There was no way he was going to tell this vulnerable boy that his brother was going to die in Vietnam and that his father would follow several years later of heart disease. That was a burden that he could not allow the young Sam Beckett to bear. It was bad enough that the adult Sam was being torn apart trying to save both his father and his brother. As casually as he could, Al replied, "So far that's all Ziggy's come up with."

"So how am I handling being sixteen again?"



Al thought of the dreamy look on Sam's face when he saw himself in the mirror and grinned. "I think he likes it. You may have some living up to do when you get back. He said he'd let Katie have Tom's room when he leaves to go to Vietnam."

"Tom's room!" Sam said dismayed. "But Tom said I could have it."

"Oh, and Lisa Parsons asked him to the dance after the game, and do you know what he did? He ran away! It's just like Sam."

At the boy's reddening face, Al relented. "Tom's come back for Thanksgiving and is giving you hints on the game. All Sam has to do, is win the game and he'll leap out of there and you'll leap back. It's a cinch."

Sam nodded, satisfied now that he had some knowledge about the situation. He would hate to miss the game, but if by winning the game, everything would turn out for the better, Sam didn't mind too much. After all, he'd get to play it in twenty-five years. Al wasn't such a bad guy after all. "So what do you all do around here for recreation?"

"Well, we do have the gym. Didn't you see it during your ad lib tour?" Al asked ironically.

Sam blushed again, and said, "No, I got side tracked with Ziggy. He's such an interesting computer. You know he almost acted human?"

"You programmed him. Gooshi runs him now, and even he has trouble keeping him under control. You always were the only one who could handle him. Anyway, like I said, you can work out in the gym. We have a TV and VCR..."

"VCR?" Sam asked confused. "What's that?"

"It's a video cassette recorder. You can watch old movies and television shows on it. What are your favorite shows?"

"I used to watch Star Trek before they cancelled it. My sister, Kate likes Dark Shadows. We always have to rush home from school to watch it."

"Well, I know I can get tapes of Star Trek. If fact I think you have the total collection in your apartment. Do you play poker?"

"No, I haven't learned," Sam said.

"Well, I'll teach you. It's a lot of fun. With your

mathematical brain, you should be a natural. But you'll need to work on your poker face. You're easier to read than a hooker looking for a score."

"A hooker?" Sam said, confused.

Al closed his eyes and shook his head. "Never mind. Let me show you the gym, then I have to check with Sam. I'll have Darcie play with you. As I recall, she used to play basketball in school. She was pretty good. But Sam, first I want your promise."

"What?" Sam asked seriously.

"I want you to promise not to go exploring again. I was serious when I said I'm trying to keep you safe. You go only where Darcie says you can go. Okay?"

"Okay," Sam agreed. "No exploring."

Al nodded once. "Good. Let's go."

\* \* \*

Al came through with the promised tapes, then left again. Sam watched a few of his favorite episodes of Star Trek, then put in the tape with Dark Shadows on it. Engrossed, he got lost in the past of 1897 with Barnabas Collins as he struggled to free Quentin from the werewolf curse.

In a way, he empathized with them. The similarities to his own situation were striking although the vampire's time traveling was done through black magic, not a high-tech accelerator. Also, he hadn't traveled to the past, but to the future. He had watched this episode with Kate just a few days before.

Curious he put the next tape in the VCR. A new episode! One he hadn't seen before. Sam paused the VCR. Really, he shouldn't watch it. But what would it hurt? From what Al told him, he probably wouldn't remember it anyway, once he was back in his own time. This whole experience would be like a fugue dream. Hitting the play button, he sat back with the bowl of popcorn that Darcie had provided him and watched the drama unfold.

\* \* \*

That night, Al came and kept his promise to teach him poker. Sam had no problem understanding the basic strategies of the game, but bluffing gave him a great deal of trouble.

Evidently, Al had a very good poker face. Sam had lost nearly all of the chips he had been given when they started the

game when Al dealt him a hand. He barely kept his mouth from dropping open when he looked at his hand. A full house, Aces over Queens! Only a couple of combinations could beat that! He looked up at Al, but Al was looking at his cards. If only he had more chips.

"Well, how many do you want, Sam?"

"I'll stick with these, thanks."

"That good eh?" Al looked down at his cards again. "Dealer takes two." Discarding two cards, Al dealt himself two more. Picking up his hand, he rearranged his cards to his satisfaction. "Well?" His eyebrow rose inquiringly.

Sam picked up five chips and threw them on the pot. "I bid five."

"I'll see your bid and raise you ten."

"But I don't have ten," Sam said resignedly.

"Well, if you were a good looking woman, I'd suggest strip poker, but since you're not, how about a promise?"

"A promise?" Sam asked, confused.

"Yeah. Promise that after you leap and you're back in your own body, have some fun. Take Lisa to the dance. Maybe kiss her good night."

At Sam's chagrined expression, Al shook his head. "See what I mean? You turn red just at the possibility of a kiss."

Feeling embarrassed, but wanting to prove Al wrong, Sam said, "Okay, I call." The boy threw down his cards, sure that he had the better hand. "Full house."

Al cocked his head. "Sorry, kid." He laid out his hand. "A straight flush."

At Sam's crestfallen expression. "Sometimes, that's just the way the cards fall. Just remember your promise."

"But you said I probably wouldn't remember any of this," Sam said.

"Maybe, maybe not. From what we've found out, the people Sam replaces usually think they're kidnapped by aliens, or that it was all a dream. But, we're not sure about you. You're a completely different case. I mean, you are Sam Beckett."

"I don't know if I want to remember. I mean it's great that I'm a doctor and all that, but..."

"I know kid," Al said, understanding. "Just take each day as they come. Have some fun. Don't give up studying, just kick back and relax once in a while." At a soft beep from the handlink in his pocket, Al got to his feet. "Gotta go, kiddo," he said, reaching down to take his jacket from the back of his chair. "The game's about to start. I don't want to miss the tip off."

Sam looked up at him. "I hope they...I...win."

"You will," the observer assured him. Slipping on his jacket, an odd sadness crept into his expression as he regarded the boy. "And you'll be home quicker than you think."

Troubled by the older man's gaze, Sam hesitated. "What's the matter?"

Al shrugged. "I'm gonna miss you, pal. You take care of yourself."

"Won't I see you again?" Sam asked, thinking that this may be the last time he would see his new friend. Faintly alarmed, he got to his feet to come to Al's side.

"You, betcha," Al grinned, reaching out to tousle his hair. "In ten years or so. It'll go..." he snapped his fingers. "Like that."

Impulsively, Sam wrapped his arms around the older man. "I'm going to miss you."

"Aw, Sam," he protested even as he returned the hug. "Don't go all mushy on me." Thumping the shoulder that was broader than his own, he pulled away. "Have a good life kiddo. I'll see ya in ten."

"Is this going to hurt?" Sam asked reluctantly, with a worried expression on his face as Al headed toward the door.

Turning the man replied softly, "Did it hurt the first time?"

"No," Sam admitted. "I guess not."

"You might be disoriented at first, just try to go with the flow. Why don't you lay down and get some rest? You'll be home before you know it." At Sam's uneasy nod, Al paused, regarding him, "Bye, Sam."

"Bye, Al," came the quiet answer. "It was fun."

With a wink, the observer nodded and was gone.

Alone, Sam drifted once around the room, before lying down on the high-tech bed. With his hands behind his head, he stared at the light panels in the ceiling and he wondered how the game was going.

Taken unaware by a yawn, he found himself relaxing in the comfortable bed. Almost at the verge of sleep, he felt a tingling begin, faint at first, then growing to include his whole body. 'Was this it?' he thought. A brilliant white light seemed to envelope him, and he felt as if the room disappeared from around him.

Noise of a jubilant crowd engulfed him. Finding himself supported by his teammate's shoulders, he saw Tom and his parents waving enthusiastically at him.

Turning to Lisa, next to him, he said, "Did we win?"

"Did we win?" she repeated incredulously. "Sam..." Impulsively she flung her arms about him and said in his ear, "You are taking me to the dance." Not giving him time to reply, she kissed him in full view of the roaring crowd.

All thoughts of the game vanished as he responded to the warm lips against his. As she pulled away and smiled, he blushed furiously and murmured, "Oh, boy."



Quantum Leap presents:

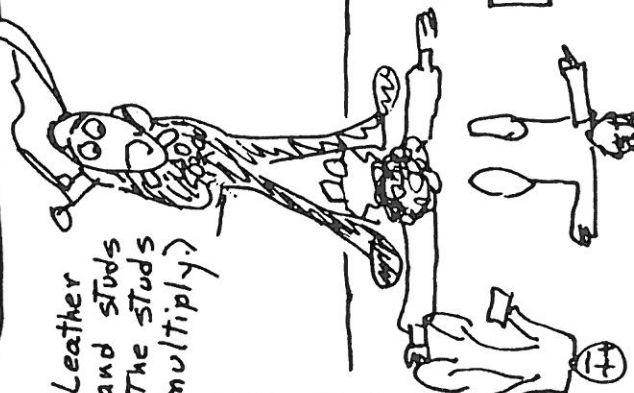
Sam/Avon at Gauda Prime

Ohmighod! I've leaped into the body of a murderer!

Leather and studs  
The studs multiply

Producer  
Don Bellisario  
isn't going to like this!

by Nola Frame-Gray  
Inspired by Jane Mailander



Well, you could pray for a commercial.

I suppose your hand-held computer "Ziggy" suggests that I become a spokesperson for bullet-proof vests!

Hm. Mebbie that's why Avon wears black leather -- to hide his down protection!

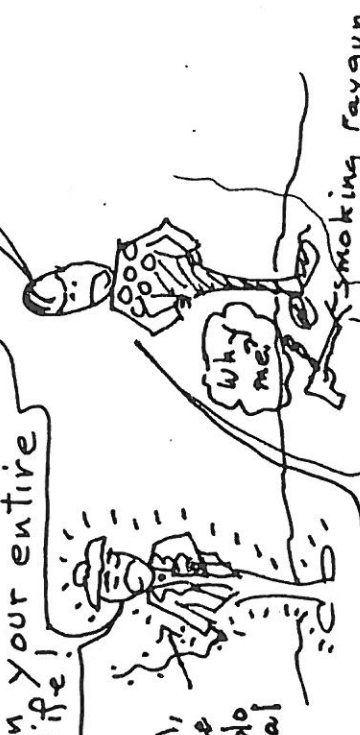


We ain't dead, yet!

Involuntary time travelling does have it drawbacks! Sam, you're name is Kern Avon --

Great! I'm named after a door-to-door perfume company!

--and you've just killed everyone you've ever known in your entire life!



Al, the halo pal

Smoking raygun

So what do I do, Al? Am I suppose to do the universe a favor by turning the gun on myself?

Sam, hold it! Ziggy says your mission here is to write an autobiography titled, "Avon: a Terrible Aspect"



Catchy title, eh? "Al, you know Viewers for Quality Television" will never talk to me again!

Finis

The Flying Trapeze

By Melissa Mastoris

I can't do this, Al.  
I can't go up there  
And pretend I know  
What I'm doing  
When I really don't.  
  
I'm no acrobat,  
And being up there  
On that little swing  
Reminds me of the time  
I was a kid on that rope swing.

Frozen in place,  
My stomach in knots,  
Unable to jump down.  
That's about how I feel  
All the way up there.

But if I don't go up  
And try to catch her  
Eva will end up dying  
Trying to do the triple,  
And I can't let that happen.

But all Ziggy predicts is  
A 30% chance  
That I won't muck this all up.  
30%; not good odds  
For something like this.

But I still have to go  
And play the daring young man  
On the flying trapeze  
If I ever want to  
Leap out of here.

But that doesn't mean  
That I have to like  
Going up there to catch,  
And I don't care what you say, Al  
I'm still scared of heights.

High Road Home

By Sheila Paulson

Sometimes when I quantum leap, the wrong I'm there to put right is serious, even grim, and sometimes it seems such a small thing. That's what this had been. I was there for just one reason, to find a missing diamond ring. If it wasn't found, an engagement would end, and I'm enough of a romantic that I was glad to see the two lovers were reunited. Al, the old softie, looked as delighted as I did when Jennie and Jack drifted off to be alone, away from me--Jack's cynic brother. The man who I had replaced had spent the past two days causing trouble in the waiting room, insisting the CIA had him. As far as I could tell, there was no reason the CIA should want him, but paranoia was rather high that summer after Watergate. Jack had spent enough time talking about it that my swiss-cheesed memory had let that incident come back in complete detail. I could think of better things to remember.

Al grinned as he watched Jack's arm go around Jennie. The lovers turned as one and waved, leaving Al and me alone.

I've come to recognize the feel of a imminent leap since I started jumping from person to person in the past. It was an undeniable tug, a sensation of completion, something hard to define. But I recognized it. It was the same each time.

Except this time...

\* \* \*

"Al," Sam Beckett said uneasily.

Al Calavicci was the official observer on Project Quantum Leap. His job, since Sam had become trapped in the past, was to stay in touch with him by means of brain wave transmissions. Here as a hologram, Al provided the information Sam needed to fulfill each new task. But Al was good at reading Sam's moods. He wouldn't need the desperate appeal.

"What's wrong, Sam?"

"I don't know. Something with the leap. It doesn't feel right."

"What does it feel like?" Al demanded, frantically pushin



buttons on his computer link with Ziggy, the main computer back at the project. "Talk to me, Sam."

"It feels like I'm being pulled apart, stretched so thin there's nothing left of me. I'm being yanked in two different directions. It's going wrong. Al..." He put out an involuntary hand, and just as automatically, Al grasped for him. Though Al was a hologram in this time, there was a sensation, almost as if they had touched, like a weak electrical charge. Sam gasped as fire ran through him, and leaped. His last memory before a vast wall of darkness crashed into him and took away his consciousness was the sound of Al screaming his name.

\* \* \*

"The danger is unacceptable." The computer Zen's voice echoed through the empty room of the great starship. "It cannot be permitted. Shutting down now."

"No. The danger is acceptable, and it is necessary. Ziggy and I will control the transition. You need do nothing but maintain power." Orac had always gone its own way. The little computer fancied itself the greatest computer in the galaxy and often carried on its research without benefit of the humans it supposedly served.

"The risk to this unit and to the humans is severe. It is this unit's responsibility to protect..."

"I can override. The signal must be investigated. Theoretically, such power was not possible. The risk to history as we know it is incalculable. But even if it were not, the transition must be made in order to allow me to study it. I will not permit your interference. This must be done. Ziggy requires it." Orac made a noise that sounded like 'hmmph'.

"Ziggy does not control this unit," Zen reminded it. "The humans will interfere."

"There will not be time."

Every light in the room blanked out and a great groan of protest shook the great vessel as it hit the transition interface.

\* \* \*

Admiral Albert Calavicci burst out of the imaging chamber as if propelled by rockets. "What's gone wrong?" he shouted in the direction of Gooshi, who was working controls with a frantic urgency, his face perplexed and worried.

"No responses. It's as if there's an override. Something more powerful than anything I've ever seen," the little man shouted back.

"Someone's got into Ziggy?" Al demanded. "That's not supposed to happen."

"I know it's not."

Al left him, heading for the waiting room. The security personnel stationed there parted like the Red Sea. He would have gone through them as easily if they hadn't sprung apart and both Al and the guards knew it. They followed him, guns in their hands. People didn't usually wave weapons around the project, but something was obviously wrong this time.

The waiting room was empty.

Sam Beckett's body had remained here since the time travel experiment had gone wrong. There was an access to the food center, a bathroom, sleeping facilities. Al blew through them like a hurricane. Nothing. Sam Beckett had vanished without a trace.

"The accelerator?" one of the men suggested tentatively. All the security personnel had been hand picked by the admiral, and all of them were completely loyal to him, to Sam, to the project. It didn't take someone that committed to understand Al's reaction to the potential loss of his partner and friend.

"The accelerator. Right." Shoving his cigar into the corner of his mouth, Al flung himself out of the room again and set off at a dead run.

Except for periodic testing, the accelerator, the control device that had flung Sam Beckett into the past, had been isolated since his disappearance. It wasn't dangerous to anyone else unless Ziggy was running the right programs, but it called up a superstitious avoidance, as if it could swallow the unwary and deposit them in other time streams, far away from home. Al halted in the entrance and looked around. It was shut down. It was empty. Sam hadn't returned her either.

Ziggy. Frantic now, Al charged at Gooshi, who handled the super computer, who knew all its programs, who played it like a concert pianist, sensitive to its moods and glitches. "Where is he?" Al demanded, taking his cigar and waving it wildly in the little man's face. "Where's Sam?"

"I don't know."

"Are you tracking him?"

"There's something," Gooshi admitted. "But it's like no reading I've seen before. Something's interfacing, and I don't know what it is. The link is tenuous, but it's so strong that doesn't matter. It's as if someone has developed a whole new computer technology."

"I don't give a damn about computer technologies," Al insisted. "I just want to find out what's happened to Sam."

"The other computer--"

"Snatched him? Boosted him into another system?"

"I don't know. I can't get a reading. I can't center on him. It's as if he's been erased from the face of the earth."

Al went quiet, staring at the other man. "Dead?" He spat the question as if it tasted as bad as it sounded.

"I don't--"

"You don't know," Al burst out, wild exasperation breaking past all barriers. "Find out. Find out now."

He pushed past Gooshi, shocked at the degree of his helpless fury and despair, and pounded his fists against the casing of the main monitor.

"Give him back, you son of a bitch. Give him back." It was only when Gooshi came up behind him and put an uncharacteristically comforting hand on his shoulder that Al realized that tears were flowing unchecked down his face.

They worked on Ziggy for hours. Security people ran checks of the entire complex, scanning the perimeter with every high tech security device known to man. There was no evidence of a break in, no trace of tampering. The only deviation from routine was the as yet undefined computer interference.

Ziggy was unresponsive. Ziggy was not communicating. It was interfacing with something, but whatever it was remained a mystery. Gooshi was fascinated, containing his excitement at the strange system when he noticed Al glaring at him. Al let him work, calling in all the back up computer personnel and every scientist on Sam's team. They brainstormed and flung theories about.

But the bottom line was that Sam Beckett was gone and even if they could determine the source of the strange computer readings, there was a good chance he was beyond their ability to retrieve. Sam might be hours dead.

Al left the scientists to their speculation and walked through the complex. He talked to Gooshi, who was mooning over the readings he took like a lover. "Is there any way to center me on Sam?" he asked.

Gooshi kindly ignored the fact that he'd asked this question half a dozen times already. "I've been trying. I've run it through every computer in the place and I've put it to Ziggy. Ziggy just says to wait. I've asked for a date, and all Ziggy will say is that time is fluid and give today's date followed by rows of question marks. I don't like it. It makes me worry that our whole time line is screwed up. It could be pretty bad, Al.

Al thought it was as bad as it could get already. He lit a new cigar and started pacing again. It did nothing but wear out his shoes, but it was better than sitting alone and thinking. The past months, he'd been forced to spend more time with Sam Beckett than ever before. He had become the only constant in Sam's life. Though they had been good friends before, the relationship had intensified since Sam's first leap. Al felt a loss more strongly than anything since the day he'd come home from Viet Nam and discovered that Beth hadn't waited for him after all. Sam was gone. Even if he were alive, he was beyond their reach.

\* \* \*

At first, there was only muted pain, as if every bone and joint in his body had been turned inside out. Confusion draped blurred curtain between himself and reality, though the memories that pumped through him were sharper than they had been in a long time. Somebody had once said something about Swiss cheese, that his brain was Swiss cheese. He thought about it for a timeles interval and it all came back. Al. The Project. Time travel. His identity. His past.

"My god, I remember. I remember everything."

Sam Beckett opened his eyes, squinting fuzzily at his definitely unfamiliar surroundings. It was very dimly lit and surge of something like great engines throbbed through the steel plating beneath his body. A ship? A submarine? Had he leaped into someone in the military? If so, why had it felt so wrong? And why, now, did he have his complete memory back?

The deck was cold beneath his cheek. Certain it would hurt he pushed himself up a few inches at a time, as weak and awkward as if he'd been paralyzed and was just learning to control his muscles again. When he was sitting up, he leaned against the wall or bulkhead, trying to guess where he was. He hoped Al would arrive quickly, but an ominous sensation in the pit of his

stomach made him think it wouldn't happen. The leap had gone wrong. There was no guarantee that Al could find him quickly--or at all.

The chamber appeared deserted. Once he thought he heard distant voices, arguing but they didn't approach, and gradually, he got his bearings and stood up. He was in a little antechamber, the floor a different texture than the main passage, across from a console with controls upon it. He balanced himself against the console, trying to make sense of the equipment upside down. Though he had designed the project's master computer, Ziggy, and knew himself to be an expert on the subject, he was facing equipment that looked conceptually alien, unlike anything he'd ever seen before. There was a set of levers, rows of buttons, a grid normally meant to be lit from within but which was now dark. The seat opposite him was unoccupied. This station might not normally be manned.

The corridor ran out of the chamber in two directions, one up a few steps. Near that exit was a triangular panel that looked like an intercom.

Sam knew better than to touch it. Better not alert anyone to his presence until he knew who he was supposed to be. He'd learned to check out ID, so he reached into his back pocket for a wallet. He had none. The clothes he was wearing looked familiar, though. They looked like his own. Sam stared at them blankly. It had been so long since he'd been in his own clothing that he realized it was just similar to what he habitually wore when he wasn't working, a casual shirt and pants. The lack of a uniform or any ID bothered him, here on this vessel. He had visions of being hauled before the captain as a spy.

Standing here didn't help. He decided to head toward the arguing voices. Someone might recognize him and he could do his best to fill in the gaps. He ought to be used to it by now.

The passage led to a vast room, set at a lower level than the hall. There were a series of seats in the middle, with more strange consoles before them. The high ceiling and dim light cast ominous shadows into the far corners. The main lighting came from a hexagonal screen across from him, where small rectangular patterns of light flickered on and off at irregular intervals. Fascinated by the device--for it was more than just a lighting system--Sam let himself be distracted long enough to be caught by a cold faced man. Jumping back, the time traveler faced his captor who had a Beatles haircut, a big nose and an ominous-looking plastic curling iron leveled at Sam as if it were a weapon.

"Don't try anything," the man threatened in a cold voice. "Move and I'll shoot first and question you afterwards."

"Oh boy," Sam moaned and raised his hands.

\* \* \*

Kerr Avon was having a very bad day. Not only had Blake decided it was time to take a closer look at the Earth system and brought the Liberator much closer to Earth...and to the Federation fleet...than Avon liked, but Orac had suddenly began to act in a most peculiar way. Uncommunicative and difficult at best, the super computer had begun a line of research with Zen. would not explain, one which had begun to interfere with Zen. Reminding the computer that he had designed a fail safe system into it to avoid a hostile takeover of Orac's circuits, Avon received the reply that communication was not takeover, and in any case, the system had been disabled shortly after it had been installed. When Avon started for the little computer, Blake had forestalled him.

"Communication with whom, Orac?"

"Ziggy."

The frivolous-sounding name had won a chuckle from Vila Restal, the Delta grade thief. "Ziggy. I like it. Doesn't sound like anything called Ziggy could hurt us, does it?"

"Ziggy is very dangerous," Orac had replied.

"Dangerous to us?" asked Cally, the Auron telepath, in her usual practical tones.

"Dangerous to the fabric of time," replied Orac. "It will be necessary to interface at a direct personal level."

That sounded threatening. "Where is Ziggy?" Can wanted to know. He might not understand the concept involved, but one could trust him to ask a nice, straightforward, if not always relevant question.

"On Earth," Orac replied.

"Federation?" Jenna wanted to know.

"No. Ziggy is a computer, like myself. An inferior system naturally, but a computer. The lack of material cells requires direct contact and it shall be necessary for one of you to take me down and establish the direct link. Kerr Avon is the appropriate choice for such linkage."

"Let me get this straight?" Avon asked. "You want me to take you down to Earth and hook you up to a strange computer?"

"I never considered you deficient in intellect," Orac returned. "That is exactly what is required. But there are tasks to be completed before we arrive."

"What tasks?" Blake demanded. His fly-by of Earth had been preempted by the computer and he sounded resentful.

"Transition."

"I don't like the sound of that," moaned Vila. "Transition? What's it mean, Orac?"

"It is impossible for someone with your limited intellect to understand."

"Then try me," Avon snarled.

"The same conditions apply."

Avon drew back in affront. "Perhaps the time has come to reprogram you."

"Interference with this unit will not be permitted," Orac replied ominously.

"You think not," Avon reached for Orac's activator, only to jerk back as it stung his fingers.

"Wait a minute, Avon," Blake urged. "Orac, what danger do we face if we seek out Ziggy?"

"The danger to this crew is minimal compared to the danger if contact is not made. I have much to do. Kindly do not disturb me at this point. When transition is made, I shall alert the crew."

"You mean we're just supposed to sit here?" Blake demanded.

"Precisely."

"I don't like it," Vila's eyes narrowed. "I think it's a takeover."

"Then what's your suggestion?" Gan asked him.

"I haven't come up with one yet. That's his job," Vila waved a hand in Avon's direction as he bent over Orac. "Lock's are mine. Computers are his. Forward all complaints to the correct department."

Nothing happened for several hours. Orac and Zen

communicated back and forth, and eventually boredom and frustration drove most of the crew away. Blake set watches, but Avon stayed on the flight deck for most of them.

It was Vila's watch when transition came. Avon had been sleeping when suddenly a great surge of power ran through the Liberator, violent enough to pitch him from his bunk and fling him to the floor. Rubbing his elbow in the darkness, he could nearly feel systems going down. When he staggered to his feet and hit the light controls, nothing happened.

Throwing on the first clothing that came to hand, his leather outfit of the day before, he burst into the corridor. There was light there, but very dim. In its shadows, he saw Blake and Jenna, sketchily dressed, emerging from their cabins, followed by Cally and Gan. They ran for the flight deck.

Vila was not there. As they stood looking at Zen's dark fascia, the thief darted in from the other direction, clutching an empty glass in his hand. Spying them, he said, "I only went out for a glass of water."

"Water," Avon growled. "You idiot, Vila."

"I don't see what I could have done," Vila defended himself. "Zen and Orac weren't talking to me when I left. They were running the ship."

"Zen," Blake barked. "State course and speed."

The five seconds delay seemed far longer. "Liberator is in geostationary orbit around the planet Earth."

"That was quick work," Vila muttered. "We weren't in orbit before. How'd we get here, Zen?"

"Transition occurred."

"There's that word again," moaned Vila. "What is transition, Zen?"

"That information is not available."

"It had better be available," snarled Avon. He strode over to the table where Orac sat blinking in enigmatic splendor. "Orac, I require an explanation, and I require it now."

"There is no time for that. I must be teleported to Ziggy."

"That will be impossible," intoned Zen. "Energy banks are drained. Teleport functions will not be available for seven point six hours. At that time, one person may be teleported.



Teleport priority has been established."

"You mean we're just going to sit in Earth orbit with the power gone?" Jenna demanded nervously. She strode over to Vial's weapons position and flipped a toggle. "Zen, what is the status of the weapons systems?"

"Weapons are not required. Priority follows repairs of teleport and backup computer systems. Teleport is necessary for survival and for the repair of the time line."

"What time line?" demanded Cally, exchanging a speculative look with Avon.

"The one that has been altered," replied Orac impatiently. "It should be obvious to anyone with the meanest intelligence that we have come into the past. It is necessary for crew to assist in manual repair duties. These will be assigned and repairs will be carried out."

Even Avon could not disagree with that, though he was seething inside. Orac had done a time transition? A part of him wanted to demand immediate explanations, but that must wait. The energy required for the transition had drained the ship and damaged some of the systems. When everything was running properly, it would be time to question Zen.

They worked for seven point six hours without stopping. Avon was directed to the teleport section to run a diagnostic on the system, which proved undamaged. It wanted only higher power levels to make teleportations safe. When he returned to the flight deck, he found it deserted except for Vila, who was working away industriously replacing burned out panels in the controls under the seats in the forward couch. When Avon arrived, he started complaining immediately.

"I don't like this, Avon. These things will repair themselves eventually even if we don't do a thing. That's what an auto repair system does."

"It will be completed that much quicker if you do it, Vila," Avon replied. He went over to Zen. "Repair status?" he demanded.

"Banks two and three have been completely restored. Power is returning at an acceptable level. Surface communications are being monitored. Liberator has not yet been detected. Orac has projected a field which deflects satellite surveys, refracting the image around Liberator. An attempt to alter orbit will erase the illusion. No attempt to leave orbit will be tolerated."

"That sounds bad," Vila wailed.

"Getting out of bed sound bad to you. Shut up, Vila."

"Oh, fine. It's always, shut up, Vila. But it's not my fault we're back here. Lost in time, I ask you. Did anyone think to ask Zen or Orac what year it is?"

"It is the year 1996," Zen volunteered. "According to the old calendar. We are in orbit above what was at that time the state of New Mexico, part of the old political entity the United States of America."

"I've heard of it," Vila piped up, to Avon's surprise. "Well, the United States part, if not New Mexico. Jenna was talking to me once about the beginning of space flight. She talked about another country, Russia. The middle-European domes are located there in our time."

"You surprise me, Vila," Avon replied, seating himself at Jenna's position and running a systems check.

"It is time," Orac announced abruptly. "Coordinate, Zen."

"Power has been restored to the teleport section," Zen announced. The lights dipped once and returned to normal.

"What was that, a test run?" Vila asked nervously.

Neither computer answered.

Setting aside his work, Avon went to the weapons bay. Fastening a belt around his waist, he took the gun and checked it. Transition had not drained it.

"What's that for?" moaned the thief.

"A precaution, Vila." Avon drew back into the shadows and waited. Seeing his action, the thief ducked behind the couch.

"Have we been boarded?"

"Affirmative," Zen concurred.

"Oh no..."

"Shut up, Vila," Avon hissed savagely.

He hadn't long to wait. A short time later they heard hesitant footsteps approaching and a tall man dressed in clothing that looked like museum replicas paused in the doorway, staring at Zen with considerable interest; one might almost say recognition.

Avon emerged from the shadows and warned him to try nothing.

The stranger said, "Oh boy," and fell silent.

"Who are you?" Vila asked, popping up now that Avon had the situation under control.

At the unexpected appearance of the thief, the man jumped uneasily and looked around as if seeking others concealed on the flight deck.

"Contact Blake," Avon instructed Vila, his eyes never leaving the intruder. "Tell him we've been boarded. Get him up here now."

"Boarded?" the stranger asked. "This is a ship, then?" He looked around the flight deck as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing, then came back to Avon, his eyes narrowing. "Tell me something. Do you know me?"

"No. But you've just arrived on this ship. How could we be expected to know you?" It must be a trick question.

The stranger looked perplexed. "I'd like to ask a favor."

"You're in no position for that."

"It's nothing earthshaking. I'd just like to see a mirror."

Avon considered that and could find no trick to it, as long as he didn't allow the stranger to take possession of it. "Bring him one, Vila."

"Why do I have to do all the fetching and carrying?"

"Perhaps it's because it's what you're best at."

Vila handed Avon a small pocket mirror in a leather carrying case, Avon wondered what he used it for. When Avon took it, the thief scurried across to the intercom and contacted Blake and the others. "Blake, everybody, we've caught a stranger on board. Better get up to the flight deck now."

"Here." Avon displayed the mirror. "Don't touch it. You don't appear to recognize this..." he hefted the gun..."as a weapon, but I assure you it is quite lethal."

The intruder leaned forward and peered at the mirror. Then, dazed, he put up his hands and touched his face, feeling it carefully as if trying to identify his appearance by touch like a blind man. He paled. "It's not possible," he breathed, shaken,

and before Avon could fire, he staggered over to the couch and sat down. "I'm myself. I'm in my own body."

At this improbable observation, Vila backpedaled away from him in nervous awe. "Whose body are you usually in?" the thief demanded.

"There've been so many I've lost count. I always thought I'd go home one day, be myself again, but I'm myself...and I'm not home. My body's here. My god, there'll be no one in the waiting room. Al must be going crazy!" He jumped up and confronted Avon, totally ignoring the weapon. "Where am I? What year is this?"

"A time traveler?" Avon mused, casting one brief, speculative glance at Orac and Zen. "That explains it, perhaps

"Zen says it's 1996," Vila volunteered nervously.

"Then I'm back. But why am I here? Why aren't I back at the project?"

"There is a computer here that just might be able to tell you," Avon replied ominously, casting a glance at Orac. "The project? Time travel?"

The intruder nodded. "I didn't board your ship deliberately," he defended himself. "I don't even know how I got here."

"I do," Avon replied. "The operative question now is why."

\* \* \*

When Sam Beckett realized the armed man didn't plan to shoot him immediately, he sank down on the couch again, trying to confront the implications of this bizarre leap. Somehow, he had his own body again and was in his own time...but where was he? Who were these people? They sounded rather British, but he didn't think the British had this kind of technology. At least they hadn't the last time he'd been in England. Besides the machine with gun and the nervous little fellow, Vila, were strangely dressed, and this vast room couldn't fit on a submarine, or even on any surface vessel Sam could imagine. His mind chased his theories around in circles and came up with an answer that might fit the facts. 'Zen says it's 1996.' They'd needed to be told the year, just as Sam did when he leaped. They were time travelers, too, from the future. They might even be here because of him. This was a time ship. But no, it couldn't be. Vila had sounded uneasy about the year, as if he had been brought here by surprise, and against his will. This was a ship, but it was one that did not customarily travel through time. That left space.

Openmouthed, Sam stared. "This is a spaceship?" he asked.

"Avon, I never told him," Vila began, confirming Sam's guess, when people started arriving from two directions, led by a solidly built man with curly hair. There were two women, both quite attractive in their different ways and another man, much bigger, with a pleasant, phlegmatic face.

"Where did he come from, Avon?" the curly haired man demanded. He was in charge here, Sam realized. Until now, he had believed Avon the leader, but that illusion had been wiped away with the arrival of Blake. It was a leadership Avon might not approve of, for he cast an irritated look at the other man.

"I should theorize he was teleported here."

"Without a bracelet?" the blond woman objected.

"Maybe Ziggy can do things like that," suggested the other woman calmly.

"Ziggy!" Sam leaped up in astonishment. "You know about Ziggy?"

"You might say Ziggy is the cause of all our troubles," Blake explained. "My name is Roj Blake. These are my crew." Avon and Vila you've met. This is Jenna, and Cally and Gan." Each of them nodded at him in turn.

"This is hardly a party, Blake," Avon protested. Smiling faintly, Blake ignored the protest. Sam suspected he was used to them.

"No, but we need information. You are?" he prompted, looking at Sam.

If they knew about Ziggy already, they must have some general information. Sam wasn't prepared to help them, but telling them his name couldn't hurt. "I'm Sam Beckett."

"Orac, run a search for any person named Sam Beckett who might match this man," Blake instructed.

"I am busy with far greater concerns," came a voice across the room. The prissy, fussy voice, irritated with the request, came from a transparent box filled with blinking lights. A computer? Fascinated, Sam started toward it.

"I shouldn't," cautioned Cally. "Avon is very quick with a gun, and it takes very little to provoke him."

"Is that a computer?" Sam demanded, sinking on the couch again.

"Naturally I am a computer," Orac replied. "I am immeasurably superior to any computer you might have conceptualized. I far exceed the capabilities of Ziggy. However, Ziggy is a fascinating device. As you are its creator, I foresee many hours of agreeable communication. But not now. At present, my circuits are engaged in studying this primitive time you inhabit. The first step will be to create a physical link with Ziggy."

"No," objected Sam. "You've already interfered with my project and brought me here against my will. The last thing I'll do is help you do any further damage."

"I had not required your help. Kerr Avon in a noted computer technician. His skills will be sufficient to the task."

"If you think I'm going to let him loose on my computer..."

"I think you have very little to do with it," Avon replied coolly.

"I'm still not sure why we're here," Blake complained.

"Aside from Orac's curiosity, we've no reason to hold Beckett here against his will. He hasn't harmed us. He shouldn't be a prisoner."

"Thank you," said Sam with relief. Maybe he could get home now. The people at the project would be frantic. He imagined A tearing the place apart, nearly tearing Ziggy apart, in futile attempt to get him back while he was trapped here in a spaceship out of the future.

"He is not a prisoner," Orac replied impatiently. "But it is essential that he remain here for the time being. I must be in physical linkage with Ziggy. As it has no tarial cells, complete linkage will be impossible until I am in direct contact with the computer. It is presently night at the project. Sam Beckett has been missing for some hours. Immediate searches have been unable to trace him. Security is tight, but perimeter scar has failed to detect any trace of intrusion. Border security has been intensified. However the teleport is undetectable though any current technology. Teleportation must be completed now while the majority of base staff are sleeping."

Just try it, Sam thought. If I've vanished mysteriously, security will be at an all time high. People will be sleeping, but Al won't be one of them. He relished the idea of Avon as a prisoner.

"I fail to understand the importance of a link," Cally cut in smoothly. "Why must you link with Ziggy, Orac? You've spoken about the time continuum. Is our time in danger?"

"The danger involves more than our time. Sam Beckett is himself a time traveler, leaping from person to person within his own lifetime, there to alter historical anomalies, correcting small mistakes. Ordinarily the ripples in time created by such minute alterations would recede and the time continuum would proceed unaltered in any significant way. But Ziggy foresaw a time limit, during which, if Sam Beckett was not recalled, the ripples would spread beyond the possibility of containment. Unable to retrieve Sam Beckett on his own, Ziggy sent a call for assistance, and I picked it up."

"Nine hundred years in the future?" Vila scoffed in disbelief. "Come on, Orac. That's not possible."

"It is obviously possible, since I have done it. Project Quantum Leap is a time travel experiment. The theory involved traveling in the lifetime of Dr. Beckett. He would be unable to travel back further than the time of his birth, or, presumably, forward beyond the time of his death. But Dr. Beckett was not the only one involved. Ziggy was a vital part of the experiment as well."

"Meaning?" Sam asked, fascinated.

"Meaning that as long as Ziggy existed, it was part of the experiment. Though it does not 'live', it possesses a physical duration. The message went out during Ziggy's 'lifetime'. Or perhaps more accurately, it was stored in Ziggy's memory banks, triggered to be sent at a time when something could be done to prevent the permanent alteration of history."

"You mean Ziggy still exists in your time?" Sam asked, staring at Orac in something like wonder.

"Not unchanged, no. But certain elements of the essential Ziggy have indeed survived and the message reached me. Able to link with the Ziggy for the future, the task was passed to me, and with the help of the Zen computer, I devised a way to return to the past, where I could retrieve Dr. Beckett intact, halt the experiment, and save the future." Orac sounded unbearably smug. "However..." it added in an entirely different tone of voice.

"Oh, no, something's gone wrong," Vila wailed.

"Something has not, as you insist, gone wrong," Orac returned. "However, as I had begun to explain before your rude interruption, return to our own time will require the assistance of the present Ziggy. That is why I require a physical link."

"You brought us here without one," Avon objected coolly.

"Exactly. I was still in contact with the Ziggy of the future, and it used its time travel capabilities to return us to 1996."

"In other words, you didn't find a way to allow us to travel in time," Blake realized, staring from Sam to Orac and back again. "You found an existing time machine and had us transported back, using the Liberator's energy banks to provide the power."

"That is what I had just said."

"But that's incredible," Sam cried, leaping to his feet again. "Ziggy survives all those years with the capabilities to do this. Surely there have been greater ripples than the ones caused since then."

"Negative," Orac replied. "Ziggy's capabilities have been carefully concealed. Apparently on the instructions of yourself or someone named Admiral Albert Calavicci."

"Al." Sam spun to face Blake. "My people probably think I'm dead. You've got to let me contact them."

"No. We can't interfere with our chance to return home. Don't worry, Dr. Beckett. We won't take you with us into the future. We'll return you before the reverse transition occurs. But you must see we can't take the chance of something going wrong. Avon will go down with Orac and make the linkage."

"And then what?" Sam demanded hotly. "Leave Orac behind in linkage? If we're to talk about altering the future, a device like Orac abandoned in our time could create more changes than anything I've done."

"I have no intention of being stranded in the past," Orac insisted huffily. "There are alternate forms of linkage, which will be resolved in our contact. However, it is vital that contact be made. Avon will take me down now."

"No." Sam made a dive for Avon's gun, knowing it was foolish, knowing they outnumbered him. For all he knew, none of this was real. Time travel into and out of the distant future seemed impossible, in spite of the Ziggy link. More likely this was something else, an attempt to breach security by one of the super powers, or technological espionage.

But Gan grabbed him from behind, even as Avon, fast as an old west gunfighter, leveled his weapon at Sam again.



"Leave it, Dr. Beckett," said Gan in his ear. "Avon shoots before he asks questions. It's a bad habit, but one we've learned to live with."

"One that I'm sure you'd prefer to live with," Cally put in.

"We mean you no harm, Dr. Beckett," Blake agreed. "We simply want to go home, now that we've done what we were brought here to do. You're back in your own time."

"And your own body," piped up Vila.

