

"I Owe My Soul to the USO"

9/19/92

Donna Hutt-Stapfer

This little soiree into the Twilight Zone runs along the premise of "what if" - the what if being "What if Sam and Al hadn't changed places at the end of "The Leap Back" - what then? What would it be like if Al was leaping, and Sam could only stand back and watch...?

My head hurts. Dammit, Sam, my head hurts. If I ever get my hands on you...

We'll have one helluva party. Then I'll kill you.

Damn, it's dark. What was that?

"Tony, get up! C'mon guy, wake up. We've gotta get downstairs, now!"

Someone was touching me -- aw, honey, don't shake me -- I hate being shook up like this --so I opened my eyes.

She has a lit candle between us, but all I can see are the three gold stars on the collar of her jacket. The hair is gold, the eyes are green and the voice is strident. And she's moving way too fast. Gold stars?

Right. She outranks me. Okay, wake up, get up. Downstairs, huh? I fell out of the bed I was laying in and stumbled as best as I could after her. She turned to take a withering look at me and grabbed me around the shoulders and pushed me ahead of her. "Now, Tony!"

My head hurt and I could have slept like the dead for another ten years. What vision I had was in a tunnel of flickering candlelight down a flight of rickety wooden stairs. There were sirens going off outside, I could hear them as my head throbbed. Falling off the last two stairs onto the landing, I saw a door in front of me. The whole place smelled like coldness and dust, somewhat sour.

The door got pushed in by the woman behind me and I got pushed in after it as the door slammed shut behind us. The candle went out in the gust of wind and I tripped over something on the floor in the darkness.

"Ow, Shelby is that you?" Another female voice, then a hand reached up, touching me on the leg, then found my hand. "Ah, Tony, I should have known it was you. Sit down before you fall down here in the dark. Shel?"

"Here I am, Sunny. Is Sue with you?" It's her again but it was too dark to see where she was.

"Yeah, she's right here. All present and accounted for, chief."

The hand holding mine pulled me down to the floor, where I found a warm body already sitting there. She pulled me closer to her, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. The floor was cold, and she was wrapped up in something warm and snugly like flannel. Irresistible, and how! Just as I leaned into her, someone else came up from behind, grabbing me around the waist and holding me close from behind.
That must be Sue...

There was the sound of a match being struck and a flame came into being six inches from my nose, moving to relight the candle Shelby had in her hand.

"That's better." she said and I tried to catch my breath as I got a better look at her.

She's pretty, God, she's pretty. Looked like one of the Breck girls with a snit on. It must be the middle of the night, she's got that wonderful blonde hair tied up in rags on top of her head and she had a khaki jacket with those three gold stars on it thrown over her robe and pajamas. Awwww. She's got the most wonderful puppy-dog eyes and the cutest turned-up nose.

"Tony, you look like crap. Did you remember your glasses?"

So much for reciprocity. Glasses -- yeah, they're in my left hand. Okay, sarge, I'll put 'em on if it'll make you happy. She put on a "that's acceptable" face and moved to sit down across from me, wrapping her arms around her knees and placing the lit candle in the middle of the floor. Okay, so much for you. How about Tit and Tat here who obviously love me?

There was just enough light for me to see Sunny next to me, wearing a plaid bathrobe and those crocheted slippers your granny makes you for Christmas. As I turned to look at her, she turned her head to look at me and smiled. And my heart fell to my shoes. A redhead with freckles and gray eyes -- maybe 22 years old. The eyes sparkled at me under the lashes. Looked just like the girl next door, y'know. She even gave me a little squeeze.

"Hey, you okay back there?" I tried to look over my shoulder, but I couldn't roll my head back that far. No problem. As I turned back around, a dark head peeped out under my arm and Sunny's. She looked up at me and I could see the candlelight reflecting in her wide, black eyes. Her hair was a mass of dark brown curls with flecks of red in it where the light shone. And she was terrified, shivering next to us. Patting

the hands that met around my middle, I tried to give her a comforting smile. "Hey, what's wrong, Susie?"

"C'mon, Tony. You know she hates these drills."

"Aw, lighten up. What I ever do to you?" Those sirens were really beginning to bug me. "That noise out there giving you a scare, honey?"

"It's not the sirens, you idiot. It's the bombs." Shelby's voice was as cold as the ice I thought I was sitting on. Okay, so that's how it's going to be played...bombs? What bombs?

"Where the hell are we?"

"A relatively deep cellar, I hope." she snapped at me, looking at the ceiling. "It's Tuesday night, remember? We're in Belgium. I think."

A series of loud pops and booms silenced any comment I would make -- we're in Belgium, being bombed? Sam, where the hell are you? They're getting closer!

"Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition..." Sunny began to sing in a warm, resonant alto, and to my surprise, Shelby picked up the verse, only up in the soprano range. Then Susie, under my arm began to sing, wavering just a little, and before long, I was listening to some of the most wonderful voices I think I've ever heard.

The bombs kept getting closer, though. One landed nearby and it rocked the house and sifted dirt from the ceiling on our heads. The girls only sang louder.

"Pity you left your accordion upstairs, Tony."

"Oh, boy."

"...And we'll all stay free...."

###

We stayed down there the rest of the night. Sunny and Susie wouldn't dream of letting me go, but Shelby curled up and slept by herself. Jeez, she could have at least sat next to one of the other girls and stayed warm. Oh no, not Shelby. I was quick to find out just what kind of package she was. This was the cat that walked by herself - and she's just fine, thank you very much and leave her the hell alone.

We woke up, piled together in our clothes like kittens in a basket and stiff as boards from falling asleep in that position. Shelby shook us awake and ordered us to

quick march it up the stairs to see what was left up there.

"We've got a truck to catch to Basel, kids. Let's move it!"

All I could think of was that I didn't feel like no kid. And where the hell was Basel? Could be fantasyland for all I knew. Where was Sam?

Upstairs was a wreck. No bombs had hit the building itself, but some had landed all around it and shook the place up pretty bad. It had been a long time since I had seen a place after it had been bombed -- but I didn't remember it looking like this. Something told me I hadn't been in a place where they built the houses out of poured concrete and plaster. Something...not so permanent. The rest was swissed to hell and breakfast, but enough was left to give me a cold chill. Perhaps I'd better leave well enough alone and not try to remember.

Shelby was all business by now, going from bunk to bunk in the dormitory we had been so rudely thrown out of last night, picking through the dirt and chunks of ceiling that had fallen to see what she could find. She was indiscriminate - anything useful and in one piece, she put into the duffel bag at her side. You'd think she did this every morning. Perhaps she had.

Sunny was pickier -- she went straight to her own bed and dusted it off, pulling an identical duffel bag out from under the bed and went to town. Susie was standing in the room much like I was, surveying the damage. She looked like she was having a little trouble taking it all in -- ah honey, it's tough being in the middle of a war. A war? Yeah...why else would we be getting bombed at night? Belgium? I took another look around -- noted what everyone was wearing. My God, I'm in the middle of World War II!

Susie met my eyes after completing her inspection, and smiled. Shrugging, she went after her own things much like Sunny had. Ah. Business as usual. Okay -- which one was mine? There were other people milling about, both inside and outside of the building. One thing was certain. I was a long way from home.

The girls and I were the only ones speaking English. I think most of what I was hearing was French, but it was hard to tell. I think I heard a smattering of German now and again, but it was hard to tell. It didn't sound harsh to my ear like you would expect it to. They were also packing stuff up and taking it outside -- I think the place was closing down for good once we left.

"Hey, look! Tony's accordion made it again!"

Oh God, I was hoping you'd forgot that. Yes, so it had. Sitting proudly at the foot of one of the bunks was what could only be a large accordion, you know the kind --

with the mother of pearl inlays and the velveteen bellows -- a little dusty, but okay. Mine. Oh shit.

Patting a pocket, I also discovered a harmonica. Three beautiful voices, an accordion and a harmonica. Bombs dropping over Belgium during World War II and we're on the way to Basel on a truck. This should be making more sense...hmmm...maybe if I look out a window....

Walking over to the set of windows letting in the most light, I had to roll the sleeve of my robe over my hand to scrub off the dust -- and frost. The window was ice cold and the light coming through it watery and without any color. I couldn't see any of the scenery from the glare coming off the snow. The windows on the other side of the room had been blown out, but these had survived, wouldn't you know. Thick glass, very old if I was any expert. It was thicker at the bottom than at the top, with tiny bubbles marring the structure. A piece of memory whispered something about supercooled liquids, but it was gone before I could grasp its meaning.

Behind the window, though, was a pair of golden green eyes sparkling in mirth, crinkling in the corners as he smiled back at me. "Boo!"

"Sam! You bum -- "

"Where have I been?"

"Yes!"

"I should ask you -- it's been over a week. Still find it hard to believe. I'll bet you just blinked and here you are, right? Can I come in?" We both knew very well all he had to do is step forward and he'd be in the room with me. But still, he stood outside the window, waving the comlink at me. Damned boy scout.

"Tony! Get packed! We've gotta go!" Shelby's voice cut through any reverie. "And get dressed, huh?"

"Good idea." Sam said quickly, "Get your stuff and go into the other room and I'll bring you up to date." Punching the request in, he disappeared.

Turning around to face the room again, I saw the girls laying their clothes out, dusting them off as best they could. Shelby was taking the rags out of her hair and began brushing it. Cocking her head to look at me, her glare was not unfriendly, but there was an expectation in it. I get it. I've got to get out of here so you girls can change. Right.

Giving the accordion a dirty look, I pulled out "my" duffel bag from under the bed

and rummaged through it until I found everything I needed for the day - including a shaving kit. Trotting across the room into what looked like a bathroom, I pulled the door closed behind me.

Sam was standing there in front of the mirror. "What a gyp. You can see me, but I can't see me."

"You look like hell, kid." Over a week had gone by since the last one? Hope this one lasted more than a few days -- Sam needed the rest. See, I could still do things even though we had traded places -- like telling him to get some sleep even if it meant on the imaging chamber floor while I slept. He hated that, but after watching him yawn his way through a few leaps, the circles under his eyes getting darker, the clothes shabbier, I figured out something needed to be done. The last one -- what was the last one? -- I remember ignoring the hell out of him until he brought a bag lunch in with him and ate a meal with me.

So a week has gone by. God, being the observer had been bad enough. I hadn't been trying to rebuild the accelerator from scratch to get Sam home at the same time. The time he had with me -- I knew that was his fun time. The rest of it -- I know he was leaving the waiting room business to Verbena Beeks, but all the other jobs I did he handled now in addition to trying to get me home. That, I knew was at the bottom of the long nights and little food. At least the funding issue was over. He was back to tell the nozzles himself where to put it. But where's Admiral Calavicci, Dr. Beckett?

Sam only turned his head and gave me a dirty glare when I told him how he looked. "Well, thanks. You look like crap, yourself."

"Don't mention it." What the hell did you expect Sam, when you came in there looking like this? He had a lab coverall over his clothes, but everything was smudged and dirty, greasy spots across the shoulders and hips where I knew he'd climbed into some piece of machinery to futz around with it. His hair looked like he had combed it with his fingers this morning, just to get it out of his eyes. He had his old sneakers on - the ones that had been white once, were now gray and held together with duct tape. And the razor must be on the charger again today - or that's what he'll tell me if I ask. The only thing that was bright and cheerful were his eyes. But, that's always a good sign.

"This one might even be fun, Al."

"Fun? Are you nuts? Last night, somebody bombed this place -- I spent the night on the floor of a cold, dank dungeon and you think it's fun! Where the hell am I and who the hell am I and why the hell am I here? Huh?"

Sam only motioned me forward until I was in front of the mirror, looking at me

over the comlink with an idiot grin on his face. He was always happy to see me, damned if I know why. "Take a look."

The face that looked back at me is that of a young man -- younger than either me or Sam. About the same as the girls, though. Early to mid-twenties.

"Oh Christ, I'm a geek." No wonder Shelby treated me like scum. I looked like the pocket protector poster child. The glasses were coke-bottle bottoms, the complexion was splotchy, the guy had no color in his face to speak of, both his hair and eyes were mousy and muddy, no chin...the girls were safe with me, no problem. Nobody would date this guy. Nobody.

