

ECHOES OF THE FUTURE

(ON THE WINGS OF LIGHT FIVE)

TERRI LIBRANDE

There was a tingling sensation and a familiar wrenching disorientation as the time traveller known as Sam Beckett "quantum-leaped" into yet another body, exchanging places, as it were. He looked around quickly at his new surroundings. Sometimes his leap put him right into the middle of the action. He never knew quite what to expect.

This time was easier -- or so it seemed. At least no one was shooting at him or hitting him. But his surroundings were definitely strange. And his clothing... what kind of get-up was he wearing, anyway? His outfit was multi-layered of old bits and pieces; fingerless gloves covered his hands.

Where was this place? He seemed to be underground in some sort of library or study. Instead of electricity, the only illumination was provided by many flickering candles. An eclectic assortment of bric-a-brac and books was piled everywhere. Nothing looked new.

Sam jumped up as the noisy thumping of a collapsing stack of books startled him.

"Uh-oh," a young voice said apologetically. "I'm sorry, Father. I'll pick them up again."

The voice's owner rose from behind an old ottoman, from where a stack of hardback volumes had been piled so high, the youngster had been hidden from view. From the back, an unruly tangle of long, blond hair made Sam think the child was female. Then the figure turned, and the scientist stared down into the small, leonine face.

A shock, for a moment, that young face. But not for long.

Hurried footsteps. Then, "Vincent, c'mon!" Another boy, normal-looking, dark-haired, and slightly older, motioned from an arched doorway with a cursory wave to Sam.

With a backward glance and a muttered, "I'm coming, Devin," Vincent stacked the last book and darted after the other boy.

"Oh, boy!" Sam muttered to himself, staring after them, what on earth was he supposed to be doing in this leap? Another thought started him scrambling through the room's odd assortment of belongings.

He looked around the cluttered room for several minutes before finding something with a reflective surface that could be used for a mirror, the chrome headlight of an ancient automobile.

Sam was staring at the somewhat distorted reflection of an obviously normal-looking, bearded face when someone right behind him cleared his throat. The headlight rolled with a clatter across the threadbare Persian carpet as Sam whirled around.

"Al!" he said accusingly to the man who was puffing nonchalantly on a cigar. Though a cloud of smoke ringed the man's head, there was no odor of burning tobacco in the room where they stood.

"How many times do I have to ask you not to sneak up on me like that?"

"Sorry, Sam," Al said not at all contritely as he walked in a slow circle around his friend. "Whoa, strange outfit! Who's your tailor--"

Sam cut off the inspection. "Al, am I glad to see you. What's going on? Where is this place?"

Al pressed a few buttons on the small computer access terminal he held and studied its LED readout closely.

"Well, Ziggy says we're in New York, but this is definitely not Wall Street."

He gave the terminal a thump and received a mechanical squawk of protest in return. Their only link with the computers back at the lab, the device could be frustratingly slow in divulging information at times.

"We are approximately five stories beneath the city, and it seems that your name is 'Father.' We haven't been able to get any more out of the old guy back at the lab."

"And the child..." Sam's eyes widened. "...the one who just left. His face...so badly disfigured."

"He is an oddity." Al shook his head as if to clear it. "This is a community of oddities. I think we're going to have an interesting time."

"The understatement of the century. What year is it, anyway?"

"It's 1968, Father," a new voice said. "Maybe you have been down here too long."

Sam looked up as another youth entered the room. He was dressed in the same strange assortment of "Renaissance" garb that Sam and the boys were wearing. The youth's most dynamic features were his large eyes, round and bright.

"I just saw Devin and Vincent running full-tilt down the southwest tunnel. I tried to catch them, but you know those two..."

"Children do things like that." Sam glanced at Al for guidance. Finding nothing but an amused look, he looked back at the newcomer.

"Any idea where they might be headed?" he asked, thinking that would be the best and vaguest of questions.

"Pascal." Another man entered, breathing hard. He was tall, black, and strong looking. "They're heading for the lower passages, moving like the wind."