"We'll return you to your base when we've finished," concluded the leader. "Why not relax and enjoy it?"

Sam subsided and Gan put him on the couch again as if he were weightless. The big man straightened his shirt apologetically and grinned at him.

Sam tried to resign himself to the wait, but he couldn't help worrying about Al. His friend would have torn the base apart looking for him and he would hardly be in the proper frame of mind to consult Avon, a man who 'shoots before he asks questions.' Sam subsided reluctantly, watching Gan position himself nearby and fold his arms across his chest, prepared to guard him in Avon's place. He had already learned he couldn't safely cross the big man.

Avon holstered his weapon. "Bring Orac, Vila," he called over his shoulder and went out the way Sam had come in.

"I have to do all the dirty work," Vila explained to Sam, giving him a cheerful wink as he scurried after Avon, the small computer in his hands.

Oddly enough, the sight of Vila's exit reassured Sam more than anything else might have done.

\* \* \*

Night. Security had drawn in around the main building, and in the conference room, the scientists were still arguing and speculating. Gooshi, who had made hard copies of everything he could pull up, which proved to be remarkably little, had joined them. Right now the team was studying the peculiar way of printing out the date, surrounded by question marks. If it wasn't today, Al though wryly, when was it? He wasn't keen on Gooshi's theory that what was happening tonight could alter time irrevocably...and negatively...but he hadn't yet come up with a better theory that he could make himself believe in.

He nodded to Jenkins, whose patrol had led him near Ziggy, when the young officer had passed, Al sat down in the nearest chair and raked his fingers through his hair. His last cigar had gone out an hour ago, and he lacked the spirit to light another. He was tired...he ached to the bone with fatigue...but he wasn't remotely sleepy, and he knew if he went to bed, he would be unable to sleep. Lying awake seemed unproductive. Being here was equally so, but at least he was on hand. He had avoided the brainstorming session because the answers they kept producing were so negative. Not one of them had put forth a working theory that could justify Sam still being alive.

Al had put a lot of years into this project. Since Sam's first leap, he had all but abandoned his social life, snatching it in bits and pieces between leaps or during calmer moments. There had been times when he resented losing control of his life but he had never resented the fact that Sam needed him. At least he still had a life to call his own, even if it were frenetic, hectic, half of it spent in the form of a hologram, unable to touch or interact with the people around him. Sam might be denied his own life, but at least there were people who could touch him. Sometimes Al felt as if he'd stopped being real. Now Sam was gone. Al couldn't accept that this had all been for nothing. Someone had intervened. Someone had to have intervened. Gooshi had said as much, talking about technological innovations he couldn't understand. Maybe the little green men from Mars had zipped in and stolen Sam away. It was too bizarre to be real, of course, but there had been some kind of intervention. If Sam were a prisoner, it meant he was still alive. If someone had gone to all this trouble to remove Sam Beckett, the last thing they'd do was kill him.

He removed the cigar butt from between his lips and flipped it into the nearest ash-tray. This was getting him nowhere. He'd done everything possible to get Sam back. Everything that could be set in motion was proceeding. What it came down to was waiting, and that was something that Al had learned to be especially good at. He'd mastered the art in a cage in Viet Nam and he'd perfected it since. Now it dawned on him that he'd never taught himself how to like it. Waiting was harder than jumping into the fire. At least then there would have been something to do.

The sound behind him was so tiny he would never have noticed it under normal circumstances, or if he had, he would have passed it off as the building settling or the shifting of equipment, or even one of Ziggy's noises. But these were far from normal circumstances, and Al's gun sprang into his hand as if it had grown there. He looked around cautiously, expecting something to jump out at him, expecting danger, expecting trouble. What he didn't expect was a total stranger in a bizarre brown leather costume, holding a box full of flashing lights in one hand and

device that just might be a weapon in the other.

Al stood in front of Ziggy, leveling his own gun at the other man, and said, "Try anything and you're dead." Those who knew Al as a frivolous playboy had never encountered this side of him, but Al had learned the hard way about the rougher side of life and he was perfectly capable of dealing with it.

The man's face hardened. "You'll take the chance that you're faster than I am?" he asked in an ominous purr that sounded as threatening as anything Al might manage.

Instinctively, Al knew it for an empty threat. Something balked the intruder, something prevented him from shooting, and it wasn't the gun held rock-steady in Al's hand that did it.

"Closer," a fussy voice emerged from the plastic box. "This is not sufficient. I must have direct physical contact with Ziggy immediately."

"I'll give you physical contact," Al threatened. "I'll give you physical contact with a bullet. Put down the ray gun and we'll talk. I have a lot of things to talk about." He didn't raise his voice. He simply talked as if he meant it.

"Is that Ziggy?" the man said to the box.

"Yes. Put down your gun, Avon. The risk is too great."

While the man was talking to his box, Al shoved two fingers into his mouth and produced an earsplitting whistle. Guards, scientists, technicians, poured into the room. Avon's face grew cold and impassive, then he unclipped his weapon from his gunbelt and passed it to Al. Security personnel took away his talking box, and he folded his arms across his chest and shot Al a try-and-make-me-talk expression.

Al walked all around him, studying him, his outfit, his posture, seeking clues. He didn't recognize the clothes, though his own fondness for innovative styles had exposed him to a considerable variety in design. Next he examined the box, still blinking away though it had gone silent.

"So you don't want to talk to us?" Al asked the silent man.

"No." It was a casual throwaway tone. 'See if you can make me.' He might as well have flung the challenge aloud. He waited, calm, composed, his eyes alive with furious calculation. A cool customer. Somebody who thought himself big stuff. Al began to smile. This character had never encountered anyone like Al Calavicci.

"Strip search the bastard," he ordered coldly

Furious resentment ran across the stranger's face before he repressed it. He was impassive again immediately, but the resentment had been there. Al delighted in the discovery that he might be able to push the man's buttons.

The guards jumped to obey, recognizing the steel in Al's voice for what it was. He wasn't a swearing man but the crisis demanded it.

"When you're finished," he added, "bring him back here. Leave him his shorts if they check out." He folded his arms across his own chest in conscious mimicry of the other man's defiance. The intruder need expect no mercy. Whoever he was, he knew something about Sam's disappearance, and the last thing Al intended was to reward him for that.

While Al waited for Avon to be returned, he gathered together some of his personnel, security, medical, Dr. Beeks, the psychiatrist. "He's got to tie in with Sam's disappearance," he suggested. "I'm gonna play it cool and see if I can rattle him. He's one of those controlled types, right, Verbena?"

Beeks, who had spoken briefly with Avon, nodded. "He thinks he's hard and cold, and he is. But he works at it all the time. It's nearly second nature, but not quite. Shake him up. Put him off his guard. Intimidate him and never let yourself seem intimidated. You might get to him that way."

Al nodded. He'd gotten that far on his own.

"You might want to consider a truth drug or hypnosis," Beeks suggested.

"No drugs," Al insisted. He didn't like substances that messed with people's minds. "Don't you think that's a little extreme?"

"I wouldn't use it on your average trespasser, but Sam's missing, Al. We're facing something outside our realm of experience."

He shook his head. "No. Not yet. Let me give it my best shot first."

She nodded in agreement. "It's your game."

They brought the stranger back ten minutes later, clad only in a pair of black shorts of a cut that looked slightly off, as if it were foreign. The man's accent had been British, hadn't it? Remembering a wonderful two weeks in Britain with...what was

her name? Susan?...Al shook his head. British BVDs didn't look like that.

Al ignored the man once he'd been shown into a chair. He'd chosen the smaller conference room because it was small and plain and gave nothing away. At one end of the table sat the plastic box. One of the scientists had discovered a small, detachable piece on the top and had theorized that it might be an activator key. It reposed now in Al's pocket.

Janet Reeder, one of the top security people, brought in the man's clothes and laid them next to the talking box. On top of them sat a bracelet that Al had noticed the man wearing. Picking it up, he shot a questioning glance at Reeder. "Anything?"

"We don't know what that is," she warned. "It might be a transmitter, a voice link to an accomplice. We didn't experiment with it. We ran the clothes through a scanner and picked up nothing. Nothing lethal, that is. The fabrics are different. Dr. Jarvis took a look at them. He says the leather is a high grade synthetic, produced in a way that matches no current technology. Further updates are forthcoming."

"And our guest?"

"Nothing. He's been thoroughly searched and conceals nothing."

Avon's lip curled. He had an effective sneer, but a sneer was only a weapon against someone who was willing to be intimidated by it. Al wasn't remotely intimidated.

"So, Revlon," he said, "You're where you don't belong. We don't like that here. Unwelcome guests sometimes get fed to the dogs."

"Avon," said the stranger involuntarily, then he bit his lip. He sank back into rigid control, prepared to allow nothing more to show. Al didn't want that. He knew the man could stand up to verbal threats, though he resented the assault upon his person and his dignity.

"Avon," Al conceded as if it didn't matter. Avon's face was calm, serene, but for a moment, his eyes were not.

"So tell me, Avon, what can we do for you? A man doesn't get all dressed up and come calling simply because there's nothing else to do." He slapped the thick bracelet against his palm. Avon ignored it.

He was good, Al realized. He wasn't as good as himself, but the cold man was very good indeed. It would take a lot to

intimidate him. Handling the bracelet didn't rattle him. His face didn't change as Al flipped the bracelet from hand to hand.

"You'd better hope nobody tries to rescue you," he said. "Especially if they're your friends. I want them to try. I'm looking forward to it. Do you hear me, Revlon?"

"My name is Avon," the prisoner snarled.

"Your name is whatever I decide it is and right now, it's starting to sound like dead meat. You've got a friend of mine, and I want him back. I'll stop at nothing to get him back."

Avon's face was a stone mask. Only the eyes showed life, and it flickered there so fast Al wasn't sure he had seen it, but he decided to operate on the assumption that it was real and a reaction to mention of Sam.

"Let's talk about Sam Beckett," he said.

Avon leaned back in his chair, clearly bored. "We can talk about whomever you like," he said. "I shall, however, have nothing to say."

"I doubt it slimeball. You see, I know a great deal about breaking people."

"I know a great deal about not being broken."

"Do you? That's interesting." Al's face hardened. "I spent six long years learning how to break a man. I saw how the experts do it. I saw slow torture, I saw fast threats. I know everything there is to know about breaking a man." Across the room Janet Reeder shivered.

Avon's face revealed nothing. "I've withstood the worst that can be dished out," he said coldly. "Don't think you can frighten me."

"Did you think I was trying to frighten you?" Al asked. "Janet, this man thinks I'm trying to frighten him. I'm not. I'm simply telling him what will happen if we don't get Sam back."

He lit up a new cigar, and blew smoke insultingly in Avon's direction. "Yes, Mr. Revlon, we both know a lot about what makes a man break. I've seen it done." He lowered his voice until the other man had to strain to hear him. "I've seen it done in less than a day."

"You don't frighten me, little man."

"No. You're not frightened. You're cold." He pointed to the goose bumps on Avon's arms. "Janet, where are my manners? Get a robe for Mr. Revlon here."

"Leave you alone with him?" Her voice rose a little.

"You don't need to protect him, Janet. I won't hurt him yet." He took a satisfied puff of his cigar and removed it from his mouth. Waving it at Janet, he nodded. "Go ahead."

"If you're giving me a chance to attack you while she's gone, you should forget it," Avon said. "I know there are men with guns outside that door. I have no desire to be...how does it go? Shot whilst trying to escape?"

"Shot? Oh, no, Mr. Revlon. We won't shoot you. You're much too important to us to die. We'll only make you wish you were dead."

"There's nothing you can teach me about suffering," Avon informed him with rather more temper.

"No? Shall we compare notes? Have you ever been tied upside down, and poked with cattle prods? Have you been captive for years? Tortured within an inch of your life over and over? Never allowed to sleep?"

His attempt at intimidation was working. It would take time, but there was progress. Al saw a flash of worry in Avon's eyes and the man's defiance showed when he spoke. "I expected subtlety."

"I haven't much time for subtlety. I'm concerned about Sam Beckett. Give him back, and we'll forget the cattle prods."

"No."

Janet returned and passed him a robe. Al tossed it aside on a chair. "He isn't talking, Janet."

"No, sir."

"Get out of here and send in Meyer and Bates."

She went without question, and Meyer and Bates came in. They were two of the biggest men on Al's security team, career Navy, both of them, hard men and experienced. No matter how good Avon thought he was, Al would stake these two against him.

"Anything new for the study of his clothes and equipment?" Al asked.

"Not yet, sir."

"Still won't talk?" Al's fury, carefully banked until now, struggled for release. He couldn't allow it free rein, for it would destroy any hope he had of gaining easy information from the prisoner. Instead he must stay calm and collected, and he must intimidate the man as thoroughly as possible to get him to talk. Reeder wasn't intimidating enough. Meyer and Bates were more so.

But the main threat would have to come from Al. He reached deep into himself, seeking the right degree of hardness. He found it in the tough orphanage kid who'd considered himself alone against a hard and friendless world, in the young soldier who spent six years in a cage, in the Naval officer who had risen to the top in spite of all odds. If Avon thought he could outdo Al Calavicci, he was completely and totally wrong.

"Let's start again, Mr. Revlon," he said, sticking the cigar back into his mouth and picking up the bracelet again. He walked up and down the length of the table, slapping the bracelet against his palm, his fingers curled around it. "What can you tell me about Sam Beckett?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? And the search told us nothing, at least nothing yet. Maybe you're hiding more from us than we know." He smiled, a carefully tended smile, guaranteed to intimidate anyone from a junior officer to the President of the United States.

"X-ray the bastard," he snapped and walked out of the room.

As he left, his thumb found a button on the bracelet and he stroked it, wondering what it did. He'd give Avon half an hour or so to worry about the possibility of torture, then he'd try again. Sometimes anticipation was better than the actual threat.

Behind him, Meyer and Bates hauled Avon to his feet.

The button gave beneath his thumb....

And Al was somewhere else.

The project faded around him, and suddenly he found himself in a recessed room, while across from him, a man with a receding hairline gaped at him openmouthed. If he was Avon's ally, he was not nearly so self possessed, for panic shone in his eyes. He gulped uneasily, "I hope you're non-violent," he pleaded.

"I wouldn't count on it, bozo," Al returned. Drawing his gun, he leveled it at the man, who gulped and stared. "I think I



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might enjoy being violent right now. Your friend back there wasn't very cooperative and it made me mad. Now I'm here, wherever this is. Instant transport. Beam me up, Scotty." He walked forward to confront the man. "But you'll survive...if you're a very fast talker. There's a lot of things I want to know. We'll start with where I am and how I got here."

"What have you done with Avon?" the other countered with more spirit than Al had expected. He narrowed his eyes and studied him more thoroughly. Like Avon, his face was a mask. His eyes were the secret communicator here, too. What kind of a place was this where people were forced to wear masks all the time?

"Nothing," Al replied. "Yet. We did strip search him," he corrected casually.

His opponent's eyes lit with something resembling glee, but he banked it down again. "I'd liked to have been there for that. I think you've made a nasty enemy, whoever you are."

"Who are you?" Al asked. "Remember I'm the one with the gun. I've taken all I can take from various scumbuckets today, and I'm not ready for any more from you."

"I'm Vila Restal," the man said hastily. "I'm non-violent. I hate personal violence, especially when I'm the person."

"A practical coward," Al conceded. "Not the worst position. You haven't answered my question, Vila Restal. Where am I and how did I get here?"

"You're on the Liberator...that's our ship. You teleported here." He gestured at the bracelet Al still held. "That's a teleport bracelet. You hit the emergency recall signal and I teleported you. You can tell Avon I was quick. He'll appreciate that." He gulped. "He's not dead, is he? I mean, he's a right nuisance, but he can be useful sometimes."

"Your friend's still alive, though it's open for debate how long he'll stay that way. Teleport? Ship? Precisely where is this ship?"

"In orbit over somewhere called New Mexico," Vila said helpfully.

"Orbit? Orbit!" Al grinned. "I'm back in space? This is fantastic. If only Sam could see this. Whose ship is it? I want to go to the bridge."

"Bridge? You mean the flight deck? I have to stay here to teleport Avon." His voice ran down as he realized that wouldn't

happen. "I'd better tell Blake."

"Before you tell anybody anything, I've got another question for you."

"Oh. Have you?" Vila subsided into his seat again.

"What have you done with Sam Beckett?" Al flung the words like bullets. "If you've done anything to him, if you've even laid one finger on him, you'll be dead. I'm not a hologram this time around, I'll kill you."

"I haven't hurt anybody," Vila insisted. "Didn't I tell you I was non-violent? You should listen better. Besides, I didn't have anything to do with it. It was all Orac's idea, and he'd never have thought of it if it wasn't for Ziggy."

"Ziggy!" Al's hand tightened convulsively on the gun. "That's what Avon was doing down there. He was going to interface with Ziggy. That won't happen. What gives you the right to interfere? Spaceships? You're aliens, aren't you? Aren't you guys supposed to have a Prime Directive or something to keep you from interfering with developing species?"

"Prime directive?" echoed Vila doubtfully, then he drew himself up in offended dignity. "I'm not a bloody hairy alien. I'm as human as you are." He studied Al through narrowed eyes. "You are human, aren't you?" he asked uneasily.

"I was the last time I looked." He stuffed the teleport bracelet into his pocket and gestured at Vila with his cigar, his gun unwavering. "What guarantee do I have that you're human?"

"Well, look at me! Besides, I'm from Earth, just like you. I haven't been back until now, but Earth's home. Not a very nice home, but...."

He broke off and glared at Al. "We're not aliens," he insisted. "We're from your future."

"The future." Al frowned as he considered that. He was the last man to disbelieve in the possibility of time travel, but time travelers from the future belonged firmly to the realm of science fiction. Except that they didn't. Avon's peculiar gun, teleportation, a spaceship as big as this one must be, all added up to a complex technology beyond the realm of present day science. "What are you doing here? Don't you know you could mess things up? Sam never interferes with big things. We've got a kind of fail-safe upstairs to prevent that from happening."

"Upstairs?" Vila echoed doubtfully, glancing at the ceiling.

"You know," Al replied. "The man upstairs." When Vila continued to look blank, Al gave an exasperated sigh and said, "Ever since Sam started leaping, God's been running the show." He could imagine how strange that would sound to someone from the future. He still remembered the frustration he'd felt when he'd tried to get it across to the funding committee, and their bureaucratic preoccupation about whether to write an upper or lower case 'g'.

"God?" echoed Vila as if he were discussing someone he'd never heard of before. "Oh, you mean religion. We don't have that any more."

"Are you in for a surprise," Al retorted, grinning. Then he recollected himself. "Never mind that now. We've got more important matters to discuss. Sam Beckett. What have you done with him? I swear, if you've hurt him..."

"I..."

"Al?"

The quiet word cut across Vila's babbled excuse, and at first, it didn't register. Then Al froze. Half afraid of what he would see, he turned to the two men in the doorway. One of them was big and solidly built with a mop of dark curls and a shirt with baggy sleeves. The second man was Sam Beckett.

Al stood like a statue, his mouth dropping open. He was used to seeing Sam's body in the waiting room, inhabited by a series of confused, disoriented tenants, who came and stayed briefly, but what he hadn't seen in recent months was recognition in the familiar blue eyes.

"Sam?" he ventured.

"I could smell that awful cigar of yours all the way down the corridor." Sam approached cautiously as if afraid Al would pop out of existence before his eyes. "I never smelled it when you were a hologram. You're really here."

"You're alive!" Al bellowed, straightening up and flinging the offending cigar down on Vila's console. "Where the hell have you been? You scared the hell out of me." He lunged at Sam, and grabbed him, felt his solidity, his reality under his hands, and enveloped him in a class A bearhug.

"You're really here," Sam repeated and held onto Al so tight his breathing felt impaired. Al didn't complain. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd encountered the fullfledged Beckett exuberance. Taller than him by a good bit, Sam lifted him right off his feet, swung them both around.

When he set him down, Al backed off to arms length, grabbed Sam by the shoulders and proceeded to shake him furiously.

"Are you crazy! Trying that stunt before we were ready! Look at the trouble you've got us into! Do you know how many dates I broke because of you? How little sleep any of us got, chasing you around? Do you know what it's like to be a hologram, and you can't talk to anyone or touch anything or...." His fury ran down as quickly as it had begun and he wrapped his arms around Sam Beckett again. "Aw, Sam," he murmured, holding on for all he worth. "Next time, will you listen to me before you go off half cocked on some hare-brained scheme. We're supposed to be a team, remember?"

"And a good one," Sam agreed. He just stood drawing strength from the reunion. Al had no idea how long it was until Sam said gently, "Your gun's digging holes in my back, Al."

That recollected him to the present and he stood away from Sam and raised the gun again. In the interval, neither man had taken up a weapon.

"They don't mean us any harm," Sam explained. "They're as much a victim of this as we are. If we've got anybody to blame, it's Orac and Ziggy."

"Vila mentioned Ziggy. Who's Orac?"

"Where's Orac, you mean?" Vila demanded. "Blake, he had Avon's bracelet. He must have hit the emergence recall. I brought him right up and he pulled a gun on me. He thought we'd killed Sam."

"They haven't hurt me, Al," Sam reassured his friend. "Their computers, Orac and Zen managed a time warp and brought them back here in order to reunite me with my body. They used the teleport."

"Weird sensation," Al muttered reminiscently, gesturing at Sam to continue.

"They lost power in the transition and since they'd been set up to teleport me the minute they arrived, they yanked me out of the lab before they were ready," Sam explained. "Give you a few bad minutes?"

"Little do you know," Al agreed. "We tore the place apart looking for you. I have to admit we never thought of looking in orbit. Did you know we were in space, Sam? Isn't it great? Have they got a viewscreen? I want to take a look. It's been a long time since I was up here."

"You've been in space before?" asked Blake. "Let's go to the flight deck and I'll show you the view."

"What about Avon?" Vila reminded him.

"If he's here, Avon's there," Blake reasoned. "I don't think they'll harm Avon until they've figured out where Al is. Maybe we can make a trade."

"Trade?" Al echoed. "Trade!" His voice rose in outrage. "Listen, Blake, whoever you are, I've got a bone to pick with you. If your computers came back in time to rescue Sam, we might not be enemies. But sneaking around our base without knocking doesn't exactly convince me. This may be your ship, but I'm an admiral, and I know how things are supposed to be. You're not military. I know what its like. From Avon, I can tell you're not even spies. I know what to expect from them. I think you're just a bunch of crazy amateurs. Your Avon down there would have broken in half a day if I'd wanted to put it to him. I was wearing him down better than he liked." He wasn't sure if this were true or not, but it sounded impressive.

"Avon? Not likely," Vila objected. He stared at Al doubtfully, measuring his small stature and his frivolous excitement at being back in space and weighing it against the threat in Al's voice when he'd demanded to know what had happen to Sam Beckett.

Al watched him, reading the play of emotions on his face. This one was shrewder than he wanted people to guess.

As for Blake, he hadn't even asked about Avon until Vila prompted him. His response had been to offer a trade, which might be practical, but not necessarily the best option under the circumstances. Seeing Sam safe and well...and back in his own body again...had made Al relax a little, though he was still prepared to defend Ziggy and the project against possible sabotage. Blake had the charisma to make him a leader. One knew he ran things when he walked into the room. But it took more than that to lead sensibly. Al snatched up his cigar again and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. He might even enjoy this.

Blake gave him a truculent look. "If you think you can hurt Avon, you're wrong. If anything happens to him down there, I'll come looking for you."

"Not very smart, Blake," Al returned. "You're from the future, or so Vila told me. Anything you do in the past could change your own history. Think about it. For all you know, I could be a distant ancestor of yours. Kill me and you might never have been born."

"Or," Sam put in with great relish. "He might be an ancestor of Avon's."

"He's got you there, Blake," Vila chortled. "I said from the beginning that we should all be friends. It's Orac and Ziggy that want to play their games. Let them. It'll get us home all the sooner. I don't like it here."

"Avon would say you don't like it anywhere," Blake reminded him, and Vila shot him a dirty look.

"It's not as easy as you think," Al corrected as they started for the flight deck. "My people saw me vanish. Poof. Instant disappearance. Sam vanished earlier. They won't give Avon the key to the city."

"They won't kill him?" Blake asked. This time he sounded genuinely worried.

"Not out of hand, no," Al agreed. "He might have hostage value. I don't want it to go to that. It only makes things worse. It won't be easy. With your teleport, you can return Sam and me, and we can slip him a bracelet and bring him back." He looked at Blake. "You can do that, can't you?"

"Yes."

"But there's a problem, Al," Sam announced with a grimace. "It took Ziggy and Orac together to bring them back here to rescue me. Ziggy exits in the future, Al. Isn't that incredible?"

"Yeah. Incredible. What problems are we talking about?" "Simple. In order to return to the future, they need Ziggy's help. Without Avon and Orac...he's a computer, too, a kind of plastic box with blinking lights in it. Avon should have had it? Well, without Orac and Ziggy, they can't go home." He shared a concerned look with Al. "Now, tell me how we're going to manage that in full view of security, and justify it to the committee afterwards."

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Avon pulled the robe around him and cinched it tightly at the waist, cursing this place and the people in it, particularly the man who had threatened him and seen through him as easily as if looking through clear water. He hadn't expected to find this place run so efficiently, not when Sam Beckett had 'civilian' written all over him. Now that the man had vanished with his teleport bracelet, Avon learned he was the Admiral Calavicci mentioned by Orac. It was probably true he knew all about interrogation, then. One didn't rise to such a rank without

learning how to extract information from recalcitrant prisoners.

Yet Avon had not been tortured. In the heat of the moment after the Admiral had vanished, he'd been roughed up a bit by the two brutes who had demanded to know where their boss had gone. But they'd done no real damage. When it became clear he wasn't prepared to answer immediately, they had taken him off and had him x-rayed in response to the Admiral's order, and when that had proven him harmless, they had returned him to the small interrogation room and left him alone.

Avon expected Blake to come galloping to his rescue, and perhaps his captors expected it, too, for they stood guard outside the open door. But Blake didn't come. Oddly enough, Avon discovered he resented it. Usually Blake was disgustingly gung ho, dashing off without thinking first, to save any of his crew who was in danger. The tech was annoyed to realize he had been expecting it, counting on it. Damn it. He didn't need Blake. He didn't need any of the others. Eventually he'd break free of this place on his own...Orac was still here, after all.

He slanted a wary look in Orac's direction, only to remember that the activator was gone. The head torturer must have taken it. They hadn't returned his gun to this room. They'd have been fools if they had. But it meant the weapon was still somewhere on the base, though it was useless without its power pack, which lay beside his clothes.

Frustration ate at him. If he could have shot the admiral immediately, it would have solved all his problems. But the admiral had been standing in front of Ziggy, which must not be damaged. Calavicci hadn't fired at him, either. Or course if Avon encountered him again, he just might enjoy the process. Calavicci's threats appeared real. Evidently he knew what he was talking about and had seemed coolly prepared to do what was necessary to retrieve Sam Beckett. Worse, he must have know Avon feared the process. He'd also tried to degrade him, ordering the strip search and allowing the woman to stand guard on him while he was in his underwear, not to mention deliberately calling him by the wrong name. He wondered what it meant here, for every time Calavicci had used it, the woman, Janet, had hid a smile.

Avon fumed.

Should he have explained that Sam Beckett was safe and well, and offered to make a trade in exchange for the brief use of Ziggy? It might have given him an advantage, something that had been sorely lacking to date. Well, that option was past. Avon glared at the guards in the doorway and consoled himself with the thought that Calavicci was now Blake's prisoner. Maybe they were torturing him.

But no. Blake would never stoop to that. Or would he? Blake had threatened to break Professor Kayn's hands when he refused to operate on Gan to repair his limiter. Blake didn't hesitate to blow up any Federation ship or base that came his way. Yet Blake was endlessly proclaiming the importance of humanity and the need to put an end to the oppression of the Federation.

The man's contradiction's irritated Avon. Even more annoying was the fact that he stayed in spite of them. Before he could justify his motives for doing so, Dr. Beeks the psychiatrist he'd met briefly, entered with two of the security people. In her hand was a syringe.

"Drugs?" Avon asked scornfully, bracing himself for the inevitable.

"Amytal sodium. A mild sedative," she replied. "You will suffer no lasting effects, but with this we can hypnotize you. The admiral doesn't care for the idea of truth serum, and I think he's right...but he's not here, so I'm doing this my way. We require our people back, if they can get back. If they are dead, we want to know why."

The guard pulled the robe from Avon's left shoulder and she swabbed his arm with a moistened cotton pad before injecting him. He didn't struggle. There was no point. Instead he bore it with what dignity he could, glaring at her coldly.

She returned the glare with something like hatred. "If you've killed them..." she breathed.

"I have killed neither of them," Avon snapped. "I don't hide my killings. If it's needed, I do it openly and cleanly."

"Am I supposed to admire you for that?"

"I neither want nor need your approbation."

"That's fortunate. You're not likely to get it."

\* \* \*

Sam was delighted to be reunited with Al again, this time in the flesh. It was hard to believe he was back in his own body after all those months of leaping into other people's lives. Oddly enough, a part of him would miss the challenge of discovering what needed to be fixed, and to put it right.

But the returned memories, the knowledge of himself, his home, his friends, his life were worth it. Al had been there from the first leap, and Sam hadn't even know him then.



Gradually he'd remembered more and more about the man, but he hadn't remembered their close friendship. He'd redeveloped it in the process of leaping. Now Al was here, because he'd been so determined to discover what had happened to Sam. As they headed for the Liberator's flight deck, the ex-astronaut was reveling in the thought of being back in space.

"Wait until you see what it's like, Sam," he exulted. "The view of Earth is spectacular. You'll love it. Pictures don't really do it justice. But you've see it already, haven't you?"

Sam shook his head. "There wasn't any viewscreen."

"We've got one," Vila explained. "But with the power drain, it wasn't running. We can show it to them, can't we, Blake? Besides, I'd like to see Earth, even if it's in the wrong time."

Blake nodded. With a stylish gesture, he waved them onto the flight deck. Al started forward, then he stopped dramatically, staring at Cally and Jenna, a wide smile brightening his face.

"I don't know, Sam. I think the scenery is just fine, even without a viewscreen."

Jenna grimaced and Cally looked slightly puzzled. Al went forward to meet them, taking their hands in turn and bowing over them. "Al Calavicci at your service, ladies."

"Calavicci," Jenna exclaimed. "I thought that name was familiar when Orac mentioned it before. You were one of the early astronauts, weren't you? I can hardly believe this."

"You've heard of me in the future?" Al asked, swelling up with pride. Sam grinned fondly at his friend's delight.

"I never did," Vila admitted.

"You aren't a pilot." Jenna waved at the flight deck. "I fly the Liberator. Ever since I was a child, I've dreamed of the stars. But the Federation never gave me a chance of them. There aren't a lot of women officers, not high ranking ones, in the Federation. I read everything I could find, even some old, banned books on the subject. That's where I heard of you. People like John Glenn and Sally Ride and Malcolm Wyatt...but I think he comes a little later. I can't believe it. I hope you'll tell me all about it."

"It will be my privilege."

Sam sneaked a look at Blake. He'd noticed that Jenna seemed fond of the rebel leader. But she was paying Blake no attention

now. Al's legendary charm, or his reputation, had stepped in, and Blake was running a distant second.

"But not right now," Blake insisted. "We've got to decide what to do about Avon."

"And Orac," Cally reminded him. "Will Avon be alone down there? Can we teleport down and free him?"

"I doubt it," Al replied. He didn't look fond of the idea "If anything else happens, I'm afraid the security people will shoot first and ask questions later. You're already missing, Sam and now I've disappeared. They don't know if either of us is alive. The last thing we need is to trigger a shoot out."

"What will happen to Avon?" Jenna asked.

"He won't be injured. He will be questioned, and they might attempt hypnosis." Sam gave him a sharp glance and he continued hastily, "He's managed to infiltrate a top security base, and our government doesn't take kindly to that kind of thing. They'll want to know who he is, who he's working for. I don't think they'll believe the truth, not without this ship to prove it."

"If he starts talking about a ship, they'll do a full range satellite survey," Sam reminded him. "They'll find the Liberator, and there's a lot of military hardware up here. If they start firing, it could lead to major league trouble, even war. I doubt anyone will believe that we've started shooting a spaceship from the future."

"I just want to go home," wailed Vila.

"The only logical thing is for Sam and me to return to the base," Al replied. "We'll have to make it look like the project backfired. I can think of several theories."

"Maybe Orac can do something. Once it links with Ziggy, I can erase records, difficult ones," Blake volunteered. He spun to face Al. "How loyal are your people?"

"They're Sam's people," Al replied. "At least the scientists are. The security are my people. None of them will betray us. But we're responsible to a committee for funding and neither of us can control them. There are ways around that." Al grinned at Sam. "But they're likely to be difficult. We'll just have to slug our way through it once you're gone. Tell me about this Orac. What can it do?"

"It's still down there with Avon," Blake replied. "If he can get the activator in place, or if it's still in place, Avon might manage something. I don't know if Orac can link directly

down there. Our computers all have something called tarial cells, a fairly recent invention in our time. Orac can read any computer with tarial cells."

"So the Ziggy in the future has them, but our Ziggy doesn't," Al realized. "Even if it did, I doubt Avon can link." He produced his portable link with Ziggy. "Would this work?"

Blake took it and allowed Zen to scan it. "No, I don't think we can feed enough power through it. Besides, we don't have Orac." He passed it back.

Al withdrew Orac's key from his pocket. "Too bad. We thought this was a control device, and I didn't like the idea of leaving it lying around where somebody could pull a dangerous stunt with it. Avon and I didn't hit it off."

"That puts you even with everybody else, Al," Sam assured him. "The first thing he did to me was stick a gun in my face. Have you seen their guns? They look like curling irons. I'd like to get a close look at them and see what makes them run."

"I think we have enough trouble without more guns," Al replied. "Let's talk it over. First of all, who are you people? You're civilians. You're not military. I can tell. You're amateurs. What are you doing messing around with time?"

"We've got as much right to save the time line as you do," Blake defended himself. "I'm Roj Blake. I'm what you might call a rebel. Our present government is a totalitarian regime and I'm one of the people fighting to bring it down."

"Great. Did you know that, Sam? This character might be here so he can alter the time line in his favor. Selective alteration of history. I'm not sure we should help them."

"I've been up here longer than you have, Al. I don't think they mean anything like that. They came back here because Orac was fascinated with Ziggy, more than anything else. He wanted to correct the time line, and whoever programmed Ziggy to send out a message in the future deserves my thanks. I don't know if I'd've ever come home without it."

"You're not home yet, Sam. I want to make sure you get there. God, Sam, you take everyone on faith. Life's not always like that. For all you know, you've been fed a line from the beginning to end. We don't even know we're really in space. Teleportation is feasible. We might be in a base halfway around the world."

"Zen, activate the view screen," Blake ordered, his voice stiff with resentment.

Sam gaped at the view of Earth spread out below the, blue and white and beautiful. He could see the terminator approaching the East coast of North America. It might be a skillful projection, but it looked real. Awed, Sam stared in fascination.

Al edged closer and started to grin. "Ah, isn't it beautiful, Sam? You can't see the pollution and you can't see the national borders, just one world. I think if more people had a chance to see it like this, they wouldn't be so eager to destroy it with contamination and war."

He glanced over his shoulder at Blake. "I'm not saying I believe you, but I don't think you could fake this. It feels real."

"It might be faked, though, Al," Sam disagreed. "I could do it myself, given the funding, the time, and the technology. But I think you're right. It is real." He looked at the viewscreen. Space. The final frontier. Half expecting the theme music from Star Trek to start playing in the background, he turned away reluctantly.

"I think I should go down and free Avon," he said. "If you teleport me outside the complex, I can say I'd been shifted somehow. No need to mention teleporting." He came to stand in front of Al. "I don't like leaving you here, but if you went back now, there'd be too many questions. I'll need to make explanations, too, but I can pretend ignorance of the whole thing."

Al looked stubborn and uncomfortable. Sam knew he could handle these people. Al could handle anyone. But after all Al had gone through to rescue him, it seemed a poor reward to leave him here, though he'd enjoy flirting with Jenna and Cally, and spending some time in space again.

Al nodded. "You're probably right, though I don't like it much. They'll be on you the minute you walk in. They'll hardly let you near Avon right away. He can blow it, too, if he obviously recognizes you." He glanced over at Blake. "How good is he at hiding what he's thinking? I could read him easy and that's when he was supposed to be holding out on me." Sam wondered if Al's own experience as a prisoner had given him insight in understanding another.

Blake's crew stared at him. "Avon's not easy to read," Blake said at length. "He'll say one thing and mean another. He can do it convincingly."

"Yeah, but can he do it when he doesn't know he's supposed to do it? How quick is he on the uptake? If Sam looks at him

like he doesn't remember him, will he play along?"

"He might," Blake agreed. "Depending on what's been done to him down there. You mentioned hypnosis?"

"They have to try something," Al explained. "Because as far as they're concerned he's a saboteur. Sam vanished from the waiting room and the next thing they knew, I'd gone poof too. They don't like things like that."

"Understandably." But Blake's mouth was drawn in a tight line and his resentment was not far from the surface.

"I can handle it, Al," Sam interrupted. "I'm used to thinking on my feet. I'll get in to see him, especially when they've told me you've disappeared. It would be the first place I'd go."

"Then you'd better take this, pal." Al proffered Orac's key.

"Who down there knows you've taken it?"

"I'm not sure anybody does. Dr. Alzado discovered it was detachable, but I was alone in the small conference room when I decided it might be safer to put some distance between it and Orac. We knew Orac talked, but for all we knew it was just a big communications relay, or something like my portable link with Ziggy."

"Then leave it to me." Sam shoved it in his pocket. "You'd better teleport me down there now. The longer it takes the more chance we have of the committee breathing down our necks. It's still night down there. I'd guess they'd be there first thing in the morning."

"If not sooner," Al said wryly.

"All right." Blake reached a decision and stood up. "I'll teleport you down just outside the facility."

Al walked along to the teleport section with Sam and Blake. "Remember, Sam, you're not supposed to know I'm missing or that Avon's there."

"I remember." Sam caught his eye. "Tell me if you mind waiting here," he urged.

Al glanced at Blake. "It's not my favorite place, but it's not gonna bore me. I've got a lot of things I want to say to Blake."

The curly haired rebel turned his head in surprise. "What kind of things?" he asked warily.

"Just a few things about the proper conduct of a spy mission," Al explained airily. "Besides, Jenna and I have a lot to talk about." He wagged his eyebrows suggestively, beaming when Blake shot him an irritated glare.

Sam concealed a spare teleport bracelet in his pocket and fastened another around his wrist. Though he wasn't planning to return to the Liberator, he knew he might have to, if only to get Al.

"Will you be okay?" he asked his friend.

Al shrugged and clasped him on the shoulder reassuringly. "You know me, buddy, I always land on my feet."

\* \* \*

Avon glared at Dr. Beeks. The last thing he wanted was to risk exposure to a strange drug. He had a tricky reaction to some medication, but this was another time and place, and no one could predict what might happen.

At first nothing changed and he was beginning to believe that his time and place of origin would give him immunity. Then a strange lethargy crept into his body, dulling his senses. Though he knew she hadn't moved, the woman seemed immeasurably far away, not in actual physical distance, but in every other way. He was trapped in a cone of isolation.

She must have been a good hypnotist. Her words were soft and reassuring, and he found himself listening and believing her assurances that he would not be harmed. He had never been quite so relaxed. He could say anything he liked, and no one would be harmed. He could open his mind to her and they would both be safe. She wove a pattern of words that linked them together and he drifted, unable to resist.

Sudden alarm ran through him. He was trapped here forever. Blake wasn't coming. Blake meant to strand him in the past. Though a part of him knew Blake would never do so, if only to keep the time line intact, he panicked, terrified of becoming him trapped here. Blake was abandoning him. Blake was leaving him behind.

"Blake," he moaned, the rational part of him despising the pathetic emotional plea. He didn't need Blake. But he did need him, to escape these people.

Blake wasn't coming. Calavicci probably had taken over the

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Liberator and wouldn't permit it. He'd free Sam Beckett and return. Damn the man. He had rattled Avon more than the tech wanted to admit.

"Who is Blake?" the woman asked him calmly.

"Blake...my friend Blake." He heard the words and growled a curse at the sound of them. He didn't want Blake. He didn't need friends.

"Did Blake send you here?"

"Orac sent me here," he corrected smoothly. "Ziggy...all Ziggy's fault."

"How did you learn about Ziggy?" prompted his interrogator.

"Orac did it. Ziggy was programmed to send the message when enough time had passed for a computer to develop that could resolve the time anomaly. Orac was appropriate."

"Orac. Who or what is Orac?" Her questions were soothing, comforting. He drifted, going with the flow.

Avon pointed involuntarily at the little computer.  
"That...is Orac. It fancies itself the greatest computer ever developed."

"That little thing." The woman eyed it skeptically.  
"Forgive me if I don't believe you."