The girls probably thought of him as their little, tag-along baby brother. Remembering last night, I'm sure of it.

"You lucky dog." Turning to stare, I saw Sam shaking his head with my old lech on his face. Which looked damned stupid, I might add.

"Aw, c'mon Sam! Look at this guy! I'm not their boyfriend, I'm the mascot! What gives?" My voice was sharper than I intended, but it got through. Face falling, Sam started punching up the data I needed but I felt like a heel. I remembered so many times Sam barking at me -- but I could consider the source. I don't think he had developed that sense of perspective yet. Maybe he never would, considering he felt responsible for my being there.

"Your name is Tony York -- that's a stage name, your real name is Hippensteel, but nobody knows that -- and you're a very talented musician who was playing in a band working nightclubs on the east coast when the war started."

"World War II."

"Yeah, it's February 3, 1942."

"Another goddamn war." I took a deep breath and sighed. Nothing bothered me more than seeing something go to waste, and a war is nothing but a big waste of the most precious thing we have -- our lives and the lives of our loved ones. War? What's it good for? Nothing! "What am I doing here, Sam?"

"Well, you're not here to fight -- Tony's 4F because of his eyes. Had a bad case of the red measles when he was a kid."

Taking off the glasses and looking at them, I shook my head as Sam looked at them too. "Measles." I said, finding it hard to believe that this was the result of a infectious disease and not something more, well, more complicated. "I was born in the

Dark Ages, Sam."

"No comment." I heard a familiar squeal as Sam gave the comlink a little smack in the rear. He didn't hit it like I used to -- just tapped it like a piggy bank he needed a quarter out of -- "Since you couldn't fight, you - Tony - volunteered to go overseas and entertain the troops. You're with USO Overseas Unit #783, one man and three women. You've been traveling what is known as the foxhole circuit -- whew, 16 performances in the last five days alone -- and you're on your way to Basel in Switzerland where you're going to stay for a few months to recuperate. Or so Ziggy says."

"A musician?" Visions of Lawrence Welk danced in my head -- it was that damned accordion -- "What kind of musician am I supposed to be?"

"Get dressed -- you'll miss the truck. Uh, you can play just about anything -- piano is a specialty, but you play the guitar, banjo...accordion? Oh, boy...there's a harmonica in your pocket, right? This is going to be fun."

"Sam, I haven't got the faintest idea of which end to even blow into. I can't play the piano and let's not even talk about that accordion right now, okay? What am I here to do? Can't be to introduce rock and roll to these people...."

"Don't worry, I'll take care it. I can show you what to do. No, according to Ziggy, once you get to Basel, you need to keep an eye out for someone - an American airman named Clyde Johnson, MIA. Ziggy says there's a 82% chance you can get him home if you can find him."

"Find him? Where's he coming from?"

"Germany. He got downed behind the lines. He's escaped from a prison camp almost a hundred miles away, was shot in the attempt but he got away in spite of it. There's nothing more after that but Ziggy thinks he got as far as Basel and died somewhere in the city and nobody ever knew about it. He's still listed as Missing in Action, AI. You've got to find him and get him to a hospital or he'll be MIA forever."

"A hundred miles? God, Sam it's the middle of winter!"

"I know, AI. Get dressed and get on that truck. You've got to get to Basel and start looking."

###

Basel. What was so special about Basel, anyway? The girls and I were sitting in the back of a supply truck trying not to get bounced onto the floor and I was racking my brain trying to remember what I could about European geography -- and coming up

nilcho. I was also carrying that...accordion...on my lap and for two cents on the next bounce, out it goes the back way. Ooops!

"Here, give me that thing, Tony. You're gonna break it." Shelby, as always. She grabbed the accordion out of my hands and strapped it down next to her with a rope, all the time bracing herself with her toes against the floor to keep from falling. It must have been near freezing, the other two girls were huddled together on the other side, blowing on their mittened hands and rubbing them together. Shelby and I, sitting together, would probably be two blocks of ice before we got to our destination. I tried to sidle up next to her, but she moved away and gave me a dirty look. When the light hit her face, I was reminded of some snow princess -- all ice and frost with no warmth. Three gold stars glittered on her coat lapel. That should have meant something, I'm sure it did, but I couldn't remember.

"I'd be careful if I were you," I told her, "In this weather, your face could freeze in that position."

She only sneered and pulled her coat tighter around her. Sunny tittered a little, I know I heard her but when I looked up, only her eyes were smiling. Susie looked petrified. Maybe she was frozen already.

But as I watched the girls try to keep their balance as the truck hit another pothole, music began to play in my head. It came from that part of my memory that I decided isn't mine -- closing my eyes, I saw myself at a piano, playing an old piece of sheet music I'd dug out of the basement. This was getting familiar to me -- no, I never played the piano, Sam did. This was one of Sam's memories he gave me when we traded places. Now what was the tune? For a moment, I was in the parlor of a farmhouse. Warm, safe...I could almost smell what my mother was cooking in the room across the way. I was not very old, either. The music was simple -- one pass and I almost had it memorized.
C'mon, Calavicci - what's the title?

"Good morning...good mornning!" The words tumbled out of my mouth like they had a mind of their own. Three heads snapped around to look at me and just as I thought they must think I'm nutso, they chimed in -- in three part harmony. They knew it! And good, too. So good I forgot the words and my mouth hung open as they sang it to me.

"We talked the whole night through, so good morning, good morning to you..."

The heads nodded together in time, the shivers forgotten as they sang together and as I watched, I was amazed. You'd think I planned this, they are so polished, so precise. Even as they bounced around, they stayed on tune, stayed in step. There were smiles on their faces as they listened to each other, and each of them carried her

part equally. Shelby was no louder than Sunny was louder than Susie, who I think was simply singing the harmonics to the other two's notes. They've sung together a lot, that much is clear. And they enjoyed it -- hell, right now I think it's what they lived for.

"...and we just hadta say, good morning, good morning to you..."

"Great choice, Tony!" Sunny piped up and started the song over again. Feeling the harmonica banging against my chest, I took it out and looked it over. Singing with a smile on her face and her eyes a-twinkle, Susie looked over at me and saw the harmonica in my hands. Her eyebrows arched and her face lit up like it was the Fourth of July and I had the homemade ice cream. How could I resist?

Taking a deep breath, I put it to my lips and threw a little prayer to the wind. Please God, let there be enough of Sam and Tony in here with me to make this work...please...distancing myself from the situation, I let whatever's inside me come out and I heard notes begin to fall from the harmonica as I began to play it. It's not Stevie Wonder, but it works!

We were coming into town, there were houses and paved streets rolling out behind us and the bouncing was lessening. But we kept making music, waving to everyone as we went by. And boy, did those people need cheering up -- bunch of sourpusses, every one.

They looked tired, hungry and cold -- washed out against a gray and white world. The women were bundled five or six layers deep in worn, shapeless coats, holding the hands of children who didn't look much better and were having a hard time keeping their balance on the ice and snow lining the road. But they turned and listened as we went by and four out of five times, they stopped and waved. The kids even smiled. "Good morning, good morning to you!"

The odd man, here and there, rifle slung over his shoulder, cocked his head to listen as we rolled past. Once in a while, he turned to see us go by. Now and again, he smiled as well.

And when the truck stopped at a crossing, the people hurried up to the tailgate and we rushed forward to greet them. We didn't speak a word of their language, and they didn't speak much of ours, but the music was cheerful and laughter is after all, infectious. I played, they sang and soon they're clapping and singing along with us. Or at least, la-la-ing it.

"U-S-O, Seven eight three." Shelby shouted to the crowd. "U-S-O!"

The crowd applauded. "Americans! Wilkommen!" And then the truck rolled away.

Collapsing back onto their seats, I looked at Shelby and saw another girl sitting there. One with green fire for eyes, an almost inner glow burning under her skin. Happy. She hugged herself and laughed, then smiled, looking up at the canvas top of the truck. But I knew she wasn't seeing it. She was wriggling inside her coat, hugging herself.

"That's why you're here, isn't it?" Pocketing the harmonica, I waited for Shelby to turn and look at me. She didn't make me wait long -- but then, she hadn't yet.

The eyes that met mine were vibrant and alive -- the eyes of a cat ready to pounce. "You'd better believe it." she replied. "Oh, did you see the children's faces?" Closing her eyes, she leaned back against the side of the truck and sighed.

Well, you ain't a cast iron bitch after all, are you? Turning to look at Sunny, I got another smile and she shrugged while Susie just met my eyes, her own twinkling like wet onyx. "Well ladies, I don't think this truck is stopping any time soon. What's next on the hit parade?"

"Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall --" Sunny began, with the most evil grin on her face. But her comrades were ready for her. They joined in -- harmonizing, of course. "Ninety-nine bottles of beer...."

Scenery and towns continued to roll by us, each one getting larger and larger, with better roads and prettier buildings as we went by. The weather stayed gray and oppressive -- high fog obscured any sunlight we might have got and kept it from getting very warm. It also kept us from seeing more than a few miles in any direction. We could have been anywhere -- at the foot of the tallest mountain, or at the ocean's edge. We wouldn't have been able to tell for the fog. What vegetation we could see poking its way through the snow was green, however. There were a lot of meadows with fences around them, the trees growing tall behind the farmhouse in the distance just before everything faded into gray. The little towns were just big enough for us to note the signpost as we entered, the change in the speed limit, felt the claustrophobia as the road narrowed between the buildings to barely enough for the truck to squeak by and then we were in open country again.

Finishing the beer, Shelby and Susie took a deep breath and leaned back. But Sunny wasn't finished, no siree.

"No bottles of beer on the wall, no bottles of beer." she piped, "Pay a buck, and then upchuck..." Looking around, she was clearly sizing us up, but decided to go ahead with it anyway. "One more bottle of beer on the wall."

"Oh God, she did it again." Shelby groaned and scooped a bit of snow that had

fluttered in into a tiny slushball and threw it across the truck at Sunny, who ducked as Susie tried to gag her with her own muffler. "No way, Webster. No stinking way."

"I'm sorry!"

But as Susie relented, and Sunny was able to make eye contact with me again, I only shook my head at her. Sorry was the last thing Sunny will ever be. I sensed a kindred spirit in that red-headed imp. And I wished Sam was here.

We sang a few more songs as the truck rolled on, night falling as we entered what had to be Basel -- it was the largest town we'd come into and this time, we didn't go through.

As it got darker, people began to disappear into the buildings lining the streets, and the lights went off behind them. Just as I was about to ask Shelby when we're going to get there, the truck started to slow down, rattling along on the cobblestone streets. Then it stopped, and the sudden quiet was deafening.

As I tried to get up, Shelby threw an arm across me and pushed me back down. "Do you know where we are?" she hissed.

"We're here. Basel."

"Are you sure?"

Huh? Why wouldn't I be? But I didn't say it.

"Have you ever been here before?" she whispered, her face a shadow in the darkness. "How do you know this is Basel?"

"Talk to me, Shelby. What's going on?"

"What do you think we're all sitting on back here, anyway?"

What?! Oh God, I hope nothing's ticking! "Boxes, Shel. Lots and lots of boxes. What else do you need to know?"

"I need to know where Marta is. She should have been waiting for us here."

She stopped talking and the silence resumed. The driver of the truck hadn't even stepped out of the cab. Oh, oh. Sunny and Susie's faces were pale ovals against the darkness, their eyes bright and round but unafraid. "It's food, Tony. And some other stuff." Sunny said quietly. "We didn't think you'd mind."

"Please, Tony...it's for the children." Susie's eyes met mine, deep and dark like coffee at midnight. "They needed our help. How could we say no?"

"Kids, I don't mind. I don't, long as it doesn't get us all killed. Woof." Turning my attention to Susie, she only looked back at me and swallowed hard. "Where is this stuff supposed to go?"

"To the cathedral -- they've got a USO post stationed there, and they can get the stuff out where it's most needed."

What I could see out the back of the truck wasn't conclusive -- we seemed to sitting off to the side of a town square, a cobblestone street winding down between townhouses, another branch running off to the right. The buildings were old, straight as tin soldiers, and dark. The place looked deserted. Listening carefully, I heard the sound of water rushing by -- like we were near a river.

