

The Worst of Times, The Beast of Times

by A.N.D.

A Quantum Leap/BatB (Season 2) story

Energy swirled around Sam, and he felt reality slipping away as the erratic Quantum Leap project once again took hold. He had just enough time to wonder where and when - and who! - he would be this time when, with a wrench, he arrived.

It took a second for his eyes to adjust; wherever he was was dark and lit only by sparse candles. Sam could smell leather and must and water, and he heard an irregular metallic banging in the distance.

And he could definitely feel the body heat of the woman he was holding tight in his arms.

Startled, Sam let go and practically jumped backwards. "I, uh, I..."

The woman barely came up to the chin of the body he was now possessing. She was quite pretty, Sam thought appreciatively, with soft honey-brown hair swept to one side and solemn green eyes. Those eyes met his and Sam's heart all but stopped, afraid he was about to be taken to task for leaping away from her like a scalded cat.

Fortunately, she seemed to be used to that sort of thing, because all she said was, "It's been lovely, Vincent. I'll come meet you tomorrow night for the concert."

"Conthert," Sam echoed blankly. "Oh, yeth the conth-concert." It took some concentration for him to manage his pronunciation; something seemed to be getting in the way of his tongue.

"I can't think of anything I'd like more than sharing moonlight and Mozart in the park with you, Vincent," she said with a sultry look. Then she turned and disappeared in the darkness beyond the door.

The moment she was gone, Sam began frantically patting his clothes, looking for a pocket with some ID. He found plenty of pockets, full of assorted trinkets - some string, a tea bag, a slim edition of Shakespearean sonnets, a box of matches, a homemade slingshot - but no wallet. No ID of any kind.

Frustrated, Sam turned to the clutter around him, looking for a mirror. The most amazing stuff was heaped all around the cave-like room, illuminated by the candles and the light from a stained glass window. There were books, candles set in every possible sort of holder, books, a juke box of the sort used in roadside diners, candles, more books, a chest full of old toys, books, several classical statues, more candles, even more books, assorted knickknacks including a carved elephant and a toy carousel, several extra candles, and, for a change of decor, some books.

But no mirror. No reflecting surface of any kind.

"Sam?" The voice of AI, Sam's holographic partner, came tentatively out of the gloom behind him. Sam turned eagerly to it, hoping that AI could use his link to the project supercomputer to tell him what was going on.

"Sam? Are you - AAAAHHHHH!!!"

AI, who had been standing half in and half out of what looked like a cushion-covered bed, suddenly bolted backwards, disappearing almost entirely into a statute of Justice. Sam whirled, trying to see what had frightened his friend. What could hurt a hologram? AI's real body was safe in the waiting room of the Project. Sam stared wildly into the darkness. There was nothing there, and just as he was beginning to worry that the mysterious threat was in the future with AI, he again heard the familiar voice calling hesitantly behind him.

"Sam?"

"AI! Are you all right?" Sam strode over to where AI was peeking out of the masonry, but as he reached out, AI flinched and looked away.

"AI? What's wrong?"

"You are!" AI gestured in his general direction with a cigar butt, still refusing to look at him. "Sam, you won't believe where you ended up this leap. Jeeze, and he seemed like such a regular guy in the waiting room."

"AI, tell me what's going on!" Sam stopped, frustrated. "AI, you can see me. I'm a bucktoothed or something? I'm having a little trouble talking."

"Or something," AI said, grimly. He glanced around the clutter while carefully avoiding facing Sam. After a second, he pointed to a colonial style pitcher and basin. "Pour some water in there and take a look at yourself."

Sam poured and looked. He looked at the long, tangled hair; the furry, slanted eyebrows reaching down his nose; the muzzle-like upper lip; and the huge fangs exposed as his jaw dropped in shock.

"Oh, boy," Sam whimpered. "AI, what AM I?"

"Beats me," was the reply. "But now I know why he was more interested in looking at your body than the Waiting Room decor. Usually the people you leap into are so curious about where they are that they don't realize that they're stuck in your body as well. He knew right off."

"Where is this place? Who is this guy - wait a minute, I AM a guy, right?" Considering what else he'd seen, he was afraid to look.

"I certainly hope so, 'cause the only thing worse than a guy who looks like that is a girl who looks like that."