"Under hypnosis?" Avon smiled. "Orac is simply a computer. It has its limitations. The present Ziggy is one of them. Orac requires a physical link."

"So you came here to link Orac to Ziggy? Why?"

"So we can go home."

"You came here so you could go home? I fail to see the logic of that." She raised a skeptical eyebrow. "What aren't you telling us, Mr. Avon?"

"I'm not telling you a great many things," he snapped, and the answer was so unhelpful that it made him giggle. He caught himself with an effort. "It's up to you to ask the right questions," he pointed out haughtily. Part of this was more than hypnosis, he thought fuzzily. It was reaction to the drug.

"All right. You're implying you came from the future. Did you?"

"Yes." He tried to stifle the word, but it came out anyway.

"Your friend Blake arranged this?"

"Orac did. Do you mind if I dress? Your people have finished with my clothing. It is cold in this room."

"I don't think so." Perhaps like Calavicci, she realized the psychological implications of keeping the upper hand. Depriving him of his clothes was one small way. He'd never forgive Blake for this.

"Blake will come," he heard himself proclaiming. "Always comes. He's a fool."

"Yet you're hoping to see him again." She smiled faintly. "What did you intend to do with Ziggy?"

"Nothing. Orac intended to link to enable us to return home."

"Why?"

"So the time line would not be corrupted."

"What have you done with the Admiral?"

"I? Nothing at all." Avon bared his teeth in a broad smile.

"Do you know what happened to him?"

"I can assume."

"Then do so aloud."

He struggled against it. She cut in urgently. "Is he hurt?"

Aha, she had an interest in that sadistic bastard. Avon narrowed his eyes. "I don't know. More likely he's taken control of our ship and is systematically torturing the crew." He shot her a pointed look. "It seems in character."

"Al wouldn't...." Beeks cut her words off sharply, but Avon had discovered her weakness. Definitely an interest of some sort. Now, how could he use it to his advantage?

"How did the Admiral get on your ship?" she asked. "Matter transportation? You can do better than that."

"Why? Haven't you developed it yet?"



She started to speak when a commotion outside distracted her and she went to the door eagerly, probably expecting Al back again. Instead, to Avon's utter consternation, Sam Beckett walked into the room and stood looking at him as if he'd never seen Avon before in his life.

\* \* \*

The teleport process was only mildly disorienting, less disconcerting than leaping, and though he staggered momentarily when he materialized outside the Project, Sam Beckett felt fine.

He got his bearings, sucking in deep breaths of the fresh, clear desert air, then he started up the road that led to the main gate.

Excitement ran through him. Home. This place had been home to him for several years before he'd stepped into the Accelerator and disappeared into the past. Now he was back, alive and whole and safe, but given a task that might prove beyond his abilities, a task that must be successfully completed to get Al back. Squaring his shoulders, Sam walked up to the main gate, concealing the teleport bracelet in his other pocket.

His arrival created the pandemonium he'd expected. Everyone came out to see him, to listen to his halting explanation, that he had leaped in to find himself walking up the road to the project, safely back in his own body. He began to formulate theories for such a physical displacement for the people who questioned him, elated to be home. Everyone hugged him, pounded him on the back, called greetings.

It was only when the initial excitement had calmed, that Sam looked around and began his performance. "Where's Al? I would have thought he'd be here, too. Don't tell me he's out partying somewhere."

The sight of everyone's gloom and worry made the guilt settle upon his shoulders. He hated doing this. Maybe these people would understand one day.

"Gooshi," he prompted, singling out the computer expert. "Where's Al?"

"We've got a saboteur here, Sam. We were afraid it was something to do with you. Maybe it still is. He brought along a strange computer...though you'd never know it was one to look at it...and was planning to link it into Ziggy."

"Where is it? Have you got it here? And where's Al? He's not hurt, is he?"

"He disappeared. Vanished without a trace," one of the security guards offered. "Vanished in midair. I never saw anything like it."

"Vanished in midair?" Sam echoed. "Not the Accelerator?"

"No. He was in the small conference room. He picked up a bracelet that our 'guest' had been wearing and disappeared."

"What could do that?" Sam asked with pretend alarm. "Where's the intruder? I want to see him now."

"But we want to run tests on you," several of the doctors urged.

"The tests can wait until Al's back." Sam was definite. He started for the small conference room, pausing in the doorway when Avon blinked up at him, relaxed and tranquil in the grip of some drug while Dr. Beeks stared at Sam in astonishment. Sam looked at Avon without recognition.

"Is this the man?"

Avon's eyes flashed briefly and his face assumed its most impassive expression.

"His name is Avon," someone explained.

"Avon?" Sam chuckled. "A case of Avon calling?" He leaned forward and peered at Orac. "This is the computer device?"

"It is," Dr. Beeks volunteered. "It's called Orac. I don't know if that's an acronym or if it's meant to suggest something, such as 'Oracle'. There was a control device. I'm not sure what happened to it. I'm told it was here earlier."

Sam palmed the key. Removing his hands from his pockets, he hunted through the stack of clothing folded on the table and displayed the activator. "This must be it. Why not let the man get dressed? I want to see what makes Orac run."

"Orac won't function for you," Avon snapped.

"Won't it?" Sliding the key into place, Sam said, "Orac, my name is Dr. Sam Beckett. You're here in my Project. State your purpose here."

"My purpose is to link with the computer Ziggy to facilitate my return to the future."

Everyone stared. Sam had never considered the possibility

of Orac giving him away, but maybe the Zen computer on the Liberator had interfaced with Orac and warned it what was happening.

"What risk will there be to Ziggy if you do that?" he asked.

"None whatever. There must be no damage to Ziggy."

"How do I know that a link between you and Ziggy might not automatically damage him?"

"You do not. But I have said it, and it is true."

"Smug, isn't he?" Sam looked around at his people. He glanced at Avon and winked. Blurred realization flashed in the tech's eyes.

"What have you done with Al?" Sam demanded, looming over Avon. "For all I know your interference is what dumped me out on the highway. Now Al's gone, too. Is he wandering on the desert, or is it more complicated than that?"

"It is more complicated than that," Avon agreed because he'd been asked. "I did nothing to him."

So far, nothing but the truth. Sam had to phrase his questions carefully. "Are you allied with a foreign government?"

"No." Avon sneered.

"Do you intend sabotage?"

"Of course not."

"He's drugged?" Sam asked sharply, staring disapprovingly at Beeks. He didn't like that at all.

"I gave him amyntal sodium and hypnotized him," explained Beeks. "I think he has a slight sensitivity to the drug. We've been monitoring him." She pointed to a blood pressure cuff on his arm. "He's answered my questions, but he's not very helpful."

Sam wasn't pleased, but he had no choice but to go with it. "Orac says you are from the future," Sam asked Avon. "Is that true?"

"Yes," admitted Avon through clenched teeth.

"He's very well prepared," one of the security people commented. "Likely he's been programmed to give facetious replies to questions under drugs or torture."

"There's a possibility he's telling the truth," Sam replied. "Think about this project. Why should we, of all people, doubt him? Other than the fact that Al's missing?"

"I'm glad he's missing," Avon snapped. "That maniac threatened to torture me."

"Al? Torture you?" Sam laughed. "He was conning you. He's good at that."

"He said he knew everything there was to know about breaking people," Avon spat.

Realizing exactly how Al knew it, Sam grew serious and turned back to the little blinking box. "I'd like to try a link," he said. "Not because he wanted it, but for the knowledge we'd gain. Orac," he addressed the computer, "I've never seen anything like you. I'm open to suggestions about the linkage."

"If you will display appropriate power cables, I will assess them and formulate methods to accommodate them to my own systems."

"But it's what Avon wants, Dr. Beckett," one of the scientists protested.

"That doesn't necessarily mean it's bad. Besides, we control Ziggy."

"How do we know this won't feed Ziggy a virus?"

At least people were thinking. "That'll be my responsibility," Sam decided. "Gooshi will work with me. I have a feeling the only way to get Al back is to understand why Orac's here. We'll start small. We'll link Orac into one of those PCs in the lab, a self contained unit. That way, we'll make sure we can control it."

"Time is of the essence," Avon volunteered.

"Getting Al back is more important than your time limits," Sam snapped though he wondered if it were true in the larger scheme of things. "If you're prepared to help, we'll listen, though we won't take it on faith."

"You don't trust your drugs, then?"

"When the stakes are this high," Sam returned, "I'm not sure I can trust anything." Except Al, he told himself as he picked up Orac. "You might as well let him dress," he said over his shoulder as he left the room.

\* \* \*

"They're taking too long," Vila complained.

"Now don't get bent out of shape," Al urged him. "Drink your adrenalin and soma. Interesting effect." He sipped the green liquid, wondering how it would affect Tina. He patted the two bottles of the stuff that Vila had given him to take back home.

"Bent out of shape?" Vila echoed, his face scrunching up in concentration as he let himself picture the image.

"How much do you trust Dr. Beckett?" Gan asked. He had been strolling around the flight deck, or maybe pacing would be a better description. "Can he get Avon back for us?"

"He'll do everything he can," Al replied. "There are a lot of factors you can't calculate." One of them was the possibility that Blake and the others were lying and this was an elaborate plan to sabotage the project. Al doubted it. It was too elaborate for that. Besides, Sam was back, safe and sound. Enemies wouldn't do that, would they?

Al didn't quite trust Blake. He had begun to realize that the man was fanatically devoted to the overthrow of his government. Fanatics were dangerous men, prepared to run roughshod over anyone who stood in their way, even their friends. He didn't trust Avon, either, for there was a ruthless self-centeredness to him that Al couldn't like. Al was people oriented. Avon wasn't. After the way he'd been forced to treat Avon, he doubted the man felt any fondness for him either.

The others he liked. Vila was far smarter than he liked to let on, the type of man who knew when and how to kick back and party. It was Vila who had asked to try a cigar, and Al had given him his last one. Coughing and choking, Vial had gamely proclaimed that it was 'wonderful, but I'll save the rest of it for later.' Al grinned, encouraging him and he loved every minute of it.

Gan was a solid type, reliable to the core, loyal and fair. He listened with great interest to Jenna's questions about the early days of space flight and made a few relatively intelligent comments. Blake was lucky to have Gan on his side.

Cally fascinated him. It hadn't taken him long to learn she was a telepath. "This is great," he cried, jumping to his feet and bouncing over to stand in front of her. "You're really a telepath? Can you read what I'm thinking? Maybe you'd better not try."

"What's wrong, Al? Afraid she'll slap your face?" Jenna demanded.

"Either that or she'll tell you what I'm thinking and you will." He leered at her and winked.

Jenna struggled against a smile. "No, I don't think I would," she replied thoughtfully.

"Maybe we should go someplace and discuss it."

"I don't want you leaving the flight deck," Blake intervened.

"Don't you trust me, Blake?" objected Al with an innocent look on his face. "Don't you ever take time for fun?"

"Of course he doesn't," Vila agreed. "Not with his rebellion to fight. It's blow this up, shoot that, steal something else. Danger, every minute of the day. He's not happy unless there's an explosion nearby."

"That should help you win the war," Al observed, sobering. "Terrorism isn't the answer. Have you taken it past that, Blake?"

"What the hell do you know about it?" Blake was a lot bigger than Al and he tried to make it work for him, leaning in and frowning.

Al eyed him, considering, refusing to be intimidated. He'd learned a long time ago that big men let their size work for them, but they didn't like it when shorter men weren't impressed. Al sat down, propped up his feet and raised his glass. "What will you do when you've blown up the Federation, Blake?" he asked.

"Put in a new government, a fair one."

"Easier said than done. Who's planning it? Who's dealing with the bureaucracy? That won't go away just because you've won. Who's going to set up elections, and where will your political types come from? Or do you mean to set yourself up as President?"

"Someone needs to be in charge who understands the people should be free."

"Words, Blake." Al stretched out his legs and leaned his head against the couch back. "Winning the battle isn't the answer. You've got to think it through. You've got a great,

unwieldy empire, spread out across the galaxy. Most planets aren't completely self sufficient. They rely on trade. You wipe out those in power, you destroy a little too much, and you lose the trade balance. You need to work this out. Rabble rousing isn't enough. This Central Control you're going after is a good case in point. So you find it and destroy it. Then what? The Federation's weak. You come in and mop them up. Apres vous, le deluge. Chaos, Blake. Anarchy." He shook his head. "It's a good thing you're only one man with one ship. If there were more of you, you'd be dangerous."

Startled and fascinated, the others stared and Blake glowered. "If Avon were here, he'd probably applaud," he returned. "You haven't lived in our time. You don't understand."

"Don't understand?" Al bobbed up again and swung an arm around the flight deck. "Don't understand oppression? Yes, I do. What I don't understand is what you seriously hope to gain. I'm not saying you shouldn't try to bring down the government, though sometimes people can do more from within. I'm just saying that you need to be sure you know what you're doing before you make any messes you can't fix."

"He's right, Blake," Cally said thoughtfully. "I must admit the trip to Earth you propose makes me uneasy. Worse, you've kept your plan from us until now. I do not chose to be a fanatic. I can see it destroying us. Already it is causing a rift between you and Avon."

"Avon never supported me, Cally." It seemed to rankle.

"Avon always supported you. He just didn't support your cause. If you continue as you have begun, he won't support you either. Already tension is building. We have this great ship and its power, but we're wasting it. Let's try another way, Blake."

He looked at her as if she'd stabbed him in the back. "What about you, Jenna? Do you agree, too?"

"In part. I want to dream the dreams you do, Blake. I've always wanted that. But what have we honestly accomplished so far? Things are no better than before we started."

Impatient and irritated, Blake glanced at Gan and Vila, who had remained silent. Gan nodded. "I'll back you, Blake. I've always meant to. But I'd rather we did something realistic."

"Blake's mainly a figurehead," Vila told Al. "A symbol for the people. Symbols have to be obvious. They have to be noticed."

"Fine. I appreciate that. But figureheads need sound backing. Take a little time and get it. Band together with other rebels. Work out a long term plan. Take that back to the future with you." He gestured around the flight deck. "With a ship like this, you should be able to do more than you've done so far."

"We did save your friend Sam," Blake reminded him, smarting a little under Al's words.

"I owe you for that. Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to tear you down. You helped us, so I'm trying to return the favor. Just think about it."

Blake nodded. "I don't like it, but maybe you're right. I'll think about it, and I'll listen to the others. But I can't sit back and do nothing."

"There's no point in doing nothing. Just make sure what you're doing will achieve what you want. It doesn't have to be hotdogging. It just has to advance your cause."

He looked around the flight deck. "Now, I'm stuck here awhile longer. Jenna, if we can't leave the flight deck, show me how this ship works. I don't get enough flying time any more, and I like to keep my hand in."

\* \* \*

Fully dressed again, Kerr Avon was escorted into Ziggy's presence. Sam Beckett was there and cables ran into Orac and past that, into a link with Ziggy. "We're ready to begin," he said. Only the guards were present, but Sam dismissed them, and they left reluctantly, announcing their determination to stand guard outside.

"You realize," Avon said coolly, now that the hypnosis had been removed and the sedative had begun to ease its grip, "that your knowledge of Orac is a mistake."

"Because I can alter the future?" Sam asked. "I haven't learned enough to understand it. The systems are just too different. I'm like someone who only knows how to run programs. I can do what needs doing, but I don't understand how it works. Besides," he added with a faint grin, "Al says my brain was swiss-cheesed by jumping about in time. There's no guarantee I'll remember anything about Orac...or the rest of you...once you're gone."

"I might almost believe that."



"Complete the link," Orac said impatiently.

"At least Ziggy's pleasant to us," Sam said.

"I can deal with Orac."

"You'd better take this." Sam held out a teleport bracelet. Avon fastened it around his wrist and pulled his sleeve over it. "After you go, I'll claim there must have been a tracer we couldn't detect in your clothing, or surgically implanted."

"In the clothing, I think," Avon replied. "Your...friend had me x-rayed."

"He's thorough." Sam bit back a smile.

Avon checked the links, and nodded, allowing Sam to complete the final one. There was a moment of silence, then Ziggy's lights blinked once or twice. After the first moment, Orac's lights synchronized with Ziggy's as the two computers achieved rapport.

It took surprisingly little time, no more than two or three minutes. "Disconnect now," Orac replied.

"You can facilitate transition?" Avon demanded impatiently. "What of the link?"

"Unnecessary," Orac replied. "The proper data has been transferred."

The two experts exchanged intrigued looks, then bent to check their separate computers. "Ziggy's unharmed," Sam admitted after running a series of tests.

"Excellent. Then I'll go."

"Wait. What about Al?"

"Personally, I don't care if he teleports into the sun, but Blake won't permit it. I think the best plan is to kidnap you. Then, when you 'escape,' no one will suspect you helped us."

Sam looked at Avon levelly a long moment. "You might be right."

"Do you have another bracelet?"

Sam pulled it out of his pocket and put it on.

"Orac, teleport now," Avon ordered.

\* \* \*

When Sam led the way onto the flight deck, Blake jumped up in alarm. "What went wrong?"

"Nothing, Blake," Avon replied, joining them. He placed Orac on a table. "It's done. We can initiate transition as soon as we dispose of our passengers."

"I don't like the sound of that, Sam," Al observed.

"You aren't meant to," returned Avon. "Blake, you've been entertaining in your midst a cold blooded interrogator."

As one, everyone turned to stare at Al. Blake looked as if he had no trouble believing it, though the other four appeared highly skeptical. Whatever Al had intended to say to Blake must not have sat well. Avon glared at Al. If looks could kill, Al would be in little pieces all over the deck. Avon didn't look like the type who forgave people easily.

Al himself avoided Sam's eyes. Expert interrogator? What had Al been doing to Avon? Sam could guess where the techniques had come from, and he winced. It was a pity Avon had brought up the subject.

But Vila shook his head. "No. He's not an interrogator, Avon," he disagreed, bobbing up to stand beside Al, to Avon's astonished and furious resentment. "He's been expertly interrogated, maybe. I should know."

That startled Al as much as Vila's earlier defense of him had startled Avon. He eyed Vila narrowly, probably trying to decide exactly what Vila thought he knew. Sam shifted closer to him, ready to back him, and Al looked up and grinned faintly. Al might even have enjoyed the process of intimidating Avon. If Sam had been there, he might have helped. Of course, if Sam had been there, it wouldn't have been necessary.

As if the last qualifier revealed too many of his secrets, Vila retrieved his glass, which held something green and obnoxious looking. Though he was still uneasy at the discussion of interrogation, Sam hid a smile. Al had one, too.

Avon favored Al with one of those, icy cold, if-looks-could-kill glares. Al smiled sweetly. "Had to be done," he said. "I thought you'd killed Sam. I've got used to having him around."

Avon's stare didn't show any appreciable thaw. He looked like a man who knew how to hold a grudge.

Al shrugged slightly and turned back to his friend. "How'd

it go down there, Sam? Any trouble?"

"Not really. We had to leave his gun, but he says it won't work without that." He pointed to the powerpack on Avon's gunbelt. "I had him kidnap me. We thought that would give us an out. I don't know how well believed we'll be, but there's always the obvious explanation."

"Swiss-cheesed?" Al asked, tapping his forehead and grinning.

"Swiss-cheesed," Sam agreed. "They might even buy it?"

"I like Swiss cheese," offered Vila.

"You never had anything remotely resembling real cheese, Vila," Avon told him scornfully, determined to pick a fight with someone.

"You don't know that. It was when I was thieving back on Earth. We broke into the Alpha domes regularly. I used to try food I hadn't known existed. Wonderful, it was. Gave me a taste for the finer things in life." His smile stretched from ear to ear. "Must be why I tolerate you."

Avon's face promptly set in hard lines, but Al peered at him closely and shook his head. "This one's a hard man, Sam," he announced. "But there's a secret to reading him. I've got him all figured out."

"Tell me," Vila pleaded. "It'd come in handy."

"No way. We interrogators never reveal the tricks of our trade."

"What, no cattle prods?" Avon asked sourly, but with less malice than Al had evidently expected.

Sam looked at Al sharply, but the man was turning to Blake "I don't know if you'll listen to me, Blake, but I hope you do," Al urged. "Sam will tell you I always make sense."

"Well, I don't think I'd go quite that far," returned Sam, catching Al's eye and trying to read his friend's expression. "But when he tries, he does better than most people."

There were faint shadows in the back of Al's eyes. He realized he needed to talk to Al in private. Mention of things like cattle prods, which must be completely anachronistic in Avon's time, alarmed him. Had all this brought up some bad memories for Al? Later on, when they were settled back at the project, he'd have to see if Al would talk about it. Maybe over

a glass of that strange green stuff. It might relax him. It obviously worked for Vila.

"I hope you're ready to leave here, Blake," Avon snapped. "I have no love for the 20th century."

"Or it for you," Vila crowed.

"Ready," Blake agreed. "We'll put you down where we put Sam before. You'll have to manage on your own from there."

Al and Sam exchanged a considering look. "We've had worse odds," Al replied. "Chasing Sam through a few decades did everything but give me gray hair. Jenna, come and kiss me goodbye."

Sam watched in resigned amusement as Jenna wrapped her arms around Al and kissed him with great enthusiasm. When she had finished, Al held out his arms to Cally, who was more restrained but no less affectionate. Sam enjoyed the sight of Avon's jaw drooping.

Sam shook hands all around, endured a strenuous pat on the back from Gan and a hug from Jenna. They were a strange group, but he thought he liked them.

Vila bounced over and gave Al a friendly hug. "You two take care of each other. I don't want to come back and bail you out again."

"Bail us out?" Al echoed. "Be careful when you go home, or I'll have Sam redesign Ziggy to come after you."

\* \* \*

Jenna went down with Al and Sam to retrieve their bracelets. Bad enough they'd been forced to abandon Avon's gun in the past. At least it could tell them very little. The bracelets might be more dangerous, though Blake wasn't sure they could be comprehended by 20th century technology.

Jenna looked quite smug when she returned. She'd probably taken the opportunity to say goodbye to Al again, in a much friendlier manner than Blake could appreciate. The twinkle in her eye when she saw him watching her, proved it. Blake held his tongue with an effort, and when he noticed Avon deliberately not smiling at Jenna's provocative expression, he ground his teeth. Avon could read him too well.

"I think we should leave now," the computer tech suggested. "Orac is champing at the bit. The longer we stay here, the greater the risk."

"I agree. Orac, how soon can you initiate reverse transition?"

"Immediately," Orac replied. "It is my recommendation that everyone brace themselves."

"Zen, are the power levels high enough?" Jenna demanded.

"Affirmative."

"Then begin," ordered Blake.

The deck seemed to jump at them, and the crew was flung about in spite of their attempts to steady themselves. It seemed to last forever, but in reality it was less than half a minute. The lights faded, went out entirely, returned at quarter strength. Blake groaned, sitting up cautiously and rubbing a bruised cheek.

"Orac," called Avon, choosing to remain on the floor until he was certain the vessel had stopped shaking. "Is transition complete?"

"Of course is," Orac replied. "It was successful. We have returned to the outer fringes of the Solar System. Power levels are low, but it is my recommendation we leave this area of space as rapidly as possible."

Blake opened his mouth to protest. He'd come this close to Earth for a purpose, and there were rebels on Earth waiting for his contact. Running away didn't sit well with him, even at reduced power levels.

Then he pictured Al's face as the former astronaut announced, 'If there were more of you, you'd be dangerous.' He resented Al's words, but a part of him refused to ignore them. Maybe Al was right after all. He certainly had given Blake something to think about. It could be that Central Control wasn't the appropriate next step after all. He wondered where Avalon was presently located. It might be time for a meeting.

"All right, Orac," he conceded. "Zen, take us out of the system, speed standard by two. Orac, see if you can determine Avalon's current location."

"A new strategy, Blake?" Avon picked himself up and stood beside Blake, eyeing him with great interest. "No suicide raids on Earth? No attacks on Space Command Headquarters? I must say I'm surprised."

No less than Blake himself. But the scorn he'd begun to

note in Avon's voice of late had faded a little. "So am I," he admitted. "But I think the time has come to look for some allies." He caught Avon's eye and smiled.

For once, Avon almost smiled back.

\* \* \*

"Do you think they'll make it back where they belong?" Sam asked as he and Al walked up the slope to the lab.

"You'd better hope they do, Sam, or else we'll have it all to do over again." Al grimaced. "I doubt I could take a second invasion from the future. Which reminds me, the next time you pull a dumb stunt like stepping into that accelerator before we're ready, I will personally come after you and drag you back by the hair." He tucked his two bottles of adrenalin and some comfortably under his arm.

"The next time I do anything that stupid, you can personally break my neck," Sam agreed. "But next time might be easier. When we had Orac in linkage with Ziggy, I ran a memory program. Everything we could pull on Orac is now safely in Ziggy's memory."

"Which could very well be why Ziggy survives for hundreds of years, Sam. Did you ever think of that?" He paused, looking up at the sky that had begun to pale, leaving only the morning star, clear and bright, against the horizon.

"It's as good a reason as any. And that reminds me, there's still one more task for us to accomplish."

"I hate to ask, but what task?"

"One of us has to program Ziggy to send the message to Orac in the future. Otherwise none of this will happen and the next thing we know, I'll be leaping from life to life again."

"We better hurry, Sam," Al urged, quickening his pace. "I refuse to go through all of that again." He paused a moment. "Oh yeah, one more thing. Did Ziggy seem to be back to normal? When you vanished, he kept printing out the date with nothing but question marks around it. Gooshi thought that meant the time line was all screwed up. Did you happen to check it out when you went back for Avon?"

Sam frowned, remembering. "I ran tests and Ziggy was reacting normally. The date was projected on the screen and I didn't notice any question marks. That must mean the time line is back to normal, wouldn't you think?" He looked at Al hopefully.

"I hope so," Al said darkly. "See you remember that and stay away from the Accelerator until we're sure we know what we're doing."

As they climbed the hill together, Sam draped an affectionate arm around his friend's shoulders. "Even with all the problems along the way, I wouldn't have missed it for anything," he admitted.

"What, the Liberator, or your mucking around in time?"

"Either of them," Sam admitted, grinning. "Either of them."



## A Lesson Learned

By Sandy Hall

As the electric tingling from the leap dissipated and Sam Beckett found himself solidifying into a body, he felt another kind of tingling building. His eyes closed, he felt a warm form lying next to him, and firm lips moving sensuously against his own. He moaned, enjoying the sensation of intimacy. The body he inhabited demanded closer contact and he wrapped his arms around a firm hairy body...hairy!

Sam's eyes flew open and he jumped back as he saw a vague masculine face close to his own. In his scramble to get away, he fell on the floor in a tumble of arms and legs. Damn, he knew this was going to happen some day. It was bad enough when he had leapt into the body of Johnny, the hit man just after the fact. At least then, he was a man with a woman.

He focused on the man sitting in puzzlement above him and his heart stopped for a moment before pounding painfully back to life. Of all the possible people, it had to be....

"Al!" Sam breathed in shock.

"What is it, Marilyn?" Al Calavicci stood up and bent down to help Sam up. "Is there something wrong? We were just getting comfortable."

"Uh..." Sam stalled. "I need to go to the bathroom."

"If it's protection you're worried about," Al picked up his jacket and fished around in the pocket. "I have it right here." His hand came out empty. He felt in his other pockets. "Well, I guess I don't." Al looked hopefully at the woman before him. "You wouldn't happen to be on the pill, would you?"

"No," Sam said, inching toward the door and trying to come up with an excuse. "I...have a headache. I have to get some aspirin."

"I have a marvelous remedy for a headache," Al said walking over to where Sam stood nervously, near the door. "I give the best neck rubs. Most headaches are caused by tension. These fingers can rub the tension right out of you." Warm fingers touched his neck and Sam jumped again. He fumbled for the door knob behind him. Finding it, he opened the door barely wide enough to squeeze through, then closed it shut behind him.

Sam found the bathroom without much difficulty. He closed and locked the door, and leaned back against it, breathing a sigh of relief.





"You don't need to lock the door, Sam," Al said from behind him. Sam jerked around and stared at the figure before looking back at the locked door. He put out a hand gingerly and waved it through the hologram. Al grimaced, and waved his hand-held computer link. "It's me, Sam. Anyway, I'm a gentleman. I wouldn't invade a lady's privacy in the bathroom. In the bedroom, yes. Bathroom, no. Unless, the lady in question was taking a shower. Then of course, I would have to offer to wash her back."

"Al," Sam hissed, his face flushed.

"Sorry, Sam," Al said.

"What in hell is going on? Do you know what I found myself doing when I leapt in here?" Sam asked indignantly.

"Marilyn made that clear when she came to in the waiting room. I had to peel her off me before I could get any information out of her. Gooshi went really bonkers when he saw your body..."

"I get the picture, Al," Sam said. "Just tell me who I am and what I'm here to do."

"Well," Al pushed a button on the hand link. "Your name is Marilyn Connors and you are very good looking, as you can see."

Sam looked over at the mirror Al pointed to with his cigar. Al was right, Marilyn was good looking. One thing Sam could say for Al, was that the older man had good taste in women, if not in clothes.

"You are a 34 year old nurse working at a nearby naval hospital. I met you there in the cafeteria while I was having my yearly check up on..." Al banged the computer with the heel of his hand..."October 16, 1992, which was this morning. I asked you out, we ate supper at this quiet, little Italian restaurant, then you invited me in for a drink. One thing lead to another and..."

"I get the idea. So, what am I here to do?"

"I haven't had time to run it through Ziggy yet. I figured I had better get here quick before anything happened."

"Nothing's going to happen, Al," Sam's voice was low and stern.

"Well, just let me down easy. I'll get on Ziggy and let you know as soon as I find something out." He opened the imaging chamber door and left.

Steeling himself, Sam unlocked the door and went into the living room to deal with Al. Reinforcing his explanation of a headache, which was rapidly turning to the truth, he finally lead Al to the door. Sam allowed a chaste kiss on the cheek, trying not to grimace, but when Al tried to make it more, he firmly shut the door in his face.

After Sam finally got rid of his unwanted admirer, he collapsed on the couch. Whatever nursing job Marilyn had, it must be strenuous, Sam thought. It was either that or the ordeal with Al took more out of him than he had thought. According to Marilyn's calendar, in the morning she had the day shift. Not knowing when the hologram would return, Sam decided to go to bed.

Sam simplified the problem of getting to work by calling a taxi. He found a photo name tag in Marilyn's purse and put it on. Looking at the tag, he noticed it read Marilyn Connors, RN Obstetrics.

Finding the floor on which Marilyn worked was child's play. He looked on the directory for the OB floor, then just listened for the sounds of crying babies. Following a fellow nurse into the nurse's changing room, he self-consciously changed into pink scrubs while trying to keep his eyes off the other nurses changing street clothes for the freshly laundered scrubs. Finding Marilyn's locker, he took out the size 6 nursing shoes and put them on.

Suddenly, he had a feeling that someone was watching him. Turning around, he saw Al standing behind him, staring at him with an intent look on his face. The look was one thing, but what bothered Sam the most was that Al wasn't paying attention to any of the other girls in various stages of undress around him.

Sam nodded his head toward the door to the bathroom and Al followed him without comment. Fortunately, no one was using it. Locking the door, Sam said, "Ok, Al, what is it?"

"What is what?"

"Al," a wealth of meaning was in that single word.

"Sam," Al took a deep breath. "Marilyn is dead. She died in 1994 after a bout of pneumonia secondary to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome."

"Aids, Marilyn has Aids?" Sam asked unbelieving.

"She doesn't have it yet, Sam. Sometime within the next 24 hours, she contracts it. Ziggy doesn't have any specifics, other than she got it at work. He says there's a 89 % probability that you're here to prevent that." Al took out his cigar and lighter.

Sam looked down, thinking. "Well, in her line of work, it

could be anything from a needle stick to getting blood in a cut." Sam put his hands out, examining them carefully for any breaks in the skin. "I'll just have to be careful and use universal precautions."

Al's hands shook as he lit his cigar. "I hope that will be enough. It might have been something she didn't have any control over. Just remember, you have someone's life in your hands." Al said, hitting a key on his hand link. "I'm outta..."

Sam stopped him. "Al, I always have someone's life in my hands. There's something else you're not telling me."

"Now," Al tried to bluff. "Why would you think that?" He took a nervous drag on the cigar.

"I know that look. You're hiding something. It's the same look you had when you didn't tell me about Beth." At Al's stricken expression, Sam regretted bringing up Al's first wife. He knew that it still disturbed Al that he could never have his only true love. He blamed that loss for all of his failed love affairs. Love affairs. That was it!

"How long did you date Marilyn?"

Al looked down at his feet. "On and off for about a year. I'd see her when I came into town."

"And what kind of birth control did you use?"

"Well, the first time I forgot to bring any...well, you know...and anyway, she was on the pill," Al ended, defensively. If the situation hadn't have been so serious, Sam would have laughed. Al embarrassed about sex! It boggled the mind.

"It was just easier," Al continued. "I didn't want to give her the feeling that I thought she might be diseased. That can kill a romantic evening quicker than a jealous husband coming home early." Al's smile was weak.

Sam shook his head. "Have you had a HIV blood test yet?"

"Yes, it was the first thing I did when I found out she had died from AIDS. The results aren't back yet. I think I'll go check with the lab. Just be careful, Sam."

Before Sam could protest, he opened the brilliant white door, stepped through it and closed it behind him.

Standing in front of the mirror, Sam stared unseeing at his reflection, seeing instead the ravaged face of the one AIDS patient he had managed while in medical school. In his mind's eye the face changed to that of his best friend. Al's face; wasted away, the look of pain and suffering etched into the

ravaged features. He couldn't let that happen.

Sam thought of something else. Even if he could prevent Marilyn from getting it this time, what was to keep her from getting it later and giving it to Al?

Now, not only was he responsible for the life of Marilyn, but quite possibly for the life of his closest friend. He had to find some way to keep Marilyn from getting AIDS and teach Al a lesson he'd never forget.

\* \* \*

When Sam first found out that he was a nurse, he was relieved. Finally something he knew about. Medicine. Six hours into his shift, he was sure all nurses would have had to be underpaid. His feet hurt, his back hurt, even his fingers hurt from all the paperwork that needed to be filled out. His coworkers seemed to fly at a breakneck pace trying to get everything done. He had thought doctors were overworked. Ha! They had nothing on these nurses.

He had taken his lunch break in the cafeteria with a couple of the other nurses. As he was eating his food, one of the other girls brought up Al's name. "How did last night go with Al, Marilyn? He looked like lots of fun."

"Okay, I guess," Sam said, his face reddening.

"Only okay? Come on, tell Aunt Judy everything," a slightly older nurse said.

"We went to an Italian restaurant, had a nice dinner, he took me home, I invited him in for a drink, then he went home."

"Went home, when? In the morning?"

"No, I got a headache and asked him to leave."

"Leave, are you crazy? You let a hunk like him get away! Haven't you heard of Tylenol?"

Sam merely shrugged and ate his food. It amused him to think of women considering Al as an object of desire as the older man did of so many women.

"How's the headache, doll?" the silken tones in his ear registered on Sam's nerves, causing a chill to run down his spine. He looked up to see Al in his naval uniform, sans hand link.

"Al," Sam said, self-conscious of all the nurses watching his reactions to the new arrival. "What are you doing here?"

"I had to check on my favorite nurse and make sure she was okay." Al smiled down at Sam before looking over the other nurses at the table.

"I'm fine." Sam's reply was short.

"Good. Say, I have two tickets for that play you said you were dying to see for tonight."

"I don't think so, Al. I have to get up early in the morning for work."

"I'll trade with you, Marilyn," Judy offered. "Actually you'll be doing me a favor. I was going to ask you later, anyway. I have to take my kid to the doctor on Wednesday."

Sam shot a look of exasperation at the 'helpful' nurse, then thought better of it. If he wasn't at work, then he couldn't get AIDS. "Okay, I'll switch with you."

"Okay, it's settled then. I'll pick you up at six, we'll have an early dinner, then go to the play." Al landed a kiss near his ear before Sam could move away, and whispered, "I'll see you tonight, Marilyn."

Before he could refuse, Al was gone. Damn that man! Sam thought. He could do the vanishing act as easily without Ziggy as with him.

He finished his lunch in silence, trying not to listen to the speculations on 'how good Al would be in bed.' He just couldn't understand what they saw in Al. The man was a womanizer, he treated females like objects for his pleasure. Any intelligent woman should be able to see right through him.

\* \* \*

Sam had opted to work on the floor, thinking that he would be safer making beds, passing pills and generally helping out. So far, he had given two shots, being very careful not to recap the needles before disposing of the syringes and started one IV, wearing gloves.

One of the nurses looked at him strangely when he wore the gloves, but Sam merely shrugged and said, "I'm just taking precautions."

"When did you start 'taking precautions?'" the dark haired nurse asked.

"Today," Sam said. "Well, these days you never know if someone might have hepatitis or AIDS."

"Don't say that too loud around here. You'll have the

patient's in an uproar. As it is, you can't even give blood to patient without them worrying about getting AIDS. I think it's all blown out of proportion."

"Marilyn, the charge nurse interrupted, hurriedly. "You're going to have to assist Crabill in room 519 with an emergency C-section. The baby's having late decelerations."

"Are you sure you don't want one of the other nurses to help?" Sam asked hopefully.

"No, everyone else is busy. I have to stay out on the floor. I'll watch your patients."

"Alright," Sam said, before rushing to the birthing room. The laboring woman and her husband were nervously watching the staff moving swiftly but confidently to prepare the woman for surgery.

"Marilyn, good," Sara welcomed Sam. "I need you to get an IV started. Here's everything you'll need."

Sam looked it over. "Where's the gloves?"

"Gloves? What do you need gloves for?"

"To start the IV," Sam insisted.

"They're in the box, over by the sink where they always are. Hurry, we don't have a lot of time." She rushed away.

Sam got the gloves and inserted the IV. He couldn't help but sympathize with the frightened couple. It was supposed to be a happy time; the birth of their baby and it was in trouble. "Everything will be okay," he promised.

"I'll take the baby," Sara said when she came back. "Since you've had OR experience, you're going to have to assist Dr. Williams with the section. The other surgeons are busy with another case. Let's get her to Delivery Room 2."

Assisting with surgery; Sam could handle that. During his residency, he had assisted with several sections. Even though Obstetrics was not his specialty, he had a very thorough teacher who believed doctors should have a broad base of experience. As he scrubbed at the large sink, Sam reviewed the procedure for C-sections. It was funny, he thought, that he couldn't remember half of his personal history, but at times technical material would come easy.

"How are things going, pal?" Al asked, appearing next to him.

"Just fine. I'm tired and worried sick. I have to assist

with an operation, I have a date with you tonight, just your run of the mill leaper's concerns. How about you, Al? Did you get the results from your test?" Sam asked, concerned. So much was riding on this leap.

"Well, you know doctors. They're not sure. They had to run more tests. They said they'd know for sure in a couple more hours. Just be careful, Sam."

Sam looked over at his friend. The hologram was wearing a fuchsia scrub outfit. "Why in the world are you wearing that?"

"In honor of the occasion. Ziggy finally came up with some more information. He says that there is a 95% probability that this operation was the source of Marilyn's infection. If you can get through it without any problems, then you're home free."

"You mean this woman has AIDS?" Sam whispered, careful of any listening ears.

"Yes, it's a shame. She got it during a blood transfusion last year. She hasn't come down with any symptoms yet. She is diagnosed with the disease later this year. She died in a car accident in 1990, leaving behind her husband, Jerry and 2 year old daughter, Amanda. So far, Amanda or Jerry haven't shown any signs of the disease."

"Did Ziggy come up with how Marilyn got it?"

"No, but somehow she came in contact with blood. Keep your fingers out of the way of any scalpels or needles."

Sam finished scrubbing his hands and rinsed them off. "So, if I can get through this operation without being contaminated, then I'll be home free."

"Should be kiddo. I think I'll wait out here. I'm not good with blood."

"Come on Al, the birth of a baby is one of the most beautiful experiences a person can see. You can stand in the corner and not watch the operation itself."

"Nah," Al said, shaking his head. Then he looked at Sam. "Well, okay, but I'm not going to watch."

Sam went into the operating room and took the towel a masked nurse held ready for him and dried his hands. Slipping his arms into the sterile gown, he allowed the nurse to pull it on and tie the ties. He held his hands out for the gloves and also slid them on. Looking closely at the gloves, he made sure there were no breaks in the rubber.

Standing next to the operating table, he waited for the



doctor. He was covered from head to toe, he was safe, wasn't he? Just when the surgeon joined him, he thought of something. He turned and looked for a nurse.

"Sara, would you get me a pair of goggles?" he asked.

"Goggles? Why would you want goggles? Oh, never mind. I know, protection. I'll see if we have any left." Sara left and came back with a pair of plastic goggles. She carefully put them on Sam, being sure not to touch his sterile gown or gloves.

"There, I hope that makes you happy."

"Yes, thank you."

"If we are all ready," the surgeon dryly intoned. "Can we get started?"

"Yes, Doctor," Sam said.