Then a church bell began to ring, off in the distance. A big one - bong, bong, bong - and then a larger one began to ring just above our heads, startling us all. It played a melody, then began to ring the hour -- eight o'clock.

"Oh, that's it." Shelby sat back with a sigh. "We're early, that's all."

Resisting the urge to at least shake her silly, I sat back as well and waited. Sure enough, the moment the bells stopped ringing, a little figure came up to the tailgate and peered in. "Sign of the four?" it asked in heavily accented English.

"Elementary." Shelby replied, darting to the tailgate. "Marta?"

"Ja. Guten abend." They began to talk as I heard the driver get out of the cab and walk around.

"Jasper? Marta, that's Jasper." Shelby made the introductions as she turned to face our driver, whom only a moment ago she didn't trust with a can of beans. "C'mon, let's get this stuff out of here."

"Nie, nie, nie." the other woman clucked. "You come in -- and get warm now. Have you any supper? I think not. Ja, I think not. Come, come, come. Innna - "

Helping us out of the truck, we all realized how stiff and tired we were -- standing up on a non-moving surface was strange for a moment until we got our legs under us. Bones creaking, we stretched for a moment and I felt Susie take my hand as I finished. It was a small hand, barely got around three of my fingers, but it was strong as it gave mine a little squeeze. Then Sunny was patting me on the shoulder and Shelby got her licks in - as always - with a firm shove forward.

"Don't forget his accordion -- it's right there in the truck."

Damn.

###

I don't think food had ever tasted this good -- could it be the weather, or the fact we didn't eat a bite all day...or the fact that the food was just this good? I dunno. Shelby keeps giving me funny looks -- then remarked that I must be hungry because I kept talking to my food.

Could be that Sam just popped in out of nowhere, too.

Sitting next to the fireplace, my soup bowl in hand, I let one half of me get toasty before turning around to warm the other side, gobbling as much of this wonderful stuff as I can get down.

"That looks awful." Looking up, I saw Sam standing in front of me, lunch box in hand. He also looked like he had cleaned up for dinner. Well, what do you know. "Is it?"

"It's called bread soup, and it's absolute yummo. Have Ziggy try to locate a recipe. It'll sound weird, but it's good. It's real good, Sam. It's a little like French Onion with the cheese on top and the toast in it? But this has a kind of beef stock in it with potato and celery root...and then they crumble yesterday's stale bread into it. 'S good. Trust me."

"Is that all they gave you for dinner?" Meeting his eyes, I shook my head. Don't worry so much, kid. God, I wished I could have made you stop.

"Sit down and eat. There's plenty more for me to plow through. And they tell me there's something for dessert."

Giving my bowl another hard look, Sam does what he's told, folding up on the floor, unpacking his lunch - what looked like a tuna fish sandwich on whole wheat, an apple and a hunk of cheese. A mug of hot chocolate appears out of thin air -- it was one of my mugs, and it's huge -- and we simply sat and ate together in silence. I polished off my bowl of soup, got seconds and thirds and a plate of what Marta called gratin, but this wasn't potatoes in cheese sauce. There was potatoes and cheese in that, but that's like saying there's violins and horns in an orchestra. Even Sam sat up and paid attention.

"Now that looks more like it."

Taking a bite that sent me into orbit, I then tried to locate Marta. She had already found me, though. Guess she liked the fact I enjoyed her cooking so much. Then again, with this face, maybe I looked like I needed feeding. I could have done so much worse.

"What's in this? It's great!" She only smiled and looked a little puzzled. Ah. Not much English. She knew I liked it, but she didn't know what I asked her.

I looked at Sam. "Was ist das?" he supplied, mouth full of sandwich. Repeating it up at Marta, her face split into a big smile.

"Ist gut? Gaou, danke," her head bobbed up and down a little, then she took my fork away from me and poked through the mess on my plate. "Gratin. Erdapfel, fenchel, schrieble..."

"Potato, fennel, onions..." Sam supplied. "Spinach, three kinds of cheese, with cream and a little white wine...baked in a hot oven for an hour." Looking at the remains of his sandwich, he winced. "Is it as good as it sounds?"

"Better." Gratin followed soup, and a lovely apple tart-like thing followed that. For wartime, this seemed like quite a feast until I did a little tally in my head. There was no meat anywhere in the meal, except for the broth in the soup and that could have been provided by just a little bit of something, even just soup bones. Lots of cheese and vegetables, some fruit...and it all tasted wonderful. And it wasn't anything fancy, either.

"What's going on, Sam?"

"Nothing. A big, fat airball nothing." Taking a big bite out of his apple, Sam's eyes unfocused as he thought and I could tell he's not had a good day at the office. "We can't get a lock on this Johnson guy to save our lives...Ziggy says he's the reason you're here, but I'm not so sure. It's a big crapshoot. We're working with the process of elimination here, Al. We don't have enough information to make a good guess, not really."

"They didn't have computers back in 1942, Sam. A lot of stuff got lost in the shuffle. It's not your fault."

All I saw was eyebrows as Sam's head tilted up. "This wasn't supposed to happen, Al. We weren't even supposed to be dealing with anything before 1953 -- it was stupid of me not to think this far ahead. Stupid."

"Far ahead? Far behind, you mean." I knew Verbena hadn't heard this. Sam

knew how he sounded, and he knew she'd lock him in a small room if she ever heard him say things like this. We both knew it was nothing but ozone -- thank God, he could still talk to me about whatever was on his mind. It was frustration...he was happy to be home, but he missed me. And every morning he woke up in his own bed is one more he knows I'm waking up in someone else's because of him. And it's one more day he hasn't found a solution. Sam has always been a guy who likes all his ducks in a row -- if it were Gooshie, or Tina, he'd be just as upset. More so -- they, at least, were the innocents of the bunch of us. I, at least, knew the job was dangerous when I took it.

"Stupid to think somebody else might have to take the risks?" I said, "Stupid to think that you might not be able to predict all the variables? The only stupid thing would be to give up, Sam. C'mon, let someone else have the fun for a while."

"Are you having fun, Al?"

"I know I ate better than you tonight." I replied, "With the odds the way they are I'll probably sleep better than you, too. Nyah."

"Shelby'd eat your...face...off."

"But Susie loves me. And Sunny wouldn't let Shelby touch a hair on my darling head."

Sam smiled at me over the rim of the mug. "They're a nice group, aren't they?"

"Yeah. They aren't involved in what I'm here to do, are they?"

"Not that I could tell, an hour ago." Putting the mug aside, Sam pulled out the comlink and began working with it. But it wasn't much use -- I could tell by the way he shook his head. "Ziggy gives them less than ten percent -- but also says there's a eighty-seven percent chance that she's wrong."

"Ziggy? Admitting she might be wrong? That's a new one."

"See what I mean? Shots in the dark. The only thing we can be reasonably certain about is Johnson. By process of elimination, he's the one looking most "pivotal", if you catch my drift."

Turning to look around the room, I saw the girls sitting together at a table across the way, bundled in their coats with blankets over them, sipping coffee and talking quietly. Sunny looked up, smiled and waved but went back to talking to the others. I think they were talking about their act -- once in a while, a spate of song reached me. Sometimes it was Shelby, sometimes it was Susie. Sunny was the one with pencil and paper.

"What happens to them, Sam? Please don't tell me one of them dies doing this after I'm gone."

"I'd tell you anything, if I knew." Sam tapped out a pattern, shook his head again. "Just about all I have is what the USO knows about them -- and that's a one-page application when they joined up. They didn't do background checks on volunteers back then. Or, at least, nothing that was kept."

Marta came by and gave me a cup of coffee, pouring a bit of cream in it. Picking the cup off the saucer, I noted two lumps of sugar sitting next to it. Sugar? Looking up at Marta, she only smiled and patted me on the shoulder.

"Awww. You've got a Swiss Mommy, Al."

"Great. I'm going to end up like Gooshie." But I put the sugar in the coffee anyway. That stuff was worth its weight in gold right now. "What can you tell me about them, Sam?"

He requested the information, but shook his head. "It's nothing you don't know already, Al. It's a description of what kind of performers they are, what their names are, what they look like...that sort of stuff."

"Why does Shelby wear those three gold stars on her jacket?"

Sam turned to look over at Shelby, noted what she had on and then went back to the handlink. "I think it has something to do with -- yeah, there it is. It was something they did during World War II. If you lost a loved one in the war, you displayed a gold star in your window at home. You wore one. It was a display of your 'sacrifice' to the war effort."

"I think I remember it now. It was like wearing your heart on your sleeve so everyone could see it. God, didn't they know how much that would hurt? You couldn't keep your grief to yourself, could you?"

"Hey, take it easy Al. Maybe people needed some way to express how they felt." Toying with the handlink, Sam looked up at me from where he was sitting with that look on his face. That "give 'em a break, why don't you" look. "It was a different time - really. People didn't pay as much attention to their feelings then as they do now."

"Maybe just admitting to being only human was too much to ask." I heard the words, felt a rush of bitterness, but why, I didn't know. Sam looked away quickly at that, biting his lip. "Sorry, kid."

"S'okay. Wars do that to people, I guess."

"If I'm an admiral, I must have been through one or two, eh Sam?"

Sam snapped his head up at that, looking at me like I had sprouted antennae. "You don't remember?"

"Remember what, specifically?" I answered. "I think I've been where there was bombing, but I don't know when or where it was -- I'm not sure even how old I was. Ain't that a kick in the butt?"

Sam just looked at me, the expression on his face changing from shock to delight. "How many times have you been married?"

Duh. Hmmm....oh, come on, this one is easy! "Sam, that's not fair!"

A mischievous glint entered his eyes as the grin wrapped itself across Sam's face. "Have you ever been married?" he asked, laughter entering his voice. "C'mon, you can tell me that, can't you?"

I stared at him without seeing him, but it's a big, fat zero. I saw faces, but no names. Lots of faces. Some even had...nice...memories that went with them. Naw, with this track record, I couldn't have married anyone. It wouldn't have been fair! "No Sam, I don't know."

"Great." Sam says, "You don't remember." And I think he was happy about it. "You swissed that from the last leap. It's okay, Al. Don't worry about it." Chuckling, he consulted the comlink again. "I think you'll be better off without it, actually."

"Oh really? Something tells me I'm going to regret that...How did Shelby got those gold stars? Do you know who they were for? C'mon Sam, give. I really want to know."

Giving me a look that would curdle cream, Sam picked up the handlink again. "Shelby Morris...oh, this is sad. Poor thing. She lost both her father and her brother...one at Pearl Harbor, the other at Midway - real early on in the war."

"And the third?" I looked over to where she was sitting, humming through a song with Susie and Sunny, one hand fluttering in the air keeping time. "A boyfriend -- husband?"

Sam looked, but shook his head. "I don't like the look of this, Al." Standing up, he walked over to where the girls were sitting, singing softly among themselves. Facing Shelby, he looked her in the eye, studying her face so intently I began to wonder if he

was seeing something I had missed. There were tears in his eyes.

"Sam...." My voice was soft, but it carried. Sam didn't turn to face me, but his words were for my ears only.

"Shelby left home after her mother died, Al. The coroner's report called it a suicide."

"Oh my God."

"...Someone to watch, over me..." Shelby's soprano rose above the background noise. Her eyes were closed, with that flush on her cheeks that I recognized from the truck ride. I wondered, was this the real Shelby? Am I seeing the girl her mother knew? This couldn't be an act...Sam just folded his arms, one hand cradling his chin as his eyes shone, listening to that beautiful voice.

The rest of the people in the room had already stopped talking. It got that sort of quiet in a crowd when you know everyone wants to listen to what's being sung. We knew the tune well, the room full of us. But to tell the truth, it was clear Shelby wasn't giving it her best. Halfway through, she broke out of it with an embarrassed smile and ducked her head as the other girls laughed. God, she was different when she sang.

Sunny looked up at me and grinned, continuing to make notes. Susie reached across the table to pat Shelby on the cheek as their eyes met, smiling from ear to ear.

"I guess that's a keeper, eh Tony?" Sunny finished her list with a flourish. "I think that'll do for tomorrow night's show."

Looking back at me, Sam shrugged. "I think dinner's over, Al. I'd better get back."

