

BARRIERS

by Sheila Paulson

The blue leap effect faded and Sam Beckett heaved a sigh as he saw the face staring back at him from the mirror. Oh, no, he was a female again. Sam Beckett stared at the girl--she couldn't have been more than twenty one--who returned his scrutiny intently. She seemed thrown together, a pair of faded jeans topped by a Columbia University sweatshirt (Sam vaguely remembered a semester or two at Columbia though he couldn't remember which degree he'd been working on at the time) and the professional and efficient briefcase in her hand didn't match the image. Her red hair was at that awkward stage midway between short and not long enough and she just missed being beautiful. Sam suspected that if she took herself in hand, she would be surprised at the results.

Sam stared down at himself in dismay. Leaping into women was never comfortable, and he had a bad feeling that this one would be worse than most. Hazarding a guess based purely on instinct, he placed himself in the late 1970's, helped by the Star Wars poster on one wall.

The room behind him was a dorm room; so she was a college student. There were two beds, one neatly made, one a rumpled pile of bedclothes; two desks, one orderly and one chaotic; two closets, one shut, the other spilling clothing right and left. Judging from the sloppy appearance, he started to sit on the unmade bed.

"Invasion of territory," caroled a second girl, an attractive blonde, backing out of the messy closet. This one was neat as a pin, well made up, hair swirled into a knot at the nap of her neck that made her appear sophisticated and elegant. Sam turned from her to the evidence of disarray and smiled at the dichotomy as he removed himself and sat on the neater bed. "Aren't you going to class?" the blonde asked in surprise. "I thought it started at nine."

"I was just waiting..." Sam began, wondering how he would ever find his way to classes. He could hardly ask, not when he didn't even know his name or what he was studying.

"I know," the blonde said with a teasing smile. "For mail call, right? You want to happen by just when they put the mail out so you can get your letter from home and take it to class and hope Professor v. doesn't notice you reading it. And maybe check out my mail, too, in case Tom wrote." Something flickered across her face, gone in an instant, that made Sam wonder if she and her absent boyfriend had quarreled.

"I'm nearly ready," Sam replied, ignoring the momentary lapse, though he wondered about it. The blonde's mention of Tom had an element of seriousness to it, and her eyes had narrowed slightly with a flash of pain. Maybe that was why Sam was here.

Now the blonde gave Sam a friendly smile. "Go on, Lucy. You don't want to be late. Don't you have that psych test today?"

A test? Oh boy! That was all Sam needed. He hoped he could recall enough from his swiss cheesed memory to keep Lucy from failing her test. He grimaced. "I guess I do."

"You guess! The way you crammed for it last night, you'll ace it for sure. Who are you kidding, that Mr. V. doesn't notice his best student. Just because he notices anyone else who meets his own qualification--" she drew an hourglass shape in the air with her hands-- "doesn't mean he doesn't appreciate you, too, even in that." A finger jabbed itself toward Sam's disreputable outfit. "You should let me fix you up some night. I could loan you a dress. That would get Ray's attention."

"Ray?" Sam asked uneasily. The last thing he wanted to do on this leap was to attract a boyfriend. He said hastily, "I'd better go so I won't be late." Picking up the briefcase, he squared his shoulders. He hoped Al would show up quickly and guide him to the test.

Right on cue, Al popped in, handlink in his hand, and stopped dead, staring at the blonde with rapt attention. "Oh boy, Sam, this is going to be a great leap," he rhapsodized. "Just look at her. She looks a lot like my third wife--or was it the fourth? Heads turned when we walked down the street together. Yeah, the fourth. Sharon. Ah, those were the days."

As the other girl turned away to assemble her rumpled bed into some kind of order, Sam mumbled out of the side of his mouth, "Help me out, Al, I have to take a psych test at nine o'clock."

"No biggie," Al replied, eyes firmly fixed on the shapely posterior presented for his view as the blonde bent to straighten the bedspread.

"Al" Sam snapped as sternly as he could in such a low voice.

"You take all the fun out of life, Sam," Al complained, turning reluctantly to face the time traveler. This time, Al's outfit was neon bright, a day glo green shirt with, jagged, lightning-bolt stripes that ran diagonally across it. A string tie was fastened with a blinking, light-up pin, and his hat was electric blue, a matching pin set in the headband. He beckoned Sam to the doorway. "Her name's Janet Anderson, Sam," he explained. "Come on, let's get out of here so we can talk."

"Bye, Janet," Sam called. The blonde waved as she turned to dig for last night's homework on her desk.

"You're a psychology major at Columbia University in 1979, Sam," Al said quickly, the minute they were in the hall. Staring at Sam intently, he continued, "It's October nineteenth. Your name is Lucy Devereaux, you're twenty-one, and you're an only child. In spite of your age, you're only a freshman. You spent two years, or Lucy did, nursing her sick mother following a serious car accident. Her mother is doing much better now, and you've come to New York. You're from a small town in Iowa. Fertile, Iowa. Do they really name towns like that out in farm country?"

"Evidently," Sam replied, recalling a few Indiana towns with equally picturesque names. "Why am I here, Al?"

"You're here to prevent your roommate from breaking up with her boyfriend," Al said promptly. So there had been something in Janet's expression, some problem. "Ziggy wasn't sure if you would remember any of this or not," Al continued, pushing a few buttons, more as a stall than anything.

Sam stared at him in surprise. "You mean because I attended Columbia?" he asked. "I halfway remember that."

"Right," Al responded, his voice drawing out the word. "Even if your brain wasn't magnafoozled," Al continued, his eyes firmly on the keys he was pushing, "Ziggy theorized that you wouldn't have any background on this particular subject. You were here last semester anyway, not this one. You won't bump into yourself. Where are you going, Sam?"

"Janet mentioned getting mail from a boyfriend. If I'm supposed to keep them together, I'd better collect the mill on the way to class." That reminded him of the impending test. "Al, I have to take a psych test. I don't suppose I have a degree in psychology, do I?"

"You'll do well enough, Sam," Al replied unhelpfully. "I'm not supposed to give out information if you can't remember it, but you'll be okay. Don't worry about it."

"Easy for you to say. You're not Swiss cheesed."

"Trust me, Sam. You'll breeze right through it. Grab your mail and come on."

Sam tried, but the mail must have been late. Al directed him to the proper box, but nothing was there yet. Maybe that was part of Janet's problem.

Hoisting the briefcase, Sam followed Al as he guided him across campus to the department of psychology and pointed him to the right classroom in the vaguely familiar building. He was just in time. The teacher, a brown haired man who seemed young to be a professor--probably a teaching assistant--greeted his students with a friendly, irreverent attitude, was just passing out the test forms. He glanced up when Sam appeared in the doorway and lifted a significant eyebrow. Sam thought he looked familiar.

"So nice of you to come, Miss, Lucy," he said in a mildly sarcastic voice. "I suppose you want one of these?" He held up the test booklets.

Uncertain of Lucy's normal behavior, Sam hesitated. "Yes. Sorry, I was running late." When the young professor merely waited, a little amused and expectant, Sam took the risk and tried again, "I was passing by anyway."