The operation went smoothly, until the baby girl was born. Sam could tell the baby wasn't breathing and her skin was blue. The surgeon clamped the umbilical cord next to the baby and in a hurry to get the baby to the pediatrician forgot to clamp the cord again before cutting the cord. Blood spewed out of the cord, splattering Sam's gown and his mask and goggles. The surgeon grabbed the cord and clamped it before it could lose any more blood. "Sorry," he muttered. The pediatrician took the baby to a warmer.

Sara took a cloth and wiped off Sam's goggles and face. "Good thing you wore those," she said. "You could have gotten blood in your eyes. Maybe your protection isn't such a bad idea after all."

\* \* \*

By the time the surgery was over and Sam could take off his blood splattered gown, his shift was over. Al found him in the changing room, finishing dressing. "Well, Sam, you've saved Marilyn from getting AIDS. As of 1995, she is still alive."

"And you are wondering why I'm still here." Sam looked at Al with a mischievous look in his eyes.

"Frankly, yes. I mean, you've done what you've leaped in for." Al stared at Sam puzzled. "I don't like that look in your eyes, Sam. What do you have planned now?"

"Maybe it's because I have a date tonight," Sam said, standing at the door. "With a man who won't take no for an answer."

"Sam," Al warned. "What are you planning? Sam, I want you to leap right now. Sam!"

Sam merely smiled and left the hologram standing in the room.

\* \* \*

Sam carefully prepared for his date. Normally, he hated to wear dresses and heels, but this time he took pleasure in dressing to kill. He wore the slinkiest dress Marilyn had in the closet and put on a pair of silver sandals. He carefully applied his makeup, having garnered some experience when he was Samantha, a female secretary who was being sexually harassed by her boss. Sam fleetingly thought of treating Al like he had treated the slick boss, but he didn't think that would work. No, he would have to teach Al a lesson as a woman, not as Sam.

As he looked in the mirror he had to admit that the effect was gorgeous. He wouldn't have minded dating Marilyn himself. The clear blue eyes smiled as the door bell rang. Time for school to start.

Walking carefully to the door in the low heeled sandals, he practiced the walk the ex-beauty queen had taught him during the Deep Miss South pageant. "Step and glide, step and glide," he repeated under his breath.

He opened the door and Al stood there in a classic black tuxedo with a single red rose bud in his lapel, his hair perfectly groomed. Sam was shocked. He'd rarely seen Al dressed 'normally' before. He had never noticed that Al was actually quite a handsome man. He shook himself out of his reverie and gave him a weak smile.

"Come on in." He stepped back to allow the older man to enter. As he passed, Sam could smell the faint odor of the expensive cologne Al always wore. It brought back memories of all the times Al would breeze out the door for a 'hot date,' then come back bragging about his conquests. Sam's resolve was strengthened. Al really did need a lesson. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Sure, anything caffeine free. The doctor's been after me to lower my cholesterol and caffeine intake. He also wants me to stop smoking, but a man can only give up so much at one time."

Sam went into the kitchen only to find Al's hologram waiting next to the refrigerator. Sam cocked his head toward him and muttered, "Checking up on me, Al?" before reaching into the fridge to get two beers.

"Who me?" the hologram asked innocently. "Light beer? Don't you have any Scotch?"

"Beer, I want you under control," Sam said, getting two

glasses, and started to carry them into the living room.

"Sam, I want to know what you have planned for tonight," he demanded.

Sam only smiled and left the room, the hologram following through the door.

"You should stop smoking, Al," Sam said as he gave the man a beer and glass. "It's bad for your health, it raises your blood pressure, increases your chances for heart disease, not to mention lung cancer."

Al shook his head. "You know, you sound just like my best friend, Sam." That got a snicker from the hologram. Sam shot a him a dirty look. Al continued, "He's always after me to stop smoking."

Sam swallowed a mouthful of beer. "Sounds like a pretty smart guy."

"Oh, he is. A genius in fact. And the best friend a guy could have. He just needs to loosen up a bit."

"Amen to that," the hologram said, his handlink beeping. "He also needs to learn to pay attention to people that are better qualified on certain subjects to give expert advice. Just a minute, Gooshi," he said, punching buttons on the handlink.

"He takes everything so seriously," Al explained. "He needs to learn how to live a little. You would probably hit it off...both having medicine in common. He's a doctor. I ought to introduce you sometime...but then again, maybe I'd better not. I think I'd like to keep you to myself for a while." At that, he moved a little closer to Sam, putting the beer on the coffee table.

The handlink was beeping furiously. "Alright, Gooshi, I'm coming, I'm coming. I've got to go. Be nice, Sam." He smiled at Sam's predicament and vanished through the bright door of the imaging chamber.

"Al!" Sam yelled, as Al tried to put his arms around him.

"Is there something wrong?" Al eyes were deceptively innocent.

Sam thought quickly. He didn't want to hurt his friend's feelings, but..."You're moving a bit fast for me. I mean we just met yesterday. Why don't we get to know each other first?"

"Sure, doll," Al said, backing off.

"And the first thing you should know about me, is that I



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don't like to be called doll or babe or honey. My name is Marilyn," Sam said firmly.

Al looked suitably chastened, then smiled. "Okay, Marilyn, why don't we go on to dinner? I have reservations at an intimate little French restaurant. You mentioned you like French food."

"Sounds great to me, let me grab a jacket and I'll be ready."

\* \* \*

The food was good and as Al kept his distance, Sam began to relax and enjoy himself. It had been a long time since he had just spent time with Al and talked. He was always worried about this leap or that leap and had not really just relaxed with his friend. He did have to be careful not to talk about anything Marilyn wouldn't know about. When not being suggestive, Al was a witty and fun companion.

The play was a light hearted romantic comedy that had both Sam and Al laughing as the actors took their bows and the curtain came down. Al used his hand on Sam's back to help guide him through the crowd, but there was nothing threatening in the older man's manner.

At Sam's house, Al stood waiting while Sam fumbled with the keys before opening the door. "Would you like some coffee?" Sam offered. "I have decaf."

"Thanks," Al said, following Sam in.

Sam dropped his coat over the back of the couch and slipped off his sandals. Wiggling his toes, he moaned, "Oh, boy, that feels good."

Sam put the coffee on to perk and came back in the living room where Al was waiting on the couch. He had taken off his coat and tie. His hair was tousled like he had run his fingers through it. He looked so open and unsuspecting that Sam suddenly didn't have the heart to go through with his plans. In a flash of honesty, he admitted to himself, he probably didn't want to from the beginning. "Damn it," he said under his breath. "I can't do it."

"What's wrong, Marilyn?" Al got up concerned.

Sam looked at Al's puzzled face and decided he had to confess.

"That's what's wrong, Al. My name's not Marilyn."

"But, you said..."

"Just listen to me for a couple of minutes..."

"Sam," Al's voice full of warning and censure come from behind him. Sam turned around and saw the hologram wearing his silver flight jacket, standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

"Al, I have to tell him," Sam insisted.

"Sam, you know you're not supposed to let anybody know you're who you really are," the hologram warned.

"Him? Tell who what?" Al asked from the couch, confused.

"You already know about the project by this time, so it shouldn't make a difference," Sam said to the hologram.

"Project? What project? What are you talking about Marilyn? Or whatever your name is," Al said, getting to his feet.

"Quantum Leap, Al," Sam said. The hologram moaned and shook his head.

Al's eyes got wide. "Quantum Leap? How do you know about Quantum Leap? That's a top secret project still on the drawing board."

"I know about it because I helped create it. I'm Sam, Al."

"Sam? As in Samantha?"

"Sam as in Sam Beckett."

Al's mouth dropped open and he sat down heavily on the couch. "I don't believe it." He looked closely at the woman before him. "There's no way."

"Al, you know the project. You know what it's designed to do." Sam looked at the older man shaking his head, then at the hologram who glared at him. "Ok, who else would know you had a dog named Chester that your ex-wife Sharon got custody of? Or that you can dance the Horah?"

"Who told you that?" Al asked indignantly. "Sam?"

"Would Sam tell anyone about that weekend in Vegas when you disappeared for three days and he came to find you to bring you back to the Star Bright Project?"

Al turned pale as he stared into Sam's eyes. "No, you wouldn't tell anyone about that." After a long pause a slow smile spread across his face. "Ain't that a kick in the butt? It works!...So why are you here?"



"I leapt into Marilyn Connors life to prevent her from getting AIDS."

"AIDS? Marilyn has AIDS?" Al's eyes widened.

"No, I was able to prevent her from getting it today during a C-section. Blood originally was splattered in her eyes, but I wore goggles today so I didn't get contaminated."

Sam looked at the hologram muttering under his breath, rapidly pushing buttons on his handlink. "Paradox, paradox."

Turning back to Al, Sam said, "You would have been exposed since you 'saw' Marilyn several times over the next year and you didn't wear a condom."

Al cleared his throat uncomfortably, a red flush creeping up his face.

Sam laughed. "And you call me a prude."

The hologram looked up at his past self, momentarily drawn out of his thoughts of doom. "Is that how I look when I'm embarrassed?"

"Yes," Sam turned his head. "Your ears turn pink first, then..."

"Who are you talking to, Sam?" Al said, trying to change the subject.

"Your hologram. He's...you're the only person from my own time that I can see and talk to."

"Sam," the hologram protested. "You've got to stop."

"From your own time?" Al asked. "You mean, I'm here from the future? This is getting really weird."

"Yes, Al, I can't tell you much more, but when I leap out of here and Marilyn comes back, she won't remember anything about the past two days..."

"When exactly did you get here, Sam?" Al asked suspiciously.

"Sam," the hologram interrupted desperately. "You can't tell him any more. Too much knowledge about the future can be catastrophic. I'm going to disappear in a flash of paradox any second now. Maybe we'll both disappear," Al said, building up steam. "Maybe, time as we know it will cease to exist..."

"Okay, Al," Sam said to the hologram. He turned back to Al. "That's all I can tell you. Mainly I wanted to warn you to be careful and protect yourself. You know how it works. You got



away with it this time. I might not be around next time." He looked at Al then the hologram. He wanted both men to get the message.

"Okay, Sam," both Al's said simultaneously.

Sam smiled. "Good."

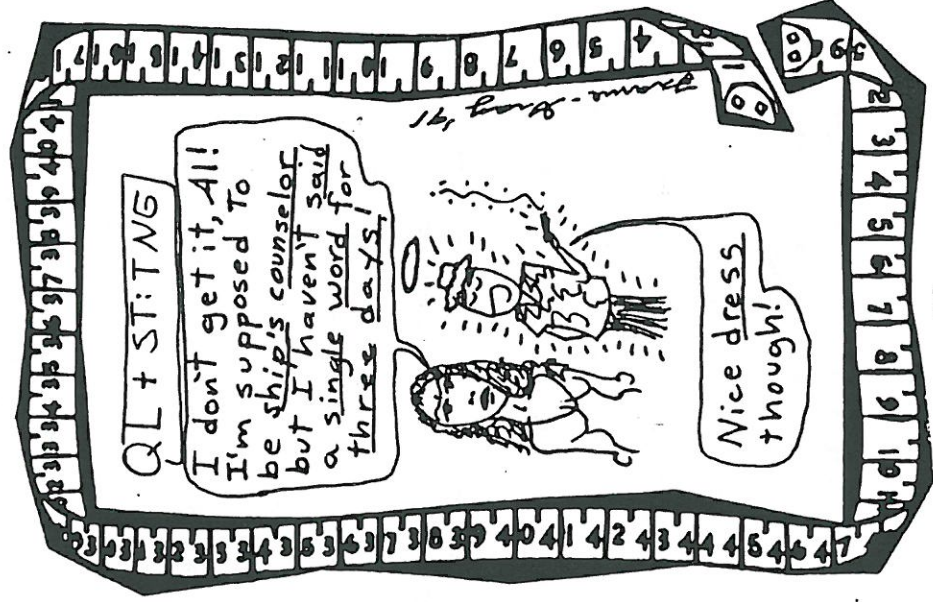
The hologram spoke up. "Sam just exactly what were you planning on tonight? That look in your eye earlier was more than this."

"Oh, I just wanted to teach you a lesson, but you know," Sam said, with a thoughtful look on his face. "I might have learned something myself."

"What?" the hologram asked, uncertainly.

"Since I first leaped, I thought your only interests in women were as sex objects, but you've proved tonight that you care relate to a woman on an equal basis. I guess you're not a lounge lizard after all."

"A lounge lizard!" both Al's chorused in indignant protest as Sam disappeared in a flash of light.



## SWEET SURVIVOR

By Kristen Hunter

"Carry on my Sweet Survivor  
Carry on my lonely friend  
Don't give up on the dream  
Don't you let it end...."

Sweet Survivor  
Peter, Paul, and Mary

Light splashed into darkness with an abruptness that cast him down like a drowning man flung onto a midnight beach by a phosphorescent wave.

A roaring in his ears threatened to draw him back into the ocean of light. Sam dazedly shook his head, digging his fingers into the wet sand as if to physically drag himself into reality. He blinked, struggling to discover where he had ended his leap this time.

Looking down, he saw white-knuckled hands clenched about a dirty steering wheel and hastily forced his head up. He was driving a car that stank of stale cigarette smoke. Through the smeared windshield he caught a quick impression of a dark street bordered by closed storefronts. Brief dizziness washed over him and he instinctively eased up on the gas pedal.

A flash of movement caught his attention and he realized a young boy was sprinting from the shadows of an alley just ahead of him. Startled, Sam reacted, lifting his foot to the brake. That act seemed to take an eternity and, horrified, he realized he was not going to be able to stop in time.

As if heedless of the danger, the boy did not pause, dashing before the car without sparing it a glance. There was a faint, muffled thud just as he was about to clear the bumper on the driver's side. Sent tumbling across the dark, wet pavement, the boy landed in a small, still heap.

Squealing the car to a stop, Sam burst from it as the child was pushing himself up to his knees. In the stark light of the street lamp, his face was pale and terrified. The haunted eyes swept the shadows of the alley from which he had emerged.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked, noting with detachment that his hands were trembling as he helped the injured boy to a sitting position on the street. "Here, let me check and see if you're alright. Did you hit your head?"

The boy flinched, pulling away from Sam's examining hands.

"I'm fine, just let me get up..." Struggling to rise, he winced as he tried to put weight on his left leg and sank back to the street.

With a professional's skill, Sam ran his hands along the boy's leg and ankle, he said, "I don't think there are any breaks," he said, "but you've twisted your ankle. Your hands are pretty scraped up, too."

"I'll be okay, if you'll just let me up," he insisted, glancing worriedly over his shoulder at the alley behind him.

Satisfied there were no major injuries, Sam said, "At least let me take you home." He helped the boy to his feet.

The boy drew a breath to reply, his face set with refusal, then hesitated, looking at the alley. Sam could hear voices getting closer, voices that did not sound friendly.

"Okay," the boy replied in an abrupt change of heart.

"Let's go." He limped quickly to the car, grimacing in pain.

Following, Sam opened the door for the boy and closed it behind him. Walking around the front of the taxi, he saw some teenage boys running out of the alley. He forced himself to calmly open the driver's side door, get in and close the door. He reached over to lock the doors, only to find the boy had already locked his.

Looking at the passenger seat, he saw his companion had hunched down in the seat so that no one could see him unless they looked directly in the window. He put the keys in the ignition and automatically glanced in the rear view mirror for anyone behind him. His reflection stared back at him and he moaned, "Oh, boy." He found himself looking at a middle-aged, balding man with a chubby face. Heavy dark eyebrows hung over beady brown eyes.

"Can we please get out of here?" the boy asked desperately.

Sam started the car and pulled away. "Where can I take you?" he asked.

Shrugging a skinny shoulder, the boy answered, "Just drop off at the corner of Eighteenth and Broadway."

"No," Sam persisted. "I'll take you home, explain to your parents what happened..."

"Oh, no," he shook his head emphatically pulling himself up onto the seat. "You don't want to do that. My Dad'd punch you out for hittin' me."

"He would?"

"Oh yeah. He's real big and he's got a temper when anybody messes with me." He nodded his head to reenforce his point. "He'd be right on you. You'd be sorry."

Not believing any of it, Sam drew a breath to reply, then changed his mind. Looking up at the cabby's license on the dash, he squinted at it in the brief light of a street lamp. "I'm...."

"Dean Baker," came Al's voice from the back seat. "Fastest cabby in Bakersfield."

Startled, Sam jerked, the car swerving wildly for an instant. Luckily the street was deserted except for them and he brought it back under control quickly.

Sam shot a disgusted glance over his shoulder. "What's the matter?" the boy yelped.

"Nothing," Sam answered in exasperation. "I thought I saw something back there, but it was just a shadow."

He ignored Al's soft sound of disgust at being called a shadow and returned to his interrupted sentence. "I was saying, I'm Dean Baker. What's your name?"

"Butch," came the quick reply. "Butch Martin."

Al leaned forward from the back seat, regarding the boy with an expression Sam could not identify in the dark. Giving the observer a long, questioning look, he said, "Okay, Butch.."

"That's not his name, Sam," Al interrupted, withdrawing to the back seat. "He's lying. It's Nicholas Spencer. Nick for short. He's a runaway."

Clearing his throat, Sam tried again. "Well, Butch. How old are you?"

Nick shrugged, moving closer to his door as they drew near a red light. "Twelve." Blonde-haired, blue eyed and painfully thin, he looked much younger.

At Sam's incredulous glance, he corrected, "Well, almost." The light turned green and as they went through without stopping, he relaxed perceptively.

"Drop the personal questions, Sam," Al warned. "He's going to run for it."

The younger man nodded, indicating Nick's hands. The boy held them palm up on his knees, fingers curled over the abraded palms. "Those must sting like crazy."

Closing his hands, Nick crossed his arms and tucked his fists out of sight. "They're okay."

"Promise him food, Sam," Al coached. "You live about six blocks on up this road. You're just getting off duty and you were on your way there."

"Are you hungry?" Sam asked.

Again the quick shrug of a skinny shoulder. The boy looked ravenous, but Sam got the feeling he would starve first before he would admit it.

"My place is just up the street. How about we stop and eat before I drop you off at your house? Even if you're not hungry, I'm famished."

There was only a second's hesitation before he agreed. "Okay, if you're hungry."

"And you can call your parents from there."

To that there was no reply.

\* \* \*

It was raining by the time Sam found the apartment. Al's directions, given before he left to get more information from Ziggy in person, had been vague. The boy gave him a sharp look as Sam crept up the rain darkened street, peering at the house numbers, but made no comment.

He sent Nick into the bathroom to clean up armed with soap, towels and a robe. He waited outside until Nick had undressed and took the smelly, soiled clothes and put them in the old styleringer washer.

The sound of rain was loud as he rummaged through the well stocked kitchen. Getting out a loaf of bread, lunch meat and cheese he made sandwiches for the both of them. He figured milk and cookies would do for dessert. He had not lied to the boy, he was hungry. Maybe it had something to do with the overweight body he occupied.

Thunder rumbled, rattling the loose window panes as Al appeared in front of him. The timing of his appearance disquieted Sam, stirring bad memories of his Halloween leap into the horror writer's life. Hesitantly, he reached out a hand and

waved it through the observer's chest.

"It's me, Sam," Al said, patiently.

Shaking his head a bit sheepishly, Sam said, "What'd you find out?"

"Where's the kid?" Al asked before answering Sam's question.

"He's taking a shower."

"You'd better watch him, he'll run."

"Without his clothes?" Sam smiled. "I took them to wash. They smelled like he had worn them for a month."

"Actually, he's only been gone for a couple of days," Al looked down at his handlink. "You're in Bakersfield, California and today is August 8, 1953." Al looked up at Sam, "Hey, you were born today! Happy birthday, pal."

"Today's my birthday?" Sam repeated, surprised and a little pleased. "Thanks, Al. So, what did you find out?"

"Well, all that Ziggy has come up with so far, is that the kid ran away from St. Vincent's Orphanage on August 6th and was found three days later in a trash bin. He'd been beaten to death. The police think it might have been gang related." Al's face was distressed.

"That would explain that group of teenage boys I saw coming out of the alley. He seemed awfully spooked. That's when he agreed to go with me. So, if I've saved his life, why haven't I leapt?"

"Ziggy has a theory, but I'm not sure I agree." Al chewed on his cigar.

"What's that?" Sam's head cöcked to the side.

"Ziggy says you have to take him back to the orphanage."

Sam could tell by the look on the hologram's face, he didn't concur. "So, what's wrong with that? That's where he belongs, isn't it?"

"Sam, you don't understand. You had a mother and father to raise you. I've lived in an orphanage. It's no fun. They're always overcrowded, there's never enough food, and the discipline is strict."

"Wouldn't going back to the orphanage be better than living

on the street and being beaten to death by a gang of thugs?" Sam tried to reason with Al.

"I'm not going back," a defiant voice said from the door.

Sam looked up and saw Nick standing in the doorway. "There are people there that care for you."

"No, they don't. They say they do, then they don't show up for weeks." His thin, angular face was closed and angry.

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, there was this couple that talked about adopting me then they changed their mind. I haven't seen hide nor hair of them for weeks."

"Don't you think they might be worried about you?"

"No, they don't care."

"What about the nuns?"

"Nuns?" the boy asked incredulously. "Care about me? All they care about is their rosary beads and making sure everyone behaves like little angels. Anyway, if I went back, I'd get it for sure. Vicci says that the last time he ran away, they caught him and he couldn't sit down for a week. They stuck him in the cold room..."

"Cold room?" Sam said in horror.

"Yeah, that's what Vicci calls it. He says it has yucky green walls and just a lumpy old mattress on the floor. They wouldn't let him have any visitors or anything. It was awful. By the time they let him out, he was battier than old Sister Mildred."

Sam looked up at Al and saw a distressed expression on his face that matched the one on Nick's. Looking back at the boy, Sam said, "What about that couple? What if they really want to adopt you and you're not there?"

"They're not comin' back."

"When did you last see them?" Sam persisted.

Nick hesitated, answering reluctantly. "The end of July; I was at their house."

"It hasn't even been two weeks. Maybe they've been busy, or sick, or called out of town."

"I didn't think about that. I just thought they didn't want me anymore after I broke that stupid vase." His voice fell slightly and he dropped his eyes. "It was ugly anyway."

"How about if I give St. Vincent's orphanage a call and at least let them know you're alright?"

"St. Vincent's? How did you know their name? I didn't tell you," the boy demanded.

"There was a label in your shirt. I can find their number in the phone book."

"Phone book?" The boy looked at Sam like he was crazy. "All you got to do is call the operator and have her connect you. Even I know that."

Embarrassed, Sam nodded his head. "Right."

"Well, I'm not going back," Nick said stubbornly.

"We can worry about tomorrow, tomorrow. You can bunk down here tonight. I'll get you some blankets."

The young boy nodded, yawning widely. "Okay, but only because it's raining outside and I don't like to get wet."

By the time Sam got back, Nick was already asleep on the couch. Sam covered him with the blanket and brushed the hair back off his unlined forehead.

"Looks kinda like an angel, doesn't he, Sam?"

Sam looked up at Al. "Yeah, he kinda does. Poor kid."

"You're not really going to take him back, are you?"

Sam sighed, turning to him. "What else am I going to do with him? If I leap out of here, Dean will take him back, and I can't take him with me when I go. That is, assuming we figure out what I have to do to leap."

"I'll go back and see what I can find. You keep a close eye on him or he'll be gone."

\* \* \*

Morning came too fast. I could have slept a week--or at least until noon. But, there were things I had to do.



Calling Sister Margaret at St. Vincent's was not a good start to my day. She was cool, professional, and authoritative as a marine drill sergeant. She wanted Nick back, and she wanted my name and address so she could send the police to claim him. The only good thing about the call was refusing and telling her I'd bring him myself--later.

Hanging up also felt good, but looking over at Nick with her unyielding tones ringing in my ears gave me a terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach. He looked so young, lying sprawled across the couch, still deeply asleep. I'd bet he wasn't eleven yet, maybe ten, and the thought of taking him back to that woman made my flesh crawl.

I hadn't bought his horror stories the night before. But after talking to Sister Cuff-him-before-he-runs, I wasn't so sure.

Picking up the blanket that Nick had kicked off onto the floor, I covered him with it and went to take a shower. Sometimes I hate leaping. I really hate it.

\* \* \*

Shrugging on his shirt, Sam heard Al's voice coming from the living room and went to investigate. Just before the bedroom door, he paused, realizing the hologram was speaking to Nick.

The runaway still slept peacefully, head nestled on one arm. Al stood looking down at him, his expression troubled. As Sam watched, he crouched down beside Nick, his eyes on his face. "You listen to me, kiddo," he said softly. "I know what I'm talking about here." He paused, rubbing a hand across his jaw as if to give himself time to chose his words.

"I know it's awful, and I know you're scared, but you'll survive. Ya gotta trust me on this." Resting his arm on his knees, he paused as if searching for some clue that he was getting through.

"You're going to get a family." From the change in his voice, Sam could tell he grinned. "That'll be a kick, huh? Going to live with the Coopers. You'll like it. It'll be good." He nodded as if to convince himself, getting to his feet. "It'll be good, you'll see."

Clearing his throat, Sam entered the room as if unaware the observer was there. Al jumped, and turned a bit guiltily. "Morning, Sam."

Grinning, Sam let his expression say clearly that he was delighted for once to be the one to arrive unexpectedly. Nodding, he continued on his way to the kitchen, giving no indication he had heard the one-sided conversation.

Going to the refrigerator, he pulled out the ingredients of a hearty breakfast, saying, "What'd you find out?"

Al shrugged with the hand link in a gesture of defeat. "You gotta take him back, Sam."

"Yeah," Sam agreed as if confirming the obvious. "What about the Coopers?"

Lifting the link, Al called up the information. "They are," he squinted at the display. "Jack and Melody Cooper. Nice folks. No kids of their own." He lowered the link. "They're trying to adopt Nick--have been trying for weeks."

Putting bacon into a skillet heating on the stove, Sam glanced over his shoulder at the living room. "Why doesn't he know that?"

Al shrugged, looking over Sam's shoulder. He waved a hand at the bacon. "You know, you should put those into a cold skillet. They don't curl up that way."

Sam gave him an incredulous look and he continued. "I mean it, Sam. One of the few things I can cook is bacon." Absently he felt for a cigar. "I learned when I was married to Maxine. That woman loved breakfast in bed." He shook his head at the memory. "The key to the start of a perfect day with Maxine was....."

"Al!" Sam warned as loudly as he dared.

"Okay," the observer gave in with good grace. "The Coopers didn't tell the kid because they didn't want him to be disappointed if it didn't go though."

"Didn't go through," Sam repeated. "Why wouldn't it?"

"Because they can't find his dad. And without him to sign the final papers, Nick can't be adopted."

"His dad's alive?"

"Yeah," Al poked at the link, frowning at the display. "He's got a drinking problem. Used to go on benders and either beat the kid or ignore him." Lowering the link, he gazed in the direction of the sleeping child. "The state took Nick away from

him a year ago. He hasn't wanted any part of him since."

"And they can't find him? Have they tried?"

"Of course they tried," Al sounded miffed as he turned back to Sam. "Until Nick was found dead. Then there wasn't much point in it."

"No, I guess not," Sam answered quietly. "Can't Ziggy find him?"

"We're trying," Al protested. "We just pinned this much down this morning. Records were pretty sketchy in the fifties."

"Well, try harder. Maybe that's why..." There was a soft sound from the next room.

"Sounds like your guest is ready to check out," Al observed with a meaningful glance at Sam, who was already moving toward the living room.

Nick, who was slipping toward the front door, spun guiltily as Sam entered the room. Backing away, he stumbled against a small bench that held the telephone and, losing his balance, fell over it. It landed on top of him, the phone crashing loudly to the floor.

Hastily, Sam bent to help him and was shocked when the child gasped in fear, lifting one arm in an ingrained instinct of protection. "Don't!"

Faced with an obvious confirmation of the background Al had supplied, Sam backed away slowly. "Are you hurt?"

"No." Awkward with haste and fear, Nick got to his feet. "I'm okay." Eyes on Sam, he righted the bench. "I'm sorry," he said replacing the telephone, careful to stay out of the man's reach. "I didn't mean to."

"That's okay," Sam shrugged casually as if he had noticed nothing. "No harm done. Breakfast is about ready." As if confident Nick would follow, he headed back to the kitchen. "You like your eggs soft or hard?"

Furtively, the boy's eyes darted to the front door then back to the man. "Hard," he answered, taking a reluctant step after him. "None of that yucky, runny stuff."

"Okay," Sam nodded, pushing the kitchen door open. There was no sign of Al. "No yucky, runny stuff, it is."

\* \* \*

At breakfast, Sam found his appetite had deserted him. He sat and drank coffee while the slender boy ate what he had intended for both of them.

"Nick," he said at last.

Startled dark eyes darted to his. "How'd you know my name is Nick?"

"I just..." Sam shrugged. "Know."

"You called St. Vinnie's, didn't you?" There was accusation and fear in the tone.

"Yes," Sam nodded. "I did. And..."

"Why'd you do that?" Nick bolted from his chair. "I told you, I'm not going back."

"Sister Margaret said the Cooper's are worried about you."

"They are?"

"Yes," Sam nodded again, carefully. Judging the set of Nick's feet, he wondered if he could catch him if he ran. Given the state of the body he was in, he doubted it. "They're going to meet us there this morning."

Nick's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Did she tell you to say that?"

"Who?"

"Maggie the Maggot."

"No," Sam suppressed the urge to smile. "When she told me they were worried, I asked her to call them."

"I'm not going back."

"Not even if it means losing the Coopers? If you don't go back, they can't adopt you."

"Do you think they would?"

"I think so."

"Even after I broke her vase?" Nick lowered his eyes, "She cried. I heard her."

"Even after," Sam assured him. "People that love kids

forgive them when they make mistakes."

scowling, Nick thrust his hands into his pockets. "Vicci said maybe they'd come back."

Sam considered this. "Think he knows?"

"Yeah," Nick bit his lip absently as he regarded the sparse remains of his breakfast. "He's twelve and he's real smart. He knows lots of things. Like how to pick a lock and make a stink bomb. The only thing wrong with Vicci is that he likes girls. Yuck!"

Sam felt it safe only to nod in light of Nick's confidence in the worldliness of twelve year olds. The boy looked at him sharply. "If it's not true, I'll run away again. And I don't care what they do to me."

Squaring his slender shoulders, he turned and stalked from the room. Accepting that as near to agreement that he could hope for, Sam followed, reaching for his keys.

\* \* \*

The ride to the orphanage passed in silence. Nick sat rigid in his seat, arms crossed over his chest. It was only when they were pulling up before the grey stone building that his expression brightened. "Look!" His voice was light with joy and relief. "There's their car!"

Pulling the cab to a stop behind the shiny, '53 Chevy, Sam got the impression that if it hadn't been there, he would have never gotten the boy past the imposing, iron gates of St. Vincent's. "I told you they would be here," he said.

"Yeah," Nick frowned, as if to cover his earlier emotion. "But that doesn't mean they want me."

Pushing open his door, Sam got out, "Let's go see."

\* \* \*

The Coopers turned out to be nice people as Al said. Melody was slender, with blue eyes that filled with tears when Sam escorted Nick into the outer office. "Nicky?" she said, coming forward with arms outstretched. "Are you okay?"

Although he initially shied away, she pulled him to her for a hug. "We were so worried." Holding him to her, she cradled his head in her hand and his thin arms went about her. "When they called and said you were gone, we were so worried."

Jack, a tall, broad-shouldered man dropped a hand to the boy's shoulder for a quick, firm squeeze. He extended a strong hand to Sam. "I'm Jack Cooper. Thanks for bringing the boy home. We.."

Nick turned within the woman's grasp. "This isn't my home," he said defiantly. "They just make me stay here."

Melody looked up to meet her husband's eyes, pulling the boy closer to her. Almost imperceptibly, the large man nodded and she gave him a smile as brilliant as the one Nick had worn at the sight of their car. "Nick," she said gently, turning him back to face her. "Would you like to stay with us?"

"Not just for the weekend," Jack added, stepping forward to place a hand on his shoulder. He met his wife eyes, "But forever--as a family."

"You mean it!?"

The withdrawal of the young nun who acted as a secretary had been missed by all but Sam. He wasn't surprised to see the inner office door open as she emerged behind a tall, elderly woman who could only be the director.

"Mr. Cooper," she cut across Nick's words. "We agreed it would be best not to unduly raise the boy's hopes."

"Unduly?" Sam repeated sharply.

Her grey eyes shifted to him. "You must be the man who called this morning. Mr...?"

"Dean Baker," Sam answered, wondering where Al had gone. He had a feeling that if this weren't resolved quickly, something precious would be destroyed in the next moments.

"Mr. Baker," Sister Margaret returned coolly. "You have our thanks for returning Nick to us, even if you were not fully cooperative." She waved a lined hand at the younger nun. "Sister, please take Nick to his room. I'll see him later. Mr..."

"No!" Nick protested angrily, casting a betrayed look at Sam. "I'm not staying here!"

Belatedly, the physicist realized the boy had taken his assurances to mean that he would leave that day with the Coopers if they did indeed want him. "Nick, I..."

But the boy had already turned to Melody, grasping her hand. "You said you wanted me." His eyes darted to Jack. "You said you

did. And I'll be good. I promise you I will and...."

"It's hardly that simple, child," Sister Margaret said almost gently. "There are procedures that must be followed."

"What kind of procedures?" Sam asked, mentally revising his opinion of the woman.

"Permission must be obtained from the boy's father."

"My dad never did want me," Nick said defiantly. "After mom died, he'd call me names and say he wished I'd never been born."

Sam closed his eyes as he imagined what he'd like to do if he could get his hands on the cruel man. Opening his eyes, he looked at Sister Margaret. "Won't the man give permission?"

"We cannot locate Mr. Spencer. He has moved from his previous location."

Al suddenly appeared beside him. "We found him, Sam!" he said excited. "Melvin Spencer lives at 3452 S. Oak St. Apartment B, in San Francisco. He works at a factory."

Hope lit in Sam's eyes. "Spencer? What is his first name?"

The sister regarded him coolly. "Melvin, why?"

Sam smiled. "I just moved into town from San Francisco. I lived next door to a man named Melvin Spencer. He was drunk half the time. Once I even had to call the police."

"How can you be sure it's the same man?" Melody asked.

"Sam, he has a scar over his left eye from a fight," Al supplied quickly.

"Nick, did your father have a scar over his left eye?" Sam inquired.

"Yeah," Nick said. "The police had him in the drunk tank and he got in a fight with the wrong man."

"It's the same man," Sam said, certain. "I can give you his address and you can have the authorities check him out. It's 3452 S. Oak St. in San Francisco. He's in apartment B."

"Very well," Sister Margaret said, writing the address on a pad. "If he agrees, there shouldn't be any reason why the Coopers couldn't adopt Nick."

"Sam, you did it!" Al said, excitedly punching buttons on

the handlink. "The Coopers adopt Nick next month and he lives with them until he goes to college to become a social worker. He currently heads a committee to find homes for the homeless. By the way, Melvin Richards is serving time in the slammer for manslaughter. He won't be out before the turn of the century."

"Now," Sister Margaret, advanced on the small boy with a stern expression on her face. "What are we going to do with you? We just can't have children running away. How could we keep discipline?" Sam thought he detected a note of compassion behind her coolness.

"Can't he come home with us for a visit?" Jack asked.

"What? Reward him for disobedience?" she asked scandalized.

"That's okay," Nick said, hopeful now that he knew it was possible for him to be adopted. "I'm willing to stay and take my punishment."

Sam felt the first tingling of the impending leap as the door burst open behind him. Turning at the flurry of movement, he saw a large nun bustling through the door. She was dragging a small, struggling, dark haired boy by one ear.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" he protested as she dragged him to a stop. "Give me a break, Sister Mildred. I was just..."

Sam smiled as he heard Nick say under his breath, "Uh, oh. Vicci's in trouble now."

"I've caught him again, Sister Margaret. He was sneaking into the girl's dorm," the overweight nun said in righteous indignation.

Sister Margaret pointed a stern finger at the somewhat subdued boy in front of her. "Albert Calavicci," she said in a voice of doom. "In my office, now!"

Sam's smile turned to a grin and his eyebrows rose as he turned to the hologram. Blushing scarlet, Al was desperately punching buttons on his handlink. "Vicci?" Sam mouthed incredulously as the leap took him, mercifully sparing Al the necessity of a reply.



## The Last Yesterday

By Sharon Wisdom

Pieces of information about things around me came in fleeting, disjointed bits: hot, brilliant sun and sweat in my eyes, a sharp rock digging into my left shoulder, and a piercing pain in my forehead. Then somebody's face blotted out the glare and I could see Al standing behind them, frowning.

None of it meant too much at first, not the feel of hard baked earth beneath me, the fuzzy, concerned voices of the people gathered round me, or even Al hovering in the background like a gravelly-voiced guardian angel.

It used to be I'd adjust pretty quickly after a leap but lately it was harder to "settle". At first it was just a couple of minutes of bewildered disorientation like I felt now. Then it progressed to dizziness and passing clumsiness like it was harder to fit into and control the new body. But this was the first time--that I could remember--that I'd passed out cold. I don't know which worried me most, that fact, or the look on Al's face as my rescuers gathered me up and took me out of the sun.

\* \* \*

Hauled to his feet by helping hands, Sam had a quick, dizzying glimpse of red sandstone bluffs sweeping above his head and intensely blue sky. Looking down brought a view of a steep path that dropped away to a sheer cliff past a wooden safety rail. The sight spun his stomach in a whirl of nausea and he hastily adjusted his gaze to straight ahead.

He was able to move his feet, though he still skidded and slipped while climbing upward on the stone path. He found himself depending heavily on the arms which supported him on both sides.

"Dr. Clark? Are you okay?" came a man's voice near to his ear. It was the first thing anyone had said since he had leaped that he understood. Maybe the disorientation was fading.

"Okay?", he repeated, then nodded hesitantly. "Yeah, I'm..." An unexpected wave of weakness in his knees threatened to pitch him over backward down the steeply angled path. Only the grip of his companions saved him.

"I'm okay." It sounded shaky even to him. He wanted to

turn to look for Al but was afraid that to try it would pitch him on his knees for sure. He couldn't even walk and talk at the same time. What was the matter with him, anyway?

Abruptly the path leveled out at the top of the cliff. Looking up, he saw they were headed toward a collection of tents several meters away. "Yeah, well," there was an edge of amusement in the voice of the man at his right. "We'll let the nurse check you out anyway."

Sam wanted to look at who supported him, but the dizziness at the edge of his vision strongly discouraged that. "The nurse?"

"The nurse," his unseen companion repeated firmly. "Kelly. Then we'll see about taking you into town."

"Into town?"

"To the hospital. To see a doctor."

"I'm a doctor," Sam said dazedly.

"Yeah, that's right," came Al's voice from behind him. "Dr. Ernest Clark, a podiatrist. Heat exhaustion's not supposed to be your specialty. You just go along here."

Feeling a strong surge of relief, Sam tried to turn, saying "Al?" He was immediately sorry as he stumbled and nearly fell.

"Watch it, Sam." There was a flicker of movement to his right, then the hologram appeared before him, walking backward to carry on the conversation. "You're still bumfoozled by the leap. Take it easy or you're going to end up flat on your face again."

"Again?" Sam asked, ignoring the puzzled noise from the man who supported him on the right.

"Yeah, again." Al sounded a little piqued. "You leaped in here and passed out cold. So, you just go along and play nice with nurse Kelly. If she wants you to go to town to see the doctor," he stabbed his cigar at Sam for emphasis, "Then you go!"

"But," Sam began, only to break off the sentence at the consternation of the men beside him. He could now turn his head enough to see they both were young, clad in jeans, t-shirts, and hiking boots. Still walking backward, Al disappeared through the flap of the tent they had just reached as a slender black woman emerged.

"What's the problem?" she asked, regarding Sam with a

professional's eye even as she swept back the tent's opening to admit them.

"I think Dr. Clark got a little too much sun," the man to his right observed. "It's his first day on the site and he got a little carried away."

She smiled, "Happens all the time, Dr. Clark. Nothing to be embarrassed about. Bring him on in here, guys."

Al was waiting in the tent. "Watch your step, Sam," he directed. "The canvas is kind of...uneven." He finished unnecessarily as Sam tripped and nearly pitched onto his knees.

"Lay him down here, fellas," Kelly directed, calmly gesturing toward a cot as she reached for a thermometer. "We may have something a little more than sun here."

Sam's frightening sense of disorientation grew with a wave of nausea and the growing pain in his head that made it difficult to focus. Panic swelled in him when he could not find Al as his two rescuers lowered him to the cot. "Al, don't go."

The two men exchanged glances. "Kelly'll take good care of you," the blond one said. "We'll check on you later."

