

THE EXISTENCE PARIDGM
(a collection of short stories)

Part 2 – The Artificial Man

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1 – Day 1

The two men escorting Sam wore dark conservative suits, highly polished black shoes and mirrored sunglasses. They were overly polite to an extreme, waiting at every doorway and motioning for Sam to enter before them. Then, with a slight nod of the head, dark suit guy number one would turn and follow, trailed mechanically by dark suit guy number two.

Sam was desperately trying to figure out how this whole thing had happened so quickly. He couldn't seem to figure out if he was actually *in custody* or really just *a guest* as they had indicated. They had never said that he was under arrest or anything like that. It was more like, "Would you please come with us, sir? We have a car waiting."

Normally that sounds like the kind of scene you'd just say "Are you kidding? Hell no!" to and then just slam the door, but this was all too weird. First of all they had shown him their ID badges as soon as he'd opened the door and explained that they were from the National Security Counsel. Wow. Then they had presented him with a short monologue about "a serious matter of National Security" and something about how "your help was needed in a most urgent way."

They had never been rude or forceful. The conversation was extremely polite and they were *asking* him to come with them—not telling him. For some reason that was eluding him right now, it had all sounded pretty believable at the time. Maybe it was just the surrealistic nature of the whole thing that had kept him off balance enough not to ask too many questions. The whole thing had just swept him off his feet. It had all happened so

quickly, as if there'd been a fire in the house they all had to rush out before it burned to the ground leaving their charred corpses in the ash and rubble.

During the drive to the airport and the subsequent flight, he hadn't gotten the impression that he was *in trouble* in any way. He hadn't felt like he was being hauled off to prison for committing some subversive communist act. Although, he couldn't actually remember ever committing a subversive communist act and probably wouldn't even recognize one if it jumped up and bit him on the ass.

The short flight from LAX had taken them to Las Vegas. They'd been met at the airport by another car and two more of the nondescript men in suites. They had a huge GMC Suburban waiting for them and they all rode together, the seventy miles or so up I-15 to a little town just shy of the Arizona border. Mesquite, Nevada, Population 1871 was what the sign had said. The town had two casinos and a couple of gas stations and they'd stopped there just long enough to grab a sandwich and a Coke.

And then he was walking down the corridors of some government facility out in the desert of Nevada, escorted by two men straight out of 'Men In Black'. How weird was that?

It's just that, now that he'd had some time to think about it, Sam was wondering if he'd done the right thing. He still didn't have any idea why he was there—aside from the *National Security* thing they'd talked about earlier in the day. But, why had he gone with them? They really had been both persuasive and very insistent, maybe to the point of scaring him a little bit. Surely to the point of keeping him from clearly thinking through and analyzing his options.

“I’m sorry, I can’t go. I have a dental appointment this afternoon,” might’ve worked okay. At least it would’ve been something other than just saying ‘okay’ like an idiot.

And now that he thought about it, their visit did seem just a bit too conveniently timed. He’d just finished a job that’d had him on location in Canada for the last two months and his next scheduled shoot wasn’t for another month or so. If he’d been working, on anything, there’d have been no way that he could’ve just dropped it and come with them on the spur of the moment like that. Now he was starting to wonder if they had known that all along.

And somehow Sam got the uneasy feeling that they already knew that he didn’t have a dental appointment. Somehow they knew that he was in between jobs and that there *wasn’t* anything keeping him from going with them. It might have just been his overly active imagination or it might’ve been the fact that his job in the movies kept him deeply rooted in fantasy, but Sam felt like they knew he was single and they knew what he did for a living. He thought that they probably even knew how much money he had in his checking account. That was a creepy feeling.

Hindsight’s really a wonderful thing, but there seemed like so many questions that he should’ve asked before just throwing a few clothes in a bag and grabbing a toothbrush. There were hundreds of questions popping into his head now, but the dark suit guys had been nearly mute since they’d landed in Las Vegas.

“All your questions will be answered in time, sir,” was one of the reoccurring non-answers that kept coming out. And the “We’re not at liberty to discuss that, sir,” seemed to be another phrase that had been burned into their skulls through some kind of operant

conditioning. Probably at the same training camp where they learned about dark scary fashion trends. Same place they learned how to kill with common household objects like pencils and paperclips.