"Maybe so." I said, rising from my seat to go stand beside him. It put me next to the girls' table. "If anything changes, you'll let me know, right?"

"Sure, Tony."

"Sure, Al." Sam began to key in the sequence I knew well, the one for the door. "I'll be back in a few hours to check on things." As it snapped up behind him, he met my eyes and smiled. With just the briefest nod from me, he was gone.

Shelby stood up, gathering the blanket around her. "Marta tells me they still hold evening services in the cathedral."

"Mass." I corrected her, "They conduct Mass in a cathedral. You aren't Catholic,

are you?"

"I thought your folks were Amish." she replied, frowning. "Anyway, Marta says we can go if we want."

"That sounds great." Sunny piped up so quickly I almost broke my neck to look down at her. "I mean, the cathedral's been here since the first part of the century. I've never been inside something that old...and I hear the acoustics are terrific. Do they have music during the services?"

Shelby met my eyes as they returned from hitting the ceiling. "Well...you're the expert." she retorted.

Oh boy...I just remembered what I thought of church and the whole rigmarole...putting it aside, I tried to remember Mass and be objective. Yes, there was music. Lovely music, actually.

"Sure. Why don't you go see for yourself?"

"I think I will." Sunny said, smiling. You'd think she was being asked to visit the White House and have lunch with Jackie.

"I want to go, too." We all turned to look at Susie -- who never speaks. She wilted a little as we all stared at her, but she met my eyes with a firm chin that dared me to gainsay her. Jeez, it wasn't as if I would tease her about it, and a little alarm went off in the back of my head. This wasn't like her.

She smiled, however, after I took her hand to lead her into the cathedral myself. Shelby was the last in line as we tromped out of the warm rectory and across the courtyard to the cathedral. The old Shelby was back, but now I could see the face for what it was - a facade. I could see the singer's face under the mask of indifference she wore -- and that it chafed, just a bit.

Sunny was the first inside the door, after giving the outside a cursory inspection, shaking her head in the dark and frowning. Shelby snapped at her to get inside, before we all turned into snow people and Sunny glared back at her but scooted inside all the same.

"We'll come back in the daylight and take a better look, I promise." I said as I took her blanket and coat to shake off and hang on the hooks lining the entryway. But Sunny wasn't looking at me - nor did she pay me the least attention. Her eyes were moving skyward and I realized I'd forgotten what it was like to be inside a cathedral. And I found myself doing the same.

"Wow! This is GRRRRREAT!" Sunny's glib, bubbly voice rebounded and echoed off every surface -- and we all jumped her, Shelby throwing her hand across Sunny's mouth to shush her.

"Christ, Sunny -- this is a church!" she hissed. Sunny's gray eyes only flashed and sparkled over Shelby's hand as her head turned to look at us and she giggled. Shelby gave her a little shake, just to make sure Sunny knew she meant business and released her. Sunny was still smiling to beat the band. "Go sit down if you want to watch -- and be quiet!"

Giving her a little push, Shelby released her and Sunny did what she was told, finding a place near the back and plunking herself down amid a sea of disapproving faces. They looked at her, clearly taking her measure, but then turned their attention back forward.

Watching Shelby shed her coat and hang it up, I looked for Susie and found her at the holy water font, dipping her fingers in it, genuflecting and then taking a seat next to Sunny, curtsying to the altar as she passed. Huh - a real veteran, she knew the ropes. Very well, in fact. That bore some more study - she looked for all the world like she had just come home, the set of her shoulders relaxing as she leaned back in the pew with a deep sigh.

"Tony?" Turning, I saw Shelby standing next to the prayer candles in the back, her figure a dark silhouette against the flickering lights burning behind her. "What are these for?"

"Wishes, honey. Mostly." Walking over to stand next to her, I stuck my hands in my pockets. "People light them to send an extra prayer. Turn up the volume a little."

Her face bathed in the light from the candles, Shelby looked almost as lovely as the Madonna in the stained glass window behind her. Noting the sign that asked for a donation per candle, she fished in her pocket for some spare change. She didn't come up with much, and it didn't look like the local currency. Looking to the sign, then to the candles, Shelby shrugged and put the whole handful into the collection box, taking out four candles.

I didn't dare take a deep breath. Shelby held the candles in her hands, looking at them like they were long lost treasures. Maybe she was looking at the faces of her family -- I wasn't sure. But she gripped them tightly, and then held them to her chest, her eyes closed, lips barely moving in a silent prayer. Finally, she let go of them, lighting and placing them into holders, one by one. They were easy to spot -- the heat of her hands had warped them somewhat. The fourth one, she kept in her hand.

"Tony..."

"Yeah, Shel."

She wouldn't look at me, but I could see the tears as they fell down her cheeks. "Tony...will you help me make a wish? You always seem to know what to wish for...what to do."

Me? Gee, thanks..."Sure, I will. But what makes you think you need my help to make a wish? You're the one who knows what you want the most...."

"I don't think I know anymore, Tony." Her voice was steady, but still the tears flickered on the lashes. "Look at this -- a candle for each star. They're all dead, Tony. Everyone I ever loved and they're all gone. All I want...is them back. Impossible, stupid wish."

"I can understand that." I looked at the third candle, burning just as bright as the others and wondered how in the world someone could decide to end their life when there was still someone needing, loving them. It only goes to prove the saying that a lot of depressed people aren't that way because nobody loves them -- most, like Shelby's mother were pretty damned well loved. God, it blew me away. I didn't know anything about the woman, and I hated her for what she had done to Shelby, checking out on her like that. And then I remembered the last candle Shelby was still holding in her fist. "They didn't want to die, Shelby. Jeez, you must know that."

"And I don't want to die either, Tony." The hand holding the candle covered her mouth as her face crumpled and the tears began in earnest. She didn't shrink away when I put an arm around her shoulders, so I took her in my arms, holding her close. So we were better friends than I thought, eh? You look out for me and I look out for you too...ah, poor baby thing...I felt the slender arms clutch me, one hand flat against my back, the other still holding the candle. "I'm afraid. I'm as bitter and ugly as my mother was, before she...she died, Tony."

"Naw, that ain't so."

"It is. I don't have anything left inside me anymore, Tony. It's all cold and ugly."

"No." I said, patting her on the back. As though from a far distance, I heard Mass beginning, smelt the incense as it reached us in the back where we were standing.

Pray for me, Albert. Everything will be okay as long as you pray for me. And a flame of anger burned inside me. No, nothing would take that away - but was it anyone's fault? For a moment, I was a little boy again and felt the betrayal. But then, something from that part of me that wasn't me began to murmur in the background of

my thoughts. **Can you forgive him Al? Nobody meant to hurt you...**Ah, what did I know? Could I really have held onto that for so long? Maybe you're right, Sam.

You know, some things have to happen in life. They weren't what we would like, sometimes. But what was worse? Holding onto the pain and feeling it anew, time in and time out...or letting it go, and accepting the truth. Trouble was, you do that and you have to come to terms with the other truth - the one that says you don't really control a damn thing in your life. And that there are a lot of things in your life you'll never control.

But that means that most of the shit that happens wasn't your fault, either. It wasn't my fault that Dad died, not after I had done everything he had told me to do, not after the Church had failed to save him...or that I didn't convince God that I needed him more than He did. Ah, wishes. Prayers...and promises.

"No, it isn't gone, Shel. If it was gone, you wouldn't be crying."

"What's wrong with me, Tony?" My heart turned over at the tone her voice had taken. It was such a beautiful voice and the pain wrenched it like an old mop going through the wringer. "I can't let them go. God, I miss them. And it's been so long!"

"It's not your fault, Shel. And quit trying to make it stop hurting. Let it hurt. Let it hurt, baby."

"I can't. It'll break me."

"Nah, I won't let it." I said into her shoulder. "Let it go, Shel. You've lit the candles for them. Say good-bye and let them go. Wish them a good journey. You'll see them again, someday. Won't you?"

"Maybe." The word disappeared into my shoulder.

"Here." Disentangling us, I turned her to look into the bank of candles again. "Look. Doesn't it look like the biggest, brightest birthday cake in the world? Look at all those wishes. Don't they look like stars to you?"

Shelby sniffed a little, but she did what I told her. "Danny always told me to wish on a star when I really wanted something."

"That hasn't changed, honey."

Clutching the candle between her hands, Shelby leaned back into me, sniffed once and then sighed. "I'll never forget them. Or how they died. God, Mama...."

"Remember how they lived, Shelby. That they loved you."

"Yes, they did live, Tony." Giving herself a little shake, she scrubbed her face with the back of one hand. "And so will I. Come hell or high water, right?" Looking back to meet my eyes, her gaze fell to the candle still in her hand. "I was going to light this one for me, Tony."

"Well, what's stopping you? Make a wish. Send a telegram to that big guy up there. He owes you one, doesn't he?"

Shelby smiled at that and reconsidered. Pulling away from me, she lit the candle and placed it with the others. But before she let go of it, she closed her eyes and her lips curved slightly as tears found their way from under the lashes. When she pulled away, her eyes met mine and she was the girl who sang in the rectory -- and something told me the bitch ain't coming back.

"C'mon, let's go sit down with the girls. It's cold in here."

Taking my hand, she didn't complain. And somehow, I managed not to loose myself in memories as the Mass went on, with its smells and bells and music. My eyes kept straying to the ceiling arching over our heads, the clerestory, the glass in the windows barely discernible, but promising a dazzling display tomorrow when the sun shines. Tonight is candlelight, incense and music. And peace. God, I had forgotten that there was even a place left in me that could find peace in a church anymore.

And perhaps that was all I needed from it in the first place.

###

"Wheee!"

Dropping everything in my arms, I raced to catch Sunny as she took another running start at a patch of ice. She'd only done this ten times this morning - and every time she's landed on another part of her anatomy, taking me with her.

"Don't you try tha--" Cursing under my breath , I dove as I saw her feet go out from under her again. I managed to catch her as she went down, both of us falling onto the cobblestone street. She only laughed when she saw I wasn't hurt. She was so well padded with everyone's coats and sweaters, I'm surprised she didn't just bounce. "Just what I need. A songbird that thinks she's Dorothy Hamil."

Sunny only stared at me like I'd lost my mind as we got up and dusted ourselves off. We'd gone out on the shopping rounds for Marta, Sunny because she wants to see the town, me because I want to see Chuck Johnson - wherever he is.

Breakfast had been another taste treat - even though it was only coffee, bread and butter and the last of the honey. Susie was even quieter than usual, excusing herself after only a few bites. Both Shelby and Sunny had exchanged a pointed look at that, but left Susie alone as she went back into the cathedral for Mass, and stayed. Before we had left, Sunny and I had snuck in the back, and found Susie on her knees at the altar, her chin resting on her clasped hands, cheeks wet with tears.

But Sunny hadn't let me go to her. When I stepped forward, she had taken my arm in a no-nonsense grip and pulled me back, shaking her head. "She needs it," was all she said.

So off we'd gone. I'd strayed down every alley I could find, poked my nose into places it shouldn't have gone (phwew!) and basically wasted most of the morning. And all I had to show for it was ice shavings down my neck and the week's groceries sitting on the ground where I dropped them.

Not that it was any feast -- mostly potatoes, bread and cheese. Maybe they had some kind of cellar at the rectory. With sausages hanging from the rafters...we weren't going to be bringing home the bacon today, y'see. There was none. Not for all the chipotle in Albuquerque.

"You do that again, and I'm not catching you. Period."

Sunny threw me a picture perfect salute, mis-matched mitten to woolen watch cap, "Okay, boss. Where to next?" Gathering our things together again for the umpteenth time, she slung the shopping bag over one shoulder.

"Whatever looks good. Forward!"

"I'm for that -- gee, it's great to be on our own again, isn't it Tony?" Shifting the bag to her other shoulder, Sunny linked her free arm in mine and put her head on my shoulder, sighing. Oh, oh. "I know, I know...it's not fair to Shelby. But I have missed you!"

Tony, you dog. "Sunny...."

"Do you remember when we first met?" Twisting my head to meet her eyes as Sunny looked up at me, I felt something go thunk inside me. There was just something about Sunny. Maybe it was the way the copper strands of her hair curled around those sparkling gray eyes, or the way her nose turned up at the end. Or was it the freckles? I'm glad she never asked for the moon. I'd still be in hock to NASA...."Our regular pianist conked out on us at the last minute and Susie dragged you in from across the street! You lost your job at that club and got one with us at ours for nearly twice as much."