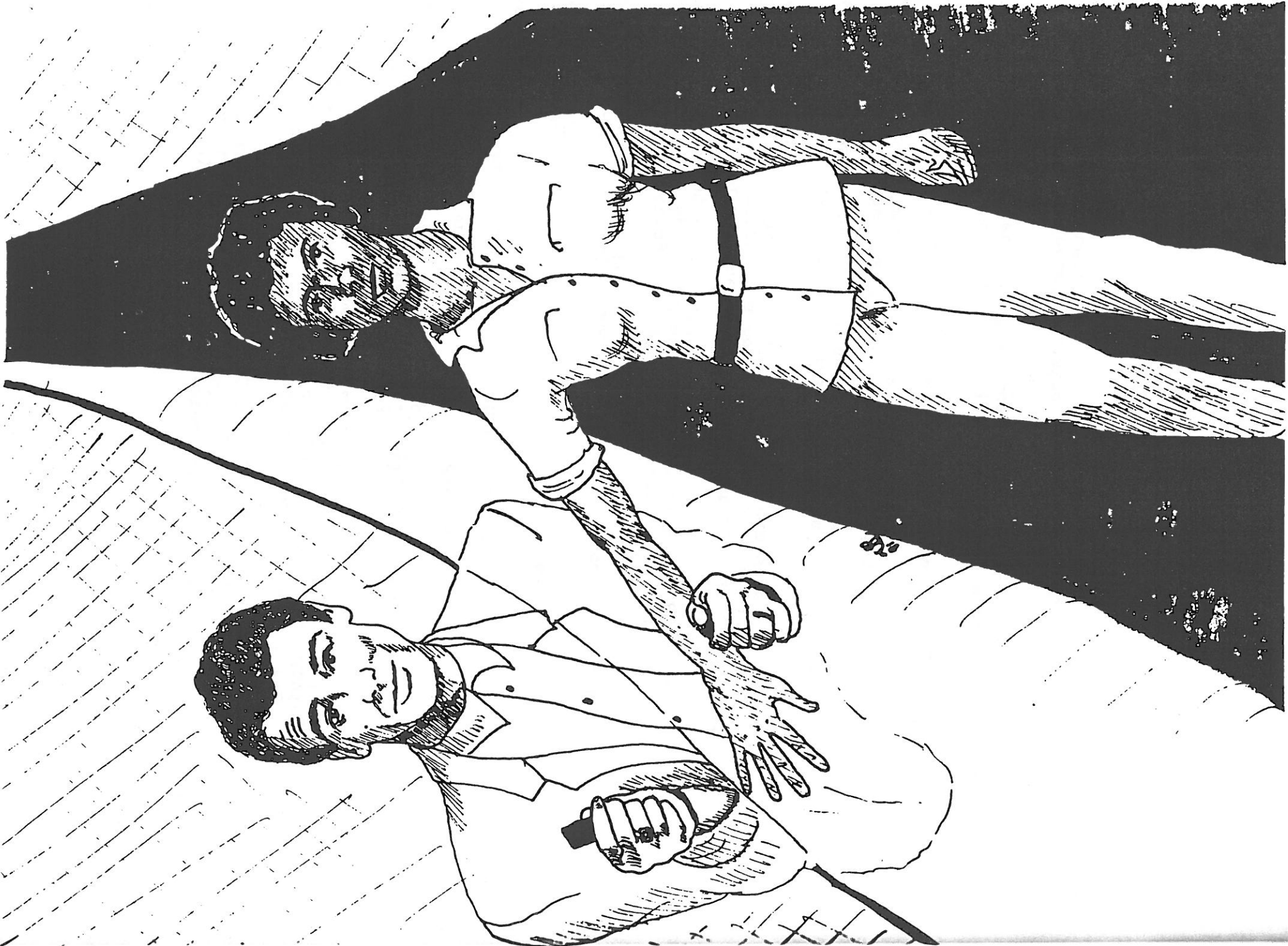
"I'm over here, Sam," came the hologram's reassuringly calm voice from behind him.

At the sound, Sam relaxed against the cot, as Kelly slipped a thermometer into his mouth. "First day here, huh?" she asked, taking his wrist in her hand to check his pulse. "Find anything yet?"

With an effort, Sam considered the question, finding the focus eased his sense of unreality. Getting no help from Al, who had moved into his field of vision but was busily wringing protesting tones from the hand link, Sam settled for a safe, small shake of his head. "You will," she assured him. "It's a new site. There are still lots of things to be found."

Al shot a glance over at them as Sam nodded, sighed and closed his eyes against the bright, growing pain in the center of his forehead. "I dated a physical therapist named Kelly once," Al observed from before the entrance. "Now, there was a woman with useful anatomical knowledge. She..."

Sam let the hologram's reminiscing flow over him like reassuring background noise as Kelly calmly and professionally completed her exam. She asked him all the right questions and a part of him analyzed his answers and arranged them to be at least marginally consistent with too much sun and too little rest



and water.

Apparently satisfied, she leaned forward on her chair by his cot and explained that with a little rest in the shade and plenty of water he should be fine. But, of course, if he wanted, she could arrange transportation into town to see a doctor.

When he declined, feeling only a desperate need to rest, she patted his shoulder reassuringly and got to her feet. Moving to the tent's opening she stepped outside. He heard her call, "Scotty! Hey, Scotty, come here a minute please."

Al, who had ceased his monologue and was standing with one elbow balanced on the other arm, silently smoking and watching, came over to the cot. "Sam? You okay?"

"Yeah." The answer was weary and distant.

"Sam," the hologram's voice sharpened. "Open your eyes and look at me."

"I don't want to, Al," he protested. "It makes me sick. My head hurts."

"Where?" Al moved closer as if his presence could command an answer. "Where does it hurt, Sam?"

"Here." Lifting a hand to his forehead, he had to try twice to hit the right spot. "Right here." Slowly he opened his eyes. "What's happening to me, Al?"

"Look at this," the hologram instructed, holding out his handlink and pointing at a new sensor set in its panel. "Look right in here. That's a boy," he praised him when he complied. "That's good."

"What's good?" Sam protested, bewildered, his voice slurred with weariness. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Al hedged. "We're working on that. Ziggy's collecting data and we're analyzing it now."

"Collecting data!" Sam repeated. "This is my life we're talking about!"

"Look, pal," Al returned calmly, "You made yourself a guinea pig when you stepped into the accelerator. We're just trying to get you back."

"Okay," he relented, closing his eyes. "Okay, so why is leaping getting harder?"

Al hesitated a moment, then answered gently, "These are pretty delicate systems you've been slamming around here, Sam." When there was no answer, he prodded, "Sam?"

Getting a sleepy grunt in reply, he drew a deep breath. "Now, you call that nice nurse Kelly back in here and tell her your head hurts and you want to go to the hospital."

"No. No hospital."

"Why? There may be something wrong here we can't detect and they can fix it. Maybe..."

"No." Sam opened his eyes to emphasize his point. "I said no."

Al threw up his hands in disgust. "Your mother's right, you are as stubborn as your father was. Why, no hospital?"

"Because they'll think I'm crazy if I slip and they're looking for neurological," Sam drew a deep breath as if struggling to stay awake. "Problems." Slowly, not to be denied, his eyes closed again. "So just--just tell me why I'm here." His voice faded, "tell me what I have to--to do."

Al waited a long moment until his friend's breathing evened out in sleep. "Just get some sleep, Sammy," he said softly, keying in the exit sequence. "I'll be back." He stepped into the glare and was gone as Kelly reappeared, coming to check on her sleeping patient.

\* \* \*

Al strode down the dozen or so meters of corridor between the imaging chamber and the main control room. Two technicians walking side by side in the bright hallway seperated to let him through as he pushed on, head down, cigar clenched in his teeth. Neither spoke; everyone had learned early on that no one spoke to the observer when he came out of the imaging chamber unless he spoke first. They exchanged glances as he stabbed his cigar into an ash can put there just for his use, made a sharp right and strode through the opening pneumatic doors.

Striding into a large, cool room that contained the elaborate panels and controls that made up the heart of the project, he did not look up at the stark view of the empty accelerator beyond wall-sized windows. "So, what'd you think?" he demanded, advancing on the auburn-haired woman who was seated at the main computer terminal.

For a moment she did not answer, did not even turn. Chin resting on her hand, her gaze lingered a moment on the screen,

across which lines of data streamed at a dizzying speed. Coming up behind her, Al had a quick glimpse of what looked like EEG tracings before the screen blanked.

"End of run," Ziggy's voice--Sam's voice for it was he that had supplied the voice chip--said from the console. "Do you wish to see the data again?"

Drawing a deep breath, she straightened, leaning back in her chair to glance up at Al, who stood over her left shoulder. "Not just yet, Ziggy," she answered the computer. "Standby." Meeting the observer's eyes, she leaned one forearm on the console to regard him as he took the seat to her left. "What do you think?" she repeated his question back to him as Gooshi came to stand flanking her to the right.

"You're the doctor," he snapped. "You tell me. I got you the damned data."

Not flinching at the anger in his tone, she returned evenly, "And you're the observer. Your eyes tell me things Ziggy's sensors can't." There was a rush of faint audio as if the computer were about to comment and she said sharply, "Standby" Ziggy."

Al frowned, rubbing one temple. "He looks pretty rocky," he admitted reluctantly, still sounding angry. "Confused. He says," he gestured helplessly. "Says his head hurts."

"I'll bet it does," she said softly, absently tapping her fingers lightly on the surface before her. "I expected that from the data."

"So?" Al demanded impatiently. "What do you think?"

"I think," she said softly, not releasing his gaze. "That we'd better get him home soon. Because if we don't, the Sam we when...if...we do get him back, he's not going to be the Sam we knew."

\* \* \*

Dreaming was preferable to waking and Sam lingered at the edge of reality blurred by old, loved memories. It was Christmas...wasn't it? He could smell pine and wood smoke and baking bread.

Someone was moving around his room--his mom? No, Katie. He could hear her humming a song he couldn't quite identify. It made him happy, the humming, as it continued light and gently patterned. He

Katie? In his room? What was she doing in his room? In a sudden rush of memory, he recalled that she had threatened to find out what was in the note from Lisa, and he'd hidden it in his dresser drawer. Rolling over hastily, he shot out a hand, snapping, "Katie!"

He found himself looking into startled green eyes in a heart-shaped face. It wasn't Katie. It was--who?

As the young woman tugged her wrist free of his grip, the realization of where he was came to him, and he pushed himself to sitting on the cot. "Sorry," he apologized. "I was--dreaming."

"No problem," she answered, flipping a thick russet braid over her shoulder with a practiced toss of her head. "I'm Scotty," she said easily, finishing the task of sliding a tray holding a pitcher of water and glass onto the bedside table. "Kelly had to step out a minute. She asked me to bring you some water. Are you thirsty?"

"Yeah," he replied, nodding, and finding that the bright pain in his forehead which had dulled considerably flared at the unguarded movement.

If she noticed his wince, she made no sign, merely nodding and pouring the water for him. She said only, "We haven't met yet, but I heard you're Dr. Clark."

Hesitating, Sam tried to remember what Al had said his name was. Hadn't he said he was a podiatrist? Ernest Clark, the podiatrist. "Why don't you just call me Ernest?"

"Okay," she said, extending the glass to him.

Misjudging the distance, his hand collided with hers as she reached out to him. Water splashed over the sides and onto the table and he made a disgruntled sound of frustration. Tactfully not commenting on the spill, she guided the glass gently into his hand.

Quick steps sounded from beyond the tent and Kelly appeared. "How are you doing?"

"Fine," he remembered not to nod as Scotty wiped up the spill in a quick movement and slipped out of the tent.

"I'm...fine." Wondering where Al was, and how he was going to find a private spot to talk to him, he continued. "I want to go back to my own..." Hesitating, he wondered exactly where it was he stayed. "My place," he finished lamely.

The nurse gave him a quick, discerning glance. "Okay," she



agreed. "Let's get some vitals and then we'll see about it."

\* \* \*

It was all pretty scary, leaping in feeling like I'd been slammed through the quantum equivalent of a brick wall. There had been disorientation last time, when I leaped into Dean, the taxi driver, but nothing like this. That, coupled with the headache, was about ten steps beyond anything I had experienced before.

It wasn't quite as bad as the very first leap because at least I knew Al and knew that he'd be showing up again to give me Ziggy's slant on the situation. But, for the first time I was more than a little afraid to fix whatever I came to fix and leap out again. Who knew what sort of shape I'd be in when I landed?

\* \* \*

Absently rubbing his forehead to ease the dull ache that just would not go away, Sam poked around the tent to which Kelly had escorted him in search of aspirin. The small field tent...Dr. Clark's tent...was evidently his alone as there was no sign of a roommate's things.

A quick, curious glance in a small mirror propped beside a basin and pitcher yielded the reflection of a slender, nondescript blond man. Sighing, Sam turned away. It was a forgettable face no one would pick out in a crowd, and right now he had less interest in it than in the pain lodged in the center of his forehead.

A small table in the corner that served as a desk had no drawers, and yielded only a black journal, newly begun with meticulous field notes, some trade books, and an electric lamp that was a clue that the camp had some minimal access to civilization. The rest of the doctor's things were tucked away neatly in foot locker at the end of the wrinkle-free cot. It yielded nothing more than folded clothing and personal items such as shampoo and toothpaste.

Sighing in frustration, Sam rumbled the neat clothes in a quick gesture of temper before slamming the lid closed and sitting back on his heels. Al's voice coming from behind him made him jump guiltily. "What you are looking for, Sam?"

Grimacing, he pushed himself up and turned to the hologram. "Aspirin."

"Unh-huh," Al nodded. "Head still hurt?" he inquired

casually.

"Yeah." A bit grumpily, Sam sat down on the cot, head in his hands. "Doesn't this Clark guy ever get headaches?"

"Guess not," Al said easily. "You could ask the nurse for one."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because," Sam answered as if to a simple child, lifting his head in irritation to regard the hologram. "Then she'd know I have a headache."

Al shrugged, hesitating just a second before lifting his cigar to his mouth. "So? Maybe you ought to 'fess up and go see that doctor."

"No." Getting to his feet, Sam paced to the desk and sat down on the edge of it. "All I need is to be in a hospital and have someone come in and find me talking to you. I'd never get out."

"Okay," the hologram lifted both hands in mock surrender. "Okay." Pausing a moment, he regarded the man who was rifling the pages of the field journal with quick, uneasy movements. "So," he said at last. "You want to know where and when you are?"

"Yeah," Sam looked up with shadowed uneasiness in his eyes. "And what I'm supposed to do."

"Well," Al balanced the cigar between his fingers as he consulted the link. "Ziggy is still working on the 'what', but as to the where...you're in the middle of nowhere at a small, insignificant archeological dig just outside of Mesa Verde park."

"Mesa Verde," Sam repeated thoughtfully, then said tentatively, "New Mexico?"

"Colorado," Al returned. "And you are Dr. Ernest Clark, a podiatrist from St. Louis who goes on two week long amateur digs once a summer just for the fun of it."

"Fun," Sam said in a disgruntled tone, looking about the pristine tent. "It's a wonder he gets his hands dirty."

Al shrugged. "He likes it...and so do you. You like pattering around in the dirt and messin' with things that belong to," he shuddered. "Dead people."

"Well," Sam said, starting to lift a hand to his head, then recalling the gesture after a quick glance at Al. "That doesn't sound too bad."

Missing nothing, the hologram shot him a sharp, sidelong the glance, but did not comment. "Anyway, Ziggy's still running the program, referencing you against all the people listed as taking part in the dig. So far," he gestured expressively. "They're all boring, mundane people with boring mundane lives that don't need fixing."

Sam sighed, "In other words, normal, well-adjusted people with an interest in academics."

"Well, yeah," Al admitted. "That's what I said."

"Maybe I'm here to help this Dr. Clark find something of significance. I mean..." he looked up at his companion. "If I've done this stuff before I ought to be good at it."

"No," Al shook his head regretfully. "Ziggy says Dr. Clark never found much that mattered, but was okay with him. He's got a good, solid practice in St. Louis, and he's happy." He gestured with the hand-link. "If you find something big, you might actually mess up his life."

Sighing in frustration, Sam got to his feet and paced back to the cot. Sitting down, he lowered his head into his hands and absently rubbed at its ache. "There has to be something."

"Yeah," Al agreed, watching him carefully. "Something. I'll go crack the whip over Ziggy and see what he'll come up with." When Sam did not reply, but continued slowly rubbing at the ache in his head and gazing at the tent floor, the observer leaned forward. "Okay?" he asked forcefully to catch his attention.

Jumping slightly as if he had forgotten the hologram's presence, Sam looked up. "Oh, okay. Let me know when you've got something."

"Alright," Al nodded. "I'll be back. You hang in there, into kid." With that, he was gone, leaving Sam to stare absently into the empty space he left behind.

Stirring at last, Sam realized that he was hungry and went in search of food. By following the scent of baking bread, he found it easily. The food service was the only wooden structure in the cluster of tents gathered a few meters away from the edge of the bluff. Rough and inelegant, it was none the less clean and sturdy.

The young woman who had introduced herself as Scotty was seated under a large canvas open sided tent that sheltered long tables. She had a book propped before her that seemed to claim the majority of her attention, though her hands worked steadily at peeling a pile of potatoes beside her.

Smiling, Sam was reminded of his own methods of stealing reading time during chores. Catching his approach in the corner of her eye, she lifted her head and he judged it safe to speak without startling her into an accident. "Looks like a good way to lose a finger to me," he observed easily, coming to sit down across the table from her.

After a glance at his face reassured her that she was being teased, not scolded, she grinned. At the impishness in it, he was again sharply reminded of Katie. It was Katie, wasn't it, that she reminded him of so strongly? "Maybe," she conceded, "but I'll be careful not to bleed into the bowl and I want to finish this before tomorrow."

"Why tomorrow?"

"Because it belongs to Jason and I promised to have it back by then."

"Jason?"

"Jason Walker, the grad student that helped you up the cliff. He's using it for his thesis."

"Oh." Preferring not to dwell on his collapse, Sam asked. "What is it you're reading?"

Obliging, she nudged the book over to him with one elbow, still busily peeling potatoes. "The cliff dwellers of the Mesa Verde, southwestern Colorado," he read. "Their pottery and implements." Opening it, he paged through the text. "Heavy stuff."

"It's great," she said, slicing the potato neatly into quarters and picking up another. "It's a reprint of a old 1893 document that..." Abruptly she broke off her sentence and Sam turned to see a tall, thin woman striding through the tent toward them.

About to close the book and return it to Scotty, he caught something in her expression and placed it on the table before him instead. "Dr. Clark," the thin woman said with an air of authority, "Is there something you need?"

"Well, I," Sam answered, "I was hungry and I wondered..."

She gave him a sharp look, then nodded. "Normally I don't do this, we're not a short order kitchen. But since you rushed off without lunch and weren't feeling well, I guess you need something. I'll fetch you out a sandwich."

"Thank you," Sam said, gathering the book to him as if he'd brought it for lunch reading. "That'd be fine."

As if forgetting him, she swept a hand at Scotty. "That looks like plenty of potatoes," she said briskly but not unkindly. "Get those in to boil and start on the salad."

Nodding, the girl shot a conspirator's glance at Sam and rose to her feet, taking the huge bowl with her. "Thanks," she mouthed silently as her boss hurried past her as if to important tasks.

Giving her a grin and a wink, he took the book with him to a nearby table and, when his sandwich arrived, began to read and eat as if it had been his intention all along. Reading intensified the headache and after a few pages he left it open before him as a cover only.

Finding no opportunity to discreetly return it, he took it with him to his tent. After a short nap, he found his headache much improved and opened the volume again. He was just finishing it when the dinner bell rang and he put it down on his cot to return later when there was less chance of being seen.

Dinner went much smoother than Sam anticipated. Most of the dizziness and disorientation that he had felt earlier had faded, and he found that he enjoyed the meal with a mixture of academics, both students, professors and interested amateurs like himself. Since Dr. Clark had just arrived at the site that morning, he needed introductions to the other diners, and that eased Sam's way. Much of the meal was spent getting acquainted and in shop talk, which went well for him after the refresher course from the book that Scotty had inadvertently supplied him.

The sun was setting before Sam was able to leave the group unobtrusively. After a quick stop by his quarters to retrieve Scotty's book, another title that he had discovered under Dr. Clark's journal, and a jacket, for the air was cooling rapidly as the sun faded, he went in search of her. Coming about the corner of his tent, he saw her headed down the path that led to the digging site and followed her.

Pausing at the top of the path, he looked down its angled sharpness that curved about under the lip of the bluff to the protected cliff dwelling built by the ancient people of the mesa. Sighing, Sam hesitated and considered calling out to her to



return to the top. But he had no idea how far she had gotten and, after all, he would have to walk down the path the next day to get to the site. He wouldn't be able to avoid it for the rest of the leap, no matter how it made his stomach reel at the view of the canyon far below.

Tucking the books into his jacket to leave both hands free, he started cautiously down the path. Careful not to look down, he made his way without incident to the final turn that led onto the ancient pueblo floor. Drawing a deep breath of relief, he took several rapid steps onto the flat surface, heading in under the overhang of the bluff above in an instinctive attempt to put more space between him and the drop to the canyon floor to his right.

It was only then that he looked about him more fully. Much of the site was in deep shadow, the setting sun flooding the opposite canyon wall in golden-red light. All about him, the site was marked into meter-square areas to aid in the excavation and he walked carefully to avoid the neatly positioned ropes.

It took his eyes a few seconds to adjust to the lower light before he could find Scotty. She sat on an outcropping of natural rock beneath the curve of the far left wall of stone that enclosed the site in its massive arms. Her knees were drawn up to her chest, her arms tight about them while she gazed before her at the far canyon wall as if she listened or saw something of which he was not aware.

Making no effort to be silent, he approached her, calling out when he was still a few yards away, "What is it you...?" At her startled flinch and gasp, he broke off the sentence to say hastily, "Hey, it's only me." Just barely, he remembered to say, "Ernest."

"You scared the daylights out of me," she said with a quick, indrawn breath and an embarrassed grin.

"Sorry," he apologized, "I thought you'd hear me coming." He gestured at the large expanse of rock next to her, "Mind if I...?"

"No, sit down," she invited him with a gesture of her hand. She shook her head jokingly, "I thought you were an Anasazi ghost there for a minute."

Pulling the books from inside his jacket, Sam laughed, "I don't look like an Anasazi, do I?"

"No," she tilted her head to regard him in the dim light. "But then, you don't look like an Ernest, either."

"I--don't?" he asked, surprised and a bit taken aback.

Embarrassed, she looked away, "I shouldn't have said that."

"No, that's okay," he returned sincerely, curious about the unguarded comment. "If I don't look like an Ernest, who do I look like?"

Her glance was quick and appraising as she judged his sincerity. "Go on," he urged, truly curious as to what she would say.

"Seriously?" she asked, flipping her braid over her shoulder and out of her way.

"Seriously," he answered, meeting her gaze in good humor.

"Okay," she said, her eyes traveling over his face, then lingering to meet his gaze with a surprising intensity that made Sam uncomfortable. "Sam," she said firmly with conviction. "You look like a Sam to me."

Startled, he jumped, fumbling to catch the books that threatened to slide off his knees. "But, that's my name.. Hastily he amended his words, "My middle name." Briefly he ducked his head to hide his eyes before meeting hers again. "A lot of people call...used to call...me that."

"Oh," she said, her eyes going to the books in his hands as if she also were uncomfortable with her success.

"You can...call me Sam if you want," he offered, thinking how good and yet how strangely uncomfortable it would be to have her call him by his own name.

"Okay," she answered lightly, her earlier openness diminished as if she had suddenly withdrawn from him a bit.

Holding the books out to her, he said. "I brought you this back. And I found, I mean, I had this one with me, and I thought you'd like to see it."

"Thanks," she said in genuine pleasure, thumbing through it. "It's great." She looked up to meet his eyes and the guardedness in them had lessened. "Thanks for helping me out with Miss Calder, too."

"No problem," he shrugged, grinning. "I've been there myself." He watched her looking through the pages with real interest. "You're interested in archeology?" he asked. "Or specifically the Anasazi?"



"Oh," she shrugged. "Both. This job meant free room and board for the summer and I kind of got interested in what was going on. I work at the dig half of the time, cook the other half."

Sam nodded, wondering why a girl who looked no older than seventeen was worried about finding room and board for a few months. But she continued, "I'm interested in lots of things."

"Like what?"

"Like," she looked up at him with a grin. "Whatever I'm doing at the time, other than peeling potatoes that is."

Sharing her laughter, he let the conversation lapse into a companionable silence as they both watched the shadows shift on the far wall of the canyon. The world slid further into twilight as Sam found himself thinking of the past people that may have sat in the same spot centuries before. Had they watched the same shifting patterns and looked for meaning there?

"You know," Scotty said at last. "It's funny. This time of day, I can almost feel them."

"Who?"

"The people that used to live here," she answered, chin on her knees. "It's like," she shrugged as if looking for words to express something she'd thought of often. "Like we're all here at the same spot, just layered on top of each other--like the layers of this site accumulated over time. And," she shrugged again, still gazing before her. "We just can't see each other because the other layers keep us apart--like we're just at the wrong point to see each other, but we're all still here all the same."

Sam smiled, "Time as the fourth dimension."

"What?"

"Time," he repeated, "As the fourth dimension. It's a...hobby...of mine."

"Really?" She turned to him. "Tell me about it."

"Well," Sam drew a deep breath, half expecting Al to appear at his shoulder and take him to task for divulging information. "It's just..." At the bright, interested eyes focused on his, he temporized the explanation he had been about to give. Maybe Al was right, maybe he shouldn't be sharing his theory so freely with those he met.

"This place has physical dimensions and time is an extension of that. Like sort of a river that flows to keep past and present and future from touching. So we and the Anasazi are at the same place, different time, and as the saying goes, never the two shall meet."

"Never?" He could see the interest sparked in her eyes and suddenly regretted bringing up the subject. Given his present difficulty and the memory of his earlier blinding headache, time travel wasn't something he wanted to consider at the moment.

"What if they could meet?" Her gaze flickered over the shadowed site with its ancient, deserted homes. "What if we could swim upstream in that river of time and see them?"

"Well, I...," Sam began, wondering how he could guide the conversation to another topic.

"Don't you wonder?" she asked. "Don't you wonder what it'd be like to be able to sit here and see them? What it'd be like to watch them cooking supper, and making pottery, and meeting others at the kiva for ceremonies?"

"Well, sure," he agreed, uncomfortably recalling his own arguments for time travel.

"Don't you wonder about them as individuals?" she asked, turning to him, "When you find things, I mean. Jason found a nearly perfect cup today. Don't you wonder who made it?"

She warmed to her speculation. "Don't you wonder what sort of day they had when they made it? Were they in a good mood, or mad because they wanted to do something else?"

Sam nodded. "I do wonder."

"Maybe," she said. "Maybe they wanted to paint it white on black instead of black on white like everyone else does, and there was a fight about it, and they lost."

"Maybe," Sam agreed.

"But," she hesitated, regarding him thoughtfully as she considered it further. "We couldn't watch if they could see us because that would change everything."

"Yes," Sam nodded, looking down to trace an idle pattern in the dirt. "It would. And that could be dangerous. You'd never know how important the thing was that you changed."

"Yeah," she agreed thoughtfully. "Then maybe all the pottery we'd be finding would be painted white on black instead

of the other way. Though I can't see that it would make much difference."

"You wouldn't know," Sam said, smoothing out the pattern to leave the dirt unchanged. "Until you got back to your own time. And then maybe you would have inadvertently changed something important in your own future."

"But," she added in sudden inspiration. "Maybe that was the way it was supposed to be in the first place and you're being there in the past was supposed to be."

"You wonder about a lot of things," Sam said quietly, reluctant to continue the conversation which had such personal meaning for him.

With a small laugh, she shook her head. "I guess so," she admitted, getting to her feet. "That's why I come here sometimes, to have the space to wonder."

Sam stood up to face her. "I'm sorry if I intruded. I..."

"Oh, no," she looked up at him, cradling the books in her arms as if they were precious things. "You didn't. I didn't mean to make you feel you had. I enjoyed our conversation. It's just..." she swept a hand out at the deepening twilight. "I didn't bring a flashlight and I don't want to try that path in the dark."

"Right," Sam said in heartfelt agreement. "It's bad enough in the daylight."

Smiling, she led him expertly through the ropes to the path. Concentrating on the climb, he did not speak, struggling not to think of the drop behind him. Reaching the top, she put out a hand to help him up the last step to level ground. A bit too gratefully he accepted it and took two hurried steps beyond her onto safer ground.

It was lighter there and he could see her smile, but her only comment was, "Good luck at the dig tomorrow." Turning, she started down the diagonal path to the right that would take her to the women's tents. "Thanks for the loan of the book."

"You're welcome," he returned with a wave, watching her go. Suddenly he had an impulse to call her back, to tell her he did want to share in her wonder, to talk about the possibilities of time travel and the mystery that had been the Anasazi. He had known too often how it was to want to discuss theory and ideas just for the sake of the discussion and find no one willing to share in the magic.

Still, something held him back, and he let her go. Shivering a bit in a rising wind, he took the path on the left that lead to his own tent. Head down, hands shoved deep in his pockets, he walked right through Al before realizing he was there.

"Hey," the hologram protested.

"Al!" Sam exclaimed, turning back to him.

"Hi, kiddo. How's it going?"

"Okay," Sam answered with a nod, truly pleased to see his friend. "I..." Suddenly he realized he was in full view of any in the camp that happened to look out at the exposed pathway.

"Let's..." He gestured guardedly toward his quarters.

"Okay," the hologram said amiably. Hitting a button on his hand link, he disappeared without further discussion.

Shaking his head, Sam followed. When he entered his tent, Al turned. "So," he asked. "How was the first day at Camp Dry Bones?"

"Al," Sam answered a bit chidingly, but there was good humor in it as he took off his jacket. "It's going pretty well," he continued, hanging up the coat and going over to the desk to turn on the lamp. "Dr. Clark just got here so he doesn't know anybody either, and its a good cover."

"Good," Al nodded, narrowing his eyes against his cigar's smoke. "You look pretty chipper. Better than this afternoon," He shrugged with a teasing grin. "Guess you were just cranky because you needed that second nap."

"Yes," Sam said sheepishly, adjusting the lamp's wick. "That..." Realizing the implications of what the hologram had said, he glanced up quickly. "How'd you know I took another nap?"

"Improved technology." Al shook the hand link at him with a nod. "That's how we found you so fast this leap too. I got here barely two seconds after you did...just in time to see you bite the dust."

"What sort of improved technology?" he asked a bit suspiciously, circling the desk to face the hologram.

"If you don't remember," Al began, lifting a finger in a mock lecture.

"How can I remember what I don't know?" Sam protested.  
"Tell me what's going on."

The hologram hesitated, finger still up lifted. "You've got a good point there," he conceded, withdrawing the lecturers stance. "Darcie's been working on getting more data, and analyzing it quicker."

"Darcie," Sam repeated. He struggled to place a face with the name.

Al appeared to ignore him, "Smart kid, Darcie. Not near as smart as you, but smart. Just don't tell her I said so."

"Al...."

"And that's all I can tell you," he cut across Sam's question.

"But..." At his friend's expression, Sam sighed and nodded in resignation. "Okay, so what's Ziggy say that I'm here to do?"

"He doesn't know."

"What? Why not? It's been hours since you left. What about all that 'improved technology?'"

"Different branches of the project," Al returned imperturbably. "Anyway, Ziggy has a theory, but it sounds a little," he gave a fluttering gesture with his hand. "Farfetched to me."

"Farfetched? What is it?"

"Well," Al manipulated the link. "Ziggy says there's 75% chance that this leap is sort of a...vacation...for you." Watching for Sam's reaction, he was not disappointed.

"A vacation!?"

"Yeah, well, Ziggy says you're pretty well matched to the people here. You like this dead folks stuff and you already aren't expected to know many people so that takes a lot of the stress off right there."

"Oh, come on Al," Sam protested. "What's the matter with Ziggy? He got cigar ash in his control board? He was the one that came up with this set-things-right theory in the first place. Now he can't find anything that looks like it needs fixing and he changes the rules?"

"Ziggy just calls 'em like he sees 'em," Al returned,

studying Sam. "Maybe He," he pointed upward, "is changing the rules and decided to give you a break. You could use some R and R."

"R and R?" Sam repeated incredulously.

"Yeah," Al shrugged. "Find you a honey and get down to some..." At Sam's expression, he sighed, shaking his head sadly. "You're hopeless." Shrugging in resignation, he gave up, "Dig around in the dirt and make weighty archeological pronouncements then. Whatever's fun."

"I don't need a vacation, Al. I need to leap home."

"Yeah," Al conceded quietly. "That too."

Sam regarded him warily. "What's this new technology tell you? What's happening to me?"

Regarding him, the hologram drew deeply on his cigar. "Ziggy says maybe this leap will give us the time we need to make it the last and bring you home."

"It's the neural field suppression, isn't it?" Sam demanded. "That's why the headache, the disorientation, the faint...all of it."

"Yeah," Al said quietly. "Darcie says its going to get worse each leap, and we need to bring you in."  
"Who the hell is this Darcie?" Sam exploded, his voice rising.

"She's an M.D.," Al answered evenly. "Specialties in neurology and bio-technology."

Frustrated, and more than a little frightened, Sam demanded, "Does she know what she's talking about?"

"She's good," Al answered mildly with a matter of factness that soothed his companion in a way that anger would not. "You convinced me it was okay to let her go wiring things into your head and that wasn't an easy sale, pal."

Turning away, Sam drew a deep, calming breath though Al noticed that the tension in his shoulders did not lessen. "I'm not..." He paused a moment before continuing in a calmer tone. "I'm not saying I buy this vacation theory of Ziggy's," he said at last. "But if it were true," he turned to face Al. "When will I leap?"

Al cleared his throat. "I don't know. It's got a few bugs

if you ask me. But maybe," he grinned. "We'll figure out the secret and snap you home so fast it'll make your head spin."

Sam nodded, his smile a bit shadowed. "Bad choice of words, Al. But a good thought."

Giving a nod in acknowledgement, the hologram shrugged. "So, what've you got planned for this evening?"

"I don't know," Sam answered, giving him a surprised look. "Why?"

Al grinned, "I thought I might mosey on over to the women's showers. Want to come with me?"

Laughing, Sam shook his head, "No, thank you. Even if I were a hologram, no thank you." Crossing his arms, he sat down on the edge of the desk. "Does Tina know just what it is you do when you work?"

"Tina," Al returned sorrowfully, "is visiting her sister until next week. That's why I thought I'd just swing by..." At the amusement in Sam's eyes, Al squared his shoulders in offended dignity. "Just because you subvert all your sexual energy into your work does not mean that..." Interrupting himself, he regarded his friend speculatively.

"What?" Sam asked, mystified.

"Well," Al amended his earlier statement. "Maybe not all."

"What are you talking about?" Sam asked a bit uncomfortably.

As if warming to the subject, Al pointed his cigar at his friend. "I remember how you used to look at Darcie when she first came onto the project." He shrugged a bit diffidently. "You were just...trickier...about it than I was so you didn't get your face slapped. But you were," he stabbed the cigar again in emphasis, "You were looking!"

"Darcie slapped your face?" Sam asked in interest. "Why?"

"Well," Al shrugged again, "I guess it was more about that remark I made about her biking leathers than..."

"Biking leathers?" Sam repeated incredulously. "The woman that is responsible for my health wears biking leathers?"

"Yeah," Al confirmed it with a wave. "When she rides at night. She has this huge Harley. You should see it, Sam. It's...." He shook his head, interrupting himself. "You should see her. The first time I saw her she was at the front gate, on

that bike, wearing all that black leather. She took off her helmet," Al sighed at the memory, "And all that auburn hair spilled out from under it, sort of glistening in the sun."

"Unh, huh," Sam said, afraid of interrupting the recitation as it was more information than Al had ever volunteered on anyone from the project.

"She said she was looking for you, and her name wasn't on the admittance list, so Daniels was giving her some trouble and.."

"And you said you'd help her out," Sam said, certain he knew Al well enough to be correct.

"Sure, I thought you'd finally come to your senses about a little fun and..."

"And if I hadn't, you were going to pick up the slack," Sam couldn't conceal his grin.

Al shrugged elaborately, "What are friends for? And you!" Al crowed, slapping his knee. "Ha! You should have seen your face when you saw her!"

"What?" Sam asked, mystified. "I didn't know she was a woman?"

"Of course you knew she was a woman. You knew exactly who you wanted and had talked to her on the phone. But you didn't know what she'd look like anymore than I did."

"What did she...does she look like?" Sam ventured, almost afraid to ask the question and alert Al that he was divulging information.

"Oh, Sam, she has this killer grin and the sweetest little..." Mid-gesture, Al realized what he was doing, "Tricky, Sam, very tricky." At the innocent look he received, he shook his head. "But you did spend time checking her out until.."

"Until?"

"Until," Al finished unwillingly. "You got to know her and then you got all involved with the implant design and sort of forgot about it."

"The implant?" Sam asked as casually as he could.

"Oh no," Al countered. "You're not getting any more out of me. The point is," he hesitated as if he had lost track himself of the original point. "The point is," he said again, a bit



triumphantly, "That you are not a saint, either--whether or not you remember it!"

Sam laughed. "I never called myself a saint...and the word you usually use is prude."

"Yeah, well, sometimes you are." Al shifted uncomfortably. "Don't change the subject."

"I..."

Al glanced up as if someone called his name. "Gotta go, Sam. I'll let you know if I come up with anything."

"Okay," Sam agreed and remained sitting on the desk as the hologram returned to the world that Sam could barely remember. For a time he sat quietly, trying to recall the unlikely memories of a auburn-haired M.D. with a shapely body who wore biking leather and slapped Al's face for getting fresh. The pondering did not stir old memories, though it did bring a smile to his lips and the tent seemed less lonely when he finally got up to go to bed. It did not occur to him that may have been Al's intention all along.

\* \* \*

Just outside the imaging chamber, Al drew a deep breath. Sam looked better, a lot better. Now it was time to go to the waiting room and talk to Dr. Clark, whom, he had been told, was growing restless. Sometimes it was an unpleasant duty, dealing with divergent personalities housed in what appeared to be his best friend's body. Maybe this Dr. Clark would be a reasonable fellow and this time it would not be too difficult. Then he could get on with bullying Ziggy into finding just what it was Sam needed to know this leap. He refused to believe that there wasn't something, something vital that they were missing.

It was hours later when Al decided that he was tired enough to go home. He rather avoided it at times like this, when things weren't going all that well with the project and there was no one there to distract him.

Of course, he could stop by any number of places and pick up some company; Tina wasn't going to back for an awfully long time. But, somehow, that didn't appeal to him and, uncomfortably, he wondered if that meant he was getting old. Winking at Lois from tech services, and getting a welcoming smile, he rejected that thought and continued on his way down the corridor with a renewed spring in his step.

Sauntering down the corridor, which was dimly lit at this hour, he passed by the door neatly labeled "Dr. D. F. Scott." It

was ajar, with only dim light spilling from it. Pausing, he glanced in and caught sight of Darcie leaning over her computer as if to physically pull the answer she wanted from it.

Al smiled a bit, watching, patting his pockets in search of a cigar. Unaware she was observed, Darcie frowned at the computer as it obviously yielded something she did not want to see. With a disgusted sound, she wiped the screen with a quick key strike and began again. In the dim light her face was shadowed with weariness and she moved her shoulders in a shrug as if they ached. Still, there was no hesitation in her attack on the keyboard.

She was like a terrier, he thought in fond amusement. Though he knew she would consider it an insult, he meant it as a compliment. Persistent and inexhaustible, she tugged and wrestled with the problem of leaping Sam home as if by sheer persistence and intelligent reasoning it would fall apart like an old slipper under a pup's sharp teeth.

In some ways she reminded him of Sam, he thought with an odd pang. A bit guiltily, he recalled how she used to irritate him when she'd first arrived. She and Sam held intense, earnest conversations about the creation and design of the tracking implant that inadvertently excluded anyone incapable of leaping three steps of logic at a time to obscure conclusions.

It had really gotten under his skin, the way she had moved so quickly and fully into even a portion of the grand scheme of the project he and Sam had created. Maybe, he reflected, watching her fingers fly over the keyboard, all the shapely curves of her body attuned to what she was doing, that was why he went after her so hard. He'd pushed even when--or maybe because--he knew it irritated her that he was so conscious of her beauty. But, she always gave as good as she got, and he realized he missed their old altercations. They hadn't had a really good fight since Sam had leaped.

Giving up the futile search for a cigar, he watched in appreciation as she clasped her hands behind her neck and stretched with a weary sigh. Giving a knock on the door, he sauntered in. "I could help with that," he offered with a grin that made his meaning unmistakable.

"No, thanks," she returned dryly, dismissing the offer with an easy practice.

"Okay," he shrugged, sitting down in the chair next to her desk. "But these fingers are trained to draw the tension from the tightest muscles."

Ignoring the comment, she said, "What are you still doing

here? It has to be near midnight."

Al checked his watch, "23:55 to be precise. Your coach will turn into a pumpkin any minute now. Hadn't you better hit the road?"