Sandwiched between them on the plane, Sam had gotten the definite impression that the zombie twins were capable of being far less polite than they had been so far. There was an unspoken tension like you'd expect when standing in front of two highly trained pit bulls on a tight chain. On the outside, their appearance may be docile and even cuddly, but you know that the one thing that separated their tearing incisors from your throat was the absence of the magic word. That one word that had been trained into them since they were puppies. The word that meant "do your worst and be quick about it."

But now it was too late. It was too late to ask all the questions that should've been asked. He was there now and there wasn't much he could do about it.

He thought about asking to go to the bathroom and then sneaking out the window. Yea, right. Only to be found dead in the desert a week later—eyeballs plucked from his head by rabid vultures. Or worse yet, torn and gutted atop the endless spirals of razor wire on the ten-foot high, probably electrified fence surrounding the complex.

Sure, you could probably get one of the hundred or so armed military personnel to help you down. Or Sam thought that he could just get sick and tell them he had to go home. He was, in fact, feeling a little queasy at the moment.

The soles of the men's shoes echoed throughout the halls as they rhythmically struck the highly polished tile floor. The two men walked as if they were on some kind of a mission—which apparently they must've been. At the end of the corridor the two men

turned in unison to face a gray metal door, keeping their guest flanked snugly between them.

Sam was finding it hard to believe that just six hours ago, he was at home in Orange County. Six short hours that now seemed to be an impassable crevasse of time separating his real life from this fairy-tale scene that was unfolding in front of him.

The men stood for a moment, looking at the large gray door in front of them. Then suit guy number one pulled a small plastic card from inside his front shirt pocket and swiped it through a slit in a security access panel along the right side of the door. A small LED turned from red to green, the box beeped twice and then suit guy number one held his thumb up to the smoked glass front of the device. The green light went out and then suit guy number two repeated the carefully choreographed procedure exactly.

There was a metallic *thunk* and the door popped open a couple of inches. Suit guy number two pushed the door inward and extended his hand slightly, indicating his request for Sam to step through the open doorway.

Sam felt weak and confused. I mean he worked on films for God's sake. And that's just what this whole scene felt like to him. It seemed more like something from one of the movies he'd worked on than anything that could possibly happen in real life.

"Have a seat, sir. Mr. Stewart will be with you in a moment." And with that request, the two men vanished out the door they'd just come in, leaving Sam alone for the first time in several hours.

The room looked something like a small lobby or waiting room of some kind. It had to institutional looking love seats sitting across from each other with a small glass coffee table between them. There were several magazines neatly spread across the surface of the table. One from the NRA and one about handguns lay next to a People magazine. Sam didn't feel comfortable enough to touch any of them or even look in their direction for too long. The walls were mostly bare and everything seemed to be painted the same shade of industrial gray. At the opposite end of the room was another door—this one without the conspicuous security device hanging by its side.

The suit man had sounded so polite when he had asked Sam to wait there that he'd felt like he was being seated in a four star restaurant, not some strange gray holding area. And as quickly as they had entered, they had gone and left Sam in the deep pulsating silence of the strange room. Waiting for somebody. Waiting for this Mr. Stewart to make sense of this whole eerie situation. Waiting.

Sam studied the poor fluorescent lighting in the room and how it cast shadows across the floor next to the ugly chairs. He thought about how creepy this room would be in a movie. He'd never done lighting, but when you work in the industry for any length of time, you just pick things up. Sam could talk his way through almost any technical movie conversation from lighting to sound to makeup, with at least a modicum of intelligence.

The last film he'd worked on had been an action adventure that had done well at the box office. Doing well at the box office was important in his business because it gave you exposure. And exposure translated directly into dollars. If you'd worked on a film that was hot at the box office then you were, by default, hot too. And hot meant more work

and better pay. The last film had been his second home run in a little less than two years and it had propelled him into one of the top slots in the special effects biz.

And that was a very good thing as far as Sam was concerned. Good because everyone had said that he was crazy when he made the decision to leave DigiWorks. After all, Digi was the special effects house that had given him his start in the business and put him on the map. They were very visible in the industry and that gave Sam an opportunity to really strut his stuff.

