

CHASING QUANTUM SHADOWS

Diana Smith/Pat Dunn

"I'm telling ya, Jack, this is primo stuff," Edgar Benedek told his partner. "It's gotta be a secret UFO installation. Who else would have a top secret project in the New Mexico desert, right where they tested the A-bomb?"

"If it's so secret, how did **you** find out about it?" Jonathan MacKensie retorted, refusing to be drawn into another of Benedek's mad schemes. They'd both been nearly killed in the last escapade and Jonathan was still limping with his broken foot in a cast.

"Snide does not become you, Dr. J," Benny chided cheerfully, quite used to Jonathan's sarcastic jibes.

"Yes, well **you're** not the one in pain, are you?" Jonathan snapped, reaching for the crutch beside his chair and preparing to upright his recliner.

"This time," Benny agreed, kicking down the foot of Jonathan's recliner and ignoring the professor's squeak. "Come on, Jack, little sunshine and fresh air will make you feel better."

"I am **not** tracking around in some desert with you," Jonathan argued, propping the crutch under his right arm. "And you still haven't answered my question."

"I got my ways, Jon-Boy," Benny said, watching Jonathan hobble around his desk to the well-used desk chair. "How much longer do you have to use the gimp-stick?"

"Another week and I graduate to a cane," Jonathan said, dropping into the chair and pulling a folder across the desk top. "I have more important things to do, Benedek."

"More important than chasing shadows with your ol' bud?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. The paranormal research will have to wait," MacKensie said, opening the folder. "I've had a letter from a colleague of mine, asking for some help on a computer he's designing."

"A computer?"

"Actually, I believe Dr. Beckett is working on a very advanced artificial intelligence--"

"A-I, huh?"

Jonathan stared in disbelief at the tabloid reporter. "You know about that?"

"Come on, Jacko, whadda ya take me for? The National Register did a story on A-I months ago," Benny said with a careless shrug. "Ya gotta keep up on these things, Jon-Boy."

"Yes, well, I do; I just didn't realize **you** did," Jonathan said defensively. "Weird, bizarre things, yes; but real science, no."

"So what does this Beckett want with you? I mean, you're not computer illiterate, but you're no genius, either." Benny perched on the corner of the desk and reached for the folder, but Jonathan snatched it and held it to his chest.

"**Some** people appreciate my real work," he said, his prim British accent becoming more pronounced. "Dr. Beckett is extremely interested in my theory about the bicameral brain as it pertains to--"

"--the evolution of the Neanderthal."

"Ramapithecus," Jonathan corrected with a glare.

"Whatever. He thinks some prehistoric brain theory is gonna help him build a supercomputer artificial intelligence?"

"Possibly. If we are going to create a mechanical brain that replicates the human thinking process, then we need to understand how that process evolved in the first place."

"Why does he want to create Hal the computer genius?"

Jonathan blinked. "I don't know. At any rate, I have been asked to go out to-- er, to visit Dr. Beckett and his associates. I'm leaving tomorrow, so I can't possibly go with you on this wild goose chase."

"We could go whizz by this Beckett, tell him he's whistling up the wrong drain pipe and then slide on to New Mexico," Benny proposed, undaunted by Jonathan's obvious attempt to avoid the trip with him.

"No..." Jonathan sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose between forefinger and thumb, and said patiently, "Benedek, you're not getting this! I would **prefer** to help Dr. Beckett! I'm committed to meeting with him. I have tickets to New--"

"New where?" asked Benny suspiciously as the professor broke off. "New York?"

"Well, no," Jonathan admitted, glancing away and fidgeting with a pen lying on the blotter.

"New Jersey?"

"Not-- quite."

"New Mexico!" Benny said triumphantly. "You're going to New Mexico, and you didn't want me to know, did you?"

Jonathan shook his head, defeated.

"I'm hurt, Jack, I'm really hurt! But don't worry, I forgive you. So when do we leave?"

"He only sent-- I just have tickets for myself," Jonathan said, trying to ignore the guilt niggling at him.

"Come on, Jack, you know you need someone to hand you barf bags," Benny protested.

"Well, actually, I wasn't planning to fly," Jonathan admitted reluctantly.

"You can't walk from DC to New Mexico."

"I know that. There **are** other forms of transportation--"

"Not as efficient as Air America."

"Amtrack is quite efficient, and considerably more scenic."

"The **train**?! You're taking a train?" Benedek made it sound as if Jonathan had just told him he was booking passage on a stagecoach. "That'll take **days**!"

"Only three," Jonathan retorted. "My meeting with Beckett isn't until next Monday, and I'm due into Alamogordo on Saturday. Besides, a train compartment will be more comfortable, given my problem with this cast." He met Benny's dubious expression. "I **like** trains!"

The journalist raised his hands in a placating fashion. "Okay, okay, relaxavision, Jon-Boy. You take your little train ride. I'll hop a plane out, snoop around a little, and meet you when you get in. How does **that** sound?!"

Jonathan frowned. "I'm not sure I like the idea of you poking around without me to keep an eye on you."

"Jon, I appreciate it, but you're my partner, not my mother! I've been takin' care of myself for decades, and I'm not gonna forget how to do it now. Have a great trip and I'll see you Saturday."

"Benedek--" Jonathan stood up and whimpered as he put too much pressure on the broken foot. He made a mad grab for the crutch and tried to hobble after the departing reporter. The crutch tip caught on the edge of the bookcase and the professor made a wild stab for support as he was thrown off balance. The bookcase wobbled as Jonathan threw his arms across the top of it.

"MacKensie, what are you doing?"

"Oh, er-- hello, Dr. Moorhouse," Jonathan said, managing a smile. "Er, I was just--" He let his explanation trail off as he regained his balance and limped back to his chair. "Did you want to see me about something?"

"I have wonderful news! I just heard about a haunted library--!"

"Dr. Moorhouse, I can't go this week," Jonathan interrupted his superior's enthusiasm.

"Can't go? Of course you can go, MacKensie," she said, glaring at Jonathan. He'd often thought she purposely wore large frame magnifying glasses to increase her intimidation quotient. "You do remember our agreement, don't you?"

Blackmail was a more accurate word, Jonathan thought. However, he smiled and said, "I know my research grant is dependent upon my doing your paranormal research but the library will just have to continue to be haunted, I'm afraid. I've an appointment to see Dr. Beckett--"

"Samuel Beckett, winner of the Nobel prize for his work in Quantum Physics?"

"Well, yes--"

"I've heard his quantum string theory of time travel. Fascinating."

Jonathan frowned slightly. "Time travel? I thought he was working on an artificial intelligence project..."

"Oh, no doubt. Dr. Beckett is quite a genius in several fields. He has the most intriguing although rather limiting theory-- I mean, if one is going to travel through time, what's the point if one can only travel within one's own lifetime?"

"One has to start somewhere?" Jonathan quipped. At her narrowed-eye glare, he continued, "You're not serious! Time travel belongs in H.G. Wells or Isaac Asimov books, not reality."

"Don't be so narrow-minded, MacKensie. Obviously the US Government believes there is validity in Dr. Beckett's theory."

"The US Government?"

"They contacted me to check on your background for a security clearance-- an Admiral Cavaleri or something Italian," Moorhouse informed him. "At first I thought you were leaving the Institute but apparently Dr. Beckett had to get a clearance for you before he could contact you."

"I had no idea," Jonathan said honestly. "I'll certainly try not to do anything that will reflect badly on the Institute-- or you, Dr. Moorhouse."