Sam had let himself be momentarily distracted, fascinated by the myriad things in the room. When Al cleared his throat, he quickly looked up and realized that the two youths were waiting for him to make some kind of pronouncement.

"They can't go far, can they?"

"But, Father!" Pascal's voice was urgent. "They were supposed to be going to study session. And you forbade them to leave the family chambers for a week! After what they did the last time, we all agreed it was for the best."

"Oh, boy," Sam repeated, noticing with concern the odd look that crossed between the other two men when he made that remark. It was obvious he'd made some kind of blunder.

Rubbing his palm against his forehead, Al spoke out.

"Sam -- I forgot to tell you. This guy, 'Father' speaks with an accent. He must be British or something. He sounds very well educated, upper class. Keep a rein on yourself. These people really look up to this guy."

"All right," Sam said with what he hoped was a reasonable facsimile of Father's accent. It must have been close enough; both men in front of him seemed to relax slightly.

"So the boys have run off. They will be back when they get tired and hungry, won't they?"

"Um, yes. But what about their punishment? We can't let them set a bad example for the other children," Winslow argued doubtfully.

"No, no. Of course not," Sam agreed readily. "But we will cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Shall I put the word out on the pipes to keep an eye out for them?" Pascal asked.

"Yes. Sure," Sam agreed readily, thankful when both youths left together to comply.

The two boys felt free for the first time in days. Their enforced punishment had told on frayed nerves. Running away. The very phrase gave Vincent an electrifying thrill. Devin always seemed to keep life interesting. But guilt about his disobedience made Vincent pause.

"Devin, you said we'd be back before Father found us gone."

"Father won't find us... for awhile, anyway," the older boy said. "We can go near the Abyss and camp." His voice rose in excitement. "I got food from Mary." Sudden bitterness tinged his words. "Just because we have a little fun, we get punished."

"Maybe Father was right." Vincent said in a soft voice. "Those firecrackers scared Mary. She's so kind to us. Devin, she didn't speak to us for days! Father was angry. It wasn't funny...afterwards."

"Listen to yourself!" Devin crouched down to be more at the younger boy's level. "*Father was right!* You listen to every word the old man says. What are you going to do when you grow up? Is he going to control your life then?"

"No..." Vincent scuffed the dirt with the toe of his boot.

"I felt bad about Mary too. He knew we felt bad. Confining us to chambers for a week was too much. You can go home if you want to, but I'm going camping."

He straightened and started down the dark tunnel. A hundred feet down, he stopped and turned back, lifting his kerosene lamp high. It lit his fine features and dark eyes.

"Are you coming, or do I do down there alone?"

With a quick glance over his shoulder, Vincent moved to follow his foster brother. There was no turning back now.

Back in Father's chambers, Sam collapsed into an armchair for the first rest he'd had since "leaping" into this weird place. As a doctor, he had no trouble coping with the minor cuts and scrapes that were commonplace to people who used spelunking as a primary means of locomotion.

The problems came from all the other hats "Father" wore. While binding a sprained wrist, he arbitrated a dispute over a newly-excavated chamber with its own hot spring (he suggested the idea of timesharing). He was consulted about the best route through the tunnels to the north end of the park (some old steam tunnel maps were helpful). A class in first aid was also his responsibility (a shy

young woman named Mary assisted with the demonstrations). The tunnel folk consulted with him about supply problems (there was a lack of everything from food to toilet paper. Luckily, someone found a stack of discarded Sears catalogs...).

By the time AI reappeared, Sam was exhausted. "Why am I here, AI?" he sighed, not bothering to open his eyes.

"Ziggy doesn't know," the hologram answered. "There isn't a thing in the computers about anyone living underground in Manhattan, except for a few homeless people and alligators.

Sam rubbed Father's beard thoughtfully. "I'm beginning to think those alligator myths were circulated by the tunnel people to scare off intruders."

"Ziggy says there's a 79.8 percent chance that you're right."