It must have been the right response. The professor grinned, licked his finger and made an imaginary chalk mark in the air. "That's one for you. Now let's see how you manage with this." He handed Sam one of the test books. Al beckoned Sam to Lucy's accustomed seat--at least the only empty one in the room--and he sat down. Al made a great show of settling himself on the desk of a gorgeous redhead nearby, though he was likely sitting on a chair in the Imaging Chamber, and smiled ingratiating into the student's face. She reached through his stomach to pick up a pencil, and Al's eyes followed the movement in surprise. Sam hid a smile.

The professor grinned at the students. "Okay, kiddies, let's see what you make of this one. Don't forget, I'll be watching your every move. You never know what fascinating research will come out of this."

"Yeah, sure, like that last one," one of the boys returned brightly. "The social relevance of eyebrow twitching at the undergraduate level? That ought to change the world."

"Hey." The professor winked ostentatiously at the class. "I take it where I find it. Okay, boys and girls. Go for broke. Remember, I expect a big, fat commission when you get your first jobs."

Sam opened the test booklet, imagining that this man's classes were likely to be popular. Then he saw the questions. He hadn't been sure what to expect, but the professor had evidently put a lot of thought into the test. This was no simple multiple choice exam, but a test that called for the students to think and reason. Sam lifted his eyes to study the green eyed man who had produced an issue of Playboy from his desk drawer and was skimming through it, the centerfold open before him. The time traveler suppressed delighted laughter when Al, noting the magazine, hurried up to peer over the teacher's shoulder in evident appreciation. Sam shook his head fondly, took a deep breath, and plunged into the test.

An hour later, Sam left the classroom feeling as if his brains had been picked. The questions in the test had evoked answers that felt right, and recalled large chunks of his own Psych 101 class. This might be the introductory class in Lucy's chosen field, but she would receive a good grounding. Sam was exhausted with the effort it had taken to complete the test. He hoped he hadn't messed up her grade point too badly.

"So, Sam, how did it go?" Al fell into step with Sam. "Did you pass?"

"I think so. That was a good test. I'm not sure the board of regents would think much of his attitude, though. The kids loved him, but he was pretty irreverent."

"I like his taste in reading material," Al replied with a grin. He checked the handlink, though it seemed almost a formality. "He gets kicked out of here in a few years, Sam," Al replied, reading information aloud.

"Oh, no! Is this why I'm here, to save the professor's job?"

"Nothing like that, Sam. Besides, don't worry about him." Al waved a dismissive hand in the air. "He goes into business with a couple of friends and does much better than he would ever have done here at the university. No, you're not here to save the professor. You're here to keep Janet and her boyfriend together like I told you."

Sam was more inclined to be concerned about the teacher he had liked instinctively, but Al shook his head. "Don't worry about him, Sam," he repeated with a grin. "He manages just fine without you. In fact, it's better not to interfere there. If he doesn't go into business for himself, the world as we know it could be destroyed, so..."

Sam stared at him doubtfully, half expecting that Al was putting him on. "Oh, come on, Al, just because one psych professor is thrown out of Columbia University..."

"One psych and parapsychology professor named Dr. Peter Venkman, who later founds the Ghostbuster business," Al explained with a broad grin.

Sam slapped his hand to his forehead. "I thought he was familiar. This is great, Al."

"Yeah, great. At least, he isn't busting ghosts now. Never mind that. You're here to keep Janet and Tom from breaking up, not to play ghost games, and I, for one, am grateful." He gave an elaborate shudder.

"Okay," agreed Sam, frowning thoughtfully. "Tom. Maybe there's a letter now. Maybe that will explain the problem. Why is it so important to keep these two together, Al?"

"Two reasons. First of all, the time line we're working on right now has already been altered by something you did in an earlier leap, so it's a little touchy. I've got information on that, too."

"Something I did?" Sam echoed, his eyes widening in alarm. He shifted his briefcase under one arm and stared anxiously at Al. He'd often wondered what might happen to the people he met in his leaps, whether his intervention might change something that would change something else that would create new problems. "You mean I caused a ripple effect? I messed up Janet's life the first time around and now I have to put it right?"

"Not exactly. The first time around, Janet became a doctor. She does this time, too. The first time, she never married. This time, she was supposed to marry Tom, but they let their careers stand in the way. You're here to make sure that doesn't happen."

"You mean her boy friend doesn't want Janet to become a doctor, Al?" Sam asked in alarm. "Why not? Is he one of those men who doesn't want his wife to have a career, or--"

"No, Sam." Al's expression grew serious, and Sam realized that the hologram had been holding back this particular information from the beginning. "Janet's father died in Viet Nam," he explained, eyes firmly on the ground. "In 1967."

"Oh, God, Al, did you know him?" That would explain a lot of Al's reluctance to bring this out in the open. It would make the leap all the harder, just as the leap with Beth had been hard for him.

Al hesitated. "Yeah, Sam. I knew him. Not that well, but I knew him. He was a Navy pilot, like me, and he was shot down a few days after I was. We were prisoners together for about six months--you grow closer in a situation like that." Al was silent for so long that Sam almost demanded further information, but he decided it would be better to wait and let his friend tell it in his own way. At length, Al collected himself, his eyes dark with memories. "He couldn't take it, Sam. He tried to get away. Picked a hell of a time, too, when he hadn't got a prayer of making it. I--sometimes I wondered if he knew he'd never make it, if he wanted them to kill him, but I guess we'll never know? His shoulders rounded in. "He just took off running across the rice paddy--no cover anywhere--and he hadn't gone a dozen steps before they cut him down--nearly cut him in half, he was hit so many times."

"Oh, Al," Sam breathed, reaching out in an abortive gesture of comfort. Unhappily, he lowered his hand before Al could notice.

"They dragged the body back," Al continued as if reciting a lesson learned by rote. "They let him lie there for almost a week, right next to the rest of us. God, Sam, the flies..." He shuddered and looked away briefly, dragging his fingers through the hair that lay on his forehead. "Finally, they took his dog tags and dug him a shallow grave. I didn't know until I was repatriated, but they waited another eighteen months to report his death. The family went through hell for two years." *Just like Beth did.* Al didn't speak the words aloud, but Sam could hear them as clearly as if he had. He winced, aching for his friend. It wasn't fair to make Al remember this again.

The hologram shook himself as if he were coming out of a trance and returned to his observer mode in a attempt to put Viet Nam behind him again. "Janet remembers those years vividly," he said, his sympathy for the beautiful student clear in his voice. He had already moved past the lustful man who had watched her make her bed and begun to see here as a person with hopes and sorrows.

Right now Sam wasn't as worried about Janet as he was about Al. Janet might have imagined her father's suffering, but Al had been there, and he knew. This leap had dredged up a lot of bad memories for him. He'd been reported missing in action, too, and his first wife, Beth, had believed him dead. Did it bother Al that Janet's family had waited and hoped until the final proof arrived and had refused to give up on him until then, while Beth had had Al declared dead and then remarried? Sam wished there was something he could do to help.

"I'm sorry, Al," Sam said gently. Al gestured the sympathy away, though his eyes warmed at Sam's understanding. "It isn't that, Sam," he said quickly, though Sam suspected it was. "Janet refuses to marry Tom because he's career Navy. She doesn't want to go through what her mother did. She doesn't give in, and they break up. Neither of them ever marry."

"He won't give either?" Sam mused, wondering at the unyielding attitude from two people who evidently loved each other. "That's too bad. There has to be common ground, a way to compromise. I know you're the big Navy man, but maybe he should give it up. Where is he now?"