She peered at him suspiciously, as if wondering if he was being entirely sincere, then gave a satisfied nod. "I suppose the haunting can wait until you get back. Oh, and MacKensie-- **don't** let Benedek anywhere near Dr. Beckett. I don't want him thinking we're actually employing cretins like that nowadays."

"In all fairness, Dr. Moorhouse, you must admit that Benedek has a great deal of knowledge about paranormal phenomenon, much more than I

do. And his enthusiasm--"

"Far outweighs his so-called knowledge," she interrupted with a sniff of disgust.

"I envy his enthusiasm," Jonathan said quietly and Juliana Moorhouse's mouth dropped open. "It's so easy to become wrapped up in research and teaching, and to forget how to enjoy life. You know, I never really had a chum when I was growing up. I was always working so hard to be what I thought my father wanted of me that I never had the time to develop friendships. And then my mother died and Father accepted the teaching post here at Georgetown. I was the strange kid from England, son of the famous Professor MacKensie. It only got worse after Father won the Nobel."

"MacKensie, I--"

"Maybe Benedek does get carried away sometimes and makes disgusting jokes, but he has a good heart. He doesn't judge people but accepts them for what they are. Some of his friends are weird, but he considers them unique and wonderful. Is that really such a bad way to be?"

Moorhouse blinked, thrown completely off balance by MacKensie's unusual display of temper. Jonathan had an easy-going temperament, easily manipulated. To see him showing so much backbone, and in defense of Edgar Benedek... "No, Jonathan," she said, her tone uncharacteristically gentle. "I don't suppose it is. Have a good trip-- take care of that foot, hm?"

"Yes, all right, thank you, Dr. Moorhouse," he said, beginning to be a bit ashamed of his outburst.

She patted his arm and smiled, then went out of the office. As the door closed behind her, she allowed her expression to soften. Jonathan MacKensie was very much like his father, Leonard. A charming, old-fashioned gentleman who had a great capacity for compassion, and would risk his own life to save another. A gentleman who would handle a young girl's crush with gentleness and leave her with some dignity... Oh yes, Jonathan was very much like Leonard MacKensie.

Jonathan sat staring at the door, unable to believe he had revealed so much, had defended Benedek so staunchly. Well, he supposed he **had** become fond of the journalist.

"Even if he is inordinately fond of puns," murmured Jonathan to himself. "I've offended him-- I'll have to make it up to him when I get to New Mexico." He sighed. "Assuming he'll stop talking long enough to listen-- or that I won't find myself trying to throttle him!" He shook off his musings with a rueful smile and pulled a notepad toward him, intent on jotting down his ideas for the meeting with Beckett.

Reading glasses perched on his nose, he lost himself in intense concentration, and gave a start two hours later when the phone at his elbow rang.

"Hello-- yes, Randi, I'm still here... Is it, really?" He squinted at the window, which showed a dusky sky. "Good grief, so it is. Yes, all right, I'll meet you at the Student Center for something to eat. Your treat? That's not... Well, we'll see. Good bye." He hung up and shook his head at his teaching assistant's not-so-subtle hint. She was a sweet kid, and a fine student, but he was-- her professor, for heaven's sake.

Jonathan reached for his crutch, levered himself up and limped to the doorway, papers tucked under his free arm. He switched off the light and maneuvered his way out of his office.

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Jonathan hobbled to his motel room door, flinging it open in response to the rather forceful knocking. "Yes?" he asked, leaning on his crutch and glaring at the dark-haired man. He had expected Benedek but instead he was staring at a man on the short side and dressed in a manner that Benedek would envy.

"You MacKensie?"

Jonathan had a fleeting feeling of being in a Tarzan movie, and he squelched the impulse to ask "You Jane?". "Yes, I'm Jonathan MacKensie," he said cautiously.

"Admiral Calavicci, Project Quantum Leap." The man smiled but his dark eyes remained unfriendly. "Dr. Beckett has spoken highly of you."

Jonathan stood aside and allowed Admiral Calavicci into his room. "I'm flattered--"

"Do you know an Edgar Benedek?"

"Benedek?"

"Says he's an associate of yours," Calavicci continued. "He came ahead to scope things out."

Jonathan took a deep breath. "Benedek **is** a friend and we do work together on occasion but not on this trip. He was already planning to come out here--"

"He's been snooping around our installation."

"**Your** installation?!" Jonathan repeated. "But why-- Oh. It must be that UFO business again." He offered a rueful smile and added, "Benedek gets the strangest ideas sometimes, but he doesn't mean any harm by it-- usually. Is-- he all right?"

"He's in our brig," Calavicci said, his tone implying he'd be just as happy if Benedek stayed there indefinitely. "**And** he's in a lot of trouble. We're a top-secret project, funded by Uncle Sam himself, and we don't care much for spies. Catch my drift?"

Jonathan's jaw dropped. "Now see here," he stammered, "Benedek's no **spy!** Look, if you'll let me see him--"

"See him? If I find out you're in cahoots with him, you'll be sharing his cell."

"Cahoots? Cell?" Jonathan squeaked.

"I told Sam we've got to be careful about who we bring into the Project. He's too trusting--"

"We're not spies! I'm here at Dr. Beckett's request and Benedek came because of some weird notion he has about UFOs," Jonathan protested, taking a step backwards.

"UFOs?"

"He has some crack-pot theory about the government hiding aliens in the desert," Jonathan babbled. He felt his crutch bump into something behind him, and wobbled as he craned his head to look.

"Hangar 17," the admiral said thoughtfully. "Yeah, I've heard of that."

Jonathan swung his head around at that, bumped his crutch against the bed again and sat down abruptly on it after a precarious few moments.

Calavicci took note of Jonathan's gasp of pain as he jarred his foot. "You all right? How'd you break it?"

Jonathan paused in rubbing his leg and patted his jacket pocket, producing a pill bottle. He was taken aback when the admiral fetched him a glass of water from the tiny bathroom. "Thank you," he said, accepting the glass and washing down a couple of pills. "I've been trying very hard to forget," he sighed, gulping the rest of the water and handing back the glass. "Let's just say it was a small price to pay for Benedek's life, although Dr. Moorhouse would disagree. She considers him a cretin and a yellow journalist, more trouble than he's worth. He's not **that** bad. And he's no spy, really."

"Moorhouse didn't have anything good to say about him," Calavicci admitted, a thoughtful look in his dark eyes.

"If you're so certain that we're dangerous, just give me Benedek and we'll go back to Georgetown and not even bother Dr. Beckett," Jonathan wheedled.

The admiral scratched one eyebrow with a forefinger and sighed. "It's tempting. But Sam would never let me get away with it. He's dead set on conferring with you on this A-I stuff."

"But if you're in charge--"

"What makes you think that?"

Jonathan blinked, tried to think. "Well, you're with the military, and if this project is government-funded..." He trailed off, then shrugged, "I simply assumed, once I heard that my background had been investigated--" He paused at the hard look Calavicci shot him, then finished hastily, "It seems reasonable, that's all."

"Don't assume, Doctor MacKensie." Calavicci paced to the curtained window and pulled aside the drapes, stared out. "The Pentagon's not behind us. The money's from a congressional appropriations commission, and I had to talk myself blue in the face to get Sam to accept that. Project Quantum Leap's his baby all the way."

Jonathan resisted the urge to ask if the project was really about time travel, and steered the conversation back towards Benedek. "So what happens now?"