"What?" Sam looked up in surprise. "You're wasting computer time on stuff like that?"

AI looked sheepish. "You know Ziggy. When that silly silicone psychotic goes off on a tangent, there's no stopping him. Right now he's looking up every reference to the names "Devin" and "Vincent" since 1940 and every reference to people called "Father" since 1900. Do you have any idea how many priests there are in the United States and Great Britain?"

"Give me something, AI. Give me anything. My gut tells me this has something to do with that extraordinary child. Maybe I better go after them."

AI pushed a button on the gaily flashing remote computer port, and a bright doorway opened behind him. "Maybe you better sit tight until we have more data. It looks like you have enough problems just holding down the fort." With that, AI abruptly disappeared.

Devin and Vincent were having problems of their own. Caught up in his own thoughts, Vincent had really not been paying attention to where Devin was leading them. It seemed Devin, who was not nearly as good with directions as the younger boy, had taken a number of false turns. Now they found themselves in unfamiliar territory.

"We are lost, aren't we?" Vincent's voice was small, afraid.

"Of course not!" Devin stated with the false bravado of a ten-year-old child. "We'll be perfectly fine once we get out of these---"

The words flew from his mouth as the tunnel floor fell out from beneath them, and he and Vincent fell, sliding down and down the shaft into dull, golden light.

"Veen-cent! Dev-in!"

Both sets of round, bright eyes encountered the welcoming smile of a small, black woman. Her age could be anywhere from 55 to 90; her voice softly accented from the islands.

Dusting the soft dirt from himself, Vincent cautiously addressed her. "You know our names!"

"Oh, yes, child. I know you both well." The smile widened on her face and she chuckled softly. Her blind eyes stared at a spot well above them, but pointed unerringly at each boy as she identified them.

"You are Dev-in, the adventurer. An' you are Veen-cent, de accomplished assistant." She gestured them near her. "I was preparing something to eat. Join me, children, join me."

Devin was unsure; Vincent, curious. The older boy held his brother back protectively.

"We gotta get on our way. Father told us we shouldn't talk to strangers."

"I am not a stranger, child," she laughed, turning and moving across the space of the chamber with a speed that belied her years. "I am Narcissa." She bent to stir the fire that burned under a large, bubbling pot. "Has not the Father told you both about me, then?"

One young gaze met the other's. This must be the beginning of their adventure.

The bowls of stew that Narcissa served them were consumed eagerly and returned for refills. Between the two, they ate four helpings, eyes wide, listening to every word the old woman said.

"I held you as a leetle babee, Veen-cent." She smiled at the memory as she carefully strung her beads with her practiced fingers. "You were a wonderous sight, such intelligent eyes. And, Dev-in, you so possessive, not allowing anyone close to your brother for too long." She chuckled again softly. "Even then you were together. Now, you both are off on an adventure." Milky eyes shimmered over her smile. "You must not leave without a fortune from me. I tell the future; the good, the bad."

"You mean like a gypsy?" Vincent flashed a look at his brother, uncertain yet eager. Devin just seemed excited.

"Come near, children."

She motioned them to a half-circle of rock in the middle of the room. Producing a

handful of shells, yellowed with age and use, she looked across at two fascinated faces.

"I can read the distant future or the soon to be. What is your wish?"

"Now!" Devin insisted eagerly.

"Future!" Vincent countermanded.

"Children, children!" Narcissa soothed. "You will both receive your fortunes." She tossed the shells and they landed in a pattern that only Narcissa could interpret.

"Now, for you, Veen-cent, I see a good life, full of many adventures and dangers." A dark cloud passed over her face. "You will suffer great grief and great joy, but a long life...unless..."

Her blind eyes came up unerringly to meet Devin's. There was more to Vincent's fortune, most of which she felt was not for a child to comprehend. Maybe when he was older. She cast the shells again for Devin and frowned.