"With Gushie," Al said, then bit his bottom lip, a tinge of color touching his cheeks. He muttered a vague profanity under his breath and corrected himself. "Stationed in Norfolk. He has leave this weekend and he's coming up to spend time with Janet."

"Gushie," Sam burst out, ignoring the rest of the comment, his eyes widening in shock. He should have seen this coming a mile away. "He's at the Project?" Then the truth broke through completely at last and he cried, "Tom! My brother Tom? Janet is in love with my brother?" He took it a step further. "He's coming this weekend? I'll be able to see him?" A smile spread across his face. He had known he'd saved Tom in Viet Nam, that Tom had not died on April 8, 1970, as had happened the first time around, but Al had never answered questions about him. It was part of the rules of Project Quantum Leap, that Sam never be given any information unless he could remember it on his own. Sam had designed the Project that way. The few times he'd tried to push Al about it, Al had looked uncomfortable and had refused to say anything. More than once, Sam had wondered if Tom had survived that one day but died later, in another battle. Now he knew differently. Tom was alive in Sam's own time, alive and well.

Or was he? He'd loved Janet Anderson in 1979. She was younger than he was; she was younger than Sam. But she seemed a mature, poised and confident young woman in the brief exchange Sam shared with her. It came down to one thing. She and Tom had not resolved their differences and both of them were unhappy. Once again, Sam was given an opportunity to put things right for someone he loved.

Al nodded. "Yeah, Sam, he'll be here tomorrow, and you'll be able to see him."

"That's great, Al I can hardly..." Something else clicked. "At the Project. You said he was with Gushie. Does he work at the Project, Al?"

Al hesitated, but he must have known he'd already given it away. "Yeah, Sam. I didn't remember him until after the Viet Nam leap was over. I couldn't say anything to you about it because you didn't remember it yet."

"I remember he didn't die in Viet Nam," Sam said, realizing what he was missing while he was trapped ricocheting about in the last half of the Twentieth Century. "But that's all. Al, I want to know. Tell me--"

"Aw, Sam, you know I can't. I'm breaking the rules telling you as much as I have, but you have to know some of it in order to help Janet."

"Does--does he know what I'm trying to do?" Sam asked.

Al nodded. "We could hardly keep it from the Chief of Security, even if Ziggy thought it was a bad idea to tell him, since it involved him personally. This leap will affect him one way or another."

"Chief of Security?" Sam asked, delighted. "Tom's part of the Project?"

"All along, Sam. He believed in it completely. He knew it would work."

Sam's eyes widened at the implications. "You mean because I'd leaped into myself at sixteen and into Magic? He realized? He told me about it?"

"No, Sam. He got suspicious after your leap into Magic and finally put two and two together. He was sure you'd traveled back in time to help him but he knew he couldn't tell you before you were ready. He was afraid that telling you what you had done too soon would put too much pressure on you, or that it might even change things for the worse. After you started leaping, he told me about it. He'd been afraid of creating some kind of time paradox. When he got home from Nam, you were studying at M.I.T. and you weren't talking time travel yet. When you first started working on the string theory, he became excited and realized that maybe, somehow, you'd saved his life, and he didn't want to take any chances in case he created a paradox and it went wrong."

Sam nodded, still dazed at Al's revelations. "This is just incredible, Al. I wish I could see him."

"You'll see him tomorrow," Al said, his voice a little gruff. "He shows up at Columbia tomorrow to talk to Janet."

Sam couldn't help smiling. It wasn't the same as leaping home and seeing Tom as he was, but it was better than he'd expected. "Now what, Al?" he asked.

"Now you follow Lucy's routine for the day," Al explained. "Do you know where your next class is?"

Sam nodded. "Lucy is probably the most organized person I ever met. Every class is listed in her schedule, with a master list at the beginning with the names of professors, room numbers and everything I need. All the books are in the briefcase and all the homework is filed in order. I can make it through today. There are only three more classes and a club meeting."

"Lucy!"

At the eager hail, Sam and Al turned to see a stocky young man with auburn hair hurrying toward them. He looked about sixteen, but was probably older because he had an armload of books. His brown eyes sparkled happily and he fell into step with Sam. "How was the test?" he asked. "Pretty tough?"

"It was hard," Sam replied, wondering if this were the Ray whom Janet had mentioned. It was always awkward not to know someone's name.

"For you? Come on, you're the smartest one in the class. I bet you breezed right through. Are you coming to the comic club meeting after third period?"

Sam quirked an eyebrow at Al, who was pushing buttons, trying to figure out who the young man might be. "It's on my schedule," he stalled.

"You're not gonna miss it, are you?" the boy asked, as if he sensed Sam's hesitation. "Gee, Lucy, that'd be too bad."

"Comics? Sounds like fun, Sam." Al shook his head. "No record of a boy friend for Lucy in her freshman year. Sorry."

Sam nodded. If Al didn't know, then the only thing to do was play along. "I'll come," he told the eager young man. "The only thing is, I'm worried about my roommate and I have to talk to her first."

"About her boy friend?" the young man asked. Lucy must have confided in him. If he wasn't a boy friend, he was at least a close friend. This must be the Ray that Janet had mentioned.

Sam nodded. "She's unhappy, and I want to help her. I don't know if I can, but I have to try. Something has to give, and I don't want it to be their relationship."

"It's really tough when neither of them can back down," he agreed. "Meet me in front of your dorm. Your first afternoon class isn't until two, is it?"

"No. I'll be there."

Sam started for his next class but the young man caught his arm. "Uh...Lucy? I...there's a showing of Forbidden Planet Monday night. I just...wondered if you...well, if you'd like to come with me," he finished in a rush. Sam smiled. He seemed anxious and innocent, as if he'd never asked a girl out before in his life. Maybe he hadn't. If he and Lucy were friends, she probably wouldn't turn him down. Sam nodded. "I'd like to." He decided to risk the name. "That would be fun, Ray."

The young man's smile lit his face. "That's great. I'll see you in front of your dorm," he said and turned away. Smiling, Sam headed for his next class. At least any relationship between Lucy and Ray was innocent enough that he wouldn't be forced to dodge an amorous suitor.

* * * *

The comic book meeting was held in one of the member's dorm room, and it was a lot of fun. The other students were all carefree and frivolous, and Sam enjoyed the opportunity to take an hour out of his schedule just to sit and talk about comic books. It didn't matter that he knew no one's name. The student's names were offered freely and it didn't take Sam long to identify the most vocal of them and avoid mistakes or awkward pauses. Sam would have thoroughly enjoyed himself if he hadn't worried about what might happen between his brother and Janet tomorrow.

Afterwards, Sam waved goodbye to Ray and hurried to meet Janet for the late lunch that had been pencilled into the day's schedule, at a restaurant not far from campus. It looked familiar to Sam. Maybe he'd eaten here before in his student days.

"There you are," Janet cried with obvious relief. A book fell out of her arms and popped open strewing papers about, and Sam hurried to help her retrieve them before the light breeze could whisk them into the nearby street. "Damn," the blonde muttered. "Why can't I do anything right?"

"Did you get your letter from Tom?" asked Sam.

"Yes. He's coming tomorrow." She stared at him, china blue eyes widening in alarm. "I don't know what to tell him. Nothing's changed. Nothing's going to change." She stuffed papers between the pages of the book at random, avoiding Sam's gaze. "I love him. Nothing's going to change that, either."