Calavicci turned around in time to see the anthropologist smothering a yawn. "Guess it can wait till morning; you look done in. I'll send a car to drive you out to our complex tomorrow at nine. We can discuss all this then."

"Yes, all right," Jonathan mumbled, his thought processes slowed remarkably by the medication he'd taken. "Thank you, Admiral. I do apologize for any trouble Benny may have caused you-- don't be too hard on him..."

"We'll see," the other man said, as he watched Jonathan's eyes drift shut. He went out and closed the door quietly behind him.

Outside by his car, Al Calavicci shook his head. MacKensie hadn't even demanded to see any identification that his visitor was who he claimed to be. Another naive and trusting scientist type... just like Sam Beckett.

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When Jonathan awoke to the streaming morning sunlight, he was quite disoriented. Sitting up, he was astonished to find he was still fully dressed although he had apparently crawled up to the pillow. Running a

hand through his hair, he looked around the motel room and realized someone was knocking on his door. "Just a moment," he called, finding his crutch on the floor. He'd had the most bizarre dream about some admiral accusing Benedek and him being spies, and he had the vague notion it hadn't been a dream.

"Yes?" he said, opening the door to find an attractive young woman dressed in a naval uniform.

"Dr. MacKensie? I'm Lt. Edwards, aide to Admiral Calavicci," she said, not unfriendly but certainly not warmly. "He thought you might need some assistance."

"Calavicci... Oh. It **wasn't** a dream then, was it?" Jonathan said, drawing a curious look from the young woman. "I'm sorry, Miss-- er, Lieutenant, I just woke up and I'm a bit--" he glanced down at his rumpled suit and finished wryly, "I think I'd better change first. If you don't mind waiting--?" He hobbled backward from the doorway, leaving her room to enter if she chose, smiled at her to convey his harmlessness. "I'll-- er-- go dress in the bathroom."

"Of course, Dr. MacKensie. If you'll give me your suit, I'll see to having it pressed," the lieutenant said as Jonathan pulled a fresh suit from the closet.

"Oh, well, you don't have--"

"My pleasure, sir. The admiral did give instructions to look after you just like we look after Dr. Beckett."

"Oh, er-- well, that was very kind of him." Jonathan balanced the suit and its hanger over his free arm, and went to get a fresh change of socks and underwear from the dresser drawer. Finally he attempted the trip towards the small bathroom, finding the crutch made it difficult to close the door, and that he had dropped his socks on the way.

The lieutenant was quick to retrieve the socks, and handed them to him before he had time to try to maneuver back out in search of them.

"Thank you, Lt. Edwards," Jonathan said, underlining his gratitude with his most charming smile.

And with that smile, the lieutenant was a goner; the MacKensie charm was not diminished by Jonathan's pain and confusion.

"The admiral suggested we breakfast before your meeting," she called through the closed door. Her original plan had been a quick fast-food drive-thru run, but now she rather relished the idea of a pleasant sit-down with the charming Briton.

"Breakfast?" Jonathan's head popped out the door, shaving cream slathered on his handsome face. "But what about Benedek?"

"He'll be taken care of--"

"He's all right, isn't he? I mean, he wasn't, well, shot at dawn?"

The astonished naval officer gawked at him. "We don't do that any more, sir." She smiled at the professor, thinking he must be joking. When he stared at her blankly, she added, "We're really **not** like that, Dr. MacKensie! Your friend's just being held in a room; he hasn't been mistreated in any way-- he's probably still asleep right now!"

Jonathan considered a moment, then sighed. "Probably. He has a knack for relaxing in the most uncomfortable circumstances." He withdrew back into the bathroom and resumed his shave.

When he came out of the bathroom, one-handedly adjusting the knot of his conservative tie, the lieutenant was hanging up the phone. "The

admiral says to assure you Benedek is alive and well, enjoying a full breakfast. The prisoner cannot be released at this time, but he is not being mistreated."

Jonathan felt guilty and he offered an apologetic smile. "Thank you for checking. I know I offended you by questioning Benedek's treatment, but your admiral was so--" he floundered and shrugged.

"Yes, he can be that way at times," she agreed, picking up the rumpled suit Jonathan had tossed on the bed. "Shall we go? I'll see to your suit while you meet with Dr. Beckett. Is there anything else you need?"

Reminded of his primary purpose in coming to New Mexico, Jonathan limped over to the desk and reached for the briefcase he'd set there the evening before. "Just my notes," he offered. "This is very kind of you, Lt. Edwards," he added. "I don't suppose you know where I could get a good cup of tea around here?"

Tea. It figured. He looked so wistful that she resisted the urge to smile and said, "I think we might find some for you, Dr. MacKensie." She opened the door and went out to the car parked in front of the motel room.

Jonathan brightened and followed.

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"Geez, Sam, he was taking pictures! This is a top secret project--"

"You're turning it in a military operation," Sam Beckett protested. "You know how I feel about that."

"Uncle Sam is paying, and he's paying Big Bucks. You've got to follow his rules and **don't** give me that crap about not wanting government money. We tried private funding, Sam, and it just wasn't there. I've agreed to do as much of the direct dealing with the bigwigs as I can, but you've got to do your part. I'm just asking you to accept a few rules."

"I know, Al," Beckett said after a moment. "I'm sorry, but-- it would serve us right if Jonathan MacKensie decided to walk out on me because of this. I hope I can convince him to help; I need his input on the Ziggy prototype."

"Ziggy?" Calavicci lifted an eyebrow. "That's its name? Why?"

The quantum physicist studied the ceiling, then shrugged. "Why not?"

"Good point, I guess. But I'm **not** turning Benedek loose. He's a scandalrag journalist, for cripes sake! We can't have Quantum Leap appearing in every supermarket from Kalamazoo to Bakersfield."

"I know, Al, but MacKensie can convince Benedek to keep quiet, can't he?"

"Sam, you gotta stop sniffing solder," Al said with a shake of his head.

Beckett favored him with a hard glare. "Well, we can at least give him the chance."

The admiral crossed his arms, his expression stubborn, but before he could object further, the intercom buzzed and a woman's voice said, "Lt. Edwards is here, with Dr. MacKensie, sir."

"Send them in," Beckett said, leaning over to key his response button, then standing up as his office door opened.



W. J.

Al scowled, but turned to face Edwards and the professor.

Jonathan wore a plastic visitor's badge clipped to his lapel, and a worried expression on his face. With a glance at Calavicci, he focused on the tall brown-haired man standing behind the desk. "You must be Dr. Beckett," he ventured. "I'm Jonathan MacKensie."

"Come in, Dr. MacKensie," welcomed Sam. "I'm pleased you were able to come out here. I heard one of your lectures at Georgetown, about *Ramapithecus*' place in the evolutionary scheme. Very interesting."

"Really?" Jonathan looked pleased, as Beckett came to meet him and shook his hand. "Thank you. Uh, I hate to change the subject, but could I see Edgar Benedek, please?"

"He's persistent, I'll give you that," Al muttered to Sam. "Okay, MacKensie, I guess you'll be useless to Sam until you've seen for yourself that Benedek is fine. Let's go."

Jonathan was expecting more of an argument, and his jaw dropped for a moment at the admiral's comment. Collecting himself, he said, "All right. Thank you... I'm sorry, Dr. Beckett, but--"

"It's okay," Sam assured him, clapping him on the shoulder. "We'll talk later."