"Devin, you must take your brother home. There is danger ahead. I do not see the dark head of Death, but that does not mean He isn't waiting for you. It is not the little one's time to see such things. You must go back. The Father will search for you soon, but..." She passed her hands over the shells again. "It is strange. He is not...himself. The shells are not clear."

"He won't be himself if he catches us." Devin slapped his hand over his own mouth.

"It is all right, young one. Narcissa knows that you run away from home." She shook her finger in caution. "But listen to me well. You take your younger brother and yourself home at once. Even as we speak, they are starting their search. The worry, the grief you have caused."

"Maybe we should go home." Vincent's warm heart reached out. "We shouldn't do this to Father."

"Vincent!" Devin stood up, readying to leave. "We return now and they'll separate us. You know what that means? They'll never let us play together again!"

Vincent's small head bent, his mind torn between his brother's words and concern for his father and the others.

The echo of the old woman's words whirled guiltily in Vincent's head as the two boys set off into the darkness. The place called "The Abyss" awaited them. Vincent longed for home suddenly, for his warm bed and kind words from Mary and Father. He wrapped his arms around himself as a shiver passed over him. It was cold here, more so than it was at home. What he wouldn't give for a cup of hot chocolate and a good book to read in his bed. Maybe this "separate" thing that Devin was talking about wouldn't be so bad.

"You'd better wipe that 'Father' look off your face," Devin said sternly.

Moving suddenly, he blocked the younger boy's path. Holding his lamp high, he illuminated the resolute expression on his own face.

"You've been talking all week about going to the Abyss. Well, I'm going camping, and if you want to go home, that's fine with me!" As he spoke, his voice rose in volume and timbre. The walls of the chamber rumbled their displeasure at the intrusion. "Make up your mind!"

"I'm with you, Dev." Vincent's voice wasn't as determined as it had been. Their encounter with the strange woman – Narcissa? -- reminded him that people he cared about would be concerned. And her prediction to Devin...His eyes dropped from his brother's as the same chill passed through him once more.

They set off once again while far above them they heard the rumble of a distant subway train.

It started as a trickle of dust and gravel, growing to a deluge of rock and noise. The avalanche ended with a last echo from the depths of the Abyss. When Devin finally recovered his footing, Vincent was nowhere in sight.

"Vincent!" he whispered, terrified that another shout would dislodge more rubble. "Are you okay?"

The answer came back to him weakly from beyond the collapsed corridor. "Probably...maybe...I don't know!" His voice rose in pitch with each word. "There's a bunch of dust and my leg feels all tingly and I can't stand up and I think we should go home now!"

A cold pain hit Devin in the chest. He would never forgive himself, and he knew the old man would never forgive him if something happened to Vincent. It shocked him to realize that he cared about what Father would feel. His voice became urgent.

"You stay right there. I'll go back and get help."

"Devin, please come back soon."

"Don't worry, little brother. I bet Father's looking for us right now." He turned to go up the steep alternate route that led from the Abyss.

"Devin?" The little voice was full of fear, trying to be brave. "If this is 'separate' then I don't want any more. Okay?"

But the older boy had already moved off down the corridor.

A crowd had gathered to join the others in their search. It amazed Sam that this far-flung community of rugged individualists became neatly and immediately unified in a crisis. Father was obviously the leader of this utopian society and a man to be admired.

Al suddenly materialized again, phasing through a rock wall.

"Father has started talking to us," he said, meeting Sam. "Considering the situation, he wasn't very understanding. Apparently, the boys are his sons, although it isn't clear if he's legally adopted them or not. The one with the face is only six years old and our guest is pretty concerned. To quote our friend: 'the lower tunnels are fraught with danger.' "

"Oh boy." The words were a breath.

Sam now knew the urgency of the situation. It was more than two boys off on a lark. There was a possibility that they might lose their way or even their lives.

Winslow was pressing Father/Sam's arm. "We've sent messages as far Below as we can."

Sam had guessed the purpose of the ever-present pipe sounds. It seemed near-gibberish to Sam's untrained ears, but the others seemed to understand.