Sunny squeezed my arm as she gave me a quick cuddle. "Yeah, those were the days." I managed to get out. "Uh, how did you three ever get together?"

"You don't remember? Shoot, I'm sure I've told you a jillion times." She looked at me for a quick second, but her eyes only sparkled and she tossed off a quick laugh. "Ah, but it's a good story, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Well, go ahead. Fill me in, already.

Falling into step with me, Sunny began to chatter, only stopping now and again to jump over a piece of ice or something in the road. But she never let go and her grip was firm, holding me closer than I really felt comfortable with. I mean, which one was Tony's girl, for crying out loud? I could have sworn it was Shelby...or maybe they're just friends...or maybe Shelby doesn't know about Sunny and me...oh, hell. Three girls, one guy and it's wartime...what do you think?

I think I'm in deep sauce.

"Y'know, I don't think I remember meeting Shelby -- we just kept running into each other at auditions, then we ended up working tables at the same place for a while...then began sharing that apartment...Shelby brought Susie home one night, found her singing on a street corner, how poetic, don't you think? Anyway...."

Maybe they **did** share the poor bum. Could be fun. Could get interesting...nuts.

We walked and talked for the rest of the morning, stopping in for a cup at a little cafe next to the train station after we had pooled the contents of our pockets. A memory fragment kept poking its way through, nearly making me see double each time I looked at the station. I might have been here before, but I'm not sure...everything looked the same, only a little more careworn, austere. **There's a war on.** But it didn't seem to be reaching here as much, although I know it surrounded us on every front. All the men had a rifle slung over their shoulders. All of them. Certain things were in very short supply and other things were available. Like horsemeat sausage. Brrrr.

"What do suppose reifleisch is?" Walking back towards the cathedral, we passed a little meat market. Looking across the way, I watched a horse-drawn wagon stop and begin to unload what looked like a hayride, except they had luggage. No, not luggage...exactly. They were instrument cases!

"Sunny, look over there. Is that what I think it is?"

She stopped and bent over from the waist to see beyond me, gasped and dropped the shopping bag as she took off across the courtyard separating us from

them. "Hurry up, Tony! It's a band! A **real** band! Let's see if we can catch them!"

Band it might be, but we're a long way from New York. Shaking my head, I followed at a more respectable clip, picking up the shopping bag. I was not too sure how these guys were going to take the Sunny barrage, but by the time I got there, she seemed to have things well in hand.

Surrounded by a group of horn players (I checked out the cases), Sunny seemed to have found at least one youngster who could speak enough English to make out what she was saying. They looked like students - had that kind of sameness that living and studying together will impart to a group. And they thought she was the cat's meow. If any of them got any closer, they'd have to unbutton her coat first.

"Tony! They're from the University!"

"Yeah?" Standing outside her little circle of friends, I adopted a slightly disapproving posture. It wasn't hard. All I had to do was think of Sam and it came naturally. Sunny was clearly in her element, though. All I could see of her was her red hair and her smile as the boys surrounded her, all of them taller, all of them very curious indeed. I would say they looked like a wolf pack, ready to pounce, except...damn, they were just too young. You'd think they had never seen a pretty girl before. Body language was truly universal -- all she would have had to do is crook her little finger and that would have been the end of it!

"And they've got the charts for a lot of our stuff - maybe we can get them to play with us tonight, what do you say?"

Sam's voice echoed in my head. "No rehearsal, no practice, unknown quantities...you don't even know these people!"

Shaking my head, I felt the grin stretch across my semi-frozen face. Play with us? I don't think we'll be able to keep them away with a stick once these kids find out she's got two partners as pretty as she is. "Get them to say yes, sweetheart."

Hell, it sounded like fun. And you just can't say no to Sunny. "Could have sworn Shelby was the brains of this outfit," I murmured. Hearing that remark, she broke off the conversation she was having with Rudolph (or whatever his name was, he had the nose for it) and laughed, her eyes sparkling as she threw her head back, her breath freezing in mid-air.

"She would be, except for one little thing," Sunny said, waving a mittened finger in the air, sobering slightly. "She just doesn't have the luck."

Her eyes meeting mine, an entire conversation passed between us and I nodded

as she went back to negotiating the evening with them. No, Shelby wasn't lucky. But maybe that just meant she was coming due.

Horn players. Looking at them, I figured they were either close to Sunny's age, maybe a year or so younger. So that made them horny horn players. Y'know, I'm just the kind of guy that would love to make something happen with this sort of situation.

So I went over and took up with the string players, a rather nice group of young ladies who were beginning to look a little left out of it all. They were most cooperative.

###

I wondered what it was going to be like. We were going to be playing and singing swingtime jazz in the cathedral...I still couldn't believe it. In. The. Church. Yow. I stood at the back of the church, watching everybody else work, trying to be invisible. Y'see, the moment they saw I was there, I'd have to go up there and rehearse too. And then we'd all be in big trouble. That accordion was sitting up there, proud as punch, just waiting for me. It'll wait a little longer, believe me. A lot longer, if I have anything to do with it. Ahhhh, shit.

When Sunny and I had dragged the troops in, you'd have thought a bomb had dropped in the rectory, so fast did everyone scatter. The girls ran to their duffel bags to drag out music and clothes, and then we all met up again, inside the cathedral, ready to rehearse like it was old home week. Shelby kept sighing, thanking me for bringing her the band. That was Shelby for you - she did have a taste for perfection. I guess the idea of she and I making all the music with a guitar and an accordion wasn't as good as doing it with a full band, even though they were students. They were giving it their best shot, every last one of them with smiles on their faces. It was all a big field trip to them. And the girls were having so much fun...this must be one of the fringe benefits of Leaps Sam was telling me about. If so, I wouldn't mind a few more like it.

But there was just something about it that made me smile and shake my head -- the sun shining through the windows, ever so reverently...the candles being lit, and Sunny belting out "Stuff Like That There" at full volume from the altar, accompanied by her band. There were nuns and priests around, shaking their heads, sure, but there were others who primly sat down to listen. And were tapping their feet after a few minutes. With all the saints watching. Still don't believe it. Why doesn't the lightning strike someone like they always said it would?

Shelby looked great - like she'd lost some unwanted baggage. Working on the act, practicing her steps beside Sunny and Susie, she smiled and laughed so hard I could hear her in the back. She had a great big belly laugh I'd never heard before - one that made a lot of the people stop and listen before they joined in. The jacket with the three gold stars on it was draped haphazardly on a chair in the back. Forgotten, for the

moment.

Susie hopped and giggled like a kid on summer vacation, and the kids from the University just ate it up. There was no sign that she had been anything but happy as all giddy-hell. I had tried to talk to her, but really it was futile if you think about it. There was a band, y'see. A real band to make real music. I couldn't compete with that.

And on one hand, I really couldn't wait to see the place tonight either - jam packed with G.I.s as they were saying - but on the other, oh boy. It would be me up there playing the piano - and maybe, that damned accordion too, if I couldn't think of something quick. I needed Sam. With any luck, the girls wouldn't notice me until he showed up. If the luck wasn't with me - it doesn't bear repeating. People threw cold water on me in the shower - does that tell you something?

Maybe it was telepathy - or maybe the damn alarm clock went off - but I heard him before I saw him, humming a tune to himself as he shuffled up to me. He likes being the hologram, don't tell him I said it, he'd be offended. Too much play, not enough work. But he likes it - and Sam always was fun when he was having fun.

"I've just had the best time," he said, smiling down at me as he continued to hum. "That kid, Tony. He's really something. We were swapping songs for hours!"

"Nice to know you're getting along," I said, resisting the urge to say more. I sensed Verbena Beeks up to her old tricks again, and silently thanked her for it. "What have you got for me?"

"Well, I hope you're dressing warm tonight - you're going to go on a little ride."

Looking up at him, I wished I could swat the smug look off his face. Right now I'm reminded of a prank I once pulled on him when we first began at the Project - when I was still setting up the Security protocols. Somebody asked me for a description of the boss and I had just gotten out of a meeting with Sam -- one that involved money, and that never left me in a good mood -- and I just spat out what came to mind first. "Blah-blah hair and eyes the color of ginger ale with grass in it. Dirty grass."

Had people coming up to him for weeks, just to stare him in the eye. He got his in, of course. My profile had the statement in it that my posture resembled a Tilt-A-Whirl. Thanks, Sam.

"A ride?" I said, taking a step back and folding my arms. "Hope it's not anything like the charge of the light brigade. What am I supposed to do? Bean some Natzis with the accordion? Hey, that has possibilities...."

"No, no. Nothing like that." Taking out the handlink, Sam did think it over,

though. Looking up and into space, I could see him reconsider the accordion as a weapon one more time before he smiled and went back to the display. "We found Chuck Johnson. But you're going to have go along with something - and make sure everybody else goes along with it too."

"Go along with what?"

"You're going to be kidnapped. By a bunch of G.I.s. They're going to take you back to their camp somewhere in the hills, and ask - nicely, of course - to sing some songs for their buddies who couldn't get away for the show."

"Some kind of command performance." I snorted. "Great. What happened the first time? I know it ain't going to go down easy with Shelby."

"It never happened the first time. Good call, by the way. Shelby hit the driver over the head with her guitar and got the four of you back to quarters before anything happened." Punching at the link some more, Sam held it at arm's length, squinting at it. "The squad reported finding a dead body the next morning in the bushes near their camp. They never could identify him. Ziggy says it was Johnson. There you go."

"So, all I have to do is go along with the G.I.s, make sure the girls go along too -- sing a few songs around a campfire...make some kind of excuse to go wandering around in the dark during a war, and presto, instant Leap. Thanks a bunch, kid."

He only shrugged, trying to look helpful which didn't help in the least. "You also have to get through tonight's performance or they won't want to take you anywhere," he added. "Knock 'em dead."

"Oh, boy," I sighed.

###

No, I wasn't left completely to my own devices. Sam and I went up and rehearsed with the kids. Blamed my fumbling on the cold - and got through it. But we stayed long after everyone knocked off for dinner, and practiced together. Hard. It was a good thing one of us was a hologram - between his perfectionism and my temper, we would have killed each other.

Producing music out of a collection of ivory, wood and strings - make that hostile collection - does not make for chummy company. Sam is patient, maybe I am too, but this...

"**Goddamn piece of shit!**" Looking down at Sam's hands on the keyboard, my fist went right through the left one to send a discordant note through the hall. I couldn't

get my hand to stretch far enough to cover the chord. Again. "Ow." I moaned, holding the hurt member to my chest.

"Easy, easy, easy." Sam replied, "We'll try something else."

"I can't do it," I said, rubbing my hands together for the umpteenth time. "I'm gonna wreck it for sure."

"No, we're not going to let that happen. Here. Relax. Try this."

So we tried this. And then we tried that. If anything, I got worse instead of better. Frustrated, I would try to force my hands into contortions I'd never dreamed were possible - and get two thirds of the chord, missing the last note by one step. I even tried using one hand to place the other - so that I'd know what it felt like? I think I'd rather try the Los Angeles freeway system at 5:00 in the afternoon. After the '94 quake.

What a memory.

Sighing, Sam was wandering around the "stage", looking at the other charts, scratching his chin and thinking hard.

"Okay, we've pretty much established Tony has most of the piano with him. You got a little of the harmonica. Hate to tell you this, Al." He had stopped by the accordion. "Time to face the music."

"Aahhh, no Sam. You're joking."

He only raised his eyebrows. "What other choice have we got? You're not going to get the piano down in time. Maybe we can fake it with this thing - the keys aren't spaced so far apart." At the look I gave him, he put on his best face and straightened his shoulders, gesturing with the handlink. "C'mon, let's get it over with...."

I don't know what it was - I had never even touched the damn thing. I had made every possible plan never to touch the damn thing. And here I was, wearing the damn thing. Sam came up from behind me, and placed his hands where I needed to place mine. One on the keys, the other on the pitch holes. Mixing my hands with his, I found he had been right - this was simpler, and I found myself easing into it with no little sense of relief.