Calavicci didn't hide his disgust as he turned to lead the way to the security offices, so Beckett sent him a warning glare as the two men left.

They found Benedek in a white walled room, lounging on a cot. He leaped to his feet as the door opened. "Jack-- am I glad to see you!"

"Benedek, you're all right, aren't you?!"

"Sure, you know me-- always come out fine, no matter what--"

Jonathan's smile turned to a scowl. "Benedek, do you have any idea what kind of trouble you're in?!"

"I've been in worse--"

"They think you're a spy! Do you know what they do to spies? This is not an UFO installation, merely a secret project for the development of a computer," MacKensie argued, dropping his crutch and grasping Benedek by his shirt front. "There is no mystery, no story; do you understand?"

"Relaxavision, Buds, relaxavision," Benny said, placing his hands over Jonathan's and pulling his shirt from Jonathan's death grip.

"**Benedek--!**"

"I know something's going down, Jack. Do you know who that is?" Benny said in a low voice, nodding at Al who stood with crossed arms by the door.

"Admiral Calavicci--"

"Albert Calavicci, the astronaut," Benny emphasized. "Astronauts are the best source for UFO sightings, and NASA has to be involved."

"There are **no such things** as UFOs, Benedek!" Jonathan shouted, his excitement making him wobble as all his weight was supported on his good leg.

"Jon-Boy, you oughta know better than that by now," Benny said, putting his hand on the professor's elbow to steady him. "Look at all you've seen since we teamed up; you've even been possessed by ghosts, Buds."

"Ghosts?"

Benny looked at the admiral. "Yeah, seven at one blow."

"I explained all that--"

"No way, Dr. J," Benny interrupted, stooping down to snag the crutch and prop it under Jonathan's arm. "Maybe it would fly on a couple of 'em, but not that last one. You knew too much personal stuff about Moe and his brother, stuff only his ghost could know."

"I-- well, I--" Jonathan fumbled with his crutch, unable to find a suitable retort.

"You, uh, really saw ghosts?"

"Ghosts, vampires, even a witch," Benny assured the admiral.

"Benedek--"

"You know she's a witch, Jack."

"How is it the two of you have run into so many freakies?" Al asked, showing no signs of his earlier impatience.

"That's what me and Jonny do," Benny said with a cheeky grin. "Chasin' shadows is our life!"

"Benedek, please," hissed Jonathan, "I'm here as a **scientist**, not a-- paranormal investigator."

"Hey, the paranormal is where you find it, Jacko," retorted the journalist.

"That may be, but it's not **here**, and Dr. Beckett may not understand your insinuations that it is."

"But Jon--"

"Do you want me to get you out of here, or not?!"

"I think for now, Mr. Benedek'll stay right where he is," Al spoke up. "You're gonna be too busy with Sam to keep an eye on him and he'll cause a lot less trouble in here."

"But--"

"Let's go, MacKensie; Sam's waiting."

"Go ahead, Jonny, I'll be fine here," Benedek promised. "The chow's pretty good for being government-issue." He smiled at Al's glare and went meekly to sit on his bed again.

"I give up," Jonathan muttered, turning to leave as Benedek made shooing gestures at him.

"I don't suppose this waiting room of yours comes equipped with some magazines or something, Admiral?"

Al studied the interloper. "I'll see what we've got," he finally said, "but don't expect The Physic Times." *Psychic*

"I'll take the latest copy of the National Register," Benny called as the door shut behind them.

"Incarceration hasn't improved him a bit," MacKensie sighed as he followed Al down the corridors.

Al raised a dark eyebrow. "Happen often?"

"Not as often as it should," Jonathan grumbled. "You will let us go, won't you? After my interview with Dr. Beckett, I mean. Benedek's really quite harmless."

"So **that's** why he's still on the loose," Al said ironically. "Yeah, I suppose we can remand him into your custody. But if I hear one word about Project Quantum Leap being a haven for little green guys, I swear I'll--"

"He won't, I promise," Jonathan said quickly.

"Hmm. I hope not," the admiral replied, lighting his cigar. He puffed on it a few minutes, then glanced at the professor. "You really worry about him, don't you?"

"Well-- I-- he's my friend."

"Yeah," Al nodded, "I know the feeling." He opened the door to Beckett's office, then closed it with a thoughtful little smile.

Two hours later, he peeked in to find the pair deeply engrossed in a discussion about a bicameral brain and its advantages over a unicameral one. Jonathan had loosened his tie and removed his jacket while Sam's hair was ruffled from endless runs of his hand through it.

Al pulled the door closed and took a ruminating puff on his cigar. Maybe he'd interrogate Benedek some more... the poker chips and cards were in the break room.

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"Well, I appreciate your input, Dr. MacKensie," Sam said finally. "I think I've got some ideas on a couple of directions to go in on this."

"I'm glad I could help," Jonathan said, draining the last of several cups of tea. The conference table was littered with the remains of their lunch, as well as notepads and papers. "Good Lord, is that the correct time?!"

Beckett followed his glance at the wall clock and looked sheepish. "I'm afraid it is. It'll be dark before you and Benedek get back to town-- if you'd rather stay here tonight, we could arrange it..."

"Thank you, but I think the sooner I get Benedek out of here, the better it will be for everyone." Jonathan picked up his crutch and levered himself up out of his chair, just as the door opened to admit Calavicci and Benedek.

The admiral looked glum while Benny was gleefully counting a handful of bills. "Ya gotta work on that poker face, Albert," Benedek informed him.

"My friends call me Al," came the quick retort. "**You** can call me Admiral-- **Edgar.**"

Sam and Jonathan exchanged glances and turned to the newcomers with similarly raised eyebrows.

"Benedek, I thought you were terrible at cards."

"Wrong, Jon-Boy, I'm terrible at gin! **Poker's** my game." Benedek grinned broadly and pocketed his winnings.

"Consider it a bribe," Al said, "for your silence." He handed the journalist's camera to him. "We're keeping the film."

Benedek looked crestfallen as he accepted the 35 millimeter. "Yeah, I know the drill. Project Quantum Leap is not testing flying saucer technology, there are no little green guys on the payroll here, and it's none of my damn business what Sam Beckett wants with an A-I computer." His blue eyes sparkled with irrepressible mischief as he added, "But that story about what you saw on your final space flight sure will make up for my disappointment, Admiral! I'll send you the release forms pronto, and we'll have it on Letterman before you know it."

Jonathan gaped at Benedek and then at the admiral, then sighed and limped towards the doorway, his companion at his heels.

"What?" they heard Al say to Sam, as the door closed. "Don't look at me like that! It was flying, it was unidentified, and I was stone-cold sober at the time, to say nothing of being--"

The office door swung shut, cutting off the rest of Calavicci's

words, and Jonathan shook his head in amazement. "You're incredible, Benny. Last night that man was ready to hang you from the nearest yardarm; today he's playing cards with you and swapping tall tales!"

"Yeah, I guess I've got the touch, Jack." His grin faded a little. "Listen-- thanks for standing up for me with these guys. Anybody else would have left me to twist in the wind."

"I hope you've learned your lesson, Benedek." But it didn't come out as sternly as intended. "Next time I might not be around for you."

"I don't even want to think about that, Jonathan."

The professor glanced at his friend in surprise, and caught an anxious expression in Benedek's eyes, which was quickly covered over by the familiar mask of humor. "Besides, who else at Georgetown's going to make me respectable if anything happens to you, huh? Not Dr. M, that's for sure!"