"I think you and Tom need to sit down and talk about it," Sam suggested as they reached their booth in the little place that was a favorite haunt of students. He dumped his briefcase and books into one side and slid in while Janet sat opposite him, her books cascading onto the table. The jukebox sent out music with a thudding beat, the sound loud enough to make people raise their voices to be heard.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," Janet said in an apparent non sequitur, gesturing at the fallen books. "I can't hold onto anything any more."

"You're nervous," Sam offered. "Maybe it's because you don't know what to say to Tom."

Janet's face grew serious. "I know what I have to say to him, Lucy. I have to tell him it's over." Pain flashed in her eyes.

"You love him," Sam reminded her. He was fighting his brother's case and had been prepared to push for all he was worth, for Tom's sake. Now he saw Janet's pain and realized, as he'd believed before he learned who Janet loved, that the issue had two sides.

"Of course I love him," Janet agreed. "That's never been the issue. I remember when we met. His brother was here, taking a couple of courses, and Tom and I bumped into each other. Literally." She smiled. "My books went everywhere. He picked them all up for me and we started talking. At first I thought he was a professor because he was older, but he said he'd only come to meet his brother, and we just started talking. I never talked to anyone as easily as I talked to Tom. We came here," she added inconsequentially, glancing fondly around the crowded room. "We sat over there and we talked for hours. I was supposed to be in class and he was supposed to meet his brother but neither of us went. The words just poured out, as if we had to make up for all the years we didn't know each other. I think I was in love with him even then." She smiled fondly. "It never happened like that before. I didn't know it could. God," she added in calmer tones, "I sound like an idiot. I remember coming back to the room and babbling to you about it."

"You weren't babbling," Sam told her. "You were sharing something wonderful."

"It was too big not to share. We went out to dinner with his brother that night." Something occurred to her. "I think you'd like Tom's brother, Lucy. He's a sweet guy. Smart, too. He has a couple of Ph.D's already and he's nowhere near thirty. If you ever get tired of Ray--"

"Ray?" Sam echoed, embarrassed to hear his own praises sung by someone who had no idea who he was. "I'm dating Ray--"

Janet stared at him. "Well, he's so shy I don't think you'd call it dating, but it's close. You like him, and I know he likes you."

"We're going to a revival of Forbidden Planet next week," Sam confessed. "But Ray's awfully young. He's a friend, but..."

"He's just a year younger than you, and he's working on his masters in engineering. That's why I thought you might like Sam, because you like smart guys." Janet smiled maternally, as if she were years older than both of them and prepared to play matchmaker.

A gum-chewing waitress in a checked apron appeared to take their order and went away writing when they ordered the hamburger platter. Janet heaved a sigh and steered the conversation to the original subject. "What should I do, Lucy?" she asked. "How can I make him understand?"

"How can you hurt him if you love him so much?" Sam asked, hoping she heard the sympathy and not the censure in his voice.

Janet flinched but not because she thought Sam was being critical. "I've thought of that. It doesn't seem possible to imagine sending Tom away and never seeing him again. It would be like amputating my arm or leg." She grimaced. "Why does everything about love sound so corny and melodramatic like a cheap novel? Yet that's how I feel."

"If he's that much a part of you, you can't send him away," Sam told her. "I know you don't want to marry a Navy man, but maybe you need to work through your feelings. We're not at war now. We won't be until..." He broke off. For all he knew, he had forgotten a war or two. He remembered the Gulf War in the early 90's. Had there been others?

"Until you don't know when," Janet returned with a show of spirit. "You can't read the future, Lucy. You can't give me guarantees." She felt silent when the waitress returned with two water glasses. After the girl had gone, Janet snatched hers and sipped it gratefully. "I watched my mother die a little more every day when my father was missing," she said in a strange, breathless voice, as if she were relating a compelling, yet depressing film she had seen. "If Daddy had died outright it would have been easier for her to bear, more final. It was the not knowing she couldn't stand. I watched her grow older almost before my eyes. She got further away, colder, pretending to herself that it didn't matter. Finally, nothing mattered. She let things go and I had to do them--mowing the lawn before it turned into a jungle, washing the dishes before the sink was too full to hold any more, even buying groceries and cooking a lot of the meals. I used to go to school with relief because it would mean I was out of that cold, unhappy house."

She wrapped her arms around herself as if to warm the empty pit in her stomach. "I was only nine when he crashed," she said. "I had to grow up too fast. I didn't have a chance to be a child again. I'd play with my friends and feel like I was only going through the motions. No nine year old should have to do that, Lucy. I can't put a child of mine through it. It wouldn't be fair."

Sam could feel her pain as vividly as if she'd painted him a picture of it. "Janet," he said gently, reaching out to rest his hand upon her arm, "Janet, none of that was your father's fault and none of it was the Navy's. You're a stronger woman than your mother was. You wouldn't do that to a child. You bore up to it and carried on. If something final happened, you'd remember your past and make sure your own children didn't suffer that. Besides, the odds against the same thing happening to you are astronomical. I'm not a doom sayer, but ordinary people die, too. If you marry a civilian, you could still lose him."

"I know! I tell myself that all the time. I'm not stupid, Lucy. It's just that I remember the way my mother became. At the end, she didn't have emotions at all. When the word came through that my father was dead, she didn't even react. She only said, 'That's over,' and she threw his dog tags away." Lucy reached down the collar of her elegant blouse and pulled out the chain she wore. Her father's dog tags dangled there. "I took them out of the trash when she wasn't looking. It was all we got back. They said he was buried in the jungle and no one knew where he was buried."

"I knew."

At the quiet voice that was full of pain and self-reproach, Sam's head jerked up. He'd been so intent upon Janet that he hadn't heard Al's arrival. "Al," he breathed. He knew from the grim expression on his friend's face that Al had been standing there for some time, listening, remembering, blaming himself for a problem he could never have helped.

"Al?" echoed Janet, glancing around in surprise. "Al Donovan? Where?"

Sam shook his head. "I was just thinking--couldn't you ask the Navy to find out who might have been with him when he was a prisoner? Someone might know where he was buried." Maybe resolving that would help her come to terms with herself. If Janet could bring her father's remains home, she might be able to close the door on this part of her past and turn toward the future.

"They wouldn't remember," Janet said with conviction. She curled both hands around her glass and ran her fingertips up and down. "We tried when the dog tags came, my uncle Joey and I. Mother didn't care, but we did. Nobody knew anything."

Sam looked at Al sadly. Anything he said to Janet now would impact on the Al of the past, and Sam wouldn't be there to help him face it. Al's recovery from his Viet Nam experience had held its share of ups and downs. Being reminded of Janet's father was bound to be one of the downs.

Yet Janet's pain deserved healing, too. Al wouldn't cut himself any Black here, and he wouldn't thank Sam for shielding him, either. "Some of the POWs weren't repatriated until 1973, Janet," Sam told her. "There might not have been anyone in 1969 who knew. There might be now."

"Then why didn't they come forward and say so?" she demanded hotly.

Al lowered his head. "I reported everything I could remember about those days, Sam. Which men I had seen die, which men were taken elsewhere. It was so long ago. They must have hunted for his remains, but they didn't find them. Maybe if I sat down with a map, I could find the right area. It might be possible to work it out, though getting remains back isn't the easiest thing in the world."