Pascal's ears were open to the slightest variance in sound. "It's an old code--Narcissa?" Wariness came over his thin face as he gave Father a knowing look. "She never sends messages," he said, his voice awestruck.

His own father, who had recently died, had told him of the old hermit woman who lived Below. He had taught Pascal the ciphers, old and new, and this particular message was a sequence of sounds of the very earliest sort.

"An old, blind voodoo woman," Al stated. "Father mentioned her and said she might be able to help if the boys were headed for the Abyss. He doesn't think much of her psychic abilities, but thought she might have heard the boys."

"The Abyss. I've heard them talking about that. What is it?" Sam tried to swallow back the words, but Winslow's keen ears had picked them up.

"They went there?" His dark eyes widened. "Devin knew that wasn't a place for kids. It's strictly forbidden!"

"It's not a great place, Sam." Al shook his head. "All the kids have been there one time or another, but it isn't safe."

Sam turned away from Al, trying to look his part.

"You went there many times when you were younger, Winslow," he stated, remembering the young man's earlier admission. "It appears that is where we must go now." With his free hand he clutched a worn doctor's bag someone had

thrust at him. He hoped that the other boy, the older one, would take care of Vincent.

His feeling must have been transferred to his face. Winslow's voice was sympathetic when he spoke to him.

"We'll find them, Father." His hand rested for a second on the older man's padded shoulder. "If Vincent is in trouble, Devin will get help, he'll find us.

The boy of whom Winslow spoke was gathering fuel for a fire. There were stubs from old torches around the chamber. He pulled matches from his small rucksack and lit the wood carefully. Biting his lower lip, he watched the flames build.

It was worse than he had imagined. Vincent's leg was swollen and black, the skin hot to the touch.

After returning to Narcissa's chamber via the alternate path he had found, Devin came back down their original route. Vincent was lying next to the debris of the cave-in. As Devin struggled with the fire, Vincent continued to lie quiet, too silent.

"Are you hungry?" He tried to keep the questions light, not to let his brother know how worried he really was. He could never forgive himself if Vincent died before help arrived. He'd have to leave the tunnels forever.

"No, just cold." Vincent was shivering, his small body trembling, lips bluish. He gritted his sharp teeth to keep them from chattering, knowing from experience that his cat-like incisors would cut him if they did so.

Placing an arm around the shaking shoulders, Devin let his fingers touch Vincent's face. It was just the barest brush, but he could feel the heat of fever burning in his little brother.

Vincent eyed the older boy, knowing his concern. "I wish we were home." He shut his eyes, worried that he was disappointing his idol.

"I think I do too, kid." Devin squeezed Vincent's shoulder. "They must have search parties out by now. I could go back to Narcissa's chamber and wait."

"I'll be separate again." Vincent's azure eyes widened slightly. The firelight was meager and he was not comfortable alone in dark places.

"I gotta go, Vin. If I could carry you back, I would, but it's too far. Can you stand it? Just for a little while?"

"Okay." The six-year-old's voice was small, trying to be brave.

Devin moved and knelt in front of his brother. With quick fingers he fastened the ties on the front of the cape under Vincent's chin. "I'll be back." He looked him firmly in the eyes. "Our 'feeling' remember?"

The blond head bobbed up and down. Their 'feeling' was an emotional tie they

had told no one about. Vincent could truly sense Devin's worry and fear. "Don't be scared, Devin. Father will be here soon."

Decisively, Devin stripped off his own warm jacket and placed it around Vincent, ignoring the boy's protests. "Don't argue. I'll get something warm to wear from Narcissa."

China blue eyes peered at his brother through long lashes. "Come back soon," he murmured, keeping his small voice level.

In that moment, Devin wanted to stay with the small boy who trusted him so completely, but his feeling of responsibility urged him to get help. Their wanderings had taken them off the beaten track. It wasn't a place that the search party would be likely to look.