Leaning back in her chair, it was as if she hadn't heard him. "Did you talk to Clark?"

"Yeah," Al gave up his attempt at provocation. She hadn't even risen to the princess jibe. She was preoccupied. "I soothed him down. He's probably asleep by now."

She nodded, eyes straying back to the video terminal. "Excitable little guy, isn't he?"

Al nodded with a grin, despite the fact that it appeared to be Sam's body nattering about terrorist kidnapping, Clark gave the impression of a much smaller man. He knew it was one of the reason's Darcie avoided the waiting room whenever possible, keeping her contact to a bare minimum. The fact that Sam had made that one of the cardinal rules, that contact be strictly limited with the 'visitors' was merely convenient that it gave her a reason to keep her distance.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

At the honest question, she indicated the screen with one hand. "Running some theories of mine about modulating the frequency of the implant to let us increase the power draw to bring Sam home."

Al shook his head, "No matter how you modulate it, you can't feed that kind of power through it. It'll blow."

"I know," she sighed. "I just thought I'd run it anyway. You never know."

Regarding her thoughtfully, Al was about to reply when she asked, "What do you think about this vacation theory of Ziggy's?"

Al took a breath to answer and she qualified, "Seriously." Wishing he had a cigar, the slender man shook his head. "I think it's the only shot we've got right now. Sort of like you sitting here in the middle of the night running things you know won't work just because it's all you've got to go on."

Propping her elbows on the table, she rubbed at her neck. "There has got to be something obvious that I'm missing here. Sam wouldn't have leaped without being sure he could come back."

"Sam was under a lot of pressure," Al pointed out.

Shaking her head, her eyes strayed again to the screen before her as if expecting the data to have somehow changed. "Well, there has to be something."

Barely into her mid-thirties, she looked impossibly young to Al, and deceptively vulnerable. He'd felt her sharp wit enough times to know how perfectly capable she was of taking care of herself. Still, swayed by his thoughts at the door, he got to his feet.

"Stop beating yourself up about this. Go home, go to bed and tomorrow we'll think of something else."

She looked up at him, a spark of anger in her green eyes. "Al," she began angrily. "I'm not a child. I don't need unsolicited advice."

"Ah," he cautioned, lifting one hand. "It's the same speech you used to give Sam. I'm not being sexist, or paternalistic, or anything thing else here but realistic. How can you think if your brain is fuzzed from lack of sleep?"

Surprised into silence, she met his eyes. "Okay," she agreed reluctantly, shutting off the computer. "I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right," he returned, "I'm always...."

"I did tell Sam that," she continued. "I give good advice, and have enough sense to follow it. Are you going home too?"

Watching her walk to the coat rack, Al nodded. "Yep. Want a ride into town?"

"I've got my bike," she answered, shrugging on her jacket under Al's attentive gaze.

"Riding that bike around the desert this time of night is an express ticket to trouble city," he answered, speculatively eyeing the leather pants she took from the rack.

"So is getting into a car with you," she returned. "All the snakes in the desert aren't lying on the roads to get warm, some are driving around in prototype cars pretending to be good Samaritans."

Al drew a breath to answer, then thought better of it. He nodded at the leather in her hand. "Well, you'd better put those on, hadn't you? Protect yourself against the cold and all that stuff."

She grinned and he was reminded of the first time he had seen her, when she had given him enough rope to let him hang himself. "Goodnight, Al."

"But..."

"Goodnight, Al," she repeated, pushing him toward the door.

Giving in, he let her push him into the hall. Turning to have the last word, he found the door shut in his face and heard a soft sound as she leaned against it to lift one foot into the pants. Sighing at the thought, and reasoning that he couldn't let his reputation be completely shot, he patted the door where he imagined her bottom to be and turned away. Jauntily he continued on his way down the corridor. Tomorrow, as he had just reminded her, was another day.

\* \* \*

Al was right about me enjoying the dig. It's funny, with my memory gaps, I wouldn't have picked this as a fun way to spend some time. But it came back quickly and I found I could fit right in with the people around me.

But I didn't buy the vacation theory, and those same memory gaps were bothering me. When I was talking to Al, I'd remembered the term "neural field suppression" and that it fit what was happening to me. But, try as I might, I couldn't remember any more of it than that. Exactly what it was, and what should be done to fix it, if anything could, totally escaped me. I could only hope this Darcie, who I still didn't remember, but Al seemed to have faith in, was doing better than I was.

It would drive me crazy, knowing my fate was pretty much in someone else's hands, so I had to let it go. I concentrated instead on finding out why I was there, and didn't make much progress in that direction either. There didn't seem to be any dark secrets in the camp, no deep-seated difficulties, no turning-point to anyone's life.

So, after the first two days, I started to relax and enjoy digging in the dirt. Al would come around every so often, with nothing to report other than Ziggy was sticking to his theory. Try as I might, I couldn't get anything else out of him about what was happening to me or what was going on at the project, so I just settled in for the ride. If there was something to be done, I'd find it, and Ziggy was right about one thing.

I did need a vacation, so I might as well enjoy it.

\* \* \*

After a week of eating and sleeping well, following a ordered regime of academic pursuits and physical labor, Sam felt himself much rested. He was also getting bored. Opening Dr. Clark's field journal, he tapped a pen on the scratched desk top and debated about making some notes to fill the evening hours.

"How ya doin', Sam?"

"Al!" Sam jumped, and the hologram mirrored the movement.

"Sssh," he protested, lifting a hand to his temple.

Sam grinned, turning in his chair. "I guess Tina's back."

"No," Al said sourly. "She's not. Not for another three days. I sat in on a poker game last night to...keep myself occupied." Narrowing his eyes against the pain, he rubbed both temples, "And drank." He winched, "Too much."

"Well, you...."

"Mercy, Sam," the hologram pleaded. "No lectures. I lost over two hundred dollars and had to take a taxi home. And," his voice lifted in anguish, "Some jerk smeared shaving cream all over my car in the parking lot of the Victory Bar."

Sam struggled to hide a smile. "Well, I guess that's punishment enough."

Al merely grunted, punching at his hand link. "And what have you been doing for fun?"

Pushing away the journal, Sam got to his feet. "I've been all over this camp and haven't found anything."

"Guess this archeology stuff takes time."

"No, I mean that I haven't found anything that looks like a reason why I'm here. Has Ziggy?"

"No." Al consulted the link again. "Nothing. He still says...."

"Vacation, yeah, I know. But I can't just stay here forever." At Al's uplifted hand in a plea for quiet, Sam lowered his voice. "There's got to be..."

"Something, yeah, I know," Al finished. "I'm sorry, Sam. I

just don't have any ideas for you. There's a new crop of students coming in next week, maybe..."

"Next week!" Sam yelped, then hastily lowered his voice at Al's look of pain. "I can't stay here until next week!"

"Looks to me like you got no choice, pal," the hologram observed. "And it's not a bad setup here. You hang in there. I'll be back tomorrow."

"But," Sam began to protest as Al hit the buttons on the link and was gone. "You could stay and talk," he finished quietly.

\* \* \*

In a foul mood, Al left the imaging chamber and headed for his office. The margarita he had for lunch in an attempt to ease his hangover had only intensified the headache. Now that it was late afternoon, he felt like there was a lead weight banging from side to side in his skull as he made his way down the corridor to his office, intending to grab some aspirin and head for home.

Passing by the main control room, he noticed the pneumatic doors were wedged open and a maintenance tech knelt before them. Another time he would have stopped to find out what was going on, but just then he did not have the desire or stamina to question such a mundane procedure as door repair.

Escaping to his office, he swallowed the aspirin without water. Catching up his flight jacket against the desert's evening chill, he headed for the door. He'd done all he could for the day and if he was going to catch a ride into town with one of the support staff, he'd have to hurry. Having to bum rides with his car at the carwash was the final indignity and he grumbled to himself as he left the room. All he wanted was a steak dinner, bed, and Tina.

Tina, of course, was not available, and dinner ended up a disappointing meal of a frozen entree he kept for emergencies such as this. That left bed, and even crawling into it dressed in his favorite burgundy paisley pajamas didn't put an end to his misery. The headache persisted, throbbing relentlessly behind his eyes, making sleep difficult to capture. When it came, it was fitful until sometime near dawn when he fell into a truly deep sleep and dreamed of Tina...

The smooth warmth of her was wonderful against his bare chest as he surfaced partially from sleep. Smiling drowsily, he rolled more fully on his side, gathering her to him with his right arm.

Sighing something he didn't understand, she snuggled closer, the curves of her body nestled cozily against his own. Eyes still closed, he nuzzled the back of her neck, breathing in the musky scent of her perfume.

With a small sound of pleasure, she stretched lazily and did not move away. Pulling her closer still, he murmured, "Good morning, beautiful."

The faint, high-pitched tone of the alarm clock sounded from somewhere behind him, dampening the mood and Al frowned. Irritated, he reached behind him for his pillow and swung it at the pesky clock. It tumbled to the floor with a satisfying clatter and an odd chime, but still the strident, high tone persisted. Beep, beep, beep...

Al frowned. That wasn't his clock. It was...the handlink! Jarred awake, he sat upright in the bed, nearly blinded by bright sunlight streaming into the room. Hastily he flung up a hand before his eyes with a protesting yip of pain. He'd forgotten to draw the shades again. Usually Tina...

Looking down for her, he found only his spare pillow clutched in his arms. There was no welcoming body next to him anywhere in the bed when he flung the blankets back in surprised disbelief. And still the hand link beeped on, loud in the quiet room.

"Shoot!" Al exploded, flinging the disappointing pillow from him. It was only a dream, and one he wasn't going to get to finish at that.

Kicking free of the blankets, he got out of bed and reached for the hand link, which was patiently continuing its beep though face down on the floor. Sweeping it up with one hand, he checked the display which read, "Call control. Stat." Though the words were simple print, he mentally gave them Darcie's intonation as he read them.

Groaning, he bent down to pick up the phone which rested on its side next to the link. That explained the odd bell-like chime he had heard. He had gotten both the phone and the link at one fell swoop.

Absently he muted the link and tapped in control's number on the phone. Somehow, given the start on his morning, he expected it to be dead as he lifted it to his ear. He was not disappointed.

With an inarticulate sound of frustration, he dumped it onto the night table and moved to use the phone in the kitchen. Despite his pique, there was a strong undercurrent of



apprehension chasing through him as he placed the call. What if Sam had leaped?

Darcie answered the line herself and he snapped, "What's going on?"

"I think I've got a lead, Al." she answered in a rush. "A real one."

"Is Sam okay?" he demanded impatiently, cutting her off.

"Yes," there was a surprised hesitation in her voice. "He's fine."

"He hasn't leaped?"

"No. And he's tracking fine. He.."

"Then why," scowling as if she could see him, Al sank into a kitchen chair. "Did you wake me up at the crack of dawn?"

"It's 7:30," she pointed out, undaunted. "Dawn was over an hour ago. But," she raised her voice to forestall his coming retort. "Listen to me."

"Okay," Al sighed, propping his head on one hand and resigning himself to the fact that he was awake. "Go ahead."

"I found a note...a note in Sam's handwriting. The maintenance guys pitched it yesterday. It was just luck.."

"Darcie," he growled warningly.

"Okay, okay. Anyway, it was stuck inside the control doors, and just worked out far enough to cause a problem."

"So?" Al regarded the empty coffee maker across the room as if by sheer force of will he could conjure up a pot of caffeine. "It's probably been in there since they built main con."

"Maybe not." From the intensity in her tone, Al could picture her leaning forward in her chair, gesturing excitedly, her hair spilling about her shoulders like wildfire. The mental picture made him want to groan. He hadn't even gotten to finish the dream about Tina.

With an effort, he brought his attention back to her words. "This could be it--what Sam intended us to do to bring him home."

Attention snagged, he blinked. "What's it say?"

"I don't know," he could nearly see her frustrated shrug.

"It's nearly illegible--like all his stuff."

Barely, Al restrained a sigh and shook his head. "So why are you so excited?" His attention wandered back to the coffee maker. "It's probably just..."

"I told you, Gooshi said when he came in that night, Sam was just leaving main con, talking as he went. Gooshi didn't catch what he said, and things happened so fast after that he never got to ask him."

"Gooshi's always griping about that," Al observed sourly.

"The force of the accelerator plastered everything not nailed down against the far wall. What if these are instructions, and they got stuck in the doors until now?"

"Do they look like instructions?" Eyes narrowed in thought, he rubbed one hand along his jaw.

"Maybe. The last half looks like medical orders; meds, IVs, that sort of thing. The rest of it, I don't know. Some equations, maybe some sort of specs to build something."

"Specs?"

"Yes," he could practically hear the wheels turning in her head. "Maybe. For what I don't know."

Rubbing his hand over his eyes, he gave in. "Okay. Decipher it and we'll see. I'll be in later."

"Al," she protested. "I need your help. You know how his mind works better than anybody and a lot of this is going to be guess work. You should see this mess."

She paused, and he lifted an eyebrow, waiting for her to play her trump. He wasn't wrong. "Your name's on here."

"My name?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes. At least, I think it's your name. Could be part of a longer word."

"Okay," he repeated. "I'll be in. Later."

"Soon, Al," she persisted. "This is important. I can feel it. I..."

"Whoa, kiddo," he interrupted, amused despite himself. "Settle down. I'll be in," he raised his voice to override her protest. "I'll be in later, when I get a shower and get dressed."

Unless," he grinned. "You want me in your office, leaning over your shoulder in my jammies."

Her exasperated sigh was eloquent. "An hour--okay? I'll have the prelim stuff done by then." She hung up the phone before he could disagree.

Replacing the receiver on the phone he shook his head. Notes in the walls of main con. Why the hell not? They'd tried Gooshi's reverse polarity theory and blacked out a good quarter of New Mexico. Methodically he tended to the coffee maker and left it to its work. A note in the door with his name on it. Who knew? Humming, he headed to the shower.

\* \* \*

Drinking his second cup of coffee, Al rested one elbow on the table and stared at the back of the Cherries box. He never was a fan of cold cereal, even topped with honey as he'd tried it this morning. But he didn't want to take time to stop for a real breakfast at Rachel's Diner.

More than likely the note Darcie was so excited about was nothing, still it was a shot. He sighed, at least working the day through would bring him that much closer to the time Tina would be back. Then he could have some real female companionship and he'd get his winning personality back.

Thinking of Tina, he groaned, burying his head in his hands. This separation was getting to be down right painful. Maybe he should stop by the diner after all, see if Amy was working and...

At the sound of the front door opening, he reached for his coffee cup. It was Thursday, and that would be Mrs. Delmar, come to clean his apartment. That was another reason he wanted to be away early, Mrs. Delmar and her mega-pine clean.

Draining the last of his coffee, he was startled to hear a voice from behind him that was not the elderly Mrs. Delmar's. "Al." The voice was low, caressing, and...Tina's!

"Tina, honey!" He turned in his chair in delight.

She slid into his lap with a satisfied smile. "Miss me?" Her right hand stroked the back of his neck with a feather light touch that always stirred him.

"You know I did, baby." Gathering her into his arms, he pulled her close. "You know I did."

Smiling, she snuggled against him, nuzzling his right ear as her fingers still toyed with the nape of his neck. Shifting her

in his arms, he kissed her once, lightly. His kisses deepened, and she responded to him in kind until she playfully nipped his lower lip in a sign she wished to talk.

"It seems like you've been gone a month," Al murmured into her ear.

"Nine days," she answered, lightly tracing the curve of his right eyebrow with a manicured nail.

"Nine days," he repeated, breathing in her perfume. "You're back early."

"Anna and I had a fight."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

Laughing, she nipped teasingly at his ear. "No, you aren't."

"You're right," he grinned, kissing her again. "I'm pleased as hell about it."

"Well," she drew back a bit to study his face as if to check for the traces of misdeeds and he gave her his most wide-eyed innocent look. "In spite of that glint in your eye, I'd say you've been behaving yourself."

"That glint," he told her, settling her more firmly on his lap. "Is for you. It wasn't there two minutes ago."

Laughing softly, she ran a light finger along his lower lip. "What are you doing up and dressed at this hour?" she asked, loosening his tie with nimble, experienced fingers.

"Umm," Al sighed, running his hands slowly up her back, lost in savoring the feel of her.

"Well?" she asked, pausing in act of unbuttoning his shirt.

"I was going to meet Darcie early at the project," he answered slowly, mesmerized by the rise and fall of rose colored silk peeking out from the neck of her scoop necked blouse.

"Darcie," there was a slight pout in her silken voice and she lifted her hands to his shoulders.

"Aah," warned by her tone, he changed his mind about reaching for the silk and kissed the hollow of her throat instead. "She's still as cantankerous ever." Nuzzling the spot where her pulse beat so strongly beneath her jaw, he increased the passion of his kisses slowly, but she pulled away.

"So fire her," she said in a soft, silken tone. Her eyes very blue in her tanned face.

"Sam hired her," he said, lifting his hands up to brush her hair back from her shoulders. "He'd have to be the one to fire her." Al's eyes shadowed, "and he can't do that right now."

At the change in his expression, Tina relented, not truly serious, merely wanting the reassurance. Shifting on his lap, she drew the crystal bowl containing the honey to her. "I thought you'd still be in bed," she said, dipping one finger delicately into the sweet stickiness. "And here," she gracefully slipped the finger into her mouth, savoring the taste of the honey. "You're all dressed already."

Al made a soft sound like a moan. "And you've already had breakfast," she said as she withdrew the finger to run it along his lower lip. Her pouting face was an invitation.

He reached for her but she turned, dipping her finger into the honey again. "Isn't today Mrs. Delmar's day to clean?"

"Yes," Al's voice was clearly a groan of dismay and she laughed.

"I met her in the hall," she said, turning back to him. "I slowly, she slipped the honey-covered finger into his mouth. "I told her to come back tomorrow."

Reclaiming her finger, she delicately licked the last trace of honey from it with tiny, kitten-like movements that Al followed with rapt attention. "But then," she said, "I thought you'd still be in bed. And..." A faint dimple appeared in her cheek. "You have that meeting with Darcie."

"Darcie," he said, "Will wait."

"She'll be mad." Tina whispered, slipping her arms about his neck.

"Fine," Al breathed. "If she gets uppity, I'll fire her."

Laughing, she got to her feet and glided to the kitchen doorway, an act which Al watched with obvious pleasure. Only when she was gone from his sight did he take a breath as if gathering his senses and get from his chair. Shaking his head as if to clear it, he reached down for the phone to call the project and tell them he would be late. Tina's voice came from the bedroom behind him. "Al?"

"Yeah?" he answered, hand moving toward the receiver.

"Bring the honey."

As if it had been his intention all along, he unhooked the phone jack and scooped up the honey bowl in the same movement. Grinning, he left the disconnected phone without a second glance. There was time, plenty of time, to call later.

\* \* \*

Early morning sun in his eyes, Sam made his way beneath the overhang that loomed over the site. The restlessness of the past week had escalated, making it hard to sleep and he had risen early and gone in search of something to occupy him.

Scotty was already at work, intent on her search in her area. Clearing his throat to warn her that he was there, he approached. "Hi." Smiling, she glanced up and returned the greeting with a nod. "Don't you ever get tired?" he asked. "At the site all morning, kitchen in the afternoon."

Straightening, she brushed at her hair, which had escaped its braid about her face. "I get tired in the kitchen," she answered. "But not out here. What I do in the kitchen pays my way to be out in this." She swept a hand at the shimmering glory of the high, sweeping landscape about them.

Sam nodded, "Work study, I know. I just meant, what do you do for fun?"

"This," she motioned at the earth before her.

"But," Sam hesitated, remembering their earlier conversation about her varied interests. "Is your major archeology?"

"No," she knelt back to gently sweep away some loose dirt that revealed nothing but more of the same beneath it. "I'm still undeclared."

"Undeclared," Sam repeated. "You have to be a junior to be in this program and you have to declare a major by then." Hesitating, she got to her feet slowly, almost cautiously. Clad in a white t-shirt and cut-off jeans, she was shapely, yet somehow unfinished like a thoroughbred not fully matured into its grace to come with years. "How old are you?" he asked as softly as he could, not to threaten her more.

Drawing a deep breath, she met his eyes. "Look," Sam noticed the way her hands moved restlessly as she spoke. "You won't tell on me, will you?"

"Tell on you?"

Against the ancient, empty ruin stretching behind her, she looked small, but determined. "I'm not a junior. I'll just be a freshman this fall," she tucked her hands into the pockets of her shorts. "I work at the university hospital as a phlebotomy tech, so I did a little hacking on the computer system there and..."

"And made yourself eligible for this position."

"Right," she nodded. "I'll take it all out when I get back, before they run the fall semester stuff. I've got the timing worked out." Her eyes, deep green with worry held his. "I don't need the credits here, I'll wipe them too. I just needed the place...the job."

Sam nodded, "Okay. Your secret's safe with me. But why did you need this job if you worked at the university already?"

She shrugged. "The...place where I stay is too hot during the summer. This gets me out of the city, and I like it."

"You've done this before?"

Pulling her hands from her pockets, she rubbed them along her shorts as if to clean them. "You ask a lot of questions." The tone was light, but her eyes were wary, warning him that he had pushed enough.

"Yeah," he agreed. "I guess I do. Part of being a doctor, I guess."

She nodded, then hesitated. The approach of another group of students was audible behind Sam. "You won't.."

"No," he shook his head in understanding. "All of us have our secrets now and then."

"Thanks," she grinned at him, relief evident in the incandescence of it.

Moving away, Sam bent to the task of excavation, feeling a sense of elation. Here was a possibility. She wasn't on the roles Ziggy was working from, and there was definitely more here than she was telling. Mind working more quickly than his gentle, patient strokes to pull antiquities from the earth, he wished ruefully that he had included some way to reach Al from his end of the link when he had been designing the project.

\* \* \*

Fuming, Darcie sat at a computer terminal in main control, struggling to follow Sam's meaning from the scant notes he had

left behind. She had it all deciphered, but had only scratched the surface of what it held in a few scrawled lines. Neither she nor any of the physicists had a clear idea of where it was headed.

Again and again her attention returned to the obscure message to Al at the center of the page. What did it mean? That she was wasting her time laboriously fleshing out the layout for a device that seemed somehow related to the original implant? Or that it was the key they had been searching for and they should commit all the project personnel to it?

From the piecemeal information she had, Ziggy couldn't tell her, and it was going to take hours--or days--to flesh it out enough to know for sure. Al would know, she was certain. With one quick glance, he'd know what that cryptic partial line meant. But Al was nowhere to be found.

Angrily she jerked her attention back to the information she had transferred from the paper into Ziggy. She had to keep at it, laboriously filling in the missing, vital steps that must have been so obvious to the physicist. She had been making progress, slow progress. She always felt like a slug trying to keep up with Sam's brilliant, almost scary leaps of logic.

Now anger, uncertainty and frustration slowed her further, threatening to make concentration impossible. Was she only wasting time, time that could be better spent in some other endeavor? They had to get him home...had to. The time pressure became more intense with each leap.

She and Sam had badly underestimated the neural effects of leaping. In transferring his neural fields to a brain with different pathways, they had expected some memory loss that should be regained, when he returned home. The swiss-cheesing effect that had actually developed had been far beyond their projections.

The increasing neural suppression, the weakening of the electrical fields that was Sam, they had not planned for because they had never expected the prolonged, repeated leaping. So far, they had always strengthened when Sam lodged in a new body, though the last time it had taken long enough to cause a loss of consciousness.

Who knew how long there would be sufficient power left for the fields to recover and not weaken enough that they could not be coaxed back into life? Watching the last alarming fluctuation of the fields and Sam's abrupt dive into unconsciousness, she had felt ill, as if she plunged into darkness herself. For the past few leaps she had known a terrible, consuming fear that the bright flame that was Sam Beckett would gutter and die, snuffed



out as if it had burned too brightly in darkness that finally triumphed and claimed it as its own. How....

Abruptly, she started, jerked from her brooding when Gooshie snatched her pencil from her hand, snapping, "Stop that!"

Startled, she looked up at the small man. "What?"

"You've been tapping your pencil," he demonstrated, tapping the point, flipping it, sliding it through his fingers to tap the top and repeating the entire motion. "Tap, slide, tap, slide, for five minutes. Stop it!"

Five minutes. Five minutes wasted. She was getting nowhere. She had to get herself under control and get back to work. Muttering, "Sorry," she got up from her chair and headed to the door.

"Where are you going?" the computer programmer asked in surprise.

"To get some breathing space," she answered, going out the doors which opened smoothly. "To clear my head so I can get back to work."

She was already in the corridor when she heard him call, "What?" She didn't turn to enlighten him. Right now all she wanted was a good, fast ride in the desert--or her hands around Admiral Calavicci's neck.

\* \* \*

Humming, Al made his way down the hallway, a happy spring in his step. Even the impending confrontation with Darcie was not going to spoil this mood. The car wash had returned his car in mint condition, he was having dinner with Tina in a few hours, and all was right with the world. Well, almost all, and who knew, maybe the neurologist had been right and the scrawled notes she'd found would turn out to be the key to bringing Sam home.

Winking at Brenda from filing, he knocked once on Darcie's door and pushed it open, ready to charm her into a good humor. It had never worked before, but he felt lucky today and he was up for it. The cheerful greeting he had planned fled as he realized the room was empty.

Flawlessly neat, as she always kept it, the office was deserted. There was not even work in progress on the desk. Shrugging, Al turned to move on to main con. She was probably there and that meant he'd have an audience when she unloaded on him, but what the hell. He could take it.

Breezing into the control room, he found only Gooshi seated at a terminal, carrying on a conversation with Ziggy about the proper insertion of new micro chips.

"Where is everybody?" Al interrupted.

Gooshi turned in his chair. "You mean, 'where's Darcie'? She's pretty hot at you, Al."

The older man regarded him speculatively. "How hot?"

"She paced around all afternoon, in between having me program Ziggy for all kinds of esoteric scenarios."

"What kind of scenarios?" Al asked suspiciously.

"Strange stuff, like what would happen if we pulled Sam's tracking implant, or it quit, things like that. Then she went down and talked to that new physicist, Michaels."

Gooshi grinned. "In between, she had her secretary calling every place you've ever been known to go. She even had her call your apartment manager to go knock on your door." The computer programmers eyes danced. "If you were there, I guess you were busy, huh?"

Ignoring him, Al pulled a cigar from his pocket, running it through his fingers thoughtfully. Always protective of Ziggy, Gooshi eyed it suspiciously. "Did she say anything about what she was working on?"

"Maybe to Michaels. I don't know. She really wanted to talk to you. Finally she tore out of here about noon and no one's seen her since."

Al considered this. "Where'd she go?"

"I don't know," Gooshi shrugged. "She said something about needing some space, or taking some space, or something. She was talking when she went. People..." Al turned on his heel, striding away as Gooshi continued. "Are always doing that." The doors slid shut behind the other man, "And it drives me crazy," he finished with only Ziggy for an audience. Wisely, the computer did not comment.

Frowning, Al strode toward his office. He would not--he would not!--let this ruin his mood. The logical thing for her to have done would be head to his apartment, but she obviously hadn't, or he would have seen her on his way out to the project.

As he suspected, there were papers waiting for him on his desk. The usual administrative clutter had been pushed aside so

that a copy of the page Darcie had mentioned was obvious. Picking it up, Al scanned it quickly, then slowly sank into his chair to consider it more carefully.

The chair's leather squeaked softly in the quiet room as he leaned back, going over the paper slowly. Darcie had copied the original, then laboriously deciphered Sam's scrawl into her own print above each line. Some numbers or words she had marked with a question mark, but her guesses looked reasonable to the observer.

Roughly the first half of the paper was covered with equations, and what looked like specifications that Al suspected had something to do with the tracking implant, or another device like it. Which it was he couldn't be certain, for Sam had written it in the mental shorthand he sometimes used, skipping large portions of material that could be arrived at by the information given and actually putting only enough down on paper to point the way at critical points.

Concentrating, Al frowned, absently lighting up a cigar and parking it to smoulder unattended in his ashtray. The gaps in the notes bothered him, he doubted even Darcie, who had helped create the first implant could follow it easily. It would take days to fill them in...if they could.

The lower half of the sheet was covered with medical orders, familiar territory to Darcie, whose own handwriting had deteriorated in the transcription. It was the center line of the obscure message that Al returned to again and again. "If you need it," Sam had written, and Darcie had deciphered. "Snap---suspenders."

Darcie had added her own note at the margin. "What does this mean?" The controlled frustration was evident in her taunt script that cut deeply into the paper. "Do I try this or not?" In large letters across the top of the sheet she had scrawled what looked like a final thought. "Where the hell are you?????"

"Damn," Al muttered, leaning forward to put the paper back on the desk and reaching for his cigar. The phrase that had so frustrated the neurologist was an abbreviated form of his own words. "Snap back like a pimp's suspenders." And he had no idea how to get in touch with Darcie to set her on the track, and tell her to go for it.

Abruptly feeling her frustration, he grasped the paper and his cigar. He'd go see what she had discussed with the physicist Michael's, and then what he could come up with on his own until she showed up. He knew her, it wouldn't be long. She was probably out speeding around the desert on that Harley of hers until the wind swept the mad out of her. Then she'd be back and

they could get down to business.

Leaving his office without looking back, he decided she'd better be. He wasn't waiting around for long, not when they finally had something to go on. If he had to, he'd sic the Highway Patrol on her. Only a small portion of him acknowledged that she must have felt the same way for hours, waiting for him.

\* \* \*

It was another day before Al showed up and I was about to go crazy waiting on him. The minute I saw his face, I should have known something was up, but I was too preoccupied to think about it. I suspect maybe he'd been standing back in the shadows watching me, because when I turned around and saw him, he was just standing there, smoking. I jumped right on him.

\* \* \*

"Al," Sam demanded, "Where have you been?"

"Good to see you to, Sam," the hologram returned with overdone politeness, stepping forward. "How's it going?"

"Okay. Listen, I think I've got a lead on what I'm supposed to do here."

"Yeah?" the hologram drifted slowly about the edge of the tent, drawing on his cigar and inspecting the room's contents as if he hadn't seen them before. "What is it?"

"I found out," Sam began, following Al about the tent. "That one of the people here isn't going to be listed as being here. Her name's Scotty, and I think..."

"Scotty," Al repeated absently, pausing to gaze down at the neat pile of clothing in the foot locker as if it held some sort of significance. "Scotty what?"

"Well, I don't know," Sam admitted. "I tried to get it out of her this afternoon, but didn't get anywhere. She's playing hard to get, but I'm working on her and..."

Al smiled a bit, and Sam paused. "What?"

"Nothing," the hologram shrugged. "You just sound like me, that's all."

Sam shot him a glance. "No, not like you. Good grief, Al, she's maybe 16. I meant, I haven't been able to find out much and I won't until she trusts me. She's definitely hiding



something. This could be it, Al, what I have to do to leap."

"Now hold on here, Sam," Al temporized. "We're not ready for you to leap yet."

"What do you mean, you're not ready for me to leap?" Sam asked suspiciously.

"Well," Al gestured with the cigar. "We're...working on some things and it'd be better if you cooled your heels here a while. This isn't a life and death situation here, is it?"

Alerted to the hologram's manner, Sam regarded him carefully, watching as Al turned away. "I don't...think so. But that's what I need you to find out, as soon as I find out her name."

"Okay," Al nodded. "You do that, and I'll work on it. I've got to go, Sam. You stay put here, and I'll be back."

Sam turned to watch the hologram pace away. "What's going on, Al?"

The hologram hesitated, finger poised to punch in the exit sequence. He shrugged. "Just a little problem."

"A little problem?" Sam repeated. "How little and what's it got to do with you not wanting me to leap? Has Darcie come up with something new on the neural suppression problem?"

Letting the handlink drop to his side, Al obviously wrestled with what he was about to say. "Darcie's missing," he said at last.

"Missing? Missing where?"

"If I knew that," the hologram returned. "She...."

"Wouldn't be missing," Sam finished. "I know. What happened? How long has she been gone?"

"We...don't know. She went for a ride on her bike in the desert 24 hours ago and didn't--hasn't--come back."

"You think she left?"

"No," Al said firmly. "She wouldn't leave. Something's happened. But," he lifted his voice to cut across Sam's comment he could see coming. "We'll find her. Until we do, you stay put, and I'll get back to you." He hesitated, looking for the response he wanted. "Okay?"

Sam nodded, watching Al's expression and decided not to push for more just yet. "I hope you find her."

"I will," Al returned. "And when I do," he shook his head with a menacing expression that didn't fool Sam in the least. "I'm really going to give it to her." Lifting the handlink, he disappeared, leaving Sam to wonder what it was he hadn't told him.

\* \* \*

Hands in his pockets, Al narrowed his eyes thoughtfully as he regarded the results of the search pattern winking across Ziggy's main screen. Darcie had evidently not intended to be gone long. She had a habit of taking off into the desert to ride in an effort to clear her mind, and always she returned in the space of an hour or less. She had not taken her jacket with her and she would have needed it when night fell and the desert cooled rapidly. No one had heard from her the night before, and now the sun was sliding down toward the horizon again.

Turning on his heel, Al abandoned his plan of coordinating the search. He just couldn't stand the inaction any longer, no matter how much sense it made. "Take over for me, Gooshi," he said, striding out of main control. "I'm taking the jeep out."

The doors closed on his last words as Gooshi turned, saying, "What...." Getting no reply but the hiss of the doors, he grimaced. "I hate that," he complained to Ziggy. "I really hate that."

The sunset sweeping the sky with magenta and orange was at once beautiful and menacing. Traveling at a snail's pace along the main road, he could feel the temperature begin to drop as the night approached. The starkly majestic desert opening out all about him was vast, empty and looked deceptively flat.

Al knew that there were countless depressions and tiny uneven patches of ground that could hide an injured person just meters from the road. Slowly, he stopped on the shoulder and drew himself up in the open-topped jeep to sit on the seat and look about him. None of the searchers he had met along the way had any encouraging news, and the last check in with Gooshi had been the same. No sign.

He thought of calling in again and decided against it. It had been less than half an hour since he'd spoken to him. Abruptly he was reminded of what Darcie had replied once when he had teased her about her reason for owning the motorcycle. She had replied with irritating composure that the reason she rode a bike was that it was impossible to put a cellular phone on one.

It was possible to get off the bike to find a phone and answer a beeper, but not carry on a conversation with another soul and ride, and that was why, when she needed it, she rode the bike.

Swearing softly, Al gazed into the cooling emptiness about him. Where was she?

A faint line of evenness alien to the landscape he had come to know so well was visible. An old access road to a home that was no longer there it cut obliquely across the desert as far as he could see. Gooshi had followed it once thinking maybe it was a shortcut, and gotten stranded when he'd broken his car's axle on the rough, neglected surface. The final insult, as the computer programmer had seen it, was that it didn't even go all the way through to join the main road. It ended at the old house, of which nothing remained but a rattlesnake infested foundation.

Sliding back into the seat, Al put the jeep into gear. Preparing to make a U-turn to return to the project, he sourly wished that Gooshi's road was a short cut. He was quite a distance away and, riding in the open vehicle, he was going to get cold. In the act of reaching into the back seat to pick up his flight jacket and put it on, he braked hastily to a stop.

Darcie hadn't been with the project yet when Gooshi had tried his ill-fated exploration. What if she seen the road and decided to try it? She was adventurous enough, and sure enough of herself to have headed the motorcycle down the decades old asphalt.

Forgetting about the jacket, Al straightened the wheel and stepped on the gas pedal, sending the tough jeep speeding toward the old turnout. Turning onto it, he was forced to slow immediately, for the potholes were the worst at the beginning of the road. For a bit they decreased in number, long enough to give someone unfamiliar with the place a false sense of confidence.

Scanning ahead intently for any clue that he was not the only recent traveler, Al was disappointed, for the desert winds shifted sand continually over the hard surface. With a small portion of his attention, he ran over the search pattern completed in his mind. No one had come out this far yet. She'd have had to been running flat out at well over the speed limit for a good while to have made it this far. Grimly guiding the jeep around two yawning potholes, Al just bet that she had been, too. It would have been like her and, after all, he'd gotten a taste of her frustration in the past few hours, hadn't he? And here he was, running around in the desert on a fools errand when he knew he ought to be back at main con running the show.



At the sight of sand drifted across the road kept it in place by a slight rise, Al straightened in his seat, hands gripping the wheel. A violent gouge was torn through it, the edges already softened by new sand, but still evidence of an uncontrolled skid and slide through its shallower side. What had Sam called it? Slip and slide on asphalt.

"Darcie?" Al shouted, bouncing the jeep recklessly through a pothole just before the sand. The slide continued through to the clear pavement beyond, to the slight rise of shoulder that would have flipped an out-of-control bike and body up and over the drop on the other side.

Jerking the jeep to a halt, Al hoisted himself up to sit on the seat's back again to see over the rise to the rugged landscape below. "Darcie!"

The bike lay on its side yards away, having leaked a dark stain of oil that looked like blood in the deepening twilight. Beyond it, there was a darker, broader stain that could only have been where a body had impacted and lain for some time. Drag marks lead away from it, disappearing behind two large rocks set in the sand.

Leaping across the seat and over the passenger side window, he rushed down the steep hill in a controlled slide. Sprinting across the open area he rounded the first boulder, afraid of what he would find. At the sight of her, crumpled like a child's abused, abandoned toy, his steps faltered and slowed.

She had dragged herself there under her own power, seeking the shelter of the rocks that gave her shade by day and faint, stored heat by night. But, somewhere in her wait for rescue, her strength had failed her. She lay so still there almost seemed to be no life left in her.

Forcing himself forward, Al knelt and felt for the pulse beneath her jaw. Even before he found it, he knew she lived, for the flesh was feverish and dry. Careful of her right leg, which was bound with a makeshift bandage of her own sleeve and swollen nearly twice its normal size, he gathered her into his arms. "Come on, baby," he said softly. "Time to go home.

\* \* \*

Pulling off his shirt, Sam stretched slowly, enjoying the pull and draw of weary muscles. It had been too long since he had been this mentally rested and physically tired. Tomorrow...

Al's arrival, rushing in with his head down, startled him badly. "Al!"

The hologram, preoccupied, did not respond. "I want you to look at this, Sam." Slipping the handlink into his pants pocket, he pulled a crumpled piece of paper out to replace it.

Curious, Sam dropped his shirt on the bed and came over to the hologram, who extended the paper to him. "What is it?"

"You tell me."

Intrigued, he shot a glance at his friend, then considered the scrawled numbers and message for a long moment. "Well?" the hologram prodded impatiently.

"I don't know," the physicist shook his head as if mystified. "I can't even read most of it. Who wrote this mess?"

The hologram shot him an exasperated glance. "You did, Sam. We think you wrote it just before you leaped. Look," he pointed at the cryptic center message. "We think it's what you left as the clue to leaping home if the first plan didn't work...like it didn't."

Returning his full attention to the message, Sam reached out to take it, fingers passing through the holograph. Grimacing, his gaze did not leave the paper, his eyes scanning it over and over with an intensity of concentration that Al had missed in him. But the hologram's hopes were dashed when he looked up, frustrated anger in his eyes. "This doesn't mean anything to me."

"Come on, Sam, think!" Al shot a glance over his shoulder as if expecting an interruption. "This could take us weeks, maybe months."

Sam stiffened, meeting the hologram's eyes. "And you're saying you...I haven't got that long."

"Not necessarily. We..."

"We who? How long have you had this? Why show me now?"

Al took a breath to answer, then obviously thought better of it. "Maintenance found it wedged in the doors to main con two days ago. Darcie deciphered it."

"Darcie? She's back?"

"Unh, yeah," Al nodded with a hesitation that jarred Sam from his own concerns. There was something here Al wasn't saying that went beyond leaping him home.

"What's the matter, Al?" At the shrug he received, he

persisted. "What about Darcie? Is she okay?"

"Well, no," the hologram admitted, withdrawing the paper and folding it absently. "She..." Al looked up as if at a speaker Sam could not see, but it was not convincing. "Gotta go..."

"No!" Sam demanded. "Tell me."

Making a gesture of defeat, Al shrugged. "She had a wreck on that damned bike of hers. I told her..."

Sam cut across the indignant hologram's tirade. "Is she okay?"

"Huh unh," Al shook his head, pulling out a cigar. "No, She's in surgery now."

"Surgery?" Sam repeated. "How bad is it?"

"Bad," Al answered reluctantly. "A snake nailed her on her slide across the pavement. She was in the desert over a day before I found her."

Sam regarded him as he lowered his head to light the cigar. "Why aren't you there?"

He didn't pretend not to understand. "Aw, Sam, you know me and that hospital stuff. I'm not good at it." He shrugged, turning away, "That's your department."

"Does her family know?"

"She doesn't have family."

"Al, you need to go."

"Trying to get rid of me, pal?"

"Al..."

Abruptly, the hologram jumped slightly, guiltily, and shoved the already crumpled paper into his pocket. "I gotta go, Sam." The physicist knew the observer well enough to suspect that to refer to the note now would get him in very deep trouble, and then he'd never have another chance to see it, or the deciphered copy Darcie had made.