"Those men went through hell, Janet," Sam said softly, realizing as he spoke that it might not be the best way to support Tom's cause. "Maybe right then they couldn't remember everything. I think it would be worth checking again."

Al pulled out his handlink and pushed buttons. "This is a good idea, Sam. She does start an inquiry, and her father's remains are finally returned in 1984." He shook his head. "It helps her put aside her bitterness. It's not enough, though. She still doesn't marry Tom."

Not enough. Sam should have known it wasn't so simple. He squeezed Janet's arm. "I'll help you. Tom would help you, too. Since he's in the Navy, it might even be best to ask him. Let him do that much for you, Janet."

She bowed her head, reaching out to cover Sam's hand with her other hand. "I'm glad we're friends," she said. "I couldn't talk like this to anyone else."

"What about Tom?" Sam prodded. "You can talk to him. You said you could talk to him like you couldn't talk to anyone else."

"Yes, but... Damn it, Lucy, I can't. I can't ask him to give up his career. I think he might if I really pushed it, but it isn't right to ask him just because I'm all tied up in knots. He might hold it against me later, too, and I think it would be easier to end it cleanly than to marry him under those conditions and watch his love for me die."

"Have you talked about it?"

Before Janet could reply the waitress returned with their hamburger platters, huge burgers with thick tomato slices, and giant mounds of fries.

Sam started to eat, still watching Janet. She bent her head, her eyes glittering too brightly. When she looked up again, she had controlled herself.

"Okay," she said. "Maybe we'll talk about it. He knows part of it, but..."

"Have you told him what you told me just now, about your mother and what it was like for her and how you had to do everything for her? "

She shook her head. "No. You're the only one I ever told. I don't think it's fair to tell Tom. He'd be so understanding. One thing I like about him is how much his family matters to him. He's always talking about Sam or his mom or his sister Katie, and I can tell how much he loves them. You should hear how proud of Sam he is. Sam's a genius. There are people who say he's the next Einstein. Tom's not a bit jealous of that. He just thinks it's wonderful. How can I tell him about my mom when his family is so perfect?"

Sam was moved. He and Tom had been close when they were kids, but his memories of Tom ended when his brother went to Viet Nam. He knew that had been changed, but he couldn't remember. It dawned on him that Janet knew much more about his brother right now than he did.

"Janet," he said gently. "Look at me. Tom chose you. Don't you think a man like Tom would have good judgement? Don't you think he considered how you'd fit in with his family? I think you need to stop worrying about things that may never happen and take a chance at being happy. You're allowed to be happy. You weren't responsible for what happened to your mother or father. You coped wonderfully, but you never had time to grieve for your father, any more than your mother did. She ran away, inside. You became what you thought she should be, someone responsible, someone who helped others. Isn't that why you're in pre-med, so you can help others?"

Janet nodded. "Well, of course? Why else be a doctor?"

"For the money and prestige?" Sam suggested.

Al watched, nodding approvingly at Sam's words. "Go for it, Sam. I think you're coming closer." Sam nodded at the handlink and tried to look a question. Al checked it and shook his head. "Not yet, Sam. Don't give up, though. I think you can get to her."

Janet shook her head. "Money's nice and so is prestige, but there are other ways to have it. Maybe you're right, Lucy. Maybe I want to help people."

"Why do you think that is?" Sam asked.

Janet wore a thoughtful expression. "I just always meant to be a doctor," she said, nibbling absently on a french fry. "I can't imagine anything else."

"Maybe it's because you had no one to help you," Sam suggested. Al nodded in agreement, his face sympathetic.

Janet looked surprised. "I never thought of that." Maybe the revelation was too much for her because she glanced at her wristwatch and gasped. "I'll be late for my anatomy class," she cried and snatched her check. Leaving her hamburger half eaten, she gathered up her books and raced toward the cash register.

"I have a class, too," Sam told Al, taking another bite of his burger. "Biology. I suppose I'd better go, too."

"Come on, Sam, biology? It'll be a snap for you. You're a doctor, remember?"

Sam nodded. Al's eyes were shadowed and his mouth was drawn tight. "Are you holding up okay, Al?" he asked, worried about his friend. "This leap is bringing up a lot of bad stuff for you."

"I'm all right, Sam," Al said instantly, though Sam knew he would have said that whether he was all right or not. "I hope we can work things out for Janet," he continued. "Her dad was a decent guy."

"She deserves to be happy, Al," Sam told him. "I just hope I can help her work it out. I like her. I think she and Tom could be happy together." He picked up his briefcase.

"I'm gonna see if Lucy can help us out, Sam. She might know something that would help Janet. I'll talk to her and come back when I can. See you later, Sam." He held up the hand which held his ever present cigar, and pushed the button to open the doorway to the Project. Sam watched him go, worried about him. Not for the first time, he wished that there was a way for him to slip through the gateway with Al and return home to stay. Now, the knowledge that Tom was actually at the Project gave him an added incentive. He wanted to go home.

The rest of the afternoon was a near blur. It was hard to believe that in less than a day he would see his brother again, even if it was the 1979 incarnation and in spite of the fact that he couldn't identify himself to Tom. Sam made himself concentrate, taking notes in Lucy's remaining two classes, hoping that she could make sense of them when he leaped out and she returned. A few minutes studying her class notebooks had taught him her style of note taking, and he tried to maintain it as he listened to the lectures.

He was glad when the last class ended and he left the classroom. He meant to find Janet and talk to her again. Some of the things she had said were starting to make a pattern in his mind and he knew he could help her if he could make sense of it. It would help to talk to her again.

Ray appeared as if out of nowhere as Sam left the building, his eager smile lighting his face. "Hi, Lucy. I thought your last class would be over now."

Sam recognized all the signs. Ray had a crush on Lucy. Whether she returned his feelings or not, Sam couldn't tell, though Janet seemed to think that they were dating, at least casually. The last thing Sam wanted to do was interfere with Lucy's relationships, and he didn't have the heart to crush Ray's eager optimism. Besides, he liked the younger man. His enthusiasm for life bubbled through everything he said and did, and his interests were varied and unique. Though the bulk of Sam's attention was concentrated on his brother and on Janet, he couldn't send Ray away, either.

"Hi, Ray," he greeted, falling into step with him.

"I'm gonna send out for a pizza," the auburn haired young man explained. "A friend of mine is working in the lab on one of his projects and he said I could stop by and help him in a couple of hours when it's set up. Want to have pizza with me and then come and watch him play mad scientist? It'll be really interesting. He's a genius."

Ray's eager invitation didn't begin to conceal his fascination with the proposed experiment. He must like that sort of thing a lot, to give up a Friday night to help someone else do lab work.

Sam didn't want to disappoint Ray, but he wasn't here to play with science experiments, although, like Ray, Sam would have enjoyed it. "I really should be with Janet tonight," he explained. "Her boy friend is coming tomorrow and she's on the verge of breaking up with him and she doesn't really want to."

"Really breaking up with him?" Ray echoed, horrified. "That's terrible. Why? He's great. Remember last time he was here and he took us all to the Hayden Planetarium, his treat? He and I had a long talk about time travel. He had all kinds of neat theories. His brother's a physicist. I suppose that's where he got them."