"Someday we'll see that stupid old Abyss," he said softly. Vincent's arms came up and Devin let himself be pulled into a hug. For a moment, the child's head rested on his shoulder. Devin forced himself to pull away. He took one last look at Vincent's confident, albeit drawn face and left. He let his feet fly, letting instinct guide him while the lamp swung in cadence against his churning legs.

Sam found himself slowed by Father's crippled leg, and the searchers left him behind in the tunnels. As he plodded along, leaning heavily on the crutch, Al stepped through a bright doorway in the rock.

"Get a wiggle on, Sam," he urged the scientist. "Ziggy says there's a 56 percent probability that you're here to save the boys."

Sam stopped abruptly in his tracks. "Great. Terrific. How am I supposed to be the one who saves them if the rest of the searchers can move twice as fast as I can? Besides, 56 percent isn't a very high probability."

Al looked mortally offended. "It's the best I could come up with. Ziggy also says that if Vincent dies, there is a 96 percent chance that Devin will blame himself, leave the tunnels and become a criminal mastermind."

"My, uh, I mean, Father's son a criminal mastermind?"

"You better believe it. And his leaving dominoes into a chain of events that destroys the entire tunnel community. Even if Vincent is saved, there's a good chance that Devin will leave out of shame for putting him in danger. So hurry, Sam."

"I'm hurrying, already; I'm hurrying," Sam muttered as he limped off toward the

torch the searchers had left to show him the way.

Vincent was grateful for the fire. Devin had placed a handful of fuel near him so he could feed the flames and keep the light going. Minutes seemed hours, passing with the speed known only to one who is bored and hurting. His hand came to rest on something near the wood; Devin's dog-eared copy of Edgar Allen Poe. In the tremulous firelight he tried to read, but he soon gave up. He felt Devin so near and tried not to be scared. Patiently, he waited for the help that he knew would come.

He curled onto his side. The floor was very hard and cold. Strange shapes formed on the wall, the child's imagination and Poe's grisly imagery overtaking reality. There was no sound, save the crackling, hissing fire; just dancing shadows, shapes. They seemed to be reaching out for him, menacing. His eyes widened in fear for a moment, but the apparitions disappeared the second he cried out.

Concentrate, he thought, on things that made him happy. When Devin wasn't around, he had a secret friend no one knew. A child his age, like him, who ran and played, only known as Mouse. He was an imaginary person he could never tell his older brother about, for fear Devin would scoff and tease. But it was comforting to think of his "friend" nearby and wish that Mouse were real as sleep drifted over him.

Devin was completely out of breath when he skidded into Narcissa's chamber. The old woman was waiting for him and took the boy in without a word.

"Vincent..." he gasped the word out, desperately clutching her arm. "His leg may be broken, and the..."

"I know, child." Her gentle voice was tinged with the tiniest drop of sympathy. "The warning was given, Dev-in."

Her words were soft compared to what Father would do.

"Not to fear." She touched his cheek, trying to soothe the child's anxiety. "The Father is coming."

"Father" stubbed his toe for the umpteenth time, barely feeling the pain. He was nearly blind here. The torches and lamps lit the anxious faces around him. They had been searching for hours.

"Almost there," Pascal said encouragingly.

Like a whirlwind, a small form came running from the darkness ahead. Sam stopped him, holding the boy's shoulders as he caught his breath. The brown eyes meeting his were frightened.

"Father...Vincent--"

"Where is he?" Sam asked patiently. This was the child he'd glimpsed earlier. He was a handsome boy, a trifle disheveled, but worried and scared.

"I had to leave him back near the Abyss. The tunnel caved in." Tears finally welled in the boy's eyes. "I had to leave him."

Winslow took one look, pulled the wire handle of the lamp over his arm, and took off down the corridor like a flash. Sam was amazed at how well the big youth could move when he had to. The others followed quickly, leaving Sam and Devin alone.

Using the cane as a brace, he knelt down at eye level with the boy. Devin fell into his arms, and Sam embraced the trembling form. "He'll be fine, Devin."

"They'll never find him, Father," the boy sobbed. "He's in a side passage. The fire's probably gone out by now."