AI diddled with his commlink to Ziggy, but even after he gave it several sideways smacks that made it squeal like a disappointed video game, he didn't seem to find any illumination in its blinking lights. "I can't find anything," he reported, worried. "There doesn't seem to be any record of what this place is or where it is or anything. It's September 7, 1988, but that's all I can tell you."

"That's all?" Sam wailed.

"That's all," Al repeated unhappily. "Hang on, Sam. I'm gonna go talk to the guy in your body and see if he can tell us anything." He punched a few buttons on the interface and Sam heard the Imaging Chamber door *shoop* open.

"Waitaminute Al, don't leave me..."

SHOOP

"...alone," Sam concluded miserably.

Uneven footsteps could be heard approaching the doorway of the chamber, and Sam suddenly wondered if being alone was such a bad idea after all. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be any back exit, so he stood his ground and hoped that whoever it was wouldn't react as badly to him as he had to himself.

A bearded older man, dressed in an assortment of worn clothes even less related to each other than Al's usual choices, limped into the room with a cane made out of what looked to be an unadulterated tree branch.

"Ah, Vincent," the newcomer said. "Catherine has left?"

Sam nodded mutely and the man came over and patted him consolingly on the shoulder. "I thought perhaps I could interest you in little game of chess now that you're free, hmmm?"

That seemed safe enough, and Sam nodded again, wondering if chess playing was one of the talents he had forgotten he possessed. The stress of leaping from life to life had swiss-cheesed his brain (as Al so bluntly kept reminding him) and Sam found the frustration of partial amnesia almost as bad as the frustration of having to adjust to a completely new existence about every three days. //It would be nice to have a vacation once in a while// Sam silently told the powers-that-be, as he tamely followed the other man out into a corridor.

He heard the sounds of other people moving ahead in the gloom and shrank back into the shadows, afraid to let them see what he had become. A young woman leading a toddler appeared out of the darkness and Sam froze in panic. But she only smiled in greeting at both of them, and the toddler tugged on Sam's pants and laughed. Sam laughed back, and startled himself with the rough purring sound he made. But he seemed to be the only one discommoded by his appearance; his guide trundled along quietly and the young woman swung the child up in her arms with a last chuckle and vanished once more into the murk.

The old man ushered Sam into a huge cave with a few chairs and tables and even more books and candles than they had left behind. Sam picked his way down the stairs leading to the main floor and frankly stared at the room around him.

"This place..." he whispered.

The other man came to stand beside him, looking with satisfaction and perhaps a touch of pride at the jumbled treasures scattered all around.

"Sometimes I just can't believe it myself, Vincent," he said proudly. "When I think of how little we started with, how much we've built together through the years... it's a place to be very proud of."

//It's a place to be cleaned// Sam thought privately, looking at the profusion of things piled every which way on every surface, on top of, underneath of, and surrounded by what seemed

to be every book in the world. There were books lining the stairs, books piled on the landing, books in every conceivable place and a few inconceivable ones. Still, it wouldn't do to be rude about what would be his home until the next leap.

"I've put a great deal of effort into creating a haven here Below, a safe place for those who want to withdraw from the insanity and violence of the world Above," his companion continued as he brought out a mismatched set of chess pieces.

//Above?// Sam thought, startled. Was that why this place seemed so cave-like? Because it WAS a cave? Maybe that's why Ziggy couldn't find any records!

"A safe place for YOU, Vincent. Do you remember what happened when you were captured last year? I was so afraid for you, afraid I'd never see you again..."

"But I'm here and I'm safe," Sam replied, hoping he was telling the truth.

The man leaned over and surprised Sam by putting an arm around his shoulders and kissing him on the brow. "I know, Vincent. But I can't help but worry. I don't know how we would survive if anything happened to you, my son."

//SON?!!//

"I can see a real family resemblance." Al's sardonic voice cut in, startling Sam almost out of his furry skin. "You must have taken after your mother."

"Al!" Sam hissed involuntarily.

"Vincent?" his temporal companion asked.

Al, I uh, I'll be careful," Sam stammered. "I don't want to hurt anyone, least of all, you... Poppa."

"I beg your pardon?" his apparent parent snapped, nailing Sam with piercing blue eyes.

Sam suddenly felt like a seven-year-old who was about to be called on the carpet. His mind raced. It all seemed to be going so well, what did he say wrong? Wait, he'd slipped and treated this man like his own father. This one seemed a little more formal. Maybe if he tried... "Uh, I mean Father."