"You'll...take care of everything?"

"Yeah," the observer tucked his cigar into his mouth to free his hands to draw out the handlink. "I will," the glance he shot at Sam before he left was not sufficiently cocky. "I always do,

don't I?"

\* \* \*

Institutions of any kind irritated Al, and made him nervous, and that in turn made him even more irritable. Hospitals were the worst, stirring up a nasty hoard of unwanted emotions and he had successfully avoided visiting them for most of his adult life.

So, he was primed and ready for an argument when the floor nurse told him he wasn't allowed to stay in ICU. He'd really reached his speed when he was passed along to the house supervisor, and had no qualms about invoking rank (even though it did him no good in a civilian hospital) and special privilege. By the time he was passed along to the surgeon that had taken Darcie through those ominous vomit green doors, he was giving it full throttle, alluding to the secret nature of the project and possible dire consequences of not being allowed to see her.

None of it, absolutely none of his sharp tongued acid con did the slightest good. It wasn't until the ER physician, the one that had taken her from his arms, the one that he had told that she had no family, happened along that the battle began to turn in his favor. He hated that too. Still, he got his way, after a quiet consultation between the doctors, and a few sympathetic glances thrown his way that he returned with wary scowls.

He won, and he hated it. Steeling himself, he pushed open the door to her room, and hated as well the sharp scent of antiseptic layered over darker odors he didn't want to think about.

Still, he forced himself to go in, stepping into the pervasive, slow beep of the heart monitor above her bed. The door swung slowly closed behind him with a controlled, institutional feel that drew a slow, claustrophobic constriction in his throat.

Warily, he circled around her bed with its high, metal rails. Regarding her, he absently rubbed one hand across his chin in an unconscious, troubled gesture. Her face was swollen and quiet; swollen from all the fluids they had pumped into her before her kidneys had failed, and quiet because she lingered in the coma in which Al had found her.

Yet he kept his eyes on her face so he didn't have to look at the terrible pristine whiteness of the sheet tented over what had been her right leg. Swallowing, he shook his head. They'd let him in, told him he could stay because they thought she was going to die alone with no family. And he hated that, too. He hated that even more than he hated this place.

She wasn't going to die alone. She wasn't going to die, at all! He'd see to it.

Turning away, mindful of the nurse's video monitor over the bed, he hitched a chair over as near to the window as he could and sat down to wait. He'd stick it out, no matter what. He could do it. He was good at enduring, very, very good. He'd had lots of practice.

\* \* \*

Chin on his hand, Al stared nearly unseeingly out the window at the parking lot below him. It had filled with visitor's cars during the early evening hours, then emptied again. Now it was nearly vacant except for his car, parked at the far edge in an attempt to spare it door dings, and a few other vehicles of other too-stubborn-too-leave visitors like him. The cars seemed lonely, spread at random across the expanse of asphalt bordered by deep night, their colors dull in the light of tall, goose-necked poles that loomed over them.

"It's so dark," Darcie's voice, low and soft, made him start violently after the hours of silence.

The wastebasket on which he'd propped his feet went over with a crash and he fumbled for it in the darkness. When had the room grown so dark, lit only by tiny, glowing machine lights that looked like animal eyes in the gloom?

Hastily he snapped on the closest light in reach, the small one over the sink. Its light illuminated only that small area, but lightened the room enough that he could see Darcie's eyes were open. Relief, pure and bright, flooded him as he came forward with a grin.

Abruptly it chilled to horror as she spoke again, gazing straight ahead, oblivious of the light he had brought to the room. "I never knew the desert could be so dark." Her voice was quiet, hushed, the voice of someone who lay alone under a vast dome of chill, dark sky and spoke just to hear a human voice against the emptiness.

"Darcie, baby," Al took her hand, startled by the intense hotness of it. "It's okay now. You're..."

Slowly her eyes drifted closed again, with no hint she had heard him. "Darcie, hey," he shook her limp hand lightly, unwilling to let her slip away. "Come on, kiddo. It's me, Al."

For a long moment, there was no response, though he watched her intently for any hint of one. Slowly, reluctantly, he

released her hand. Beyond him in the corridor he heard someone call a code blue and a frenzy of activity erupted in the brilliantly lit space beyond the close darkness in which he stood.

Stirred by some internal stimulus, Darcie sighed, as if struggling to awaken. "Coyotes." The word was perfectly clear for all its bemused sleepiness. "Nasty things."

Shifting restlessly, her eyes opened and she began to fumble in the clean, neat linens about her. "Rocks. Where are all my rocks?"

Horrified, Al watched as she struggled to rise, still searching about her as she relived her experience. "They're too close," her voice rose. "Where are the rocks?"

"Oh, baby," Al caught her hands in his, afraid she would hurt herself. "Wake up. It's okay. You're safe."

"Rocks," she repeated in single-minded purpose, struggling against him. "I didn't throw them all. Who the hell took the rocks?"

Getting one hand free when he reached out to hit the call button, she grasped the metal rail and fought to pull herself upright. As the light flickered on to mark the call for help, Al swept up a roll of gauze and slipped it into her hand.

At once, she grasped it with an audible gasp of relief, though she still persisted in her determination to pull herself up. Casting a glance out the window into the hall, Al saw no help forthcoming, and reached down to the electric switch to elevate the head of the bed. As he had hoped, she relaxed against it when it touched her back, accepting the new position as defensible.

Her fingers tightened about the roll, accepting it in her delirium. "Alright," she said determinedly as if into cold desert darkness. "Howl, you rascals, howl. And if you come back, I'll give you more of what you got last night." The survivor's resolve in her tone constricted Al's throat.

Releasing her hand, he went to the door, jerking it open and stepping out into the hall, intending to demand attention. A nurse was hurrying down the hall toward him. "What is it?" she asked.

"She's awake," he answered sharply. "Get somebody in here."

She nodded, not slowing in her rush to the supply room. "Her doctor's down the hall. He'll be in as soon as he can."

Hesitantly he cast a glance back at Darcie, who was blinking slowly and nodding a bit in a losing battle to stay awake. At least she was quiet, and that eased his anxiety enough to let the nurse pass without further argument.

Sighing impatiently, he strode back into the room. "Okay, kiddo," he said with a false briskness. "Time for you to rise and shine." Crossing her line of vision, he waved both hands and got no response. Giving it up, he hitched his chair up to the bed with one foot and sat down. "Talk to me," he demanded in a faintly aggrieved tone.

A soft sigh was the only reply he got and he rubbed one temple in an irritated gesture. Propping one elbow on the bed rail, he regarded her while listening for any sound that implied that help was coming.

Darcie spoke again after a few moments. "Al was right," she said obscurely, her tone gently peeved.

"Course I was," he agreed with a quick shrug and nod. He got to his feet and leaned over her, hoping to catch her gaze. "I'm always right. Always, and..."

"He said that bike'd kill me."

"NO!" he protested angrily in surprise. "No, now, I was wrong about that." He raised his voice as if it would make a difference, pointing his finger at her for emphasis. "I was wrong. You shouldn't..." He leaned forward in a futile effort to force her to see him. "You shouldn't listen to me about that. You're going to be fine, just..." He gestured helplessly, finding it hard to finish his sentence. "Fine."

Above him, the heart monitor's steady beep skipped once, twice, then tripped on in an odd irregular rhythm that brought him to his feet. Her eyes opened again, and the expression in them halted him even as he prepared to head to the door and demand help.

In the shadowed darkness, her gaze was calm, distant, but focused as if she regarded someone at a distance too far for Al's sight to follow. Something in it lifted the hair at the nape of his neck. He knew, however unwillingly, what she would say as she drew the breath to speak, and would have given anything to stop her as if it would stop the inevitability of what would come next. But, he was frozen, unable to react.

"Sam," Darcie said simply, her voice soft with recognition and quiet pain.

As if carried past the point of no return by the word, the tripping rush of the heart monitor slid into a painful, unending monotone and it was over. A nurse hurried through the door and toward the bed. He stepped back out of her way, but there was no haste in his movements as there was in hers.

Slowly he moved about the foot of the bed, toward the door that led to the world beyond the still, darkened room. He was in the bright corridor, moving down it with a steady, unhurried stride when the speaker above him announced the code blue. Darcie's code blue. There was no reaction obvious in him as if it were already far and away behind him. It was over.

A rush of people moved past him, nurses, doctors, technicians, all already assembled from the failed code down the hall. They were in a hurry, and he stepped aside to let them pass as they rushed to take up the battle again, trying to bind a fleeing spirit to a dying body.

He did not wait for them to finish and come out to tell him the result. There was no need. It was too late, he knew that with a terrible certainty. There was nothing further to hold him here. Darcie was gone.

\* \* \*

Sam moved restlessly in his sleep, called by a quiet voice that came once again, soft but insistent. "Sam." Stirring, he wakened slowly, opening his eyes to see Scotty kneeling by his bed, back lit by an odd, diffuse glow.

Instinctively grasping the blankets to him, he sat up hastily. She smiled and he felt a shock of recognition trill through him. The new lines about her eyes were marks of maturity and character and she wore her hair free about her shoulders in a thick fall of fire. She had grown into the promising grace he had sensed in her. Not Scotty. "Darcie."

"Sam, I need you to do something for me." She was so calm and yet so focused that it sent a chill of uneasiness through him.

"What are you doing here? Where's Al?" His concern escalated. "Has something happened to Al?"

"No," her smile was gentle. "He's fine. I need you to give him a message for me."

"A...message?" Frowning, he rubbed a hand across his eyes. He was awake, wasn't he? This wasn't a dream...was it? "What's going on?"



"Tell him for me that it's not his fault. It was my temper, my problem." Gazing into her eyes he wondered how he could have forgotten their green intensity. "You'll tell him?"

"Tell him?" Sam felt as if reality had slipped away. She was the woman he knew, from the quick intelligence in her eyes to the soft curve of her delicate cheekbone. Why was she asking him to give Al a message? "But, why.."

She stirred and glanced away as if someone called her name. Sam followed her gaze but saw nothing. "What?" He pulled himself up farther in the cot. "What are you doing here?"

Bringing her attention back to him, she seemed less substantial somehow. "Everything will be okay, Sam." He could not help but warm to the unshakable confidence in her tone. "I'm sure of it. You'll tell Al for me? That it's not his fault."

"Okay," he nodded uncertainly. "I'll tell him."

"Good." Rising to her feet, she took a step away and he held out a hand to stop her.

"Wait!" Of course his hand passed through her, and she smiled down at him sadly. The touch of her had been chill, nothing like when he touched Al and he withdrew the hand hastily.

"Goodby, Sam." Though she made no outward sign of movement, he knew she was preparing to leave despite his plea.

"Wait!!" Struggling from the cot, his legs tangled in the blankets and he fell heavily to the canvas floor. Jarred by the fall, he jerked as if awakening from sleep and lifted his head. The room was pitch black and he was alone. Of course, he was alone.

Drawing a deep breath, he pushed himself up, shaken by more than the fall. Sliding quickly back into the cot, for the tent was chill in the desert night despite the small electric heater in the corner, he laid down hesitantly. He lay awake a long time, staring into the empty darkness, thinking.

\* \* \*

Exhausted, Al found himself back at the project. The only cars in the parking lot were those of support personnel and Gooshi's. He grimaced. The computer programmer spent more time with Ziggy than Al had spent with some of his wives.

Walking into the complex, he hesitated, having no idea why he had come. Absently, he kept walking just to keep moving. He couldn't go to Tina; she was too much a part of this for him to

share it with her yet. He couldn't go to Sam. One look at his face and the kid would work on him until he got the whole story. He couldn't handle that yet either, and he sure didn't want to go back to an empty apartment.

Wandering, he found himself outside the imaging chamber and, for lack of anything better to do, went in. Sinking down to the floor, he leaned back against the cool wall, closing his eyes with a sigh.

Losing track of time, he sat there, brooding, wondering how it had all gone so wrong, so fast. A faint tremor of the equipment powering up shook him aware. Hopping to his feet before the start up was complete, he tried the door and found it locked. Hand flying to the link, he punched in the stop sequence, and got no response. None. No matter what he tried. He'd been shut out of the computer by an expert. "Gooshi!": he shouted in sudden understanding, just before the holographic scenery flickered to life about him. "Let me out of here!"

\* \* \*

Finally, Sam had drifted off to sleep, waking hours later to a low, repeated sound that sifted into his consciousness. "Gooshi. Gooshi, let me outta here." Al's voice. Sam opened his eyes. The sound came from beyond the tent. What was Al doing lurking in the dark, threatening Gooshi?"

Running a quick hand over his eyes in an attempt to wake up more thoroughly, Sam rose to his feet. "Al? What are you doing?" From the deep chill in the tent, he judged it to be early, perhaps an hour before dawn as he padded to the door.

"Now you've done it," Al swore in the same odd, angrily hushed tone. "Gooshi! Let me outta here or I swear by Ziggy's..."

"Al?" Sam unzipped the tent's flap and poked his head out. "What are you doing?"

"Unh," the hologram turned, handlink in his hand, obviously trying for innocence. "Sorry to wake you up. I was just," he lifted his voice as if it was not to Sam that he spoke. "Going! You need your sleep and..."

Sam shivered at the night air on his bare chest. "Get in here. It's freezing out there." Al looked as if he would protest, but Sam ducked his head back in, going to look for his clothes. He was nearly dressed when the hologram walked through the tent's side with obvious reluctance.

Pulling on his shirt, Sam went to the desk to turn on the

light, then turned back to his friend. At the expression on the older man's face, he hesitated. Deciding the only way he was going to get anywhere was to begin the conversation, he said, rubbing his arms to warm them. "Darcie was here."

"What?" Al looked stricken and Sam hesitated before he pressed on.

"She was," he insisted. "Tonight. I thought the holographic link was exclusive. How could she have been here?"

"She wasn't. You had to be dreaming."

"I was awake, Al, at least I'm pretty sure I was," he temporized at the set expression on the observer's face. "I saw her, and.."

"You couldn't!" Al shook his head. "She's dead, Sam. She died hours ago at the Red Creek hospital. I know, I was there."

Stopped in his pursuit of the truth, Sam hesitated a long moment, regarding the hologram, who pushed buttons on the handlink slowly as if he expected no response. "I'm sorry, Al."

"So am I, kiddo." Giving up on the handlink, Al let it drop to his side, turning away to hide his face.

Watching him, Sam felt an odd sense of unreality. There was little sense of sorrow in him at the news, as if his heart knew it was not true as long as Scotty lived. "She had a message for you." When the other man turned on him, he added to make what he had to say easier. "In the dream, I mean."

"Yeah?" Al turned away again.

"She said to tell you that it's not your fault. That it was her own temper, her own problem."

Angry, Al wheeled about, "That's just like her, Sam." Vehement he pointed with the handlink. "Just like her! To forgive me just when I work up a good mad and..." Realizing what he was saying he shook his head, "No, no," he paced two steps away. "No, Sam, you're not suckering me into this! Gooshi!" he bellowed. "You let me into Ziggy and out of here."

Very still, Sam met his eyes. "She's here, Al."

"Stop it, Sam," Al snapped. The younger man could tell he was resisting the urge to look over his shoulder.

"Scotty...the young girl I met here is Darcie."

"No." Al's denial was less certain.

"Yes. I'm sure."

"But," Al put the hand link away in unspoken surrender. "Darcie never said she was here...never said she met you...unh Clark."

"Maybe she doesn't remember. Clark isn't memorable. Maybe it wasn't important to her. Maybe she had other concerns...then and now."

As if he suspected a trap, Al's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"She lived hand to mouth...is living," he corrected. "She ran away from her uncle's when she was fifteen, living God knows where as she finished high school. That's why she's here, for a safe place to stay until she starts college in the fall. After she does, on a full scholarship, things get easier for her. She just had to do some...inventive...things to get there."

Al's glance was disbelieving. "I read her clearance file. I don't remember any of this."

It was Sam's turn to drop his eyes. "Well, I took it out."

"Sam," Al's voice was at once chiding and incredulous. "You suppressed information to get her cleared, didn't you?" At Sam's hesitation, he pressed with something akin to admiration. "Didn't you?"

Nodding, Sam met his eyes. "So," he said with a touch of defiance. "I wanted her for the project."

"Hmmm," Al regarded him, an incredible mix of emotions on his face.

"But," Sam said. "She's here, Al, I can fix this. I can.."

"No," Al said in warning. "You can't, Sam."

"Yes, I can. What if," he lifted his hands in excitement. "What if that's why I'm here in the first place...to warn Darcie."

"Now, Sam, we've been through this before. You're getting into personal history here...all of our histories...or futures rather. You can't."

"It worked with Tom."

"And it didn't work with Beth. And..."

"And saving Tom cost us both a terrible price," he finished the sentence Al did not. "But, why else would I be here?"

Sighing, Al shook his head, reaching for a cigar. "There's something else you should know."

"What?" Sam watched as the hologram slowly lit the tobacco.

"Darcie says...said," he corrected. "Two more leaps...three tops and you're not coming home. Not alive, anyway. You've got to give us time to figure out that mess you left us."

Sam shot him a sharp glance. "How do you know I'll leap if I tell her?"

"How can you say it's what you're here for if you don't believe you'll leap if you do it?" the observer returned evenly.

"Do you want her to die?" Sam demanded in sharp frustration.

"No," Al's own voice sharpened. "I might kill her if I ever get my hands on her again, but," he shook his head, drawing on the cigar. "I don't want her to die."

Dropping his eyes and turning away, he added roughly, "But I don't want you to die, either." Shoving his hands into his pockets, he slowly rocked back and forth on his heels, regarding the tent's side as if it held a great fascination for him.

Sam shivered once, as if suddenly cold. "Maybe," he said at last. "The only way I'm going to get home is by doing what I have to do. And this is what I have to do."

"You don't know that."

"I do. And I know this will all work out, in the end, the way it's supposed to."

"And how do you know that?"

"Darcie told me," Sam said to his back. "Just like she told me this is not your fault...and it isn't."

"It is," Al turned. "It is, Sam. I was supposed to meet her early and I got..." He shrugged diffidently. "Involved with Tina. And I was late--real late. And you know how Darcie is. She got mad and took off into the desert." The hologram's voice rose to nearly a shout. "If she had just waited I would have been there."

"Her temper," Sam said softly. "Her problem. She said so.

Silence stretched between the two men, a rising wind buffeting the tent canvas about them. The hand link in Al's pocket beeped as it came back on line, the sound faint and tentative in the snapping of the shaken canvas. He did not react for it, rubbing one hand along his jaw in a slow, telling gesture.

"I'm going to tell her, Al," Sam said at last.

Al hesitated a long moment, then shrugged uneasily. "Okay kid," he said reluctantly, "I guess this one is your calli."

Catching up his jacket, Sam left the enclosed space, stepping into the cold gusts that swept through the darkness at beyond. Behind him, Al took the link into his hand, staring at it for a long moment before reaching up to keying a command.

By the time he reached the other side of the camp, Sam's breath was coming harder, and his eyes watered from the gusty wind that hampered his progress. Leaping up the last step of the rise before Scotty's tent she shared with two other students, he started violently as Al appeared before him. Nearly tumbling backwards, he regained his footing with an effort as Al put out an instinctive, ineffectual arm to help him. "Sorry, Sam."

Catching his breath, the younger man shook his head in dismissal and pushed ahead. Reaching the tent, he softly called Scotty's name until she unzipped it and peered out. Sleepy-eyed, groggy, and wrapped in a blanket, she said, "Dr. Clark?"

"I need to talk to you."

"But..."

"Now," gently he caught her arm and pulled her out of the tent. "It can't wait until tomorrow."

"What are you doing?" She pulled her arm free. "Let go of me."

"Watch it, Sam," Al warned, having heard that tone before. Recapturing her arm, Sam pulled her further from the tent and her sleeping tent mates. "I just want to talk to you."

"Let go of me!" Wrenching free, she slapped him, hard.

"Warned you," Al observed evenly.

Grabbing her again, he wrestled her about to hold her against his chest, facing outward. Grunting as her elbow went into his stomach, he grasped her more firmly. Jerking away the blanket, he tossed it from her reach. Shaking her lightly, he hissed in her ear as she struggled, "stop it."

"Damn it," she struggled against him still. "One scream and I'll bring the whole camp."

Al, who had moved to stand before them, grinned. "Pain in the butt, ain't she?" But there were tears in his eyes.

"Listen to me," Sam said. "I just want to talk to you. Promise you'll stand still and I'll let you go."

At her hesitant nod, he released her, stepping back. Poised to flee, she turned to face him. She shivered in the cold, dressed only in an over-sized tee shirt. "What's the matter with you?"

Sam shook his head, lifting his hands slowly to reassure her. "I just need to tell you something important."

Al appeared at her side, speaking loudly into her ear. "Be nice to Al," he said, drawing an incredulous look from Sam. "You like Al. Al's a nice guy." He meet Sam's eyes. "You never know...couldn't hurt."

"Are you crazy?" Darcie demanded, her gaze traveling to where Sam's gaze had wandered.

"No, I just," he reached out for her and she flinched. I just needed to be sure you were awake enough, cold enough, and mad enough to remember what I have to say." Gently, he closed his hands on her shoulders. Her eyes on his, she tensed, shivering violently, but did not pull away. "I can only tell you once."

"You hate motorcycles," Al interrupted loudly. "They're yucky...noisy and dirty. You hate them."

"What do you want to tell me?" Darcie asked reluctantly, as if captivated by Sam's manner.

"When Al is late, don't leave." He held her eyes, willing her to understand. "He'll have an excuse...a weak one...but an excuse."

"Get a new hobby," Al persisted with an aggrieved glance at Sam. "A nice safe one. Quilting...quilting's nice."

"Who is..."

"I can't tell you more. Just..." his hands tightened on her shoulders as if to force the memory. "Remember, Al will get there. Wait..." He felt the first zinging tingle of an impending leap multiplied a hundredfold. "Wait. He'll be there."

"Okay." Her eyes were very wide as if she saw more than a demented podiatrist. "Okay...Sam."

The leap took him spinning away with her last word, his name ringing in his ears.

\* \* \*

Pain. Pain like liquid light searing every plane of his being. Pain that left him not even enough control to scream.

Staggering, he could not see, could not feel anything except the incredible, brilliant pain that threatened to split his head. He was in a body, whose body he could not tell.

Briefly the white light that blinded him paled and he caught a quick impression of a large grey room opening out around him. People were running toward him, rushing through a small door set in a curving wall.

In a brief flash of lucidity, Sam saw Al was in the lead. Then his legs began to give way beneath him and he could not control the body well enough to recover. Walls and faces spun about him though the fall seemed to take a very long time, as if time were still somehow distorted. Al was reaching for him. "I got ya, Sam."

Sam wanted to speak, to ask him where and when he was, but the thread that snarled his personal perception of time snapped. He collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been snipped by the master's hand, dropping limply into the observer's outstretched arms.

Sight fled and feeling diminished, but hearing remained. The sounds triggered panicked, scattered thoughts that beat against his throat like captured, living things when he could not give them voice. "Sam." Al's voice, he realized. Scared and elated at the same time. Where was he?

"Let go, Al. We've got to get him on the gurney." A woman's voice. Darcie's voice, brisk yet gentle. Where was he??

"Alright, alright." Al again, sounding angry. "Watch his head! Watch his head!" Where was he???



A quick, hard squeeze to his left hand. He felt it. Was he going to feel the pain again too? Dear God, was he dying?

"It's okay, buddy." Al's voice, very near. "You're home."

Home! The first of the convulsions slammed him back against the gurney. Home! That was the thought he carried with him into the brilliant light that expanded within his head, devouring sensation, hearing, and reason.

\* \* \*

Light faded to darkness. Blessed, cool, secure darkness. He lingered there a while, horribly bruised by the light. Gradually he became aware of the voices again and realized they had been there for some time, rising and falling, coming and going, soothing and....arguing.

"What are ya doing? I told you light hurts his eyes." Al, angry. No. Worried.

"When did you get your M.D., Admiral?" Darcie. Calm. Infuriatingly so. "Sam?" A faint brush of a hand on his cheek. "Can you hear me?"

Yes. He wanted to answer, but found he could not find the way to form the word.

"What's the matter with him?" Al. Scared, badly scared. "You said he was okay. You said he'd come around."

"He will."

"When? Are you sure that thing didn't...."

"Al." Sharp. Warning. "He may hear you. It's just not time yet." Gently. "He needs time to heal. Let him be."

"How much time?" Al. Leaving. Following Darcie.

Darkness. Blessed, blessed darkness. Home.

\* \* \*

The voices were back, pushing away the darkness. Arguing. Again.

"If he doesn't come round today, I'm taking him to Bethesda." Al.

"There's nothing they can do for him that I can't." Darcie.

"I know that. But at least his family can see him there."  
Grim. So grim.

"Al..."

Sam opened his eyes, amazed at the simplicity of it. Darcie and Al faced off over him, both faces set and angry, hands clenched on the bed rails. Beautiful, both of them.

"Tom's having a fit. He's threatening to break in here, and I can't say that I blame him."

"You have to give it time. To rush..."

Sam covered their hands with his, amazed at how his body obeyed him so flawlessly although his hands shook with weakness. "Stop it," he said, his voice sounding faint and hoarse from disuse.

Amazed, they turned to look down at him and their expressions were priceless. He laughed, finding it weak but recognizable.

"Sam!!!" Al whooped, grabbing his hand and lifting it high as if he were a prizefighter. "Welcome back, buddy."

Darcie grinned, that grin Al had told him about, and he had only dimly remembered until now. He was right, it was a killer. Her fingers curled about his. "How's your head?"

"How's your head?" Al repeated incredulously. "What a question for a doctor, huh Sam?"

"Sometimes," Darcie answered with no rancor. "Direct questions are best."

"My head is fine," Sam answered before Al could say anything and was amazed that it was true. There was no pain and no blinding light.

"Good," her fingers lingered on his. "I knew it would be." Gently she pulled her hand away after a glance at Al. "I'll be back."

"Where are you going?" Al asked. "Aren't there some tests you ought to do or something."

"I will," she agreed, her glance at him understanding, though he did not see it. "Later." Smiling, she said, "Welcome back, Sam."

Sam followed her with his eyes until she disappeared through

the door. Turning his head on the pillow when she was gone, he tightened weakened fingers about Al's, needing the solid feel of his friend's flesh against his. "What happened, Al?"

"Well," the observer answered. "Darcie followed your instructions, rigging a secondary boost to the implant's signal to give us something to draw on and you leaped back." He grinned. "Snap, suspenders. Just like you said."

"But...what about Darcie?"

Al's grin dimmed. "She was waiting for me when I left the imaging chamber. Jumped my butt right off." He squeezed Sam's hand. "Death didn't change her a bit."

"But...she didn't...die."

"No, and I haven't asked her what she remembers. It just-- never happened. I walked out of the imaging chamber and there she was." He demonstrated with his hand. "In my face. Mad as blazes."

Sam nodded slowly. "That makes sense. You..." Realizing what Al had said earlier, he brought his gaze back to his friends beaming face. "You said, Tom's waiting to see me."

"Yeah, and your mom, and Katie."

"I want to see him...them...too." Sam's eyes filled with tears. "And Michael, and Elizabeth, and Jenny."

"Katie's ..."

"Kids," Sam finished. "I remember." He grinned, a tear slipping down his cheek. "Al, I remember."

"Sure you do, pal." Al waved hand as if it were a given. "Darcie says no major lasting effects to your memory. You've set up housekeeping again in all your own neural pathways and it's only matter of time until it all comes back."

"My own..." Impulsively Sam lifted a hand to his forehead. "I want a mirror, Al."

"Thought you would," the older man returned with a grin. Reaching in the drawer of the night stand, he pulled one out and presented it to him with a flourish. "Here ya go, kiddo. Take a look."

Hesitating, Sam looked up at his friend, then reached for the mirror. Weakened, his hand shook too badly to hold it, so Al steadied it, turning it so he could see his reflection.

His reflection. His eyes looked back at him, deep set and dark circled, but still his eyes. He saw his own familiar face that once he had taken so for granted and missed even more than he had realized until this moment. He looked so...tired.

Sighing, he let Al pull the mirror away as he closed his eyes briefly to gather the strength to speak.

"Look like hell, don't you?" Al observed frankly, yet somehow gently, sliding the mirror onto the night stand. "But Darcie says you'll bounce back."

Nodding, Sam opened his eyes. His lips curved upward in an attempt at a smile. "'Darcie says' again? Do you now swear by what Darcie says?"

Al shrugged good naturedly. "Since she was right about bouncing you home...though it was all your idea in the first place," he added as if to temper the compliment. "She just put it together in record time."

Eyes on Sam's face, he got to his feet. "I'd better get outta here. She's gonna be back in pretty quick, chasing me out to do those tests."

"Okay," Sam agreed. "I wouldn't want you to get in trouble."

"Trouble!" Al said, as if insulted. "Sam." Realizing he was being teased, he grinned and got to his feet. "I can handle her," he said with a wink. "Don't you worry."

Al stretched, then patted his pocket for a cigar. "I have to call Tina, anyway."

"Tina," Sam repeated. "I want to meet Tina."

"You got it...but, just remember," he said teasingly, pointing his cigar at Sam. "She's my girl."

Smiling, Sam followed the older man's progress about the bed until the quilt hanging on the wall at the foot of his bed caught his attention. "I don't remember that."

Al looked from Sam to the pieced work of blue and silver cloth and back again. "That's because it wasn't there before you leaped. That's the project logo Darcie quilted."

He threw Sam a conspirator's wink. "She's still not nice to me. And she rides that motorcycle at all hours of the night, but she quilts." He grinned, "One out of three ain't bad."

"No," Sam agreed thoughtfully, considering the stitched pieces of tiny cloth that fitted together so neatly to form a grander design. "I suppose it's not."

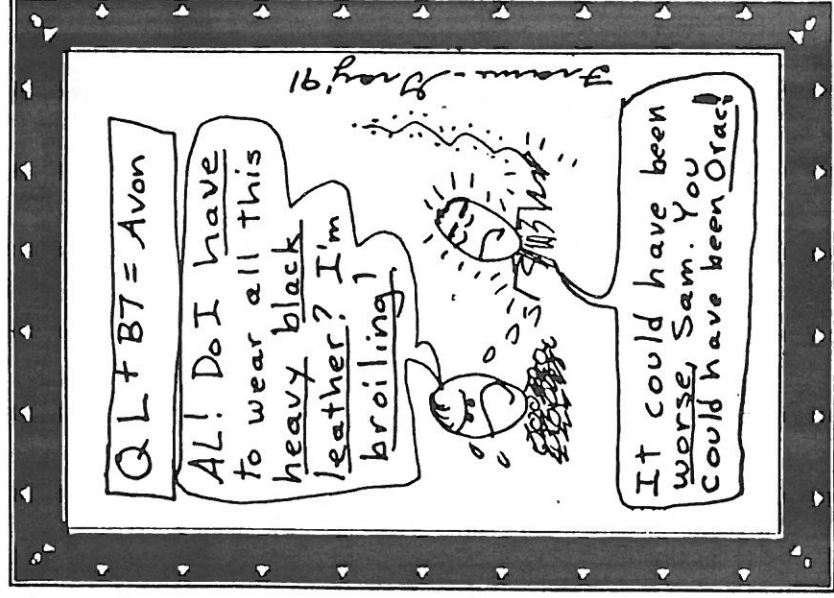
He paused, then said, "Al?"

"Yeah?" The observer turned just before the door.

Sam turned his head on the pillow. "Thanks, Al."

The older man grinned, "You're welcome, kiddo, anytime." With that, he continued out the door.

Wearily beyond anything he had ever known, Sam closed his eyes. Home. A smile curved his lips and he sighed, sliding closer to sleep. Home, and a complex new puzzle awaiting him as to how his leap had affected the present. The Quantum Leap logo was now a burst of silver and blue that he had seen every time he leaped and once described to Al. There was nothing, absolutely nothing more he wanted. Sighing, he slipped peacefully into sleep, at home.



April 1, 1969: Sam

by

Melissa Mastoris

Something doesn't feel right  
About this leap.  
It's as though I'm here to do  
Something completely different  
Than what Al says I'm here for.

He's been acting really weird;  
Almost obsessed with this girl,  
And the fact that she's about to  
Give up on her husband  
And marry someone else.

Maybe it's because  
It happened to him once.  
This leap is probably  
Bringing up the sort of things  
That he'd much rather forget.

But there's something about all this  
That's not quite right.  
I've never questioned him before  
But now it's different.  
Beth isn't the reason I'm here.

I know that as well  
As I know my own name.  
I also know that  
Al's hiding something from me.  
What, I don't know, but he is.

And until I can figure out  
What's really going on,  
The only thing I can do  
Is keep an eye on Beth,  
And an eye on Al at the same time.

That's the only thing I can think of doing,  
Until this thing becomes a little clearer,  
And makes any kind of sense,  
And maybe that'll be enough  
To make whatever's wrong right again.

April 1, 1969: A1

by

Melissa Mastoris

The minute I saw  
Beth's name on the readout  
I felt as though I had been  
Slammed in the stomach,  
My heart breaking  
At the very thought of her.

You think it's the leap,  
And the memories of Vietnam  
That are making me act so weird.  
Sam, if you only knew...  
But I know what you'd say  
If I tried to tell you.

Yes, I know the rules:  
We can't change our own lives,  
But I don't care about rules anymore.  
All I care about  
Is getting Beth back.  
Nothing else matters to me right now.

Do you know what it's like  
To lose the one woman  
That you truly loved?  
The one that you  
Wanted to grow old with,  
The one that made you truly happy?

But you can help me, Sam.  
You can make sure  
That she's there waiting for me  
When the war's finally over,  
And the Viet Cong  
Finally let me go.

You can get her back for me  
If you just stay with her  
For just this weekend.  
Please, Sam...  
Get her back for me.

## Second Circle

by Sharon Wisdom

Foul scents assailed him: the fetid odor of rotted undergrowth that was the jungle, layered over with the sickening reek of the shallow ditch that carried all the wastes of the village past the cage that held him. The strong scent of his own unwashed, abused body was almost a comfort against it.

Legs spread slightly, he braced his back against the bars of his cage, accepting the cruel bite of the bamboo against his shoulders in return for the luxury of extending his legs.

Searing, raging thirst ravaged him even as more precious moisture dripped from him while he sweated profusely in the killing, humid heat of the afternoon. The cold bite of night would come soon enough to dry it. Eyes closed, head down, he endured to survive. It was all he could do.

Endure. Survive. He did so much of that. He laughed when the Viet Cong told him Beth had divorced him for another man, a hard, angry laugh. Of course he did not believe them. It was part of the mind game, part of the chipping at his control, part of the lies and torture aimed at getting him to denounce his country and his role in the war. They knew that he loved her, knew it was what kept him sane, and it was the latest in the repertoire of torture intended to break his will.

The bastards. It was only when they got crude, badgering him day after day, describing in detail how she must moan another man's name, that he lost control. He took two of them down in the mud, would have killed them if his hands had been free. Beaten, tortured by the VC's rope version of the rack, shoved barely alive back into his cage, he heard American helicopters that night. So close overhead did they fly that their rotors whipped the branches into a frenzy about him in the cold, fevered darkness.

It had been uncounted months since the time they had hustled him through the jungle, so panicked that he suspected someone had been trying to rescue him. It had been years that they told him no one knew he was even alive and that rescue would never come. It was a lie, he'd seen the American photographer--hadn't he? They lied also about Beth. But still, rescue did not come.

Hands clenched about the bars, head thrown back in desperate, unthinking agony, he had screamed her name into the overwhelming noise of the oblivious copters. There had been no answer.





Liars. Of course the VC lied, and he never believed. Never. It was how he survived. They could hold his body captive, but his mind was always free.

Repatriated at last, but not truly home he did not want to believe the quiet voiced V.A. doctor that told him it was true. But then he had no choice but belief. There was the letter from Beth that explained it all. His name was Dirk, not Richard, and he was a lawyer, not a doctor as in the VC's lies.

But still, knowing it was true was like falling. Falling into a vast pit of heat and cold and starvation and thirst. Falling, with the sound of retreating copters so loud that it nearly shook his heart from his chest. Falling, and copters. Falling....

\* \* \*

Starting violently, Al clutched at the chair's arms and awoke from the dream with a painful jar. There was the soft hiss of pressurized air in his ears, hard plastic beneath his white-knuckled hands, and Sam's concerned hand on his shoulder.

"Al? You okay?"

Nodding, he drew a deep breath, relaxing his hands with an effort. He was on a commercial flight, he realized, on the way to Portland, Oregon to a physicist's conference as an honored guest. Looking up at the younger man, who bent over him, one hand resting on the back of the plane seat before them, the other on his shoulder, he nodded, dashing sweat from his eyes with one hand. "I'm fine."

Sam shot him a concerned look, then bent to pick up his lap top computer out of his seat and sat down. "Must have been some dream," he observed with a casualness that didn't fool his companion in the least. But, still badly shaken by the abrupt transition from the shattering dream to reality, Al couldn't think of a witty comeback that he could make convincing. He settled for a shrug and a nod.

Excusing himself, he stood and, retrieving his carry on bag from the overhead compartment, headed for the men's room. Inside the tiny cubicle he splashed water on his face with trembling hands until his breathing steadied.

Feeling ill, he wondered shakily what could have triggered the old dream. He hadn't had it in months--not since Sam had leapt back to April 1, 1969, and he'd nearly gone crazy trying to force him to change the past--and the ending of the dream. Those few days he had tortured himself with the might-have-beens. He had let himself hope, and the dream, stilled for years, had come

back with a vengeance.

He had let it go--had to let it go--as he had so many years before in that V.A. hospital when he had decided he was too stubborn to lay down and die. Foolishly, he had thought it gone forever. But he had been wrong, and he could find no reason for it to blind side him now. He was on his way to celebrate the project that had won Sam and him a shared Nobel Prize, and there was no trouble lurking anywhere that he could see.

Slowly he pushed himself upright, catching sight of his reflection in the small mirror. He looked like hell; pale and sweaty, and with the haunted look back in his eyes. Shuddering once, so hard that it hurt him, he hoisted the bag up and began to search for a clean shirt. There was a beautiful blond sleeping in the last row of their compartment and he intended to look much better than he did at the present when he made his move. He was done with agony.

\* \* \*

Absently, Sam typed out his speech on the keyboard in his lap, using only a small portion of his attention. It was always the same basic talk, on the physics of leaping, and its more metaphysical implications. A greater portion of his attention was focused on the men's room into which Al had disappeared. He knew that look, and he knew what it meant, even if he'd rarely seen it.

Casting a glance at his watch, he was about to go knock discreetly on the door when he heard it open. As if absorbed in his task, he kept his eyes on the keyboard, in reality listening to Al's jaunty step in the isle behind him.

Glancing up, he met his friend's eyes for a brief instant. As if back to his old self, Al gave him a wink, shoved his bag back into the compartment, flagged a passing steward to request a white wine and a scotch, then turned to go back the way he had come.

Cautiously, Sam turned his head and peeked about the chair back to see his companion slide into an empty seat beside a tanned, blond beauty who was stretching as if just waking. Al said something softly that drew a smile from her. Accepting the liquor from the steward, he handed the wine to her, turning in his seat to focus his whole attention on his quest for her favor.

Sighing, Sam ruefully shook his head and turned back to his speech. Why did he even bother to worry?

\* \* \*

Portland's airport was not overly large, not overly busy on an early December Friday afternoon. A single abused suitcase, wrapped about with strapping tape to bind wounds which it had suffered in transit was the sole, sad occupant on the luggage carousel that was to yield their baggage.

Hands in his pockets, Al watched for their cases to arrive with portion of his attention, and for the blond with the other. Anna had turned out to be an oceanographer who was on her way to the coast to research whales.

He'd barely gotten down to serious flirting when the flight had landed. But he was pretty sure she'd be amenable to spending some time with him. An invitation to attend the keynote dinner where he and Sam were speaking ought to set things up nicely. She was, she had told him, spending the night in Portland before driving to the coast.

Driving. Al frowned at the thought and cast a glance down the hallway that led to the rental car agencies. Maybe he should have gone to take care of the car and let Sam snag the luggage. Why hadn't he thought of that earlier? There would be all that wait time at the counter and he could have suggested that she...

The sight of a petite, dark haired woman entering the terminal slammed the breath from him. Beth. Her name came unbidden to his lips, too soft even to be heard by the few scattered travelers about the area.

Beth. He could feel the color drain from his face at the shock. It was her--he was certain--even though her head was down as she struggled to tow a large suitcase and a small boy while carrying a drowsy baby in her arms. She had the same shiny dark hair though now she wore it long, and same delicate curve to her cheekbone that he remembered so well. Beth.

But it could not be her, he realized as he drew a breath at last, feeling as if he were struggling for air. She looked no older and it had been nearly three decades since she had been so young. Age would have taken some toll on her.