"Not a likely possibility," Jonathan admitted. "Although I think she may be mellowing."

They continued their banter until they were standing outside the installation headquarters, near Benedek's rental car.

Jonathan was mildly surprised to see that his suit was already waiting in the vehicle, draped with a dry cleaner's bag. "That Lt. Edwards is certainly efficient," he murmured, struggling to get into the passenger side of the two-door economy size.

"Lt. Edwards... tall, leggy redhead? Efficient isn't the word that crossed **my** mind," Benny said, shoving Jonathan's leg into the car and slamming the door. "Buckle up, Bucky," he said, getting behind the wheel.

"I'm buckled and don't be such a slug," Jonathan said automatically, knowing Benedek would ignore him anyway.

"So, how about pizza? There's a little place Al told me about where we can grab a decent pie," Benny said, starting the engine.

"No anchovies and no onions," Jonathan said firmly, and Benny nodded absently.

The pizza place was in a poorly-lit shoppette and Jonathan felt uneasy, but Benny just shrugged off his concern and left his partner to wait in the car while he got the pizza. After a moment, Jonathan decided to get some milk at the convenience store in the shoppette.

Benny emerged with a white cardboard box in time to see Jonathan losing his struggle with a pair of thugs as they were shoving him into the back of a van.

"Hey! Let him go!" Benny shouted, charging towards them, pizza box and all. He slammed it across the back of the bigger thug, which merely resulted in attracting attention to himself.

"Jonathan--!" Benedek exclaimed as he was lifted off his feet and flung into the van as well. "Jonny, what's going on here?!"

The professor groaned as Benny inadvertently fell on him. "Kidnapped--"

"Great book, lousy crime," Benedek said, as the van's doors slammed shut. "Hey! Let us outta here! Help!"

The vehicle's engine started, and it pulled out of the parking lot, causing Benedek to lurch against the windowless side panel. "Jonny," he said, groping his way back to the slumped form of his partner. "Are you okay?!"

Jonathan didn't reply, and Benny felt his forehead, coming away with

something warm and sticky on his fingers. "Aw, geez," he said, as the world around him spun and tugged at him like a centrifuge. "Jonny?" Benny clutched at Jonathan's arm, feeling as if some internal force was trying to pull him apart.

Everything slowed down for a split second, and then Edgar Benedek was gone.

"Oh, boy," a voice said a moment later.

To Jonathan, the voice would have sounded like Edgar Benedek, the face in the dim light would have appeared as Benny's but in fact Benny was now several years in the future looking and sounding like Sam Beckett.

Sam groped around in the darkness and found an unconscious form. They were apparently in the back of a moving vehicle, either a truck or van. Sam's eyes adjusted to the faint light and he could see that his companion was a man. He shook him lightly and the man moaned in pain then fell silent.

Sam braced himself against the wall of the van, sitting next to the injured man. He could barely make it out, but there appeared to be a bleeding wound on the man's head.

"Al, where are you?" Sam whispered in the darkness, but there was no reply. Sometimes it took a while for Ziggy to locate him for Al. He felt in his pockets, hoping for a handkerchief to staunch the flow of blood. Finally he ripped off the tail of his shirt, hoping that whoever it belonged to wouldn't mind.

"Benny?" the man mumbled and Sam wondered if that was who he was now.

"I'm here," he said, taking a chance. "Take it easy, you're bleeding."

"What do they want--with us?"

"I don't know," Sam said honestly. It was obvious they weren't in an ambulance, and his initial hope that whoever was driving this vehicle was taking them to a hospital was fading fast.

"Sorry, Benedek," slurred the injured man. "You shouldn't have--interfered."

"Interfered?" Sam echoed, only half-registering the name.

"Let them-- take me. Must be a mistake."

Sam was thrown against his companion as the van lurched to an abrupt halt. He could hear doors slamming and footsteps, then he was squinting into the glare of flashlights as two men opened the rear doors of the van.

"Get out," a voice ordered. The bigger man grabbed Sam's arm and pulled him out, and his companion covered him with a gun. "You, too, Dr. Beckett."

Sam gave a start at hearing his own name, addressed to the injured man still in the van. When he didn't move, the thug crawled in and dragged him out.

In the light Sam could see his fellow prisoner was vaguely familiar but he was fairly certain he wasn't Sam Beckett, although with his swiss-cheesed brain he couldn't be positive. Al would know, if he ever showed up. The man's hair was about the same color, and there was something about the nose... but he wasn't Sam Beckett.

The gun was waved in Sam's face and he turned around to shuffle off in the indicated direction. The taller thug half-carried, half-dragged

Sam's companion, who had a cast on his right foot, apparently from an older injury.

"Get comfortable, guys, the Doc'll be along soon," Sam's captor said as the pair were shoved into a small room that contained two cots and little else.

"Doctor? He does need a doctor--"

"Don't worry about him. The Doc needs his brain," the shorter man laughed as the door was slammed and locked.

Sam knelt over the unconscious man and checked his vital signs, then carefully hauled him up from the floor and onto one of the cots. At the sound of the Imaging Chamber door, he turned his head to glare at the holographic image of Al Calavacci. "Where have you been?!"

"Sorry, Sam, but Ziggy had trouble locking onto you," Al said with a hitch of his shoulders. "Is he-- dead?"

"Not yet. Head wounds bleed a lot and can look worse than they are. I just hope it's not serious," Sam replied, looking down at his companion. "So who is he?"

"Jonathan MacKensie."

"Jonathan-- I know him, don't I?"

"He helped with the break through on Ziggy," Al said quietly. "He and his partner, Edgar Benedek, were kidnapped the night they left Project Quantum Leap. I don't know the details, but MacKensie was killed and Benedek blamed himself. He abandoned his tabloid journalism and went into news, became a war correspondent and was killed in the Persian Gulf."

Sam felt something leaden in the pit of his stomach. "Al, they think he's me! One of them called him Dr. Beckett just now. MacKensie must have been killed when they found out they'd made a mistake."

Al whistled softly, rubbing the back of his neck. "You mean somebody was out to nab you, and picked them up instead?"

"Looks that way, Al," the time-traveler answered. He looked down at MacKensie with guilt and compassion in his eyes. "Al, I've got to get him out of here-- alive!"

Al studied the handlink he carried, gave a slow nod. "Ziggy's giving me a 90% probability that's your assignment here."

"Where **is** here?"

"Hmm? Oh--" Al chomped his cigar between his teeth and punched the handlink's keys. "Well, this is New Mexico, 1986, as you know-- and you're being held in an abandoned ranch thirty miles from Alamogordo. No neighbors nearer than ten miles-- looks like they picked a nice isolated place to do their dirty work."

Sam sighed. It wasn't encouraging, but it was a start. "Can you scout around for me, Al? Find out how many there are, and where? They said something about 'the Doc' coming to see us, whoever he is."

"Ziggy's drawing a blank," Al griped, whacking the side of the handlink and ignoring its whine of protest. "Nothing on any 'Doc', but that's not surprising. This ranch belonged to a Barnaby Siegler but he died in 1976 and it's been abandoned ever since. Apparently no heirs. Dead end there."

Sam hoped Al's use of the word "dead" wasn't going to prove prophetic as far as MacKensie and he were concerned. His expression must have said as much, because the Observer looked apologetic and punched the handlink



viciously and muttered, "Ziggy, center me on whoever's handy. See you later, Sam."