Sam smiled uncertainly across the chessboard and was relieved when Vincent's father simply said gruffly, "That's better" and returned to the game.

"Sam, we need to talk," Al warned.

"Father?"

The older man looked up.

"Er... I'm feeling a bit tired. Perhaps we could play chess tomorrow?"

Although obviously disappointed, he was gracious. "Of course, Vincent, if that's what you want. Good night."

Sam nodded and rose, uncomfortably aware of the wary gaze on his retreating back. Once out of earshot in the safety of the corridor, Sam turned to Al for an explanation, but before he could do more than open his mouth, they were interrupted by a child's voice.

"Vincent?"

A small boy, about ten or twelve years old, shifted uncertainly from foot to foot slightly higher up the corridor.

"Vincent? Can I have my slingshot back, please?" he pleaded.

"You - I mean he - took a toy away from a little kid?" Al protested. "That dirty dog!" He took another look. "Or something."

"I promise I'll be careful," the boy continued, oblivious. "I already apologized to Mary about breaking her window."

"Oh," Al said.

"And for hitting Arthur."

"It sounds like you've managed to do enough damage with that slingshot," Sam said.

The boy nodded and looked ashamed. "Are you gonna tell Father?"

Sam thought about it for a moment and decided on lenience. There was an incident with a slingshot back in his own youth on the farm... "Not if you help Mary fix her window and you apologize to Arthur and do something nice for him."

The little boy considered the terms for a fraction of a second. "How can you be nice to a raccoon?" he asked.

Sam wondered that himself. He also wondered how a raccoon had wandered into the conversation. Al simply started snickering.

"Find him a treat to eat or something," Sam suggested.

The boy broke out in a big grin. "Okay!" he chirped.

"But I'm keeping the slingshot," Sam added and the boy's face fell.

"Okay," he repeated, this time unhappily, before slouching off.

"Arthur's a raccoon?" Sam asked when he thought it was safe.

"Uh, yeah, the real Vincent told me about that, but I didn't have a chance to warn you."

"That must have been an interesting conversation," Sam grumbled, heading back to the privacy of Vincent's room. "What else have you found out?"

"Well, since Ziggy had no information on this place, I decided to talk to the guy in the Waiting Room and see if he could tell me anything. First of all, you're living in the abandoned subway tunnels beneath New York City."

"That guy who called me 'son' said that he'd created a safe place down here. He talked about it like it was a completely separate world."

"Yeah, well, 'that guy' is Jacob Wells and Ziggy did have a record on him."

Al pulled out his portable link-up and began alternately pushing buttons and slapping it into submission.

"He was a doctor working for a nuclear research institute in the 1950s and he didn't like the direction the research took. He became a no-nuke protestor back before that was the popular thing to do and he got hauled up before the House Un-American Activities Committee, which

stripped him of everything. His wife divorced him, he lost his medical license, and then he simply disappeared. He wasn't heard from in over thirty years. Then in 1987, he suddenly reappeared, only to be arrested for the murder of the lawyer who'd defended him before the House."

"He's a murderer?"

"Nah. He was acquitted because of evidence brought in by a DA's assistant named Catherine Chandler."

"The woman with me when I leaped in was named Catherine."

"Same one."

"What have you got on her?"

"She's a wealthy socialite, daughter of a prominent corporate lawyer. About a year ago, she got mugged coming home from a party and... YUCK!" Al flinched back from the display.

"What?"

"They cut her up real bad, Sam. She was missing for days, then she suddenly walked out of her own apartment with her face all stitched up and wouldn't say what happened. Soon after that, she dropped her job in her Daddy's firm and joined the DA's office."

"What happened to the people who attacked her?"

"Their bodies were found at a brownstone, near the body of the woman they were originally hired to get. They'd been ripped apart limb from limb."

"What could do that?" Sam asked, horrified.

"Look at your hands, Sam," Al said, very quietly and very gently.

Sam did and his blood ran cold. He had big, muscular hands with tufts of blonde fur running down each finger to sharp, vicious claws.

"I think you did it, Sam," Al said softly.

"Oh, my God!" Sam whispered. "I'm a homicidal monster!"

"I don't think so," Al reassured him. "The guy in the Waiting Room was able to fill in a lot of Ziggy's blanks. He's the one who found Catherine after her body'd been dumped in Central Park. It was the old man back there who stitched her up and saved her life."

"But to rip somebody apart..."