"Maybe," agreed Sam, who would have been surprised to find that his more practical brother was interested in time travel if Al hadn't explained the reason for it. Tom must have ached to discuss it with Sam but never risked it. Sam could imagine him talking with Ray about the possibilities. It would have been hard for him to resist this eager boy, especially when the subject held such an important meaning.

He smiled. "It must have been interesting," he said. "But that's not reason for Janet to stay with him."

"Oh, yeah," Ray agreed readily. "I hope they didn't have a big fight. I can't see Janet fighting, though. She never lets her guard down, does she? Well, maybe she does with you since you're roommates, but not with other people. She's always so together. You're organized, but you like having fun. I always wondered if Janet knew how."

"I don't think she does, Ray," Sam said seriously as they strolled across the campus. The only way Janet lowered her guard was in her untidiness. Maybe that was symptomatic. Maybe she'd reached a point where something had to give and that was the easiest, and safest.

"When I first met her, I thought she didn't like me," Ray explained earnestly. "Then after awhile, I saw that she wasn't being nasty to me. She just didn't warm up to people. I thought it was really nice the way she was when she was with Commander Beckett. She came alive with him, like she was another person. It was great."

"I know, Ray. He's coming to see her tomorrow morning, so I want to be there tonight if she needs to talk. Maybe we can get together tomorrow night instead if you're not busy."

Ray grinned. "That'd be fine. Or after they've left tomorrow morning I could come by with a frisbie or something. It's supposed to be a gorgeous day."

Sam agreed to that. Ray walked him to the dorm, chatting about all kinds of things, from the latest issue of his favorite comic book to the possibility of a haunting in Weaver Hall. "They say it's an old psych professor who was running experiments that backfired and he disappeared completely. No one ever found him, but sometimes, late at night, he walks the halls."

"Do you really believe that?" Sam asked. He could vaguely remember taking a class at Weaver Hall, but he'd never seen a ghost there that he could recall.

"No, not really. It's just one of those stories. But wouldn't it be great if it were true?"

They stopped outside Sam's dorm. "I'll see you tomorrow," Ray said and hurried off. As he walked away, Al appeared, paused to stare after him, and then turned to Sam. "Be nice to him, Sam. Lucy likes him. According to Ziggy, they never get together, though. Lucy marries a man she meets in her senior year and they have four children." He added with a grin, "Lucy says that she and Ray aren't serious about each other, just good friends, so you can relax, Sam. You won't have to fight him off."

"Thanks, Al," Sam replied wryly. "I needed to know that. Have you found out anything more that would help me with Janet?"

"No, not a lot. I remember hearing about all this a long time ago, but Ziggy says we probably shouldn't question Tom about it now. He'd be too close to the issue."

"I really feel for her, Al," Sam said. "I thought I'd take Tom's position completely, but when she was telling me that she'd never had a chance to be a child, I realized that Tom's giving up the Navy wouldn't solve Janet's real problem. She's chosen to blame the Navy for her unhappy childhood. Because of that, I don't think she ever came to terms with losing her father--and in essence, losing her mother."

"I think you could be right, Sam. But what are you going to do about it?"

Sam heaved a sigh. "I don't know, Al. I just don't know."

* * * *

Janet returned to her room half an hour after Sam did, and she tossed her books onto her rumpled bed with a disgusted sigh. "Damn it, damn it," she muttered. "I have this urge to get up at the crack of dawn and disappear. Wander around New York and avoid the whole thing."

"You can't do that," Sam cried, picturing Tom's reaction if he arrived and didn't find Janet waiting for him.

She dragged up her desk chair and collapsed into it. "I know I can't, but I'm scared, Lucy. I'm going to lose him, and I need him. No one else ever made me feel so--so complete."

"Then you can't send him away. You've got to try to work it out with him. Let him have a say in it, too. I think it's important."

Janet sighed again. "I know. I'll be here and I'll talk to him, but it won't make any difference. I need to study now. If Tom's coming tomorrow, I have a lot of work to do." She grabbed a couple of textbooks and set them on her desk. Raising her eyes she smiled tremulously. "I know you're trying to help, Lu, and I'm grateful, but for now, just let me study."

Sam heaved a sigh of his own. He could push it but Janet wasn't receptive. "Okay," he said. "But I'll stick around. I need to study, too." If Janet felt the urge, he would be here.

Janet turned to the first book and buried herself in it. Though Sam waited the entire evening, she never once lost her fierce concentration. He read a paperback mystery he found on Lucy's desk, listened to the stereo, tried from time to time to bring himself unobtrusively into Janet's line of vision, but she had wrapped herself too tightly in her shield, to notice him. Time ticked away, each minute bringing him closer to Tom's arrival, closer to a confrontation he had been unable to influence.

Janet gave it up at midnight, tearing the last sheet she had been typing from her typewriter and sorting through the pages. "There. I can stop now."

"Are you okay?" Sam asked.

"Not really, but I'll manage. Right now I want to sleep." She pulled off her sweater and Sam turned away quickly while she undressed, hunting for Lucy's night clothes. This proved to be a Columbia tee shirt folded neatly beneath her pillow. Sam undressed quickly and slid it on, turning to find Janet, striking in black baby doll pajamas, busy brushing her hair.

Sam felt helpless. He wasn't sure what to do now. She had made it clear she didn't want to talk, so he expected that, but time was running out.

* * * *

Morning brought him no closer to a solution to the problem. Janet got up and vanished in the direction of the shower. When she returned, she busied herself dressing in a pair of slacks and blouse, smoothing her hair into its usual knot, and applying her make up as if her life depended upon it. She wasn't in the mood to talk, refusing to respond to Sam's conversational gambits. He dressed quickly in another pair of jeans and a sweater. It was a beautiful day in late September and the air was crisp, though the sunshine promised warmth later in the day.

Tom was expected at ten, but their telephone rang at 9:30. Janet jumped as if it were the summons to an execution and flung herself at the receiver. "Hello?"

A moment later, her tense shoulders eased and she passed the receiver to Sam. "It's Ray," she explained.

Sam took the phone. "Ray? Hi."

"It's a gorgeous day," Ray announced as if he'd designed it himself. "Want to come out and throw a frisbee around?"

Sam nearly said no. He wasn't making progress with Janet and he felt the urge to stay, though she wouldn't talk to him about Tom. Then he thought it over. If they stayed outside the dorm, he'd see Tom when he arrived and maybe he could catch him and coach him first. Tom had met Lucy before, if he had included her and Ray in an outing, so it wouldn't seem unnatural for Sam to approach him. Then a better idea occurred.

"That sounds like fun, Ray. I'll bring Janet. Meet you in ten minutes, okay?" When Ray agreed, Sam told him goodbye and hung up.

"Bring me where?" Janet asked in surprise and disapproval. "I have to wait for Tom, Lucy. You know I can't go with you now."

"We'll just be out in front. You'll see Tom when he comes." Sam took her by the arm. "Come on. It'll be fun."

Janet's face stiffened as if the whole concept irritated her, but she let Sam pull her along. Sam could imagine her standing, arms folded, watching him and Ray throw the frisbee, refusing to participate.

The sunshine and the knowledge that he would soon see his brother warmed Sam's spirits, but Janet's tense and unhappy face worried him. Janet and Tom deserved a happy outcome, and Sam didn't know how to give it to them.

