

## The High Road Home

by Sheila Paulson

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

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

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

Except this time...

"Al," Sam Beckett said uneasily.

Al Calavizzi was the official observer on Project Quantum Leap. His job since Sam had become trapped in the past was to stay in touch with him by means of brain wave transmissions. Here as a hologram, Al provided the information Sam needed to fulfill each new task. Sam had come to rely upon him completely, and when he spoke, his worry must have shown. But Al was good at reading Sam's moods. He wouldn't need the desperate appeal.

"What's wrong, Sam?"

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

"What does it feel like?" Al demanded, frantically pushing buttons on his computer link with Ziggy, the main computer back at the project. "Talk to me, Sam."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There will not be time."

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

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

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

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

"I know it's not."

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

The waiting room was empty.

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't know."

"Are you tracking him?"

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

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

"The other computer--"

"Snatched him? Boosted him into another system?"

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

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

"I don't--"

"You don't know," Al burst out, wild exasperation breaking past all barriers. "Find out. Find out now." He pushed past Gooshi, shocked at the degree of his helpless fury and despair, and pounded his fists against the casing of the main monitor.

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

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They worked on Ziggy for hours. Security people ran checks of the entire complex, scanning the perimeter with every high tech security device known to man. There was no evidence of a break in, no trace of tampering. The only deviation from routine was the as yet undefined computer interference. Ziggy was unresponsive. Ziggy was not communicating. It was interfacing with something, but whatever it was remained a mystery. Gooshi was fascinated, containing his excitement at the strange system when he noticed Al glaring at him. Al let him work, calling in all the back up computer personnel and every scientist on Sam's team. They brainstormed and flung theories about.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The deck was cold beneath his cheek. Certain it would hurt, he pushed himself up, a few inches at a time, as weak and awkward as if he'd been paralyzed and was just learning to control his muscles again. When he was sitting up, he leaned against the wall or bulkhead, trying to guess where he was. He hoped AI would arrive quickly, but an ominous sensation in the pit of his stomach made him think it wouldn't happen. The leap had gone wrong. There was no guarantee that AI could find him quickly--or at all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Communication with whom, Orac?"

"Ziggy."

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

"Ziggy is very dangerous," Orac had replied.

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

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

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

"On Earth," Orac replied.

"Federation?" Jenna wanted to know.

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

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

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

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

"Transition."

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

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

"Then try *me*," Avon snarled.

"The same conditions apply."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Precisely."

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

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

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

Nothing happened for several hours. Orac and Zen communicated back and forth, and eventually boredom and frustration drove most of the crew away. Blake set watches, and Avon stayed on the flight deck for most of them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Transition occurred."

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

"That information is not available."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That sounds bad," Vila wailed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Neither computer answered.

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

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

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

"Have we been boarded?"

"Affirmative," Zen concurred.

"Oh no..."

"Shut up, Vila," Avon hissed savagely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're in no position for that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The intruder leaned forward and peered at the mirror. Then, dazed, he put up his hands and touched his face, feeling it carefully as if trying to identify his appearance by touch like a blind man. He paled. "It's not possible," he breathed, shaken, and before Avon could fire, he staggered over to the couch and sat down. "I'm myself. I'm in my own body."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I should theorize he was teleported here."

"Without a bracelet?" the blond woman objected.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm still not sure why we're here," Blake complained. "Aside from Orac's curiosity, we've no reason to hold Beckett here against his will. He hasn't harmed us. He shouldn't be a prisoner."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Meaning?" Sam asked, fascinated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That is what I had just said."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And your own body," piped up Vila.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Al had put a lot of years into this project. Since Sam's first leap, he had all but abandoned his social life, snatching it in bits and pieces between leaps or during calmer moments. There had been times when he resented losing control of his life, but he had never resented the fact that Sam needed him. At least he still had a life to call his own, even if it were frenetic, hectic, half of it spent in the form of a hologram, unable to touch or interact with the people around him. Sam might be denied his own life, but at least there were people who could touch him. Sometimes Al felt as if he'd stopped being real.

Now Sam was gone. Al couldn't accept that this had all been for nothing. Someone had intervened. Someone had to have intervened. Gooshi had said as much, talking about technological innovations he couldn't understand. Maybe little green men from Mars had zipped in and stolen Sam away. It was too bizarre to be real, of course, but there had been some kind of intervention. If Sam were a prisoner it meant he was still alive. If someone had gone to all this trouble to remove Sam Beckett, the last thing they'd do was kill him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Strip search the bastard," he ordered coldly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They brought the stranger back ten minutes later, clad only in a pair of black shorts of a cut that looked slightly off, as if it were foreign. The man's accent had been British, hadn't it? Remembering a wonderful two weeks in Britain with--what was her name? Susan?--Al shook his head. British BVDs didn't look like that.

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

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

"Anything?"

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

"And our guest?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was good, Al realized. He wasn't as good as Al, but he was very good indeed. It would take a lot to intimidate him. Handling the bracelet didn't rattle him. His face didn't change as Al flipped the bracelet from hand to hand.

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

"My name is *Avon*" the prisoner snarled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No."

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

"No, sir."

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

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

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

"Not yet, sir."

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

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

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

"Nothing."

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

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

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

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

The button gave beneath his thumb--

And Al was somewhere else.

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

"I wouldn't count on it, bozo," Al returned. Drawing his gun, he leveled it at the man, who gulped and stared. "I think I might enjoy being violent right now. Your friend back there wasn't very cooperative and it

made me mad. Now I'm here, wherever this is. Instant transport. Beam me up, Scotty." He walked forward to confront the man. "But you'll survive--if you're a very fast talker. There's a lot of things want to know. We'll start with where I am and how I got here."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I--"

"Al?"