"They'd just killed another witness and they were coming after Catherine. Vincent was coming to her rescue. He loves her, Sam. He was just protecting her."

"Judging from the look she gave me earlier, I'd say she loves him as well."

"Apparently. But 'Daddy' back there doesn't approve. He's afraid she'll lead Vincent into one too many dangerous situations, or she'll find a regular guy and break his heart."

"Somehow I don't think so."

"Anyway, I explained to Vincent how Quantum Leaping works - that he can't get back here where he belongs until you find out what's about to go wrong and fix it. I asked him if he knew

anyone who might be about to get into trouble that he wouldn't be able to help."

"Did he think of anything?"

"Well, he's worried sick that something will happen to his girlfriend, but judging from the record, she can take care of herself and he can take care of anything that's left. No, the only thing he could think of was that a friend of his named Mouse would get arrested for stealing. Apparently this guy doesn't have too good a grip on the concept of private property. He's the one with the raccoon, by the way."

"Arthur?"

"No, Mouse."

"Let me get this straight," Sam said helplessly. "There's a man named after a rodent who has a pet rodent named after a man?"

Al shrugged. "Hey, I just pass it on, I don't make it up."

"So what do I do now?"

"I suggest you sleep on it," Al said wryly. "Do you know what time it is?"

Sam didn't have a very restful night. He snuffed the candles, but the stained glass was right over the bed, and it gently glowed all night. Furthermore, the pipes never stopped banging, and every 15 minutes or so his bed shook from what he guessed was the roar of the subway. By the time Al appeared the next morning, Sam was definitely not a happy camper.

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead," Al caroled, appearing through the stained glass. The window was in soothing shades of green and gold, which clashed horribly with the enthusiastically vibrant shades of the orange and silver pinstripe suit Al had chosen that day. Sam peeked, groaned, and rolled over.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," Al coaxed, walking through the bed - and Sam. "You've always been a morning person."

"Not when I've had to listen to rattling plumbing all night," Sam moaned into the pillow. "Does that noise ever stop?"

"Vincent says that's the way they communicate down here."

Sam groaned again and burrowed beneath the blankets. "You were never a morning person," he complained in muffled tones. "How come you're so cheerful?"

"Well, I spent some of the evening talking to Vincent, whose favorite topic of conversation happens to be Catherine. He kept using all this flowery speech about her - 'she's my life, she's the light in my darkness' that sort of stuff - and when I got home, I tried talking like that to Tina. Sam, I practically had to club her off! She just melted into a puddle and..."

"Spare me the gruesome details," the lump of blankets pleaded.

"I tell you, Sam, I think I've found the one best way to get women. Give 'em flowers, quote 'em

a little poetry, and bingo! They're all over you like a cheap suit."

"Al," Sam said, digging his way back to the light, "Has anyone ever told you that you have the morals of a mink?"

"You have," Al said, puffing placidly on his ever-present cigar. "All the time, in fact."

Vincent's closet proved to be as eclectic as the rest of the chamber, full of patched apparel that frequently bore more resemblance to its original use than to clothing. Al perused the possibilities by walking sideways through the wardrobe and offering his help in choosing, but Sam, all too familiar with Al's clothing sense (or lack thereof) forestalled him by putting on the first things that came to hand. It occasionally took both of them to figure out the lacings and fasteners, but Sam was soon warmly dressed and ready to face the day.

Sam rapidly found out two things about Vincent. First, he had a reputation as a rambler, which Sam hid behind several times to avoid explaining that he was in some little-used, dead-end tunnel or private chamber because he was completely lost. Al tried to help, walking through walls and telling Sam what was on the other side, but on the whole, Sam felt like a mouse in a maze. Al's constantly cracking habi-trail jokes didn't help either.

Second, Vincent seemed to have a social schedule even more grueling than that of the single working mother Sam had once been. Someone wanted his help carving tunnels, someone else asked him to help teach a class, and someone very small indeed asked him to read a story out loud. Sam expected people to be afraid of the creature he'd become, but now, seeing the trust and acceptance freely given by everyone he met, he became almost envious of Al's being able to actually meet the man whose body Sam had usurped. The person he'd seen looking back from the water was not the sort of being he'd expect to become the pillar of any community.

But the one person Sam most wanted to meet remained elusive. Mouse was simply not to be found, and by mid-afternoon, Sam was starting to wonder if he existed at all.