He'd started at Digi right out of college and within five years, had gained enough of a reputation in the industry to make striking out on his own a reality. And he'd gained that reputation because he was good. He was very good.

Sam built animatronics and he did it better than anyone else around. He built heads that were more expressive than most human beings and he built fully articulating hands capable of threading a needle or playing the piano. He'd come up with innovative AI software systems and voice-actuated control for his creations.

But Sam's forte, the thing that he was really known for, was the skin. He'd developed special polymer makeup that looked more like real skin than real skin and he'd been responsible for inventing hair follicle insertion equipment that had been adopted for use by the medical community. Even though his devices worked flawlessly and did things that others could not, it was the lifelike nature of the skin that allured those in the motion picture business to Sam's work. After all, as Sam was often quoted, "In the business of make believe, the look is always the most important thing."

So, with the exposure from two Hollywood hits under his belt, Sam could just about write his own ticket. As an independent, he was paid more than any other single effects contractor. So much so, that he kept his friends Rex and Sally on permanent retainer.

When he had first left Digi and went out on his own, they'd worked with him for almost nothing on that first film. Well, they did work for nothing. But they were young and ambitious and just loved being around the movies and loved working with their hero, Sam Haywood. Even though they were both more intelligent than he was, they both looked up to him like he was some kind of a God. Another offshoot of that high exposure at the box office.

So after the success of that film, Sam had the luxury of being able to write them into the budget for the next film. In fact, if his next film or two did as well, Sam was planning on officially starting his own special effects house. And Sally and Rolo—Rex never did fit him so they just shortened his last name—were going to be his first two employees.

He'd met Rolo in college in a C++ programming class. Sam was a senior and Rolo, a freshman. He was a little nerdy but Sam quickly found out that he was probably the best software engineer he'd ever come across. Sam was okay. He could usually hack out most anything that he needed to, but Rolo was a monster.

If Sam wrote the code for a robotic hand to play the piano then Rolo, a musician himself, would write the code to give the performance the personality of Bach, Beethoven or even Stephan Foster if that's what you wanted. He'd spend a hundred hours on tiny details that most people would never even notice. The velocity on the down stroke and the angle of the wrists during certain passages were all considered key nuances to

Rolo and an integral part of the final product. In Sam's eyes, Rolo possessed a true genius for his craft.

And he never seemed to sleep. Ever. At least that Sam could make out. He figured that he must've caught a couple winks whenever he wasn't looking, but in the last nine years, he'd never caught him once. Sometimes, he'd find Rolo just sitting there staring, kind of zoned out, but with his eyes wide open. He wondered if he was sleeping then.

Sally on the other hand was Sam's scientific crutch. She was awesome at any kind of math and she had a double Masters in Mechanical Engineering and Chemistry. Rolo had dated her once for about a week before they came to the mutual conclusion that they were both too analytical to be together. You need to find people that you have something in common with but there comes a point where too much alike just doesn't work. And those two were definitely there. Besides, as Sally put it, Rolo's strange ability to do without sleep had made their intense one week affair seem like a lot longer.

It was funny, but usually when people had had that kind of physical involvement with each other, it was hard for them to interact normally out in the real world. There was always that *thing* between them. But with Sally and Rolo it was different. They acted as if they'd always worked together. Like they were brother and sister or something like that.

Sally had started out as a Music Major but after her first year, had switched to Mathematics. Halfway through that year, she switched again, to Mechanical Engineering. She still loved singing and continued to play the guitar and piano. But, as she found progressing through her education, her true love was calculating. Calculating and figuring. If Sam told her that he needed a way for two plus two to equal five, then she'd

work out a perfectly logical hypothesis on why such a phenomena was plausible and then set out at developing an equation to explain the condition of apparent un-equality.

Sam's dream was to not only employ them both, but to ensure that they were wealthy and successful beyond their dreams. He cared for them deeply and felt like they brought out the best in him. They were a good team and they inspired each other. He was good at a lot of things but where the rubber met the road, it was Sally and Rolo that made his ideas work.