"Thanks," murmured the physicist, as Al vanished. He checked on Jonathan, then went to the door and tried the lock. It was all too solid, and he kicked it in frustration, then turned away.

"Oh God, my head hurts."

Sam knelt before Jonathan as the injured man struggled to sit up. He lifted one eyelid to check Jonathan's pupil and paused at the expression on Jonathan's face, as they were nearly eyeball to eyeball.

"What are you doing?"

Sam abruptly released the eyelid and sat back on his heels. "You've had a nasty blow to your head. I was just-- checking," he finished lamely as Jonathan just stared at him.

Jonathan touched the sticky wound on his head and winced. "They must have used a club or something."

"I wouldn't be surprised, Jonathan."

Jonathan paused and tilted an odd look at Sam. "No comments about a sap?"

Sam considered, then shook his head. "Don't think so."

"Did you hit **your** head?"

"Uh, no," Sam said, groping for what he hoped was Benedek's smile and manner.

"Then I must have hit mine harder than I thought." Jonathan swallowed and closed his eyes, leaning back against the wall. One hand flexed over his stomach as if to comfort himself. "Has anyone bothered yet to tell us why we're where we are?"

"Apparently they think you're Dr. Beckett," Sam ventured.

One brown eye opened. "Dr. Beckett? But what would they want with him?"

Sam rose to his feet and began pacing. "I wish I knew. I don't remember any-- I mean, Al didn't mention any threats. Did, uh, Dr. Beckett mention any to you?"

"No. I can't imagine what Beckett is up to that unsavory characters would find interesting."

"Neither can I."

"Well, it's obviously a mistake of some sort. I'll just explain I'm **not** Sam Beckett and they'll have to let us go." Jonathan paused, then added, "won't they?"

Sam hesitated. "Maybe, Jonathan."

The professor looked at him with both eyes wide open. "That's my name-- my **correct** name! Are you **sure** you're feeling all right, Benedek?"

"Of course I'm all right," Sam said, offering an ingenuous smile. "And why wouldn't I call you by your name?"

"Because ever since we met, you've gone out of your way to avoid using it, just to irritate me," Jonathan said, staring at Sam. "I've begged you to call me Jonathan, but you always find some outlandish moniker instead."

"You're hurt and we're in danger. Calling you Jonathan seems the least I can do," Sam said, thinking fast. He seldom had this much trouble adapting to the leapee's life. Very few people had ever questioned him, and he'd always been able to squirm his way out of it.

"Well, stop it because you're making me nervous," Jonathan said,

touching the wound on his head. "I have enough to worry about without you adding to it."

"Okay," Sam agreed, wondering just what he **was** supposed to call him. Sir? He could sure use Al...

§§§§§

"What? I can't leave now, Gooshie-- He's what? Let me check on Sam first and then-- What do you mean there's no time? Just hope Sam understands," Al grumbled, punching up the Imaging Chamber door. Stalking through the aperture, he glared at the man behind Ziggy's main console. "This better be serious, Goosh, or I'll feed you to Tina's alligator."

"Admiral, I wouldn't have bothered you if it wasn't," Gooshie said, twisting his hands together. "The leapee is, well, sir, freaking out. He's beating on the doors, demanding to know if Jonathan's all right and why have they been kidnapped."

"Oh boy," Al said, borrowing Sam's favorite phrase. "I guess I'd better see to him. Have Ziggy keep a microchip on Sam, will ya?" He pocketed the handlink and headed for the Waiting Room where he motioned for the guard to let him in.

"It's about time-- Al? Did they get you, too?" Benedek demanded, approaching the Observer. "What about Dr. B? Do you know what they've done to Jonny? He was bleeding pretty bad after they roughed him up. They didn't look like little green men, but maybe they've enslaved some poor schmoes--"

"Take it easy, Benny," Al said, raising his hands to stem the floodtide of words. "This is not a UFO! You're still at Project Quantum Leap--"

"Huhh?" Benny's worry became disbelief. "**You** kidnapped us?!"

"No!" Al waved his cigar in emphatic denial. "It's kind of hard to explain-- this **is** the Project, only it's--uh--" he rubbed his neck, blurted it out. "It's 1999, Benny. Quantum Leap's a time-travel experiment. Except Sam's been gone since 1993--"

"Sam Beckett?" Benedek was looking more confused than ever. "I don't get it--where's Jonny?"

Al took a deep breath. "He's still in 1986. Sam's with him-- you see, the problem is that things went a little ca-ca on Sam's first trip through the Accelerator, and he's been bouncing within his own lifetime, doing good deeds. He leaps into peoples' lives, and they come here until the Big Guy leaps him out again, then they go back."

Benedek's blue eyes grew wide and he took a step back. "Whoa, you'd better find out what's in those cigars, pal."

Al blinked, looked blankly at his cigar, then chuckled. "Yeah, I know how it sounds. Come over here, Benny. I want to show you something." He walked toward the center of the room, stopping beside a waist-high table made of a highly polished material.

Benny followed, cocking a curious look at the admiral. His gaze followed Al's to their reflections on the table top.

"Dr. B? But-- that's **me**!"

Al nodded. "Sam looks like whoever he's replaced-- and while they're here, they look like him."

Benny met Al's eyes with dawning realization. "It's really true,

isn't it?! Wow-- what a trip! I'm in the future--" His grin faded. "I'm here-- Jonathan's not... He's in trouble, isn't he? Bad trouble-- and I can't do anything to help..."

"You're right that he's in trouble--"

"You said Sam does good deeds," Benny interrupted. "Like helping little old ladies across the street?"

"Not...quite."

"He saves lives, doesn't he? He's there to save Jonny's life, isn't he? Because I couldn't," Benny said, a stark expression on his sharp-featured face. "I got him killed."

"But it's **not** gonna happen. Sam's there and he'll save both of you--"

"Both? I bit the Big One, too?"

Al snapped his mouth shut, realizing he'd said too much.

"Okay, now that I know, I can go back and stop it, right?"

Al shook his head. "Sam can't leap out until he's fixed whatever went wrong."

"Can't leap out?" Benedek repeated. "But can't you just shove me in this Accelerator thing and beam me back to--"

"No," Al said gently. "We're not exactly in control of the experiment any more."

Benedek's shoulders sagged, and he leaned against the table, his entire demeanor one of utter despair. "I shouldn't have left him alone..."

Al put a sympathetic hand on the journalist's shoulder. "I've got to go check on Sam again, all right? You stay here and take it easy. If you want anything, push this button and someone'll come in. And-- don't worry. Sam's got a knack for this sort of thing."

Benedek was staring at the floor, apparently not hearing him.

Al sighed and went out, pulling the handlink out of his pocket as he left. He knew exactly how Benedek felt; his inability to help Sam left him with the bitter taste of frustration and guilt. If he hadn't gone to that party, he could have stopped Sam from going into the Accelerator before it was fully tested.

He made a detour to the office of the staff psychiatrist.

"Our guest could use your ear, I think," he said to the elegantly beautiful black woman seated at the desk. "Benedek has maintained his memory, and he's worried about his friend. Sam's there to save his life and Benny feels guilty that Jonathan died. I've tried to tell him that it'll be okay, but he's not taking it well, Verbena."

"He knows about the Project?" Verbena Beeks asked, lifting an eyebrow in surprise. "How much have you told him, Admiral?"

"More than I should have," Al admitted. "Listen, you go do your shrink number-- I gotta get back to Sam."