Ray came trotting across the grass to meet them, frisbee in hand. "Hi, Lucy," he called. "Hi, Janet."

"Hello, Ray." Janet gave him a polite smile and reverted to her unhappiness.

Ray joined Sam and glanced at her in alarm. "I thought Tom would have come by now," he said in an undertone. "Did he go already?"

"No, he's due any time. I can't get her to talk to me, so I thought I'd bring her out into the sunshine. Maybe we can encourage her to play with us."

Ray's open face registered disbelief, and Sam was forced to agree with it. Getting Janet to toss a frisbee around required more skill of persuasion than he possessed. He doubted it would work.

"Well, we can try, anyway," Sam agreed. He and Ray took up their positions and started to toss the bright red disk to and fro. Sam could remember frisbees, but he wasn't sure he'd ever tried one before, until his first throw sailed smoothly into Ray's outstretched hand.

"Way to go," he enthused with a broad grin. "You've been practicing, haven't you?"

"Well, maybe a little."

"Maybe a lot," Al said, stepping out of his holographic doorway. "Frisbees, eh, Sam? You were always good at this. You ought to ask Janet to play. Ziggy says it will do her good to loosen up."

"I know, Al," Sam agreed in an undertone. "That's why I brought her here. Do you think it will work?"

Ray glanced over at Janet. "Heads up, Janet. Catch!" He tossed the frisbee in her direction.

She stared at him, startled, and put up both hands, not to catch it but to fend it off. "I don't know how," she confessed when it bounced off her fingers and fell to the grass at her feet.

"It just might work," Al agreed, watching her. "She could just go away, but she hasn't. Maybe people never tried hard enough to include her. Go for it, Sam."

"It's easy," Ray encouraged her. "You hold it like this, see?" He ran over, scooped it up, and demonstrated the proper grip. "Then you throw it and it just floats on the air." It sailed to Sam's waiting hand.

"Aerodynamics," Janet volunteered, watching it without much interest.

"Something like that." Ray started to explain about lift and angle and things of that nature. "Throw it back, Lucy, and we'll let her try," he encouraged.

Sam flung it in their direction and Ray caught it.

"See," he encouraged. "Nothing to it. You just reach out and grab it. Come on, try to throw it. It'll be fun."

She eyed him doubtfully, but he was so eagerly insistent, like a puppy waiting for its owner to throw a ball for it to catch, that she tried to cooperate. It didn't go very far, skimming along the grass for a dozen feet before making a crash dive. Ray didn't let that daunt him. "Never mind. We all have a few chances to practice." He retrieved it, demonstrated his grip and the flip of the wrist again. "Yeah, like that. Now try it."

The throw soared. It didn't go smoothly in Sam's direction--he had to dart sideways to catch it--but Ray cheered as if she had won the campus frisbee championship and Al joined in, jumping up and down and waving his arms in the air. Janet's face flushed. Sam wondered if she was remembering the little girl she had been, the one who had forgotten how to play. Maybe this was the best thing they could do for her right now.

They formed a triangle, throwing from one to the other to the next one, and Al tried to join in, jumping after each toss as if he could really catch it. He only backed off when one of Sam's throws soared right through his chest. With a disgruntled look, he watched it emerge from his midsection and turned to shoot a mock glare at his friend.

Janet's throws increased in accuracy as they played. She seemed to be enjoying herself, and Sam watched her hopefully. This was hardly the solution to her problems, but at least it was helping her to unwind. She didn't mind missing, either, digging in the bright, fallen leaves with an enthusiasm that surprised Sam.

Ray stopped suddenly in the midst of retrieving Janet's errant throws from another pile of leaves, and a delighted grin lit his face. He grabbed up a handful of leaves and darted forward quickly. Sam got a face full of leaves.

"Way to go, Ray," encouraged Al. "This looks like fun, Sam. I wish I could play. My second wife--third? No, second--liked playing in the leaves. We had the greatest time down by the river that ran past our place. Frolics in the grass. .." He gave a heartfelt sigh.

Sam grinned. Before Sam could retaliate, Ray pounced, grabbed Sam's collar, and stuffed the leaves down his back.

Sam howled a protest, but the moment's mood carried him along. He grabbed as many leaves as would come to hand and stuffed them down the front of Ray's sweater. "You're dead meat, Ray," he threatened, laughing to show there was no malice in the threat. Al cheered the pair on, while Janet stared in surprise.

Ray grabbed another arm load of leaves and flung them at Sam. They exploded against his chest and went flying in all directions like bright, copper pennies.

It turned into a wonderful free for all, leaves everywhere. Sam got a mouthful and spat them out, throwing great bunches of them in return. Al coaxed enthusiastically, darting here and there, having as much fun as Ray. Then Sam saw Janet standing rigid beyond them, her face blank with perplexity. Caught up in an inspired moment Sam grabbed leaves and tossed them full in her face.

She froze, then, instinctively, she stooped, caught up an armload of the golden leaves and returned the throw. Sam drew her into the leaf fight, laughing as she dumped a handful of leaves down the neck of his sweater. "Way to go, Janet," Ray called from the sidelines. "Give it to her."

"Go for it, Janet," Al added, bouncing up and down on his toes. "Rub his nose in it."

"Whose side are you on?" laughed Sam, shooting Al a dirty look.

"Mine," cried Ray, assuming the question had been directed at him, flinging leaves at Sam with uninhibited joy. "This is great."

Once started, Janet really let go. She grabbed huge piles of leaves and flung them at the other combatants, darting here and there, completely caught up in the moment. Her hair worked its way free of its bun and spun out around her head in a golden flame of color. Sam wondered when she had last been so spontaneous.

At last, the leaf fight began to die down. Laughing and gasping for breath, Janet flung herself down to the grass, her back against a tree. Suddenly her face changed, the panting breaths changing to shaky sobs.

"Un oh, Sam," warned Al, his face full of anxious sympathy. "I think you reached her. She's about to lose it."

Sam started toward her in alarm, only to halt when Al shook his head. "Let her cry," he urged in a serious voice, full of sympathy for the weeping woman. "It sounds like the poor kid's been bottling it up a long time. She needs to cry."

It was true. Sam knew it was true as soon as Al said it. Maybe this was the break he had been waiting for.

His face full of sympathy, Ray crept closer, gazing at Janet in alarm, then he sat beside her and put his hand on her shoulder. "It's all right, Janet," he said. "Go ahead and cry. We're here." She flinched slightly but didn't pull away. Hiding her face in her hands, she wept as though her heart would break. Other students looked at them curiously as they passed, but Sam scarcely noticed.

He sat opposite Ray and spoke her name, and she lunged for him and wrapped her arms around his neck. A few passing students stopped. Sam put his arms around Janet and held her as she cried, making soothing sounds and stroking the tangled blonde hair. "Easy, Janet, it's all right."

"Janet!"

The cry cut through Sam like a knife and his head came up to stare. It was Tom Beckett, standing on the sidewalk outside the dorm, staring at them. When Sam looked up, Tom must have realized that the sobbing woman was really Janet because his eyes widened in alarm. Sam could only stare as his brother hurried toward them. He was older than Sam remembered him, his hair was longer, and he was casually dressed in civilian clothing instead of his Navy uniform. It was all Sam could do to keep from running to meet him. Tom was alive. Al had told Sam he'd saved his brother in Viet Nam, a price Al had paid, and Sam had believed it. He had been there when that April day ended and Tom realized he had survived. Not until now, actually seeing Tom, alive and well, had Sam really been able to feel it in his heart. "Tom," he breathed and lifted his eyes to Al, who stood beside him. "Thanks Al."