"Then we must find him together. Help me up."

As he helped his father stand, Devin's face tipped back, lit by the light from lamps and torches. "I thought you'd be mad."

What would this child's father say? "I am," Sam said, holding the boy's face gently. "But we'll discuss that later. Right now, you're the only one who can help Vincent. This is a great responsibility." He stepped back and laid his hand on the boy's slender shoulder. "I have every confidence in you."

Without a further word, the boy picked up the lantern and began to lead the way.

Back in the collapsed tunnel, Vincent curled into a ball as the fire slowly died. There was a little lingering warmth, but not much. He was glad for the cape and coat he clutched around him. Would Father come soon? There was hardly any light now, but his excellent night vision pulled out shadows.

He didn't expect to see two eyes staring at him; twins of his own from across the chamber. From the same direction came a soft, throaty growl. Gasping in fear, he jerked upright, his cape falling around him. The apparition faded as the sound of running feet approached the chamber.

"Devin!" The child's voice was pure relief as his small arms reached up and encircled his brother's neck. There was warmth in the arms holding him, security.

"I'm here now, Vincent." Devin held his brother close as he carried him out.

"There was something in there!" Vincent's voice was feverish, but resolute. "I saw eyes in the dark."

"It was probably a rat or something." He smiled down on the vaguely feline face. "You were very brave."

Tenderly, Devin passed the boy from his arms to Father's. Trusting blue eyes looked up to meet Father's, the expression in them switching from confidence to confusion in a heartbeat.

"You're not Father." Vincent's voice was without fear, just a touch perplexed. At that moment the rest of the searchers poured into the blocked passageway.

Sam's eyes snapped to meet the child's calm expression. Could he see him as he truly was?

"You have a fever," he said, touching the boy's forehead. "Of course, I'm Father."

"Oh, you're not; but it's okay." He reached up as Sam wrapped a blanket around him, returning the jacket to Devin. His small arms encircled the man's neck. "I like you."

Winslow gave Father a white-eyed stare. "Is he delirious?"

"Nonsense." Sam kept his discomfort out of his voice. "Just a little feverish, and we must get him home immediately."

Devin reached his brother's side. Guilt and pain were written all over his face. If Vincent were so badly hurt he couldn't recognize Father...Without words, Vincent reached down and clutched Devin's hand. In just a touch, they made their contact, each knowing the other was safe and loved.

Al appeared to Sam as they began their journey back up to the familiar tunnels of home.

"Ziggy is indicating that there are two elements that need correcting. One, Ziggy

doesn't know. The other is that you need to talk to that older boy, Devin. Lately, he's been putting himself into awkward or dangerous situations and his father hasn't been cutting him any slack." His hand hit the terminal he held and it beeped loudly. "It's a classic case, Sam. Good son, bad son syndrome. Either you build up his self-esteem now, or there is going to be a rift between him and his father forever."

Sam handed Vincent to Winslow and touched the head of the boy that walked beside him.

"You shouldn't have gone to the Abyss, Devin. If things were that bad, we should have talked about it."

A flash of fire in the boy's eyes and sullen looked was his answer. "You were busy with Vincent," was the abrupt reply.

"We shall make more time for us to spend together." He could feel the boy's attitude begin to lighten. "I love you both equally. I was frightened for both of you. But today you proved that you know the tunnels and are able to take care of yourself."

Mischievous eyes twinkled up at him. "I can take care of us both, Father."

Vincent's head popped up. "He's not Father," his clear little voice rang out.

Al's eyes widened. "The kid..."

"Vincent," Sam said, overlapping Al's words. "I am Father. We'll get you home and in a warm bed. These strange feelings will fade."

Vincent smiled and closed his eyes. The man looked like Father and he had a warm comfortable spirit like him. Winslow's arms were strong and comfortable, and it wasn't long before he fell asleep.

Sam looked decidedly uneasy. Sotto voce, he spoke to his friend Al. "He can see me. The funny thing is, I don't think he noticed you."