"Admiral--" Verbena was protesting to a closing door and she sighed, then stood up and straightened her skirt. Just like the admiral to drop a bombshell and run off, she thought as she hurried to the Waiting Room.

§§§§§

"The bleeding's stopped," Sam informed Jonathan, checking the gash on the professor's forehead. "It should have stitches, and we don't even have a band-aid."

"But I'll live, right?" Jonathan said, attempting a sickly grin. "It's only my head, after all."

"Head wounds are no laughing matter," Sam responded with a frown. "There could be internal neurological damage--" He broke off at the disbelieving look Jonathan shot him.

"Since when have you learned words like 'neurological', Benedek?" Jonathan asked Sam. "You generally let me handle our first-aid needs."

"You can't very well take care of yourself this time," Sam pointed out. "You can't see your own head, can you?"

"No, but I can certainly **feel** it," the professor remarked, wincing and trying to settle himself more comfortably on the cot. He moved his broken foot a little too rapidly and gasped suddenly.

"Does that hurt, too?" Sam asked, nodding at the foot.

Jonathan glared at him and fumbled in his jacket pocket for his prescription bottle.

"What are you doing?!" Sam exclaimed as Jonathan removed the cap and shook two pills into his palm.

"Taking my painkillers, if you don't mind, **Doctor** Benedek."

"You shouldn't--" Sam caught himself and added, "I mean, I heard once that a person with a head injury shouldn't take anything to make him drowsy, just in case of a concussion."

Jonathan considered and sighed, putting one capsule back into the bottle. "Maybe half the dosage will be all right." He dry-swallowed the medication, then closed his eyes. "I should have taken that assignment Moorhouse was attempting to foist off on me. A haunted library could hardly have been any worse than this."

"That's probably true," Sam agreed, looking up as Al stepped through the Imaging Chamber door. He moved to the other cot and sat down, deliberately putting distance between himself and Jonathan. "Well?" he murmured in a low voice.

"I saw four guys playing poker, none of them too brightly," Al said, holding the handlink to his side. "Hired muscle usually doesn't have too high a ranking in the brain department. All of 'em have knuckles that drag the ground."

Sam's brows drew together as he glared at Al.

"I, uh, found the Doc's lab," Al admitted reluctantly. "He's got an operating table..."

"So he's a medical doctor, right?" Sam asked, his tone pleading for reassurance. "He can help Jonathan--"

"It's got great big leather restraints, Sam," Al interrupted with an apologetic shrug. "I don't think he's Marcus Welby."

Sam looked uneasily at Jonathan, then said, "Al, one of them said this 'Doc' wanted my-- I mean, MacKensie's brain... He couldn't have meant it **literally**, could he?!"

"Well, it's a possibility, Sam--"

"We can't let that happen, Al!"

Jonathan opened his eyes and stared dully at Edgar Benedek, who was gesticulating and apparently holding a conversation with thin air. It had finally happened-- Benedek's sanity had snapped completely, at last. "Benedek?"

Sam froze, turned slowly to face Jonathan who had raised up on one elbow. "Yes?" he said cautiously, offering what he hoped was an innocent smile.

"Who are you talking to?" Jonathan purposely kept his voice calm.

"Uh-oh," Al commented.

"Talking to?"

"Wait a minute, Sam! Tell him it's a contact from the spirit world," Al interjected eagerly.

Sam stared at Al as if he'd suddenly sprouted a third eyeball.

"Go on; trust me."

Sam cleared his throat. "Uh, it's my invisible guide, Al-- he's contacted us from--" Sam nearly choked on the last few words, but he got them out, "--the spirit world."

Jonathan sighed. "Your spirit guide-- of course, Benedek, I should have known. What does 'Al' have to say about things? Or did he just come to welcome us to his world shortly?"

"No! That's not going to happen," Sam said firmly. "Al's here to help us."

"Unless he can unlock this door or has an in with the police, I don't think he'll be much help."

The sound of the lock turning made Jonathan sit up and all three of them stared expectantly at the door.

One of the bully boys shoved the door open and came in, aiming his gun at the prisoners. Another followed him and took up a similar position.

A dark-haired, dark-eyed man entered behind them. "Good evening, Dr. Beckett," he said to Jonathan.

The professor summoned up an apologetic smile. "Look, I think you're making a terrible mistake, Mr.--er--"

"I am Dr. Frank," the newcomer said, his expression impassive. His features were those of a handsome man who had coarsened somewhat with middle age. "You are not here by mistake, Dr. Beckett."

"But I'm **not** Beckett!" Jonathan exclaimed. "My name is Jonathan MacKensie!"

"Nonsense," Frank told him. "You are Samuel Beckett, the modern world's most intelligent man, and you are going to assist me in my project."

"I don't think I can do that--" Jonathan said, cringing as one goon started toward him.

"Wait!" Sam said, stepping between Jonathan and the thug. "Dr. Frank, he's telling the truth! He's **not** Sam Beckett, because I am!"

"Sam--" Al began.

"Don't be absurd, Admiral Calavicci," Frank said pleasantly.

"What?!" exclaimed Sam, Jonathan and Al in chorus.

"I have made a study of your habits," Dr. Frank said, continuing the pleasant tone of voice. "The pair of you were followed from your project complex to your favorite pizza restaurant. Al Calavicci is a small, dark-haired man while Beckett is taller with brown hair. I believe the pair of you fit that description. Calavicci is known to dress rather flamboyantly, and a Hawaiian print shirt with jeans and sneakers is not exactly conservative."

"But it's not on the cutting edge of fashion, either," Al said indignantly.

"But I'm Jonathan MacKensie, and he's Edgar Benedek, and we were just visiting that project. Really!"

"It's true," Sam added. "You can check with the Georgetown Institute of Science and verify our identities!"

"Wait! Look at this," Jonathan said, reaching into his pocket for his prescription bottle. The sudden movement alarmed one of the goons who leaped forward and caught Jonathan by the arm, jerking him to his feet and twisting his arm behind his back.

Jonathan's head swam with pain and nausea, and if it hadn't been for the man's grip on his arm he would have fallen. "My name's-- on the label," he gasped, even as the pill bottle was forced from his fingers.

The thug handed it to Frank, who glanced at the label and pocketed the bottle. "Bring him," he ordered.

"No!" Sam shouted, just as the blue glow of the quantum leap effect enveloped him. His mental scream of protest echoed around him and then his head cleared. He was being dragged down a hallway, and in the background he could hear a man shouting. The voice was vaguely familiar but before he could place it, he was hauled into a room that looked like an operating room.

"You think your theory for A-I is superior to mine, but I will prove you wrong, Dr. Beckett. I have decided that **your** brain should power my unit," another familiar voice said in his ear. "The perfect irony, don't you agree?"

As Sam was lifted onto a guernsey, his gaze travelled around the room to see a small man struggling in the grasps of two larger men.

"Jonathan! It's me, Benny! Don't give up, Buds; we'll get out of this! Come on, Jack, give me a sign you're okay!"

Jonathan? Sam blinked in bewilderment. "Oh boy."

§§§§§

"Mr. Benedek?"

Jonathan swallowed hard, shook his head and blinked in amazement at the beautiful black woman staring at him anxiously. "Benedek? Where is he?" he asked, finding his tongue at last. He looked down and studied his hands; at least, he **thought** they were his, but they looked strange.

"Just a moment, please," the woman said, not answering his question but going to the door and stepping outside.