And suddenly, everything was all right. The chording made sense - my hands found fingerings I could live with. I could feel the stress as my hands stretched to cover the points, but my fingers got there. I even liked the tune. It was the mental equivalent of your ears popping - everything became clear. Familiar.

Sam just stood back and watched, dumbfounded. "Nola," he pronounced. "And you even got the timing right."

"Didn't you say that Tony was really something?" I said, chuckling and flexing my hands in front of me. "Wow. Ain't that a kick in the butt. Now I wish we'd tried that in the first place. What do you want to bet that he learned accordion first?"

"Humor me." Looking up, I saw Sam watching me pensively, one finger tapping his chin. "Put the accordion down and go back to the piano. I've got an idea."

Shoot, anything's better than wearing this thing. Sitting down to my second worst enemy again, I watched as Sam circled the rest of the instruments to face me as I laid my hands in the start position on the keyboard. "Play the same tune," he said, "Use both hands, if you can."

"Sam, quit trying to avoid the furniture. You're not going to run into anything - you're the hologram, remember?"

"Huh?" Standing next to the piano, he cocked his head and made a face at me. Then he looked at where he was standing - in the only clear spot on the stage. His expression transforming into a wry grin, Sam made a performance out of walking through the piano once or twice, ending with a bow as he returned to the precise spot where he had stood before. "Satisfied?"

"Much." Placing my hands on the keyboard again, I felt the reach inside my head connect with someone else's memory again. A strange feeling, yeah, but it was like flying a prototype - if it kept the plane in the air, you didn't argue with it. You did it.

I began to hear the notes falling as I played. Didn't sound nearly as nice, but damn if it didn't work! And the stretches were bigger, but now I made them. It was like I had read some kind of instructions - there was a way to do it, and suddenly I knew how. However, that same 'something' resisted the idea - this song for that instrument, that sort of thing. Wasn't me. Wasn't Sam. "It's Tony, Sam. He doesn't want me to do this."

"Ohhhhh-kay," Sam murmured, watching me like I was a lab rat. "Then play something. Anything."

I sat for a moment, finding my way around the holes in my memory, waiting for something to strike me. Finding myself grinning like a Cheshire cat, my hands found the tune as my memory coughed up another melody. And it was a doozie.

Bang, bang, bang, bang! "I want to jump, but I'm afraid I'd fall..." Sam's eyes just

about popped out of his head, the jaw dropped and then he began to laugh. "I wanna holler, but the john's too small..."

"Old man river's got a hold on me too..." Sam jumped in.

"I've got the rockin' pneumonia and the boogie woogie flu!" we finished together. And laughed.

"Where the hell did that come from?" Sam cried.

"You, I think!"

"No way!"

We went through the evening's line-up after that, all of them letter perfect. We both then sat back and took a deep breath. How do you spell relief? A-C-C-O-R-D-I-A-N!

I was half expecting Sam to pull out a Miller Light and crack a semi-lame joke when we heard applause, when there shouldn't have been a soul in the place. A singular set of hands, belonging to one little Susie, who stepped out of my old hiding place in the back to stand at the rear of the sanctuary, her round face beaming. Her applause finished, she folded her hands in front of her, silent as always. When she had come in, I didn't know.

Sam looked at me, I looked at him; neither of us knew what to say - if anything. She had liked what she heard, but could she explain it? Or was it even unusual?

"What's she doing here? I thought she was with the girls getting ready for the show tonight."

Susie didn't budge. "Sue, is something wrong?" I asked, "Shelby's gonna have my hide for shoe leather if she goes looking for you and can't find you."

A gentle sigh escaped, as her eyes closed, head tilting towards the floor as she shook it in a negative. "She knows where I am."

Waiting a moment, I wanted to see if she would keep talking. When that didn't happen, I stepped down from the "stage" and went to her. She watched all this with her wide, black eyes that blinked but never wavered. Susie and I would never exchange more than twenty words, it would turn out. We hadn't needed to.

I heard Sam take out the handlink and begin to pull information from where he stood behind me. Glancing back, I saw him standing there with the link in his hand,

serious as a judge. He didn't say anything, but watched the two of us intently. Something was going down, and wonder boy hadn't been expecting it. Hope Tony hadn't gotten her pregnant - now wouldn't THAT be an 'opportunity'?

"She knows I wanted to tell you myself." The eyes had fixed themselves on me while she spoke, but as she finished, her gaze drifted upwards as a gentle smile appeared on her face, and I knew I was off the hook. She might love me - er, Tony, but she was not IN love with Tony, er - whatever. Somewhere, I'd seen that look before. It made one tingly on the inside, like you were watching someone touch magic - personal magic, something you couldn't see or feel. But you knew they did.

"You're staying," I blurted out. "You're staying here with the church." As her gaze came to rest on my face again, she nodded, her smile broadening. "Good," I said, in spite of myself. "You'll be happy here, won't you? It's safe and quiet...." She silenced any other prattle of mine, by stepping up on tiptoe, kissing me on the cheek.

"I'll never forget you, you know. Thanks."

"Me, either." I murmured, bending over to hold her. "Be happy, Susie-Q. We're gonna miss you."

She didn't say anything more, just squeezed a little tighter, then stepped away, smiled nervously and darted for the door, looking much like the sparrows Sunny and I had chased out of our way that morning.

I stood there until I was certain she was gone, then turned back to find Sam. "That was supposed to happen, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, but that's only my opinion. Who needs history, anyway?" Sam smacked the link a good one, then shrugged with a wry look on his face and put it away. "Well, that's the best we can do. Better go get dressed. It's showtime!"

Showtime - that means I'm that much closer to a long, cold ride in the dark. Showtime, my ass. Whumpie. I can hardly wait. Hope I packed my long underwear. Yeah, that's me. Long John Liberace.

"What's so funny?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out," I retorted, reaching for a cigar that didn't exist. "Why don't you go clean up a little, huh? At least shave --"

"The razor's--"

"--on the charger. I know. I know, Sam. Borrow Gooshie's."

"That's low."

"Not as low as you're gonna feel if some kid sees you like that tonight. You'd scare Rosemary's baby right now."

"Would not."

"Would too. Do it."

Boy, have I got him trained. I oughta go into business.

###

The fire marshall would have had a litter of fits, if such a thing existed where I was - which I doubt. I don't think there was a square foot of space anywhere in the cathedral left free - the pews were full, the aisles packed and there was only standing room left at the back - if you were taller than the Allied's finest already standing there. I heard German, French, English with so many accents I lost count...uniforms every color uniforms came in, and my bullet-ridden brain couldn't recognize many of the emblems of rank and I found myself stumbling over introductions. Me, who probably outranked most of these kids.

You heard the old joke about how they were busing them in? These folks invented it. Running back and forth between the choir room where the girls were getting ready, the stage where the kids were tuning up and the audience I found myself getting lost in it all. Soldiers...hundreds of them.

One thing I noticed immediately, though, was how much older they all seemed. Many of them were married, had lives and careers waiting for them back in the States...they leaned up against the walls, smoking cigarettes near the doors, shivering a bit from the chill, telling lies...then a mental whisper reminded me that the war I had fought had been done with soldiers much younger...and then another part of me slammed down on that whisper so firmly I found myself shaking my head in shock. Whoa Sam, not so hard.

I was looking damn good. Cleaned up to the eights in the best clothes in my duffel bag, spruced up by Marta herself. Someone had offered their "Russisch Leder" aftershave, and deciding it was their version of Old Spice, indulged. Polish, polish, polish. Every hair in place. Spit shines and four-in-hand ties. Of course, the girls were still working on their looks and I wasn't allowed near them. Rats.

Look down at my watch, I could see that showtime was rapidly approaching - but there were no girls and no Sam. I heard Sunny beginning her warm-ups from where I

was wandering near the altar, the tones clear and warm, albeit a little strained to my ear. Nerves? Then I heard Shelby join in, Susie following and it all smoothed out and I heard the hush sweep over the crowd - I took the natural cue and stepped up to my piano, catching the eye of the first violin. Bright penny that she was, she tapped her bow against the neck of her instrument, waited for me to nod to her.

We began with a quiet instrumental number to cover the girls putting the last touches together before coming out on stage themselves. Looking for a glint of blonde hair from my vantage point behind the piano, I saw Shelby step out from the choir room, lick a finger and settle one last lock of hair into place before she shimmy-settled into her dress and marched forward, her stride getting dirtier as she reached the band. Sunny hurried behind her, slipping a hairpin into place, with Susie bringing up the rear, her eyes huge in her white face. But when they hit the mike, it was old home week and the music just came to them as naturally as washing their hands.

Rehearsal this afternoon couldn't have been more different than what was happening now. The room had been nearly empty and filled with echoes this afternoon - now, filled with people and lit only with candlelight, it was warm and full of sound. Golden, and somehow magical. The only safe place many of these people had known in months -- perhaps that was where the magic feelings were coming from. Even the stiffest, most proper soldier began to lean back in the pew he sat in, a smile on his face.

They sang, I played. Sunny took the mischievous ones, Shelby took the ballads and between them, we milked the house dry. "Someone to Watch Over Me" left the hall silent, and then thundered with applause as Sunny stepped forward to give them "Stuff Like That There" - the intro sounding much like Shelby until we hit the body of the song and swung it as hard as we could.

"I don't suppose one of you gentlemen out there would be able to oblige me, would you?" Sunny coyly struck a pose that would have made Madonna proud, and then scuttled back to the shadows under the stares from the clergy, albeit tempered with a few smirks. Shelby then stepped forward to the mike.

"Come to think of it, I wouldn't mind either," she said, and grinned as the hoots and wolf whistles deafened us all. At least Shelby had the good grace to blush as she looked back to me for her cue. "What'll I Do" followed, which settled the audience back into silence - not hard to do, it was a winner for this crowd. But when she finished....

It was karma. It was a fluke. I began the intro to "Kalamazoo" - and then began singing it! Shelby spun around so fast, I swear she snapped something in her neck. Sunny began to laugh, Susie grinned from ear to ear. But it was the glue that held us together - they joined in to back me up and damn, it worked. Off key, you name it. We did it.

"Kay --"

"Ay!"

"Em em oh, oh, oh what a girl!"

"In Kalamazoo..." I crooned like the old groaner himself. All the rats within ten miles probably died and a few dogs must have gone deaf. Not to mention the cats that jumped into the Rhine rushing on its way outside. What I couldn't give in pitch, I made up in volume. And all they did was laugh and applaud harder. I couldn't believe it. Sam, how does it all happen like this? This is great!

"Now you know why we hide him behind the piano!" Sunny laughed as the applause died down.

"But I thought you liked hiding behind the piano!" I retorted as Sunny broke up again, staggering as she blushed furiously.

"Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain," Shelby intoned, shaking her head. "You've been a great audience. But it's time to put Tony to bed without supper. He's been a baaaad boy!"

"Not that bad if you keep wanting to put me to bed, Shel."

Oh, that one nearly cost me my life. Thought she was gonna die. But the boys just ate it up. We kept that up for almost an hour - without playing a note. But we did give in at that last, gave them a sad, sentimental tune to put them to bed with and we stood for ovation after ovation before we were allowed to stay in the choir room, drink hot toddies and relax. The kids from the band joined us a little later before their chaperones gathered them up and away. We said thank you, they said bitteschoen and off they went into the night to their dormitory rooms.

"Oooh, my feet are killin' me!" Kicking off her shoes, Sunny fell back into her chair and stretched out, wiggling her toes against the cold stone floor. "Good show, Tony. Damn good show."

"Mmmhmmm." Shelby hummed into her mug, taking a deep slurp. Blinking a few times, her gaze fell upon Susie sitting in the corner behind me, and I could tell they had locked eyes. "Sure we can't talk you out of it."

I heard her sigh, and as I turned to look, I also heard the sound of the blankets shifting as Susie shook her head. But still, she smiled.

"Where in the world are we going to find someone to replace you?" Shelby said

sadly. "The act just won't be the same."

Susie only shrugged. It was clear her mind was made up.

"Oh, well. C'mon, we might as well get to bed. Have to leave tomorrow for Zurich - and then, home." Rising, she put her hands on her hips and leaned back. "Yippee."