"Al?" he asked quietly during one of the few times no one was demanding his attention. "Are you sure it's Mouse I'm here to help?"

"He's the only lead we've got."

"But think a minute, Al. In all my other leaps, every single one, I met the person I was supposed to help within about five minutes of leaping in. It's like He," Sam gestured to the ceiling and the deity he believed was now running the Project, "wants me to know who I need to worry about right away."

"Are you sure?" Al asked, unconvinced. "I mean, there's always a first time."

"I'm sure," Sam replied, getting more and more convinced as he thought about it. "Look, it takes you a little while to center in on where and when I am, right? I mean, usually I don't see you until at least 10 minutes into a leap, and sometimes a lot longer."

"Yeah, so?"

"So name me one time, one single leap where I had not seen the person I needed to help within 10 minutes of your arrival."

"There was that German girl... well, no, she was dead, but she was still the first person you saw. And there was that girl dating that pianist... no, she was the first person you met coming

offstage, wasn't she? Wait, there was the guy playing Don Quixote. You didn't see him first when you leaped into his understudy!"

Al flourished his cigar in triumph, which proved short-lived when Sam pointed out, "Yes, but I had still met him before you arrived. Besides, I didn't say I always saw them first, I said I always saw them soon before or after you arrive. Al, maybe we can't find this Mouse because we don't need to find him. Vincent was wrong. There's something else that we have to fix."

"What? Who did you meet when you leaped in?"

"Catherine... Al, ask Ziggy if anything is going to happen to her in the next couple of days."

*punch*punch*SMACK*whine* Al shook his head over the link. "Nope. According to Ziggy, the worst thing that happens to her in the next month is that her credit card at Bloomies gets overcharged. Who else did you meet?"

"Vincent's father, whatshisname - Dr. Wells. Anything on him?"

"Nah. He hasn't got any records at all after that murder arrest last year. The charges were dropped when the real culprit was found."

"Where is he now?"

"Hang on, I'll go check." With that, Al punched a command into the pocket link, shouting, "Gushi, center me on Wells!" The unseen project technician must have been able to get a fix, because Al disappeared instantly.

Within moments he was back. "He's in that big library you were in last night, surrounded by about 15 kids, making them read Dickens. Yuck."

"Not everyone learned to read from supermarket tabloids," Sam commented dryly.

Al ignored the comment. "Y'know, all those kids were calling him Father. That guy must have amazing stamina. Do you think he eats oysters or something?"

"Don't be cruder than normal. It's more of a title, I think."

"Spoilsport. Still, there's nothing wrong with him. I think we should keep looking for Mouse."

"No, I want you to go back and keep an eye on Wells."

"But Sam..."

"Do it."

"Okay, okay!"

With a shrug, Al punched a couple of keys and disappeared, presumably to carry out his orders. Sam turned his attention to simply trying to find his way back without getting lost.

He couldn't do it. After three dead ends, two rockfalls, and a close encounter with a Brooklyn-bound express, Sam was starting to wonder if he was the only person around in need of divine intervention. Remembering that the pipes were the local telephone substitute, Sam found the noisiest conduit he could and began following it back to civilization.

He had just reached a few caverns that looked vaguely familiar when Al reappeared again, jumping out of the wall like a ghost from a B-grade movie and starting Sam half to death.

"Sam! You were right! You gotta come quick!"

"What happened?"

"That old guy, Wells - he's dying, Sam!"

"WHAT?"

"He's choking and they can't get it out. Come ON, Sam!"

"Show me where!" Al headed off down the corridor at a dead run, Sam pounding along behind.

The pipes exploded in a frenzy of clatters and lanks, and people started appearing in doorways, asking questions and sprinting to help. Al simply bolted straight through anyone in his way, but Sam, afraid of mowing down the slower runners, shouted to clear the corridor and was amazed to hear himself roaring like a lion instead. The noise, although unexpected, proved highly efficient. People disappeared as quickly as they had appeared and those ahead promptly flattened themselves against the wall to get out of the way.

Sam and Al burst into a large cavern - a sort of mess hall, to judge from all the tables set around. Father was lying limp in the arms of a huge man in a chef's apron who was trying to administer the Heimlich maneuver. One glance told Sam it wasn't going to work - Father wasn't breathing at all, meaning that there wasn't enough air pressure in the lungs to force the blockage back out.

"Get a doctor!" Sam shouted, skidding to a halt.