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

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

"Sam?" he ventured.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Vila mentioned Ziggy. Who's Orac?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What about Avon?" Vila reminded him.

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

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

"Avon? Not likely," Vila objected. He stared at Al doubtfully, measuring his small stature and his frivolous excitement at being back in space and weighing it against the threat in Al's voice when he'd demanded to know what had happened to Sam Beckett. Al watched him, reading the play of emotions on his face. This one was shrewder than he wanted people to guess.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

"Yeah. Incredible. What problems are we talking about?"

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

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

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

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

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

Frustration ate at him. If he could have shot the admiral immediately, it would have solved all his problems. But the admiral had been standing in front of Ziggy, which must not be damaged. Calavicci hadn't fired at him, either. Of course if Avon encountered him again, he just might enjoy the process.

Calavicci's threats appeared real. Evidently he knew what he was talking about and had seemed coolly prepared to do what was necessary to retrieve Sam Beckett. Worse, he must have known Avon feared the process. He'd also tried to degrade him, ordering the strip search and allowing the woman to stand guard on him while he was in his underwear, not to mention deliberately calling him by the wrong name. He wondered what it meant here, for every time Calavicci had used it, the woman, Janet, had hid a smile.

Avon fumed.

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

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

The man's contradictions irritated Avon. Even more annoying was the fact that he stayed in spite of them.

Before he could justify his motives for doing so, Dr. Beeks, the psychiatrist he'd met briefly, entered with two of the security people. In her hand was a syringe.

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

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

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

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

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

"Am I supposed to admire you for that?"

"I neither want nor need your approbation."

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

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

But the returned memories, the knowledge of himself, his home, his friends, his life, were worth it. AI had been there from the first leap, and Sam hadn't even known him then. Gradually he'd remembered more and more about the man, but he hadn't remembered their close friendship. He'd redeveloped it in the process of leaping. Now AI was here, because he'd been so determined to discover what had happened to Sam. As they headed for the *Liberator's* flight deck, the ex-astronaut was reveling in the thought of being back in space.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I never did," Vila admitted.

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

"It will be my privilege."

Sam sneaked a look at Blake. He'd noticed that Jenna seemed fond of the rebel leader. But she was paying Blake no attention now. Al's legendary charm, or his reputation, had stepped in, and Blake was running a distant second.

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

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

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

"What will happen to Avon?" Jenna asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's still down there with Avon," Blake replied. "If he can get the activator in place, or if it's still in place, Avon might manage something. I don't know if Orac can link directly down there. Our computers all have something called tarial cells, a fairly recent invention in our time. Orac can read any computer with tarial cells."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If not sooner," Al said wryly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blake wasn't coming. Calavicci probably had taken over the *Liberator* and wouldn't permit it. He'd free Sam Beckett and return. Damn the man. He had rattled Avon more than the tech wanted to admit.

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

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

"Did Blake send you here?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So we can go home."

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

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

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

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

"Your friend Blake arranged this?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Why?"

"So the time line would not be corrupted."

"What have you done with the Admiral?"

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

"Do you know what happened to him?"

"I can assume."

"Then do so aloud."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Excitement ran through him. Home. This place had been home to him for several years before he'd stepped into the Accelerator and disappeared into the past. Now he was back, alive and whole and safe, but given a task that might prove beyond his abilities, a task that must be successfully completed to get AI back.

Squaring his shoulders, Sam walked up to the main gate, concealing the teleport bracelet in his other pocket.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is this the man?"

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

"His name is Avon," someone explained.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Everyone stared. Sam had never considered the possibility of Orac giving him away, but maybe the Zen computer on the *Liberator* had interfaced with Orac and warned it what was happening.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No." Avon sneered.

"Do you intend sabotage?"

"Of course not."

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

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

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

"Yes," admitted Avon through clenched teeth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Time is of the essence," Avon volunteered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Maybe we should go someplace else and discuss it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I might almost believe that."

"Complete the link," Orac said impatiently.

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

"I can deal with Orac."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Excellent. Then I'll go."

"Wait. What about AI?"

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

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

"Do you have another bracelet?"

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

"Orac, teleport now," Avon ordered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That startled AI as much as Vila's earlier defense of him had startled Avon. He eyed Vila narrowly, probably trying to decide exactly what Vila thought he knew. Sam shifted closer to him, ready to back him,

and Al looked up and grinned faintly. Al might even have enjoyed the process of intimidating Avon. If Sam had been there, he might have helped. Of course, if Sam had been there, it wouldn't have been necessary.

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

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

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

Al shrugged slightly and turned back to his friend. "How'd it go down there, Sam? Any trouble?"

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

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

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

"I *like* Swiss cheese," offered Vila.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, I don't think I'd go quite that far," returned Sam, catching Al's eye and trying to read his friend's expression. "But when he tries, he does better than most people." There were faint shadows in the back of Al's eyes. He realized he needed to talk to Al in private. Mention of things like cattle prods, which must be completely anachronistic in Avon's time, alarmed him. Had all this brought up some bad memories for Al? Later on, when they were settled back at the project, he'd have to see if Al needed to talk about it. Maybe over a glass of that strange green stuff. It might relax him. It obviously worked for Vila.

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

"Or it for you," Vila crowed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Affirmative."

"Then begin," ordered Blake.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No less than Blake himself. But the scorn he'd begun to note in Avon's voice of late had faded a little. "So am I," he admitted. "But I think the time has come to look for some allies." He caught Avon's eye and smiled.

For once, Avon almost smiled back.

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

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

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

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

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

"I hate to ask, but what task?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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