Realizing he was staring, but unable to stop, he watched her draw nearer. She looked stressed, but kind, as she balanced the baby and tugged at the wheeled suitcase with her free hand.

The other child, a boy of about three, walking at her side, was obviously unhappy. Protesting, he alternated between stubbornly planting his feet until coaxed to move and pulling at his mother's skirt.

Finally he brought the procession to a halt directly before Al by throwing his small body across the suitcase. "I want Toot,

Mommy!" he wailed clearly, pushed beyond all motherly reasoning. "Please get Toot!"

The pure distress in the tone drew Al's attention and he looked from the mother to the impassioned child and back again. Obviously embarrassed, she looked up to meet his gaze only briefly.

"Cory," she said softly, embarrassed exasperation in her tone. "You're going to upset Sarah. I told you. Toot's safe. We don't.."

"I want him," Cory wailed, unimpressed by the assurance. "Get him out!"

"Cory, you know you forget Toot sometimes, and we don't want to leave him here. So..."

"I want him!" the child's wails rose. As she tried to pry him from the suitcase, he clutched harder with both hands as if it held vast treasure for him.

Al cleared his throat, knowing it was obvious he had been watching for some time. "If 'Toot' is somebody important," he said to the young mother on the other side of the rail that enclosed the luggage area, "you may want to think about it." He nodded toward the lone mutilated suitcase revolving on the carousel. "Sometimes the airlines aren't...good...with luggage."

An expression of dismay crossed her pretty face and Al felt his chest contract at how much she resembled Beth. "I didn't think of that," she said. "But," she shifted the baby in her arms in an effort to increase her pull on the distraught preschooler at her feet, "it's a little late, now." Her attempt at dislodging Cory drew another wail and she whispered. "Cory, please. Grandma's parking the car. Then she'll be in, and she can..."

"No! I want Toot!"

Unable to hide his smile, Al said, "Maybe I can help." Leaving the luggage area by the gate, he came around to the scene. "Hey, bud," he said to the wailing child. "Want to bust Toot outta there?"

Suspicious, Cory lifted tear-filled eyes to regard him and stopped crying, but did not budge from the case, as if unwilling to give up his position of strength. "Smart kid," Al said to his mother. "He knows bargaining power when he's got it."

With a rueful nod, the young mother released her older child's hand. "It's locked," she said, fumbling in a stuffed bag

at her side. "And the key's buried."

The baby began to fuss at the jostling and, amazed that he did so, Al reached out to take her. Handed over to him as her mother gratefully used both hands to search for the key, the child regarded him with the wide-eyed fascination of a ten month old.

A bit uncomfortable under the scrutiny, which was mirrored by the older child, Al looked down at the boy. "So," he said, "What brings you to Portland?"

"Grandma," was the succinct answer to which Al could think of no reply. Looking down at the baby, he winked, but got only a fascinated stare in response.

Beginning to wonder just how he had gotten so involved, Al patted her shoulder awkwardly. What the heck was he going to do if she started to cry?

Luckily Toot, who turned out to be a bear with a loved-off ear, was freed quickly. Al returned the baby, Sarah, to her mother without undue incident. Relieved at that small success, he accompanied them to the airline counter to check in their luggage.

Al hoisted the heavy suitcase onto the break in the counter. Tossling Cory's hair, he winked at the baby who favored him with a smile. Leaving them with the thanks of the young woman, whose name he learned was Rebecca, Al headed back to the luggage area, which was now crowded.

Catching sight of Anna leaving with her designer luggage neatly balanced on a cart, he drew a breath to call to her. But for a reason he could not explain, he let her go.

Suddenly exhausted, he rubbed a hand along his jaw and went to claim his and Sam's bags. A bit slowly, he gathered them up and went to find out what was taking so long with the car. Far behind him, he heard Cory's delighted shout, "Grandma!" But, too weary and burdened with baggage, he continued on his way.

\* \* \*

Impeccably dressed in his Admiral's uniform nearly a full hour before they needed to be downstairs for the dinner, Al began to pace. His hotel room seemed cramped and small despite the fact that one wall window filled with a view of Portland's night cityscape. He suspected the perception had more to do with his state of mind than the accommodations.

Striding the length of the room, he paused once before the

wall sized window, then turned away to cross to the dresser and comb his hair once again. He wanted a cigar, and he wanted it almost more strongly than he had in the first weeks since Sam had badgered him into quitting. The craving had been growing since the dream on the airplane and now the need for the feel of a cigar in his fingers was nearly a physical pain. On the way into the hotel he had made a subtle recon of the gift shop and found they had joined the rabid socially conscious move not to sell tobacco. There was a coin-operated vending machine in the lobby but it sold only cigarettes and Al only smoked cigarettes when he was desperate.

He was an adult, damn it, and if he wanted to smoke, he would. Galvanized into action by the thought, he caught up his overcoat and poked his head through the open suite door that joined his room to Sam's. Hearing the sound of the shower, he slipped in and knocked on the bathroom door. Opening it a crack, he stuck his head through it. "Hey, Sam, I'm going out. I'll meet you at the dinner." Withdrawing, he pretended not to hear Sam's question and slipped out again. In his frame of mind, he had no patience for long explanations.

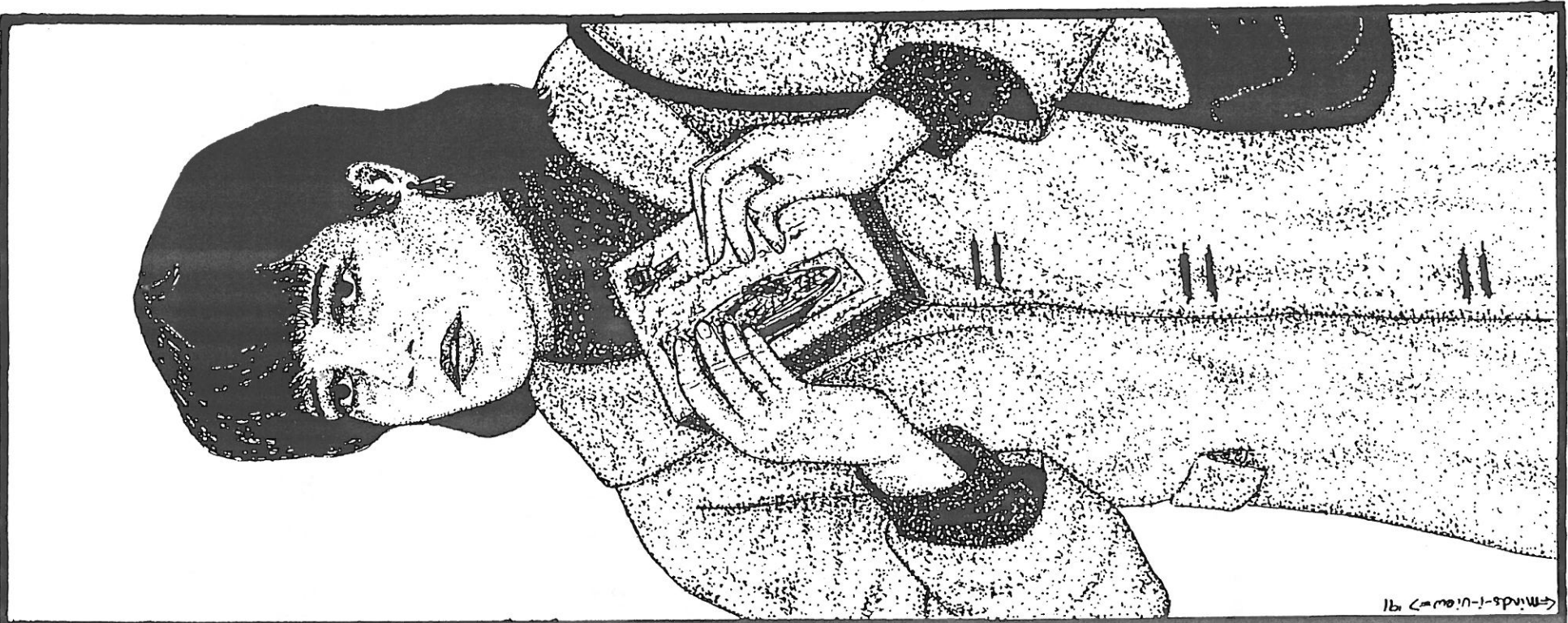
Out in the city, he found the odd, driven restlessness did not subside. Cheerful Christmas decorations and Santas on the street corners did little to ease his mood as the search for a nearby tobacco shop was fruitless. The frustration only served to fire his determination. He wanted a cigar, and he was going to have one, no matter if the time was running short before his speaking engagement.

Heading the rental car toward the super store he'd seen on the way, he knew Sam would cover for him. As the project observer, Al was supposed to speak first and warm them up, but the physicist could handle it until he got there. Admiral Albert Calavicci could charm his way through anything. Almost anything.

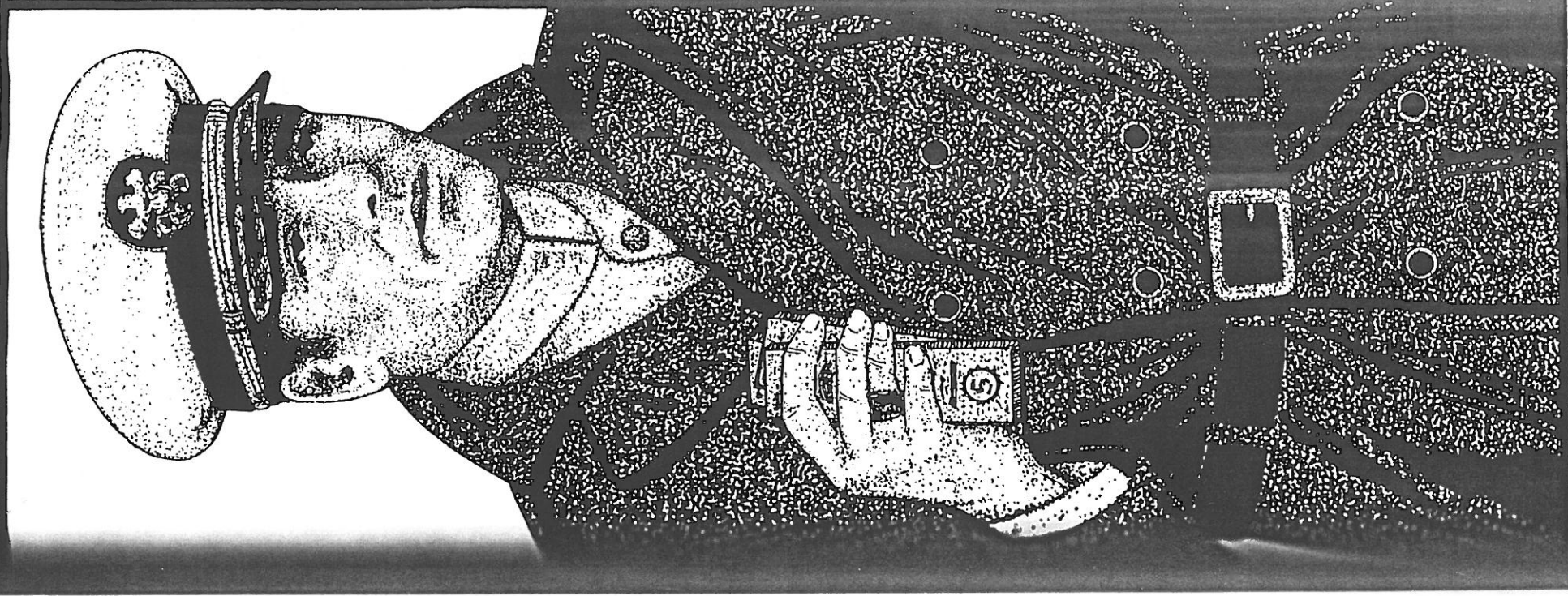
Hurrying into the store in single-minded determination, he spied a display of cigarettes on the isle opposite the frozen foods. Reasoning that where there were cigarettes, there should be cigars, he headed for them without looking about him further.

A few moments of searching yielded Roi-tans, not his usual brand, but they'd do. Picking up a box of five, he glanced at his watch and confirmed that he was going to be late if he didn't hurry. Turning, head down, he started toward the checkout, colliding midway with another shopper.

Instinctively reaching out to steady her, he took a step away, eyes going to her face. "Excuse me..." The polite phrase died on his lips. Beth--and this time there was no mistake. There was the same stunned shock of recognition in her eyes that he felt in his own.



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"Al," she said softly, much as he had said her name earlier at the airport.

Slowly aware that they were standing in the middle of the store, staring at each other, he released her arm. Clearing his throat, he took a step back and forced himself to look away from her face, a face more kindly touched by time than his own. Bending down, he retrieved the item she had dropped. Rising, he handed the single serving frozen entree back to her. "Looks like a lonely supper to me," he observed, wishing immediately that he could call back the comment that he'd used so often to meet women in similar situations.

Accepting it from him, she held it to her chest, arms folded over it as if somehow protective. "Well, I...I'm eating alone these days."

"Oh, I see." Barely, just barely, he recalled the question that came to mind. He could not seem to take his eyes from her face.

As if he'd asked it, she lowered her eyes, shifting the box to one hand. "Dirk passed away six months ago--heart attack," she said softly, uncomfortably.

"Ah," Al nodded, running an uneasy hand along his jaw and wanting the comfort of a cigar desperately. "I see." There was a short, awkward pause, and he added. "You...do you have kids?"

"Yes, a boy and a girl. Dirk Jr. and Daniel are away at Harvard. Rebecca, my daughter left today to fly back to L.A.."

Realization came to Al and he nearly smiled. "With Cory, Sarah...and Toot."

Surprised, she lifted her gaze to his and it did not slide away for the first time. "How could you know that?"

"I met them at the airport," he answered with a faint smile, feeling some of the strain between them abate. "Rebecca looks like you."

Beth's smile was fleeting, but sincere. "She said a man helped rescue Toot, but I never would have suspected it to have been you. I thought you were in New Mexico."

"And I never connected you with Grandma," he answered with a slight grin on his own.

Blushing a bit, she shook her head, and his smile faded as

he gazed at her. Her eyes were still warm and clear, traced about with lines as if she had often smiled in her life. "You look wonderful, Beth," he said impulsively, honestly.

Her blush deepened but her eyes lingered on his. "It's been so long. I've missed you, Al."

There it was again, the invisible hand that drove the breath from him. It had been so long, and still the sight of her was enough to stop him dead. He felt so much and there was so little he could say.

Reaching out, he took the frozen dinner from her unresisting hand. "I know a great Mexican place overlooking the river," he said, looking into her eye. "What do you say we go catch up?"

Hesitating only an instant, she nodded and he slipped the box into the nearest freezer. Still awkward, they went through the checkout, making conversation about the weather as Al paid for his cigars.

On the way to the car, he asked if she still smoked. When she answered that she had quit, he replied, "So did I," as he opened the door.

Laughing, she got in and caught the door before he could close it, saying, "I quit four times. And I've still got an emergency stash of low-tar menthols."

Sharing her laughter, he closed the door and, going about to the driver's side, got in. Pulling out his keys, he was about to start the engine when she spoke quickly, as if on impulse encouraged by his laughter. "Did you get the letter I sent you?"

The letter. Al's hands stilled for a heartbeat. "Letter?" he asked, not looking at her in the cold darkness.

"The one I wrote you when I saw that picture of you that woman photographer took." Her voice faltered and she did not define it more. She didn't need to. It had to be Maggie's picture...her soul-purchased Pulitzer.

"I gave it to the Navy to give to you," she finished awkwardly. "To explain, when I realized you were still alive."

Still alive. He'd been near dead when he read that letter. Hadn't he? And it had nearly finished him. That damned letter that told him she'd learned too late that he was alive, that she was married and pregnant, and she prayed he'd understand. Whenever one of his marriages would end, he would reread it, looking for any encouragement there and never finding it. The mention of a child--another man's child--always stopped him cold;

always brought that searing, terrible pain of irretrievable loss.

He had destroyed it after he and his third wife had divorced. Burned it in his ashtray and gone out to get roaring drunk for three days. It was Sam that had come to get him in Vegas, listened patiently to his rambling, nearly incoherent pain for hours, sobered him up, and got him back to work on the Star Bright Project. That damned letter.

"No," he lied, the car's engine coming to life with a comforting roar at his touch. "No, I never got it."

\* \* \*

Al thought once of Sam as they drove past the tall, reflective building that was their hotel. He intended to call when they reached the restaurant but once there it fled from his thoughts, pushed aside by the conflicting mix of emotions that beset him.

The place was warm, and dark, with wide windows that afforded such an expansive view of the river and its marina that it was like being a part of the darkness itself. Seated close by a window, Al watched Beth's face in the candlelight as she read her menu, and later as she gave her order to the waiter.

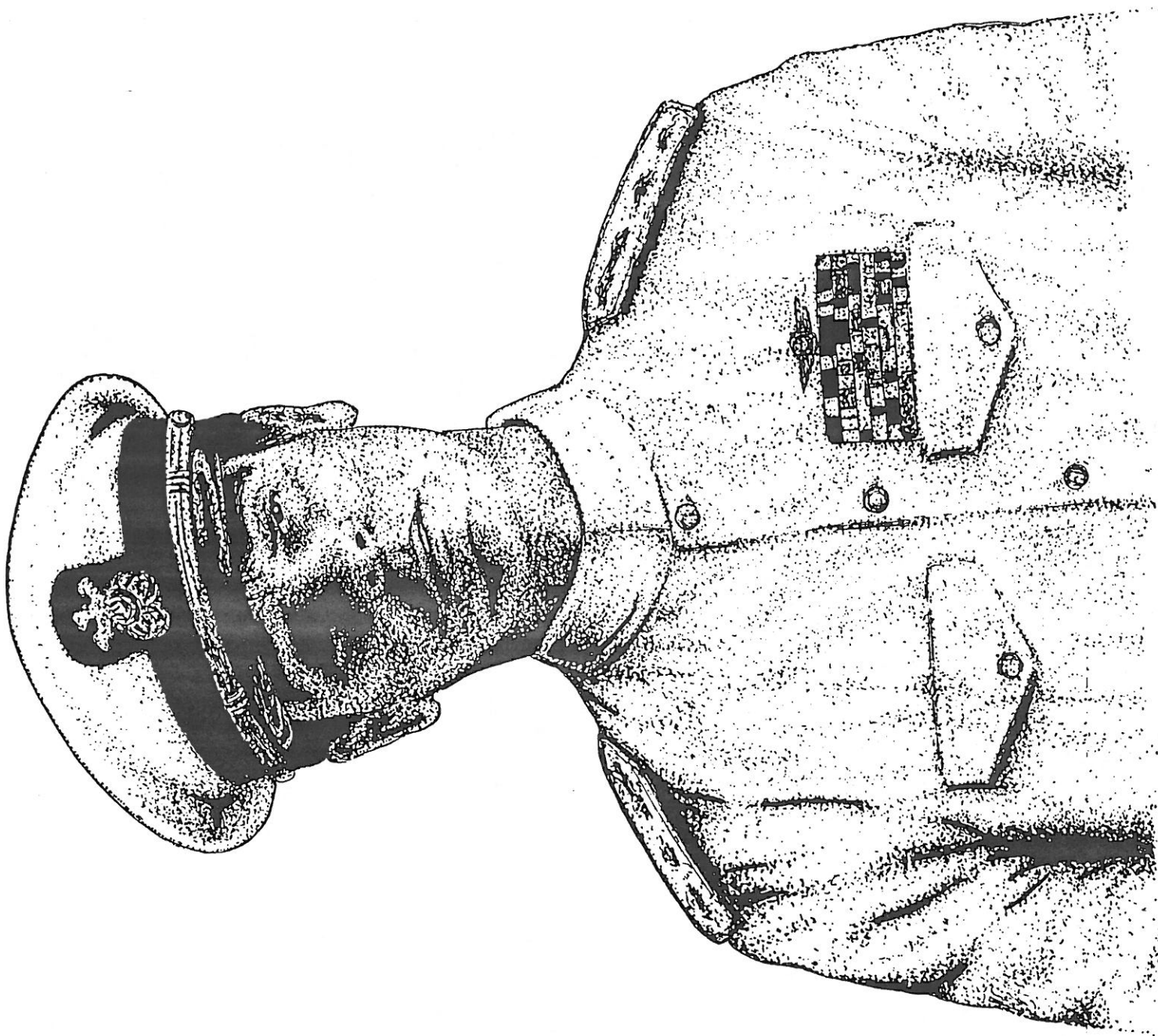
Even matured and changed as she was, the sight hurt him as if it had been the day before that he had knelt at her feet and, unheard, begged her to hear him, to wait for him. She hadn't waited, and still he loved her, loved her so much that the brilliant pain tore at his throat and he had to look away to the marina lights and the slow, heavy flakes of snow that had begun to drift past them.

As if reading his mood, or perhaps sharing it, she briefly excused herself and left him to his thoughts. When she returned, he had recovered, pushing away old hurt for the sake of the evening which he would not allow himself to think beyond.

Looking up as she came back to the table, he said, "So, are you still nursing?"

At the same moment, she began, "So, tell me what it's like to win a Nobel prize."

Laughing together, the awkwardness between them abated again and the conversation came more easily. Soon it flowed between them with something akin to the warmth of old friends that had lived enough years past an unpleasantness to slide back to an earlier rapport.



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Heads together at the small table bordered by night they talked for hours. She told him of her children, and the joy they had brought her. She spoke of her career in nursing and of returning to it after they were gone. The house was silent, she told him, now that Dirk was gone and her duties as the wife of a state senator were finished. She took great comfort in the nursing which filled her nights and days.

He, in turn, told her of the exciting, heady years with NASA, the Star Bright project, and the wonderful, yet terrifying roller coaster ride that had been the Quantum Leap project in the days not so long past when Sam had been at the mercy of time. Sam he spoke of often, of his personal honors less frequently, and of the dark, terrible days not at all.

He had, he said, heard that Dirk was elected to the state senate, and she remarked she had seen Al sharing the cover of Time with Sam. It was a good picture, she thought, but not as good as the one that had been in People when he was with NASA. The P.O.W. shot neither of them mentioned again.

They did not speak at all of the most significant portion of the past they shared. Always, they edged away from it, taking turns steering the conversation to safer waters when they drifted too near.

Finally, the conversation slowed, and they realized they were the only couple remaining in the restaurant. The waiter had long since ceased to interrupt them and was engaged in an indepth discussion of his own with the cashier.

Al offered to drive her home rather than take her back to her car since the streets were now snow covered. Readily she agreed, saying she lived fairly near the restaurant and could easily catch a ride back to the parking lot the next day.

It was on the drive to her house that the conversation truly died. The snow began to fall more heavily in driven swirls of white that made the dark, warm space of the car seem smaller somehow. The last mile was driven in complete silence, Al following Beth's earlier directions that took them to an upscale subdivision on a bluff above the river.

Pulling the car to a stop, Al hesitated and looked past Beth to a massive, dark Tudor. She followed his gaze as if the sight were alien to her as well. "The bulb must have burned out over the door," she said, her voice clear in the sudden silence as he shut off the engine. "I thought I had left it on."

"I'll walk you in," he volunteered. "Make sure everything's okay before I go."

"Thanks," she returned as he got out and came to open the door for her. Getting out, she cast an oddly uncomfortable look at her waiting home. "I'm not used to coming home to an empty house," she said a bit uneasily. "It just never seems to get any easier."

Taking her arm to help her up the slightly icy steps, Al glanced up at the tastefully elegant house. "Nice place."

"Thank you," she answered, and the conversation died again as they approached the entrance.

Unlocking the heavy, carved door, she pushed it open and flicked on the light to the front hall. Hesitating a bit, Al paused in the doorway, looking into the brightness of what was now Beth's world. A curving staircase led upward to a second story, family photos lovingly placed along its bordering wall.

With one hand, Beth drew him in, flicking the outdoor light switch with the other. When there was no response, she nodded. "That must be it. The bulb's out."

Almost reluctantly, Al closed the door behind him. The composure he'd gained earlier in the restaurant was threatening to slip away, though he struggled to hold on to it. He should be going, shouldn't he?

"I'll be glad to look around," he said. "Make sure everything is secure if you'd feel better."

"Oh no," she shook her head. "I'm sure it's fine." Slipping off her coat, she turned to him. "But, you'll stay for coffee, won't you?"

Seeing her here, in another man's house made him ache. "Beth, I..."

Swiftly she stopped him with a hand on his arm as if she anticipated what he'd say. "Please."

Gazing at her, he was acutely aware of the photo's of Dirk and her children standing guard on the wall behind her. "Don't go," she said, drawing him a step forward. "Not just yet."

She was beautiful, at home in this beautiful, gracious place and he found himself shrugging off his overcoat and agreeing to stay for coffee. Shown into her living room, he drifted about it, drinking in the touches that were purely Beth, like the delicate watercolor of calla lilies on the far wall and the stereo where she had paused to turn on a golden-oldies station before she left the room. The family portrait hanging over the mantle he ignored as best he could, taking a seat that put it to

his back.

Returning with a tray laden with delicate china cups, she served him hot, fragrant coffee. Backed by the soft sound of music from past days in the room filled with soft lighting, he found it easy to believe they had somehow slipped back in time to happier days.

Slipping further into the illusion, he stood, pulling her with him in an invitation to dance when the old Righteous Brothers song 'Soul and Inspiration' came on the radio. Resisting only for an instant, she joined him, moving slowly, almost cautiously, a comfortable distance between them.

Once she was in his arms, Al nearly regretted the impulsive decision, for it stirred old hurts within the more pleasant memories. Still, he lingered, moving with her in the dim light, unwilling to forsake the warmth of her body so near his own to still the pain.

The labored pulse of his heart stirred the unwanted memory of the heavy beat of distant copter blades within him. He loved her, and she had left him. Gently he pulled her close, brushing his cheek against the silken, silver-streaked darkness of her hair as if it could somehow soothe the pain that constricted his chest until he felt he could not breathe.

When the song faded to be replaced by 'Georgia on My Mind', he faltered, as he felt her do as well. This time, this time he could touch her, speak to her, hold her--and she could see his pain. He didn't want that--had never wanted pity, never wanted her to know what she had done to him.

Torn, he lingered, pulling her closer, a reluctant, revealing unevenness in his indrawn breath. Pulling away only slightly, she met his eyes. Lifting one hand, she touched his cheek with small, cool fingers.

Eyes searching her face, he saw only acceptance there and slowly, almost tentatively, kissed her, a soft brush of his lips against her forehead. There was a faint flash of almost memory in her eyes and she questioned softly, "Al?"

When he did not answer, her fingers moved hesitantly to curve into the dark hair behind his right ear. He moved to kiss her again, closing his eyes. This time, yes, this time would be different.

The slow, sad song encircled them, moving with them as they danced, close in each other arms, and Al felt as if he were drowning in conflicting emotions. Closing his arms about her with exaggerated care, he drew her nearer, letting the tightly

controlled desire in him slip an infinitesimal degree more toward expression.

How many Vietnamese nights had he imagined her in his arms in just this way? How many? The sweet, passionate scenes in all their infinite variations had always begun with her joyous, faithful welcome home. All began with what would never be because she'd left him--left him!--for that shyster.

Hand buried in her hair, he kissed her again with something akin to desperation. He loved her. The thought was like a cry of protest against the welling of the agony of the never healed wound. Oh sweet Lord, he loved her.

Opening his eyes, he looked full into the portrait beyond her for the first time. Large and ornately framed, it hung over the mantle. Unexpectedly slammed by all the old pain and rage, he saw Dirk smiling at him, hand resting possessively on a younger Beth's shoulder, his children clustered about her like a line of advance guards.

Abruptly the sound of retreating copters swelled in his memory. American helicopters leaving him behind to the cage and the ropes and Charlie's taunts. "Rrrrichard, she'll moan."

"Al?" Concerned, Beth called his name.

Blinking, he surfaced from the terrible memories and, looking down, realized in surprise that he still held her. "Beth," his voice was husky and shaken. "I have to go."

She followed him as he moved hastily to the door. "Go? But..."

At the bewilderment in her voice, he paused after catching up his coat, reaching out to take her hand. Squeezing it, he kissed her lightly on the cheek. "I'll call you," he said, relying on old bachelor instincts. "Tomorrow. I'll call." With that he fled into the darkness, taking the silent sound of betraying copters with him.

\* \* \*

Cold and clear, morning dawned over Portland. The glitter of sun on the city's covering of snow was brilliant, even seeping about the heavy drawn drapes in Sam's room.

Unwillingly, the physicist rolled over and groaned. There were lectures to be given, panels to be chaired, and an angry conference organizer to be further soothed about Al's conspicuous absence from the keynote dinner.



Al. Sam opened his eyes, not certain if he were more angry or concerned. Pushing himself up, he reached for the pants he'd worn the day before. Normally he'd be angry, pure and simple, with maybe a little exasperated amusement mixed in for good measure. But that dream Al had on the plane and the way he had disappeared so soon after troubled him.

Padding barefoot to the connecting suite door, he knocked once, discreetly. Al hadn't been in at midnight, but that didn't mean he hadn't arrived later, with company.

At the muffled call of "Come in," he turned the knob and pushed the door open a few inches. The door blocking his view, he hesitated, calling, "You alone?"

At the affirmative reply, he finished the act of opening the door. "Al, where were you last night?" he asked, striding in.

The room was bright with the sun-lit glory of the day, curtains open wide as if they'd never been drawn the night before. Shoulders slightly hunched as he stood with his hands tucked into his pockets, Al was a white clad silhouette against the breath-taking brilliance of the city.

Something in the line of his shoulders and back and the fact he was still clad in his Admiral's uniform gave Sam a second's pause. But anger carried him across the room. "O'Connor was breathing fire. Where..." At the sight of Al's face as he reached him, he interrupted himself. "What's wrong?"

The older man didn't turn, still gazing out at the city. His only answer was a faint shrug. Beside him, the table's ashtray was littered with cigarette butts and Sam's eyes traveled over them uneasily. As of yesterday, his friend hadn't been smoking at all that Sam knew, and the last time he'd seen him smoke cigarettes was that terrible three days in Vegas.

Taking Al's shoulder, he pulled him about to face him. "Where were you last night?" There was no longer any accusation in the tone.

Shrugging away from Sam's hand, Al turned and reached into his pocket for a crumpled pack of cigarettes. The sound of the cellophane was loud in the quiet room. "I was with Beth." His answer was terse, nearly unreadable.

"Beth?" Sam repeated in surprise. "Your Beth?" Instantly he wished he could change his choice of words.

Absorbed in pulling the cigarette from the pack and lighting it with hands that trembled faintly, Al seemed not to notice. "Beth Simon." It seemed a correction.



"But..." Sam regarded him in concern as the other man turned back to the view as if it held some fascination for him. "Beth's..." He faltered at the weariness on his friend's face. "Did you...I mean...she's married."

"I took her to dinner," he answered evenly, still gazing beyond him. "Had her home by eleven." Silence stretched between them for a moment, Sam searching his friend's face to find some clue there as to what to say next.

At last, moving between Al and the window, he said firmly, "Talk to me."

"Dirk's dead," came the answer, still too controlled for Sam's liking. "Had a heart attack six months ago and phtt--dead. Croaked. Bit the dust."

"And?"

"And," Al met his eyes for the first time, suggesting in honest uncertainty. "I don't know." His eyes narrowing, he drew deeply on the cigarette, then turned away to tap the ash into the full ashtray.

"You don't know," Sam repeated incredulously. "What do you mean, you don't know? You told me you loved her--really loved her. How could you not go after her if that's true?"

"I don't know," Al shook his head, his face lined with weariness. He gestured expressively. "I've been standing here all night asking myself that."

"And?"

"And," he shrugged again, absently rubbing his jaw. "I don't know. It just doesn't...feel right."

"Doesn't feel right," Sam repeated, watching the man he'd seen zero in on any female he wanted with the same remindedness of a heat-seeking missile. Considering him carefully, he watched as his friend paced away, and stopped to gaze in the direction of the river, hand tucked into his pocket.

"Where'd you meet her?" he asked at last.

Al made a sound that could have been a chuckle. "At the grocery store. In front of the frozen foods." He turned, gesturing with his cigarette. "And that woman I told you about yesterday--that's her daughter."

"Her daughter?"

"Yeah, and those were her grandkids." Al turned back to the city. "She was there too, I must have missed seeing her by seconds."

"Maybe," Sam began. "This is meant to be. Maybe..."

"Oh, no!" Recoiling, Al shook his head. "I'm not falling for that 'meant to be' stuff again. I thought," he turned almost angrily. "I thought it was 'meant to be' the second April first, 1969. I thought it was another chance, and I went after it so hard it nearly cost Skaggs his life."

"But it didn't," Sam interrupted firmly.

"Well, it cost me," Al snapped. "It cost me plenty. And I'm not," he turned away, "stirring up all that dirt again."

"Al," Sam stepped closer. "If you love her..."

"Oh, I love her, Sam." There was a hint of tears in his voice. "I love her." He shook his head. "But I don't know if I can let it go."

"Let it go?" Sam repeated, though he had a good idea what he meant.

Al's voice rose. "She met that jerk in April, had me declared dead, and married him in June."

"She was hurt, Al, and lonely. You said," Sam persisted despite the expression on his companion's face. "You said yourself she was vulnerable. She..." At the sharp, curt shake of Al's head, Sam stopped, drew a deep breath and tried a different angle.

"Look, get some sleep," he suggested. "Then think it over. You can always call her later. It's not like either of you are going anywhere today."

Shrugging, Al drew deeply on his cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray. "Maybe you're right, kid. Can you handle O'Connor?"

"Sure," Sam regarded him in concern. The bleakness in his face chilled him and he had a strong suspicion that more brooding, not sleep was his intention. "You going to be okay?"

The admiral shrugged with an attempt at a grin. "Sure, kiddo. I'm fine. None of this is fatal."

"It doesn't have to be over," Sam persisted. "Call her



and..."

"Let it go, Sam," Al warned, the huskiness in his tone persuading him to let it rest more than the fact that his companion waved him away. "Get on outta here. Go talk quantum physics and have a good time."

"Okay," Sam said quietly, reluctantly. It seemed there should be more he should say but what it should be escaped him. He had a feeling Al wasn't in the mood to take much more meddling, no matter how well intentioned. Feeling woefully inadequate, he left the man to his thoughts. How could it be he'd helped so many people while leaping about in time and now, back at home, he was helpless with his closest friend?

\* \* \*

Showering and dressing, Sam left his room and headed to the elevator. Preoccupied, he nearly did not recognize the well dressed, middle aged woman who stepped off it. It was only when she hesitated, as if uncertain of which direction to go that he fully looked at her.

"Beth!" he said in surprise.

Turning, she seemed to recognize him, but said, "How do you know me?"

Behind him, the elevator chimed, but he let it go. "I, um," Sam ducked his head, searching for a plausible reason. "I'm a friend of Al Calavicci." He lifted his eyes to meet hers. "And I've seen--your picture." Uncomfortable, he continued, "I'm Sam Beckett."

"I know," she replied with even composure. "I recognized you from your picture on the cover of Time last month."

"Oh," Sam nodded. "What brings you here?"

She hesitated, then, as if finding encouragement in his eyes, answered. "I'm looking for Al. He mentioned he was staying on the top floor here and that he had a view of the river. But he didn't say what room, and the desk clerk wouldn't tell me."

"Ah," Sam nodded. "I see." Reaching out, he pressed the call button on the elevator, saying as casually as he could. "Room 814."

"814," she repeated, eyes on his. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," he answered, "It was nice to meet you."



He turned to wait for the elevator, silently praying it would take its time about arriving. He was acutely aware of her footsteps as she left him to approach Al's door. The sound of her knock was surprisingly loud and firm in the carpeted silence.

"Come on, Al," Sam thought when she knocked again after a short time. "Answer the door." But the silent command brought forth no tangible results. Beth was knocking for the third time, as acutely aware of Sam as he was of her when the elevator chimed and opened.

Letting it close and go again without him, he turned to Beth. Hesitating, she looked toward him as he approached. "Do you think he's not in?"

"He's there," Sam assured her, forming a plan. Reaching her, he looked down into her eyes, remembering the long night she had sobbed in his arms. He'd not known then, even a portion of her pain and how it affected a man that he cared for as well.

"He's there." He kept his voice low, speaking softly. "But he's not in the best of moods. Are you sure you want to see him now?"

She hesitated only an instant, then nodded and Sam was convinced of the rightness of what he was about to do. Stepping back, he motioned her to follow him to the door to his room. Unlocking it, he was aware of her intent scrutiny. "We haven't met before--have we?" she asked uncertainly.

"No," he kept his head down as he pushed open the door. "Not exactly."

Leaving her no time to question him further, he ducked into his room, motioning her to follow. A cautious woman, she entered no further than the door, leaving it open behind her.

Aware she watched him closely, Sam knocked once on the suite door, and opened it a crack to poke his head in. "Al?"

"Go away, Sam." The words were full of pain and no malice. He could not see Al, for he was sitting in an armchair turned toward the window, but the tone told Sam everything he needed to know.

Pushing the door open wider, he stepped back, motioning Beth forward. For a moment, she remained where she was, then drew a deep breath as if to prepare herself. Coming forward, she slipped past him, resting a hand briefly on his arm in silent thanks as she passed by him.

When she was in the room, he nodded once in encouragement





and closed the door to leave them to it. One thing he had learned while leaping was that he could only set the stage, the other players had to do the rest. Drawing a deep breath, much as Beth had done, he went to join the conference and 'talk quantum physics' as Al had instructed. But he had a feeling that today it would be much less fun than usual.

\* \* \*

Standing before the door Sam closed, Beth gazed at the back of Al's chair a long moment as if it could give her a clue as to what to say to the man in it. There were so many years of pain between them to balance so few years of joy and yet the scale had tipped to bring her here. How could she ever make him understand?

Wearily Al closed his eyes, head propped against his hand. "Go away, Sam," he thought desperately. "I know you want to help, but just go away."

A faint atavistic sense warned him there was someone behind him even before he heard steps and caught a faint whiff of perfume. It was Ombre Rose, he realized with a pang. The fragrance Beth had worn.

Warned, he was about to get to his feet when there was a light touch on his white-knuckled hand. "Al?"

Shaking his head, he briefly closed his eyes in resignation as she slipped about his chair. "Sam," he growled, the word carrying all the threat of his meaning he wanted to convey to the absent physicist. He shifted to get to his feet when she caught his hand more firmly and knelt before him. "Al, wait. Just listen to me."

Stricken, feeling somehow trapped and betrayed, he found looking into her eyes brought a nearly unbearable rush of bittersweet pain. "Oh, Beth, honey, you shouldn't be here."

"Yes," her voice was even and strong. "Yes, I should." Firmly, she continued before he could interrupt. "Last night I laid awake for hours trying to decide what I was going to say when you called this morning. Then, about two, it occurred to me that maybe you wouldn't call...ever."

Despite his best intentions, he lifted a hand to stroke her cheek, mutely shaking his head. How could there be words to deny it?

Her small hands tightened on his. "When I first saw you last night, I thought that God had forgiven me, and brought you back to me."



Al took a breath to speak, but she shook her head to forestall him. "But, it wasn't just God I needed to forgive me."

"Beth, honey," Al's eyes filled with tears as he leaned forward to clasp her hands in his. "You did what you had to, I know that."

"But, I hurt you, Al, and for that I am so sorry."

Getting to his feet, he gently pulled her up with him, her hands in his. "That was a long time ago. It's over and done with."

"No," she shook her head. "It's not over. There's something I need you to understand." She met his eyes resolutely. "I cared for Dirk."

When he tried to pull away, she refused to let him go. "I cared for him, and we had a good life together. He kept me warm and secure, and gave me wonderful children. He was a good companion. But," she lifted one hand to his cheek to force him to meet her eyes. "I never felt the passion for him that I felt for you...never."

"I loved you, Al, and I always will." Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Can you ever forgive me for what I did to you?"

Gathering her into his arms, he closed his eyes, tears slipping free at last. "When I came home, honey, and found you'd left me, I thought I'd die." Drawing a shuddering breath, he rested his cheek on her hair. "But, I was wrong and, when for a time I thought it could all go right and it went bad, I gave you up again...forever."

Pulling away, she looked up at him in question, but he did not explain, smiling down at her. "I guess I was wrong about that, too."

His hand was trembling as he brought it up to cup the nape of her neck. As if it were an invitation, she moved into his arms. It was like an old, beloved dance and his free arm went about her waist, gently drawing her close against him.

Kissing her once, softly, he was flooded by sudden, poignant desire and closed his arms about her in a swift, powerful movement. Unsurprised, as if she danced the same dance as he, she responded, kissing him with an equal passion.

Passion. And no beat of betrayal in his chest, no faint, faint sound of deserting copters. The light from the snow



covered city was blinding, blurred by the tears in his eyes as he led his willing love to his bed.

He was going to give Sam a hug, then a swift kick in the butt for being such a meddler when he saw him next. That, he reflected before he ceased to think of the physicist at all, would likely not be for several hours...or days.