"Thank God." Al sighed in relief. "That on top of all this weirdness, would ice the cake." Just as he spoke, he slipped away. It mildly annoyed Sam, but there was not much assistance that Al could offer.

It was some hours before Sam managed to get Vincent and Devin home and tucked into their bed. The older boy fell asleep almost immediately, but Vincent seemed as if he'd never lose his energy.

Sam leaned across the bed to pull the quilt over the boy deeply asleep at Vincent's side.

"You should be resting, son. It's late and you need your sleep."

Vincent felt much better than he had earlier. His leg wasn't broken after all, only

sprained. Already it seemed to be getting better. The liquid codeine and warm milk took away most of the pain.

"What's your name?" Vincent asked. He cocked his head, face beguiling and honest in the warm candlelight. "I can't call you Father."

A deep sigh emerged from the adult. No one else was nearby to hear the conversation, and Devin was totally fast asleep. "My name is Sam," he breathed.

"Where is Father?" There was no fear in the child's voice.

"He's in another...place, for now. Sort of a waiting room." He tugged the blanket up under the leonine boy's chin. "Guaranteed he'll be home soon."

"Will you read me a story?" The boy curled over onto his side, his arm pillowing his maned head. "Father always reads me something every night."

"You know, Vincent," Sam mused, touching the boy's long blond hair, "you're pretty calm about this situation."

"Father says I should trust those that live here. You've been kind, very kind to Devin and me." His eyes were as placid as his voice, and wise, very wise for his years. "I like you. Father says I should be nice to everyone, so they'll see the good side of me and forget my looks."

Strange, but Sam suddenly realized that he had not noticed Vincent's "face" for the last few hours. The boy had a good heart and a sweet disposition. "You are a beautiful child, Vincent. Don't forget that." He pushed himself up from the chair. "Now, I'll find that book and read you something."

The cases in the boys' chamber were stuffed with volumes and objects of all kinds. There were classics mixed in with some old "boy hero" novels; *Tarzan* resting next to a worn copy of *Wuthering Heights*.

"Something new, please." Vincent's small voice came from the bed. "I've read everything."

Sam grinned gently as he searched. "Not everything, Vincent."

"Of course I have." The child drew himself up, pride echoing in his voice. "I could read when I was four."

"I can believe it." The six-year-old spoke like an adult. To Sam, it didn't seem much of a surprise that this boy could read something like Tolstoy and comprehend it.

His eye caught a very dusty volume on the top shelf. It was tucked behind the other books as if purposely hidden from sight. He reached up and pulled it out, blowing the dust from the cover. Opening it, he read the title. A smile crossed his face as he took it to the chair by the bed and began to read.

The story was a long one and very interesting to Vincent. His eyes barely blinked throughout the tale, his ears wide open and listening to each word Sam spoke.

Finally, they came to the last paragraph. Sam read each word carefully, suddenly aware of a growing awakening in the child. His blue eyes were wide with realization, as if a door in his mind had been opened.

"...and they lived happily ever after."

As he handed Vincent the worn copy of "Beauty and the Beast," the old, familiar, tingling sensation took over and Sam felt himself pulled from Father's body. There was a moment where they became as one, and he zapped off to his next assignment.

Sam's eyes widened in terror as he hurtled down the darkened city street at almost 60 miles per hour. He slammed on the brakes and the car that had been following him zipped past, spraying bullets in its wake as it disappeared around the corner. A peppering of lead starred the windshield and window of the car Sam was driving. Gasping for breath and trembling from adrenaline, he reached over to the glove box to see if there was a pink slip. All he found was the owner's manual for a '65 Corvette Stingray.

Jumping out of the slick black car, Sam patted his pockets for a wallet or anything that might help him understand who and where he was. In the pocket of "his" black leather jacket was a note addressed to someone called "Stingray."

Sam looked heavenward, and sighed. "I've been a housewife and a football player; now I'm a car. Oh, boy!"

END