What was this place, and where was everyone? Seconds ago, he and Benny had been struggling with several rather large and ugly men. Now he was alone in a room that contained a waist-high polished metal table and little else. And now he was dressed in a shiny white jumpsuit--

--and no cast on his foot.

"Benedek!" he screeched, bolting for the door and pounding on it with both fists. "**BENEDEK!**"

"Please move away from the door, Dr. MacKensie," a disembodied, feminine voice said. "Everything will be all right, I assure you..."

Jonathan staggered back and gaped at the ceiling. "Who are you?!"

"Sam Beckett gave me the designation Ziggy," the voice told him.

"And you are my godfather, of sorts."

Jonathan's mind was unable to take in everything which had happened to him in the last few moments, and he fainted, just as Dr. Beeks and a medical team entered the Waiting Room.

§§§§§

"Jonny, fight! He's gonna kill you!" Benny shouted, breaking off as a meaty fist plowed into his solar plexus.

Instinctively, Sam lashed out with his right foot and caught one of his captors off-guard. The cast cracked against the man's chin as he'd leaned over Sam's feet, and he sank to the floor.

Rolling off the guernsey to one side, Sam shoved it into the man coming after him. Adrenalin-pumped strength slammed the man into the wall and he collapsed over the guernsey.

"Enough, Dr. Beckett."

Sam turned to find Dr. Frank pointing a gun at Benny. Sam, breathing hard, held his hands out before him in surrender.

"Sam, this is it," Al said, checking the readout on the handlink. "Ziggy says odds are 99% that Jonathan was shot instead of Benedek." He squinted at Benny. "Sam?"

The journalist ignored him, all his attention on the gun muzzle aimed at him.

Al waved a hand in Benedek's face, and when that provoked no reaction, he tapped furiously on the handlink's keys.

"All right," Sam said to Frank. "So I ~~am~~ Dr. Beckett--"

"Huhh?" Al exclaimed, swinging to face him. "You're MacKensie now?!"

'Try to keep up, Al,' thought Sam, as he finished aloud, "I'm the one you want. Let him go, and I'll cooperate."

"Jack, have you lost your mind?!"

"My money's with him," Al said, jerking his cigar in Benny's direction. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I remember your theory, and it won't work, no matter what brain you use. What you're planning is murder--"

"Not when it's done in the name of Science! One life is a small price to pay," Dr. Frank interrupted, dark eyes wild as he gestured with the gun.

"But you were prepared to kill Benedek, to get me to cooperate," Sam said, edging towards him, his eyes on the wavering gun. "That's **two** lives."

Benedek gaped at the extraordinary sight of what occurred next. It looked as if Jonathan MacKensie stood on his injured right foot and lashed out with his left in a graceful spin and kick which knocked the gun from Dr. Frank's hand and sent it flying.

"Whoa-ho, Jonny! I never knew you could do that," Benny said, both amazed and impressed. "Did old Leonard teach you?"

Sam ignored him, just as Jonathan would, and he grappled with Dr. Frank who was scrambling for his gun. Benny snatched it up, aiming it at the older man.

"Okay, Dr. Frankenstein, the jig's up," Benny snarled in his best Jimmy Cagney impersonation.

Sam seconded that observation by a powerful right-left combination of punches which left Frank slumped into unconsciousness on the floor.

Taking a deep breath, Sam looked down at the man, then quickly knelt and pulled Frank's arms behind his back, using Jonathan's belt to fasten his hands together.

"That's the way, J.J.," Benny said with mingled astonishment and admiration. "Hey, are you feeling all right, Buds? I mean, you've gotta be in **pain**, after that kung-fu trick you just did--"

"Adrenalin," Sam said, thinking fast. "It--er-- gives you the strength to do things like--that."

"Well, yeah, I know, but--"

"Benedek, look out!" Sam called, as the door flew open to reveal the doctor's last two henchmen.

Benny whirled and aimed the automatic at them. His sudden movement discharged it accidentally, and a shot ricocheted off the door jamb above their heads.

The men froze, then threw down their weapons and turned tail in flight.

"A-ha!" Benedek crowed. "We did it, Jon-Boy!" He slapped Sam on the shoulder. "What the heck was he gonna do to you-- some sort of brain transplant?"

Sam scratched an eyebrow. "Something like that. Uh, why don't you go find a phone and call the sheriff. I'll keep an eye on the doctor."

"I'm gone like a flash, Jonny." Benny handed him the gun. "Thanks, Jonathan."

Sam frowned after the journalist, then looked at Al. "Why haven't I leaped?"

"I don't know," Al said, whacking his palm against the handlink and then giving the whining device a shake. "Maybe you have to wait for the Boys in Blue."

"Jonathan's going to be okay, isn't he?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, Ziggy says he and Benny go on to become the most famous pair of para-para--" he whacked the handlink--"paranormal investigators. Due to Jonathan's insistence for scientific testing, their reputation gains world-wide respect."

"Then what's the problem?"

Al opened his mouth but before he could find an answer, Benny returned.

"The calvary is on their way, pal," he announced cheerfully. "How's the foot?"

"Foot? Oh, it's okay," Sam said, glancing down at the cast.

"Yeah, well, it would be, wouldn't it?"

"Excuse me?"

"I don't know how you've done it, but I appreciate it," Benny said, studying Sam in such an intense manner that the time-traveler grew uneasy. "You tell Al the secret's safe with me-- my lips and typewriter are sealed."

"Al?" Sam's gaze slid around to meet the astonished Observer's eyes.

"Is he here?" Benny followed Sam's gaze, waved his hand through the hologram. "Or is he watching on a giant screen TV or something wonderful like that? Is Jonny with him?"

"What are you talking about, Benny?" Sam asked, striving for innocence and failing.

"It's okay, Dr. B. I know you were here to save Jonathan's life, and I'm not gonna do anything to mess that up. He's my best friend." There was no doubting the sincerity shining in Benny's blue eyes. He stuck out his hand in friendship.

Sam hesitated, then shook hands with the writer. "You're welcome, Benedek. Al, I think we're going to need to have a talk about this when I get back--" Sam's comment was cut off as he Leaped.

"Benedek?" said Jonathan MacKensie in bewilderment, a moment later. "What happened?"

"Jack, you're back!" Benny exclaimed, a grin splitting his face. "Was that a trip, or what?!"

Al watched for a moment, unseen, then keyed up the Imaging Chamber door and stepped through. "Bye, guys," he muttered as it closed.

Jonathan looked at Benedek, then at the unconscious Dr. Frank. "Would someone please tell me what has been going on? I seem to have misplaced my memory."

"Relaxavision, Jonny," advised Benny. "We've got things under control. The mad scientist type here thought you were someone else." He chuckled at that, and Jonathan wondered what the private joke was. "How do you feel?"

"All right," Jonathan admitted after considering the question. "Not bad, actually..." He frowned at Frank. "I remember-- he kept saying I was Dr. Beckett... then I must have fainted-- I had the strangest dream, or something. I was in a white room-- and the ceiling was talking to me..."

"Wow! Better check your medication, Jack," Benedek advised. "How's the foot, by the way?"

"Still broken," Jonathan said with a glare. "What did you expect?"

Benny grinned and caught Jonathan by the arm as the professor wobbled. "Not a thing, Jack. Predictable as always. Don't ever change, Buds."

Jonathan stared at Benny, then shook his head.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I was kidnapped by aliens..."

Jonathan sighed. It would be a long wait for the police.