"Aw, nuts. It'll be good to get a hamburger again." But Sunny also looked less than enthused, and didn't get up. "God, I'm tired. But I don't want to go home, yet. I just don't wanna. I must be cracked."

"What about you, Tony? What do you want to do?"

"I want to go out and do the show over again. I just thought of three more jokes." It got the appropriate response. They groaned and threw things, I ducked.

Old home week.

###

Okay guys, anytime you're ready. Sam had said we were going to be kidnapped - well, they'd better make it snappy or they'll have to drag us all out of bed. These girls are heading for the sheets, do not pass Go, do not collect \$200.

"C'mon, c'mon. Where are you?" I was standing out in the courtyard between the rectory and the cathedral, staring at Bernoulli's marker, hopping up and down to stay warm. I kept expecting Sam to pop out of nowhere and tell me he was only joking about the jeep ride into the dark. I kept peering into it, waiting for whatever was out there. Will they ask or just hit us over the head and drag us away?

And just where the hell IS Sam? Must be fiddling around with the accelerator again. Found a lead or testing a hypothesis. He loses track of more of my time that way.

The girls will be here any minute - I got ahead of them saying I didn't have to pack much. And that's mostly true, the accordion is just about it. But it's been an hour already. Okay, maybe not. But it felt like it!

"Tony, what are you doing out here? You want to freeze or something?" Shelby out the door first, as I expected. She was carrying her guitar, looked tired and more than ready for bed.

"Gee, we don't need an escort across the street, Tony." Sunny stepped through

the door, letting Susie close it behind her. Good, they're all dressed warm enough -

"I was just looking around. Lot of history happened here." I wasn't lying! Much. That's when life got strange.

Someone grabbed Shelby - just his hands on her shoulders, but it was a big enough surprise that she yelped and jumped in alarm. Reflexes took over from there. I remember taking the guitar away from her, but then the guy's face turned and I got a good look at him. I knew his intentions were good, I swear I did, but at that moment he had Shelby and she was frightened. And he wasn't sorry. He hadn't even noticed. That made me mad.

After I sounded the alarm, Sunny hit him high, I took him low and when his two buddies arrived to help him out, three Joes in khaki ended laying face up on the concrete at our feet. That's when I heard the Imaging Chamber door open and I turned to see someone throw Sam through the door and shut it behind him. That's right, throw. Looks like the boss lost track of time - again. Good thing he wasn't really there - he'd have killed me.

He was filthy. And furious. I had pulled him away from his work again, that much was abundantly clear. He still had the soldering iron in one hand as he took a quick assessment of the situation, glared at me and hissed something he wouldn't want his mother to hear. Dropping the hot iron, he pulled out the comlink and began keying at a rate I knew it wouldn't accept. Sure enough, he began to shake it - you'd have thought he was making martinis.

"Oh, special AI. Just - special." Running greasy fingers through even greasier hair marked with the imprint of a cap that was no longer there, he stared a hole through me as the girls started to recover their bearings. "Do you know what you just did?"

"Made the world safe for democracy?"

Good thing looks can't kill.

"They're AWOL, AI! Now they get court-martialed, sent home in disgrace - the bad paper follows them around the rest of their lives - two of them end up in jail on life sentences...the other --"

I couldn't stand it anymore. I did what any other red-blooded admiral in the Navy worth his salt would have done in this situation.

I swore like the sailor I was. Loudly, with great delight and variety. And kept it up for at least ten minutes. I could have gone on longer, but I didn't see the point of wasting what I had learned at the hands of the space program in Houston. What little I

did get out was plenty. Shut Sam up. Only guy I know that shuts up by dropping his jaw wide enough for a 747 to get through.

Long enough for Susie to grow pale, Shelby's eyes to turn to dinner plates and for Sunny to blush redder than her muffler. When I finished, she applauded quietly.

Sam rolled his eyes and picked his chin off the floor. "Is that the best you've got to offer?"

"Tony, I don't think that was called for."

I threw a look at Sam that said "watch me," and spun on my heel to face Shelby.

"Where do you suppose these kids are supposed to be right now? They're AWOL - they've been waiting hours for you to come out so that they could talk to you!"

"How was I supposed to know that? You're the one who hit them!"

Good point.

"So I'm sorry! We've got to get them back to their squad before someone misses them. C'mon!"

She only put her hands on her hips and cocked her head. "Terrif - how?"

I just passed it back to Sam who glared at me and said "Find their jeep - I'll give you directions."

"We'll follow their tire tracks. Maybe they have a map. I dunno. Wake one of 'em up."

Susie looked at me like I'd lost my mind. With the haymakers I'd given those kids, they weren't going to wake up anytime soon.

"We're going to carry them piggy-back?" Sunny asked.

"How do you think they got here? C'mon, they've got to have a jeep stashed around here someplace."

"The jeep is around the corner." Sam added dryly.

"C'mon, it's probably around the corner in the dark."

"Riiiiight." Shelby picked up her guitar, I grabbed the accordion and put them in

the jeep we "found" just where Sam said it was - and then we went back for the boys.

"We'll give 'em a few tunes for their trouble, Shel. Why not?"

"Sure, " she said, wincing. "Maybe then they'll forget about the shiners you gave them. I didn't know you could do that, Tony. When did you get to be the physical type?"

"When someone tried to get physical with you." I answered, jostling the accordion into place. When I turned to look at her, she merely met my eyes with a puzzled look and shook her head. Then she sighed and gave me a little peck on the cheek.

"I don't know what's gotten into you, lately. But it's not half bad, Tony."

Jeez, it was cozy. Probably the only thing that kept us warm. Each girl had one of the GI's on her lap and between hanging onto them, and hanging on for dear life, they were too busy to notice me talking to the steering wheel.

Good thing, too. Not much of it was fit for human consumption. The more I drove, the darker it got. The lonelier, too. Before long, I couldn't even see the edge of the road anymore. The jeep was fitted with blackout shutters - flaps that prevented any of the light from the jeep's headlights from being seen from above. Made it damn difficult to see anything but the road right in front of the grille. When there was a road in front of the grille, I might add.

"Sam, this had better not be a wild goose chase."

"This whole Leap has been a wild goose chase. Why stop now?"

"Okay, so next time I'll leap somewhere in 1990. Happy?"

"Ecstatic."

Darker. Bumpier. The road began to deteriorate into a cow path, and I had to really slow down. "Sam...."

"You're getting warmer."

"Like hell."

That fog I remembered from the days before was still with us, making it impossible to even see the moon, let alone the stars. Cold and damp, the only sound I heard was the sound of the engine, the girls constantly shifting their weight to keep their

balance, and Sam breathing in my ear, his comlink squealing like a hamster on steroids.

Soon, we literally drove into a small encampment - blackout conditions being what they were, I nearly drove into a tent, sending everyone scattering.

But when I cut the engine, I went cold all over as I realized we hadn't reached the home team. I'll tell you, nothing sounds as nasty as someone cussing in German. And there were a lot of somebodys.

"Don't panic. Swiss army." Sam said quickly, punching in requests as fast as his fingers could tap. "I think this is a checkpoint - the real camp is still down the road."

"Swiss army - like the guys who guard the Pope?"

"Yeah. Don't worry. They like musicians."

Looking at the angry faces surrounding me, all of them gurgling and gargling consonants at a furious rate and shaking their fists, I wasn't comforted. Boy, did they look at us.

One man, with more gook on his sleeve than the rest of them, stepped forward while motioning the rest back. They went silent as they faded into the shadows. I cut the engine and the lights - sending us all into blackness. They waited a few beats - I'm sure their eyes took as long to adjust. But I heard the man move before I could see him again - he moved slowly, as if he owned the place. Could be that he did.

"Was ist das?" Stepping up to Shelby, he met her eyes as he cautiously bent forward at the waist and took a good sniff.

"He's not drunk," she spat. "Overeager, but not drunk."

Another solider had come up from behind and began poking around at the instruments. "Amerikaner - keine problem."

Staring at me as he stepped back, the big man fingered the strap holding the rifle slung across his back. "USO?" I offered, "Have mercy on a bunch of stupid musicians, willya?"

He stood there and stared at me - I had nowhere else to look, so I returned his interest. Wish Shelby hadn't bit his head off.

"Stupid, yes." he said, in English almost too good to believe. Almost British - but not. "But not as stupid as American soldiers, ja?" He said this, tapping Shelby's G.I. on

the head. Allowing his hands to find their pockets, he leaned back while he stared me in the eye. "Take them back," he added, turning to give orders to the crowd surrounding us. "Take them back and say to stay there, please." In the poor light, he looked almost like a ghost - the ubiquitous mousy hair and colorless eyes added to the effect. "Ja?"

"Sure." Feeling a nudge in the shoulder, I turned to find another equally colorless face holding a lit candle lamp by the base. Snickering, he handed it to me. Oh, I get it. To find the way, right? Turning to look at Herr Kommandant, I saw that he was smiling at me. "I'm Tony, " I said, handing the lamp to Shelby.

"Rolf. Viel Gluck."

"You too."

Nothing like a civilian militia. I wonder what that guy did for a living in the real world. I'll bet it had something to do with children -- I felt like the kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. In the dark after knocking it off the shelf, no less.

"Sam...are we there yet?"

"I thought that was it. Must be around here someplace."

"Oh, you're such a comfort in my old age. C'mon, Sam! I'm in a bind here - we're all gonna be history soon!"

"Okay, okay! I'm having Ziggy center on Clyde - he's gotta be around here somewhere." He stood alongside the road, the brightest spot in my center of vision. Wincing at the readout on the link, he looked up at me and shook his head. "I don't believe this."

Passing him, I cursed his parents for the third time that evening and tried not to stray from the dirt tracks in front of me. "You don't believe this."

"Insufficient information. She can't lock onto him."

"What? Oh terrific!"

Slowing even further, I felt like getting out and walking. The girls were turning blue, the road was quickly petering out to less than a goat path - we must have taken a wrong turn and ended up in a cow pasture, it sure smelled like it. "That's it. I give up."

"That's just fine with me." The voice was strange, but the sound of a bolt being drawn back on his rifle was not. Both were clearly of American make, too. "What the

hell are you doing here?"

"Returning some stolen property of yours." I didn't even blink, and kept my hands on the steering wheel. "You know, the jeep, the soldiers...things like that."

"Huh? Who the hell are you?"

"USO troupe 783. Foxhole circuit. Now don't you feel stupid? I know I do."

"USO? Aw, shit."

Well, it's a start. Turning to find Sam in my field of vision, I saw him step out from behind the sentry who was now twisting around backwards, looking for his backup in the dark.

"Al, I just thought of something."

"You think of a lot of things - that's how I got here. What?"

"What are American soldiers doing in Switzerland during World War II? And behind a Swiss checkpoint as well?"

"Nothing that was written in the history books, that's for sure." Tell them to stay there, the man had said.

"Oh, boy."

###

We were escorted to a hole in the ground. Not a foxhole, mind you - a complete abode, built entirely into the side of a hill. It had a door covered with turf, which the sentry opened after pulling a string latch through.

"Sam, it's getting deep out here..." Sam wasn't paying me the least bit of attention, though. Between the sight in front of him and the comlink, he was completely occupied.

It seemed that there was a lot that wasn't written down during World War II that a parallel hybrid computer could recall about this situation. Sam kept requesting information - those taps I remember - but kept coming up empty.

"A hobbit hole." I heard Sam say. "Dammit, it's a bona fide hobbit hole. What are hobbits doing in Switzerland?"

Whatever hobbits were. Watching us like a hawk, the sentry stood in the doorway, half closing it against himself after he had gotten somebody else's attention on the inside. Then he appeared to wait, watching us sitting in the jeep. Light spilled out from around the edges, casting the sentry in a less than friendly light. We weren't supposed to be here. We weren't even supposed to know where we were. And here we were, almost as if we'd been given directions. Oh, boy.

"Tony..." Shelby kept looking at me like I knew something I wasn't telling. Not exactly false, but I wasn't holding that much back.

"I'm in the dark, Shel."

"We're all in the dark, Tony." Sunny shifted position in the back seat, edging closer to Susie. "Can't we just dump them and split?"

"Looks warmer in there than out here." I replied. "If they'll let us in, maybe we can get warmed up again before we go back to the church."