Tom scarcely noticed him or Ray, and of course he couldn't see Al. His eyes were on Janet alone. Ray scrambled to his feet and withdrew to a discreet distance. Sam scarcely noticed for he couldn't take his eyes off his brother.

"What's wrong, Lucy?" Tom asked, sparing Sam a momentary glance before turning back to the weeping woman. "Janet, I'm here. What's happened? Has anyone hurt you?"

"She--" Sam started, but before he could continue, Janet jerked her head up and raised her eyes. "Tom?" Suddenly she wriggled free of Sam's comforting embrace and threw herself into Tom's arms. He pulled her against him as if he didn't intend letting go.

"No one did anything to her," Sam assured his brother quickly. "We were having a leaf fight. She was having fun. She just started to cry." There were so many things he wanted to say to Tom now that he was here, now that Sam could finally see him, but he could say none of those things. He couldn't be Tom's brother now, only Janet's roommate, and the frustration threatened to overwhelm him. Beside him, he saw Al watching him with sympathetic eyes. Al understood. Al always understood.

"Oh, Tom," Janet breathed, clinging to him for all she was worth. "I've been an idiot, haven't I?"

"No, it's all right. You're not an idiot. What's wrong?"

"I was going to send you away," she confessed, hiding her head in his shoulder.

"Ssh. I know. It's all right. I wasn't going to go. We Becketts are a stubborn lot. We don't give up on what we want, and I want you."

"You want the Navy, too, and I didn't think I could stand it," she mumbled against his shirt. "But I was wrong. It isn't the Navy I'm afraid of, Tom. I was afraid I'd lose you, too, the way I lost my dad." She caught her breath shakily. "The way I lost my mother. Everybody goes away, and I was afraid you would, too. I thought the only way to survive was to control it all, to make sure it didn't happen again, and the only way I could think of to make sure you didn't go away was to send you away before you had the chance to leave me--or die. Isn't that stupid?"

Tom shook her lightly. "No, it's not stupid, Jan. It isn't very smart though. I gave a lot of thought to whether or not I should give up the Navy. I didn't want to lose you, and that seemed to be the main hang up. I don't think it's the right answer, though. It's a part of my life, just like you are, and I didn't want to give it up. I would, if I thought it was the answer, but both of us know it isn't. You said it yourself, that the Navy was your excuse. I knew you hadn't really faced it, and I wanted to help you. I still do. We can work this out together, the two of us. What do you say? I think we can do anything if we want it badly enough and work hard enough at it." He kissed her gently and smiled at her. "Did you think I'd walk away the first time you told me to go? You should know you can't get rid of me that easily."

"I don't want to get rid of you," she admitted, the tension easing from her face. "You'll have to help me, though. I don't think I can handle it without you. Just be here for me while I work it out. Please?"

Tom hugged her fiercely. "You know I will."

In the background, Sam saw Ray retrieve the frisbee. He waved at Sam and started away. Sam suspected he should retreat, too, but he couldn't bring himself to leave, not when his brother was standing there, not two feet away, close enough to touch, close enough to hug.

"This is great, Sam," Al enthused, reading happily from the handlink. "Ziggy says they get married after all, and, hey, this is really great!" He captured a trace of Ray's eager enthusiasm in his voice. "You have two nephews now. Their names are Sam and Ray."

Delight filled Sam's heart as he grinned at Al. Tom had named his son after him. "That'll make Ray happy," he murmured, thrilled to the core himself.

Tom looked up and smiled at him. "Lucy. There you are. You can be the first to congratulate us. We're getting married. I've got to call everybody, my mom, my brother..."

Sam grinned. He was the first to know, after all, even though he wouldn't remember hearing the news as himself until he finally leaped home. "I'm really glad for you, Tom," he said.

For a moment, Tom's eyes narrowed and he stared at Sam, almost as if he recognized him. He'd called Sam 'little brother' at the end when Sam had leaped into Magic. Al said Tom had figured it out. But this time, he had no clues, nothing to reinforce the thought, unless he could see Sam staring at him out of Lucy's eyes. Then he shook his head slightly as if to dispel the image. "We'll see you later, Lucy. Come on, Jan, we have a lot of talking to do," he told his future bride and walked away with her. She went without hesitation, her face glowing with life and happiness.

Janet made one final protest about fixing her hair but Tom shook his head. "Leave it. I'll just rake a few of the leaves out." Suiting the action to the words, he pulled away a leaf or two, and smoothed the flowing hair away from her face. "You should wear it loose more often. It's beautiful."

Janet slid her arm around his waist and he dropped his arm around her shoulders and they hurried off down the sidewalk.

Sam heaved a sigh. "That's wonderful, Al. I'm glad I was able to help her, though I still think she did it herself with some help from Ray."

"No, Sam, you started her talking. She thought over what you said and I think it made her take a good, long look at herself. She couldn't have done it without you," Al insisted.

Sam's eyes followed the two fair heads so close together. "I only wish I could have talked to Tom," he said regretfully. "By the time they come back, I'll have leaped." He stared after his brother longingly and took a couple of steps in their direction, then he stopped, his shoulders bowed. He'd done what he came here for. Why should he feel so lonely?

Al was silent for so long that Sam thought he'd gone away again, but when he turned, Al was standing right where Sam had left him, grinning a mile wide. "Come on, Sam," he said, a delighted gleam in his eyes. "That was then. This is now." Before Sam's amazed eyes, he stretched out his hand and wrapped it around something. Tom Beckett materialized beside him as if he'd teleported in, Al's fingers closed around his wrist to enable Sam to see him.

"Tom!" cried Sam in delight. He had never expected this, though he knew Al could manage to show him people when in direct physical contact with them.

His brother appeared older than he had when he had walked away with Janet. He wasn't in uniform this time, either, wearing jeans and knit shirt. His fair hair had the first traces of grey in it, and there were laughter lines at the corners of his eyes, but he looked good. Al pointed with his other hand and Sam saw the wedding ring on his brother's finger. "Tom, this is fantastic," Sam cried. "I never thought I'd see you--you look great!"

"Go ahead," Al urged, nudging Tom in the side with the handlink. "Talk to him. He'll hear you. We worked hard enough to figure out how to do it."

Tom caught his breath and turned an earnest stare in Sam's direction. "Thanks, little brother," he said, his eyes alight with affection and happiness. "Seems like you're always picking up the pieces after me. I don't know where I'd be without you--" he caught himself. "Yes I do. I'd be dead." Automatically he reached out a hand for Sam, who grabbed it, only to fail as he passed through the image.

"You're coming home soon, Sam," Tom continued. "They're working on it round the clock. It won't be long before we can see each other face to face. I promise."

"If it was my choice, I'd be there," Sam agreed. There was no time for more. Sam felt the leap start and struggled to resist it, but it was too powerful. The last sight he had of his brother was Tom grinning at him while Al raised his hand to wave goodbye.

Sam materialized in a farm yard, a bucket in his hand, a bunch of squealing pigs milling around his feet.

"Oh, no," he groaned. "Not pigs again."