"Someone from Above won't make it in time!" the fat chef yelled back in frustration. "And you know he's the only doctor down here, Vincent!"

"No, he's not, Sam," Al corrected from the background. "You're a doctor too."

"Give him to me," Sam demanded.

"Vincent!" the chef protested.

"Give him to me! I can help!" Sam snarled - literally. The animal-like growl got instant results. The chef practically dropped the body on the floor as he stepped back.

"There's no air getting in at all. I'm going to have to do a tracheotomy. Somebody get me some alcohol!"

After a moment of flurry among the onlookers, the chef handed over a drinking glass full of what smelled like pretty potent moonshine. Sam sniffed at it, dubiously thinking that he wouldn't dare drink it, but he bet that the alcohol content was more than enough to sterilize a couple layers of skin right off.

"Knife," he muttered. "I need a sharp knife."

"Fingers, Sam!" Al yelled. "Use your fingernails!"

Sam froze. Rip this sweet old man's throat out with his claws? A second glance showed that Father's lips were turning blue and his eyes were starting to dilate. He was fading fast. Sam couldn't conceive of tearing into him with bare hands, but he'd damn well better if he wanted to save this man's life.

Steeling his nerves, he poured the bathtub gin over his right hand and sliced.

Several people screamed and children started crying.

Someone yelled, "Vincent! What are you DOING?" and tried to pull him away, but Sam lashed backwards with his free hand without looking up. Judging from the sound of the crash, whoever he'd hit had flown a respectable distance. No one approached him again.

The crowd gasped once in horror and fell silent - making Father's first wheeze echo loudly in the stillness.

"He's breathing! Quick, I need a small tube to keep the air passage open!"

He could hear fumbling and stumbling going on all around him, until someone reached over his shoulder and plucked an old fashioned pen out of Father's pocket. "Will this do?"

"Yes." Sam snatched it, awkwardly trying to disassemble it with one hand. Someone took it from him, took it apart, and poured the moonshine over and through the casing before handing it back.

Gently, Sam worked the tube into the incision he held open with the tips of his claws. When he withdrew his hand, the flesh closed around the pen like it was supposed to and Father, still unconscious, started breathing normally.

Al cheered and although the crowd couldn't hear him, they followed suit. "It's working!" "He's breathing!" "Father's safe!"

Sam turned to the cook and muttered under the sound of applause "He's stable enough to be moved, but the blockage still has to come out."

The cook nodded and turned to single a man out of the crowd. "C'mon, Ezra, Let's go get a stretcher and send a message up to Dr. Alcott."

Sam followed behind the stretcher, fretting all the way. He found himself in a small cave turned into a primitive hospital, rather like a subterranean M*A*S*H unit. All the basic necessities were there, but none of the frills. Sam and the other stretcher bearers got Father onto an operating table and prepped for surgery, but Sam's concern was deepening. He hadn't leaped out yet. Something was still wrong...

They all turned at the noise of footsteps pounding up to the door, but the sound didn't herald the entrance of the expected doctor from Above. Instead, a young girl darted in.

"Doctor Alcott can't come!" she panted. "His office says he's away on vacation until next week."

"We can't leave Father like this for a week!" the chef protested. "Who else can we get?"

"Dr Wong?" one of the others suggested.

"He's just a herbalist. He can't help."

//Oh, no// Sam thought. //I can't, I can't...// He took a deep breath. "I can do it."

"Vincent, you're no doctor!" came the immediate objection. "You did a great job doing emergency aid back there, but you can't do an operation!"

"Tell them you've assisted Father in surgery before," Al ordered.

"I've assisted Father in surgery before," Sam obediently echoed.

"But you haven't done any on your own!"

"There isn't anyone else who can do it," Sam said with determination before Al could prompt him.

Sam didn't seriously expect that anyone would let someone like Vincent perform a delicate operation, but he had underestimated Vincent's position, or possibly his talents as well, for the others in the room dropped their eyes and backed away.

"Do you want help?" one asked.

"No," Sam told them and they left.

"I can't believe they'd let me do this!" Sam burst out after they left.

"You'd better believe, Sam," Al warned. "Because you have to do it. That has to be why you're still here."

Sam looked at his hands and shuddered. "Who would let this guy do surgery, Al? For crying out loud, he might shed in the patient!"

Al was silent for a moment and when he spoke again his voice was uncharacteristically quiet and remote.