She only sighed and looked up. "There aren't even any stars." she said, complaining.

Looking around, I began to feel the same way. This wasn't where they belonged -- they ought to be back in at the rectory, asleep in their beds. Why were they here? Why was I here?

The door opened again, and two more men came out. Dressed much like the sentry, they exchanged a few quiet words and looked at us again. Then the fellow nearest the door rapped on it with his knuckles and whispered something urgent to the man on the other side. A few minutes later, a group emerged from underground, approached the jeep and took the soldiers from us. Slinging them over their shoulders, three of them walked off without saying a word. The others offered a hand down to the girls, a courteous wave-on to me.

"Go with them, Al," Sam said, "You'll find out more than I can give you right now."

Where else could I go? I was beginning to feel like we knew too much already, and that it wasn't a Good Thing. Behind us, two of the guys were covering the jeep with black tarcloth, weighing it down with rocks and clumps of turf. Making sure Shelby's guitar and my accordion got taken out of the jeep as well, we followed our "hosts" into the hole in the ground.

"If it's any help, Ziggy says you're red hot. Clyde is somewhere very close by."

"If it's outside of this bunker, it might as well be Timbuktu." Hearing the door

shut with a thump, I noticed it had no lock, nor any significant hardware. Just a wooden panel set into a wooden frame with a few simple hinges. The fellow closing the door gave me the eye, however. It was clear that he was the lock, and he wouldn't be picked open with a hairpin.

"This used to be a potato shed." Turning in the direction of the voice, I found myself looking up into the face of an Army Captain, from his rank insignia. Dusty faced, he looked half my age and twice as old. Sleeves rolled up, he looked like he had been working in a mine shaft. Maybe, he had. "Thanks for bringing my boys back. I'll ask how you found us later."

"No problem, Rolf sent us. I guess you can get cabin fever real easy out here, huh?"

"Got it in one." he replied and sighed. "C'mon, let's get you and the ladies a place to sit and something warm. Rolf sent you, huh? I don't doubt Murray and his gang did first." God, he looked tired. "I'm really sorry but you'll have to stay the night here. Sorry."

"Tony."

"Ken." Yawn.

While he covered his mouth with a dirty fist, I became aware of a scent other than that of sod and dirty gym socks - dog. Big dog. Big, wet dog. Ugh.

"Wow, what a huge mutt!"

Looking through the doorway to my left, I saw Sunny bending over to pet the largest living rug I'd ever seen. Susie was also showing some interest, but alarms were going off in my head as I checked over my shoulder to find Sam there. The dog would see both of us - and in the past, dogs hadn't liked holograms.

Or they didn't like me. Either way, if the dog didn't like us, the going could get difficult. Fast.

"Sunny, leave it alone -- " Shelby, to the rescue. Standing behind Susie, the expression on her face did not bode well. Somehow, I hadn't expected her to be afraid of dogs, but this one sure had her rattled. Still and all, it was a big dog.

"She'd make a great den mother," said Sam. Then, considering where we were, he frowned and went back to the comlink.

"Aw, stuff it," Sunny replied. "Dogs love me." The object of her attention raised

a huge head and snuffled her outstretched hand. It was a bona fide St. Bernard, complete with drool, gentle as a lamb. I think it even smiled at her, wagging a long, feathered tail in the dust. And ignored me and Sam entirely, for the moment.

"Barry, be nice to the ladies." The rest of Ken's platoon appeared from out of the corners - I counted eight in all. But they hung back like wallflowers at a senior prom, and I was once again reminded that we were Not Where We Were Supposed to Be. One of them, a particularly colorless specimen, stepped forward to heavy-handedly pet the dog on the head, smiling half-heartedly at Sunny. "Hi, I'm Frank."

"Sunny Webster, USO." Stretching out her hand to be shook, they both looked at it, covered with doggie slime and thought better of it. Sunny colored slightly, and began looking for a place to wipe it off. She had three choices - her skirts, the dirt floor or the dog. "Nice doggie. Where are you from?"

"California. You?"

"Whoo. What are you doing here?" Meeting his eyes, he only looked at her blankly, then put a finger to his lips. His eyes sparkled, though, as he did it.

"Oh." Then Sunny looked at me and I only shrugged and looked at the Captain. He only looked back with that kind of stare that told me I could ask all night - I wouldn't get any kind of answer. He looked so young - his hair cut so short, it stood up in a brush, the face soft and uncreased. This one wasn't far from the nineteen years old I remembered soldiers being - if he was twenty-five, I'd ask for beauty secrets. Right now, I could see he was at a loss. He had guests - friendlies - but still, unexpected. And his troops had picked up his tension, staying quiet and still in the shadows and doorways. They had a sameness to them...their silence and suspicion...expressions... looking closer, I saw something else. They also could be related to each other - rather closely.

They all had the same coloring - mousy hair, albeit cut short for most, some had let it grow longer. Those that had, had a headful of curls. Light gray or green eyes. Just like the people that had run up to the tailgate in the towns on the way to Basel. Swiss. They were American Swiss. All of them, I'd bet the accordion on it.

"A potato shed, nine guys - make that twelve - and a dog." Looking Ken in the eye, I fought the smirk off my face. Sam didn't have to - matter of fact, he was chuckling as he walked through the two of us to get a better look at the dog. "Captain, somehow, that doesn't spell 'secret weapon' to me."

"Who said we were here to fight?" he answered, turned and joined his men. Lagging behind, I kept him between me and the enormous furball being spoiled by Sunny, Susie and eyed with distrust by Shelby. Sam had no compunctions, however.

Squatting down in front of the dog, next to Sunny, I watched him engage the dog's attention and to my surprise, the dog didn't freak out. Trust dogs to like Sam, I guess.

"Ohhh, good dog! What a nice fellow..." Sunny continued to scratch Barry behind the ears as Sam gave him a good once over. "Come on, get him to open his mouth a little..." Yawning in his face, the dog obligingly followed suit, exposing a mouthful of yellow teeth. "Oh, you're an old fellow, you are...sich eine brav hunde...." The ears perked up noticeably at the German words. "So you're native. Hmmm. Al, we need to talk."

You bet. Find the mens room. Great. "Uh, Captain....?"

###

The request for the latrine's location was met with a groan and then a chuckle. It was outside, of course. But, when a man has to go...he can be very convincing.

I insisted on some privacy. The sentry might have to keep me in sight, but I could tinkle by myself, thank you. So, with our backs to the sentry, I pretended to write my name in the snow while Sam and I compared notes.

"What are a bunch of Americans doing in Switzerland? Visiting home, it looks like." Looking sideways at Sam, I caught the glint out of the corner of his eye. "What? Ziggy finally cough up something?"

"Yeah, they're American. First-generation born in the United States. I checked out the Captain and a few of the guys wearing their names on the tags of their shirts -- and here is where it comes together, my friend. They're Jewish."

Swiss Jews from America in a potato shed with an old St. Bernard. "I don't get it."

Sam only smiled. But the smile was one that reached his eyes and set them dancing. "Al...if there was one thing I could count on in a leap, it was that I always had the things I needed to set things on the right track - all I had to do was find them."

Zippering my trousers, I ticked the items off on my hands. "Twelve guys - thirteen if you count me - three women who really ought to be getting their beauty sleep right now - and a dog the size of Cleveland sitting on their duffs in an unheated hole in the ground."

Matching my gestures movement for movement, Sam continued to tick off

fingers. "A tunnel being dug, the dog's name is Barry and you're missing a POW coming from Germany!" And he continued to grin at me, eyebrows raised as he spread his arms wide. "C'mon Al, it's perfect!"

I waited a moment, hoping it would all come together. It didn't. "Naaah!" I vigorously shook my head at him. "What's so perfect about it?"

"You don't get it."

"I SAID that."

Face falling, Sam shuffled his feet, scowled and checked off the points on his fingers again. "One, you are looking for a wounded POW - chances are, he's leaving a blood trail - "

"Frozen blood trail. Hurry up Sam, I'm freezin' my onions off out here."

"Two, you have a bunker full of Jewish Americans of Swiss ancestry with a St. Bernard named after one of the most celebrated rescue dogs in history --"

"You think a name makes that ancient pile of fuzz a lifesaver?"

"What other reason would someone want to share cramped quarters like those with such a large dog?"

"Central heating?"

"They're waiting for Jews to come across the border, Al! They're waiting in there, even building a tunnel...for someone to come across that border."

"Switzerland didn't grant asylum to every Jew who came into the country...did they?" Checking the sentry, I saw that he was no longer interested in me. He was looking north again -- towards the border. "Besides, Rolf wouldn't let -- oh, ho! Yes, he would! He would, wouldn't he, Sam?"

"Keep the Swiss army from throwing them back, and then let the American contingent claim them, get them to the American embassy and bing! On their way to safety." Sam stood there and grinned at me in the faint light reflected off the snow. "Nobody ever knew."

"But they missed Clyde, the first time."

"Yeah. I'll bet he's here, someone between Rolf and us." There was no light, nothing to see by. But still, we searched the terrain. Somewhere, someone was out

there...dying. Waiting for us.

Pulling out the comlink, Sam's face was bathed in the multicolored lights as he tapped in a request, gently rocking the link to and fro instead of knocking it. "Come on baby, come on...."

"Hey, Sam." Getting his attention, I pointed back towards the bunker. "Maybe they'll let me walk the dog, huh?"

"Works for me. Ziggy can't get a lock. I can't believe it."

"Hey Sam," I said, shaking out the tension in my shoulders as I walked back in the direction of the sentry. "Maybe Clyde isn't it after all."

"Hey, even Ziggy says it's the best chance...even though she hasn't a clue about anything else."

"World War II wasn't exactly the information age."

"Unless you were German."

"True."

Standing next to the sentry, I was just about to tap his shoulder when Sam saw it. Saw him. Good thing, too. Neither of us saw a thing.

A gasp, a soft whoosh of air and the sound of a rapid-fire comlink keying and then...

"Al! Over here!" Spinning in the sound of his voice, I nearly knocked the sentry over.

"What?" I yelled. Oops, a lot louder than I should have.

"Here! Here!" Sam, wearing dirty coveralls, waving his ballcap over his head. Then, in his impatience, he grabbed the penlight out of a pocket and turned it on and waved that in the other hand.

"Holy cow! Look - over there!" The sentry, about to make a midnight snack out of my hide, got the shock of his young life when this pimply-faced dweeb of a musician grabbed him by the shoulders and forced him to look over the fields to the east - when a lump of dirt was moving. Moving ever so weakly. "What's that?"

He glared at me for a moment, then to his credit, he looked. Looked hard.

"Probably a cute little bunny rabbit." he hissed. "A life-threatening bunny rabbit."

"You're not out here to catch dinner." I growled back at him. "I didn't see no rabbit...I saw a hand. I'm gonna go look."

He made a decent grab, but I've had a lot of experience ducking reaching hands. Running toward Sam, I heard him cuss and then run for the door of the bunker. A shout went up inside and before long, I heard the door slam again and more footsteps following me.

Please God, let them bring the dog...Sam was farther away than I thought, but he was smiling -- this was it. I kept running towards him, through the plowed fields, clotted with lumps of grassy sod and ice, slick with snow. It felt like slow motion - it felt like forever. I tripped and nearly fell I don't know how many times. But I ran, towards Sam standing in the field over a dirt-colored bundle in the field waving a cap and a penlight in the dark. Use the comlink, Sam...I kept thinking...use the comlink!

Then that old dog passed me up on the left and I tripped and measured my length out in the dirt.

Spitting gravel, I was nearly thrown down again as the entire squad followed the dog to where he was dancing around Sam and his prize, as much as his old limbs would let him. He was quiet though, wagging his tail like a banner, softly "wuffing" over and over.

Soft, gentle hands slid under my arms to help me up. Susie on one side, Sunny on the other. Standing, I faced Shelby. She only shook her head, that beautiful face frowning at me. "C'mon, let's see what the dog found." she said, flicking dirt from my shoulders, readjusting my muffler.

Looking up at the group surrounding Sam's prize, Sam looked up at me and gave me the thumbs up signal. But he was watching the activity going on at his feet, and his face was falling.

"Are we too late?" Taking a hand in each of my own, I led the girls to the site.