"You once yelled at me for saying that some of my best friends are black. It's true, but you felt it was a racist thing to say. You've leaped into all kinds of people - minorities, women, the handicapped -- and each time you fought and fought hard for equal treatment. You've always treated other people - no matter who or what they were - like they were just as good as you, if not better. I've always respected that in you, Sam."

He stopped to let that sink in, then continued. "I've been talking to Vincent, Sam. You wouldn't believe what he's like. He's smart. He's well read. he's got a better education than I do and he was self-taught. Next to you he's the most patient and decent man I've ever met."

Sam was silent for a long moment, struggling to find words. Then a wheeze from the table brought them both back to the pressing business at hand.

"Can you find me surgical gloves?" Sam asked, opening drawers and pulling out instruments.

"Try the little drawer on the left."

It was a simple but delicate operation. Sam pried a bone out of Father's throat and put disinfectant on the internal lacerations it had made as it wedged itself. He found to his surprise that Vincent's large hands were very deft at putting in the tiny stitches to close the incision. In fact, the only real hitch was to annoying sensation of the fur being pulled the wrong way as he pulled the rubber gloves on.

Al stood on tiptoe throughout, peeking over Sam's shoulder, generally staying out of his way and quiet except for the occasional "ick" when things got bloody.

"You did it," was the only comment when Sam finally stepped back and stripped off the uncomfortable gloves. "He gonna be all right?"

"He should be fine," Sam said as he pattered around, cleaning up. "It was a simple operation." When he finished, he turned and faced Al.

And waited.

And waited a bit more.

"So why haven't I leaped?" he finally asked.

"I don't know!" Al replied. "Maybe you have to go tell everyone else that the operation was a success."

Sam did, making a public announcement back at the crowded mess hall. The crowd's relief was obvious, their applause thunderous, and Sam struck a noble pose, waiting for the random energies of the project to sweep him away.

They didn't.

Sam looked across the room to Al, who shrugged. Defeated, Sam shrugged back and prepared to spend another day in the life of Vincent.

Al looked at his watch and suddenly disappeared. He reappeared with equal suddenness next to Sam and muttered, "Your girlfriend's waiting for you. You'd better go see her."

"Wait, didn't she say she'd be in the park? How do I get to the park looking like this?" Sam whispered back.

"You don't. C'mon, I'll show you."

Al led Sam down a new set of tunnels and pipes until Sam could see Catherine waiting up ahead. She was padding the floor of a drainage tunnel with blankets and pillows. Sam could hear the sounds of an orchestra warming up wafting gently in through the storm grate.

"Y'know, I used to sneak into the sewers with a couple of blankets and Mazie Dingblatt when I was a teenager," Al started to muse, but Sam shut him up by swatting through him. Offended, Al backed out of arm's reach, but made it clear that he had every intention of being a third wheel on the date.

Catherine was putting the finishing touches on her nest when she noticed Sam looming over her. "Vincent!" she whispered loudly, running into his arms and hugging him tight. "I was starting to wonder if you'd make it."

"There was a minor problem Below," Sam hedged, not wanting to worry her.

Just then, the opening notes were struck and Catherine pulled him down onto the pillows. She curled up against him and put her head on his shoulder as he looped his arm around her.

The music was lovely and his companion lovelier still. Sam would have enjoyed himself tremendously if Al hadn't gotten bored and started lobbying for a little action.

"Kiss her, Sam!" he started urging from the tunnel entrance. "C'mon, give her a peck!"

Sam glared ineffectively at Al and wondered if he could think of a reason for suddenly throwing a pillow through the tunnel. Evidently, his distraction caught Catherine's attention, for she suddenly reached up and turned his face to hers.

"What's wrong, Vincent?"

"Oh, nothing, I..."

"Go for it, Sam!" urged his over-dressed, one-man Greek chorus. Overwhelmed by the music and Catherine's obvious feelings, he did.

The instant their lips touched, Sam felt the leap begin. Al cheerfully waved goodbye with his cigar as the universe once again turned a blinding blue and the quantum energy pulled Sam off into the void.

When the leap dissipated, Sam found himself sitting in a dark room, looking at a compact disk player, which was telling him "Remember, if you or any member of your IM force is captured or killed, the Secretary will disavow all knowledge of your actions. Good luck, Jim. This disk will self-destruct in five seconds."

The lid snapped shut and the box started to smoke.

"Oh, boy," Sam whimpered.

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