And it was Sam that seemed to bring out the best in both of them. Without Sam, they were both really smart and really *unfocused*. Sam figured it was that way with most intellectually superior people. Probably just too much logical thought going on all the time to keep the rest of the world in focus. They always needed a problem or a puzzle to solve—it was their Ritalin. But it was Sam that brought order and focus to their existence. It was Sam's passion that spurred them on and motivated them. Under Sam's guidance, they all could participate in the creation of things that were beyond the scope of their individual ability to understand. They had synergy. When Sam was around, all they wanted to do was make him proud of them and to make him look good for the people he worked for.

In a way, Sam was more like their agent than their manager. Neither Rolo nor Sally had any kind of aptitude for business. Too much problem solving going on to realize that you've got no customers. Sam had to balance Rolo's checkbook. And Sally was about as interested in business as she was in cooking.

So Sam did the business. Lined up the work and dealt with the money, the contracts, the producers and the schedules. Sam kept his eye on the big picture and coordinated everything with ease and a grace that was almost ballet like.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Haywood.”

Sam was staring down at the 9mm pistol on the front of one of the magazines and hadn't noticed the elderly gentleman standing in the doorway. The man looked like he was about sixty and was holding a folder underneath his arm. He reminded Sam of his father, but he was a lot nicer dressed. He wore a white dress shirt with a conservative red power tie. Black suspenders held up the dark blue dress slacks and Sam was sure that there was a matching jacket hanging around someplace in the other room.

“I'm terribly sorry for the way we were forced to handle this affair, but I hope you won't think too unkindly of us after I tell you the whole story.”

The man's voice was soothing and hypnotic and Sam felt like he should respond in some way. He just couldn't think of anything appropriate to say.

“Do you need anything, Mr. Haywood? Something to drink? Coffee? A Coke?”

“No, sir. They fed us on the plane.” Sam thought for a minute then added, “The food's pretty good in first class.”

“Yes, I'm sure of it,” he spoke softly and turned slightly sideways to reveal the office behind the mysterious inner door.

It was warmly lit, devoid of the harsh fluorescent cast in the outer lobby. Inside, Sam could see the outline of a large mahogany desk with a tall dark wooden bookcase behind

it. Pictures and mismatched books were situated on the shelves in between the occasional sculptured piece or odd knickknack.

“Please,” the man turned as he spoke and entered the office.

Sam followed almost without conscious thought. As if a levitation system in the floor was moving him along an invisible curtain of air.

The man stepped around the back of the desk and turned the black leather swivel chair slightly toward him. Then he slid into it and leaned back all in a single, fluid motion.

“Please, have a seat Mr. Haywood.” The man motioned to one of the two stuffed chairs directly in front of his desk. “I’d like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank you for coming out like this. You’ve been most gracious. You certainly could’ve refused our request.”

“Oh, now you tell me,” Sam thought as he sat down in the chair the man had just pointed to.

“But I think you’ll find it more than worth your while to hear me out.” The man paused briefly to monitor Sam’s reaction then added, “And if after hearing me out, you’re simply not interested in what I’ve got to offer then we’ve already got your first class seat booked on the next flight back to LA. Deal?”

Sam was feeling funnier by the minute. First he felt kind of like he’d been kidnapped and now he was feeling like he was some kind of visiting dignitary. Royalty or something along those lines. All he could do was nod his head in dumb submission.

“Let me begin by saying that I’ve followed your work for quite some time now.” The man set down the folder he’d been holding, opened it and began to leaf through the pages.

Sam could just make out some of the production stills from the films he’s been involved with. He could also see what looked like line drawings and schematics of some of his work.

“The last film, ‘Summer Of Pain’, was quite spectacular. I don’t get out to the theater that often but this was certainly worth the effort.”

“Thank you...” Sam let his words just kind of trail off without any real ending.

“Oh, I’m dreadfully sorry. Where are my manners?”

The man stood and extended his hand and then introduced himself as Lieutenant Commander John Stewart, retired. Sam had thought that he detected a twinge of a British accent there but now, with the pronunciation of Lieutenant as *Left-tenant*, there was no doubt.

“Nice to meet you, sir.” Sam couldn’t figure out if it was really nice to meet him or not but he was getting caught up in the whole air of politeness thing that seemed to be happening.

“Very good then.” The man plopped back into his chair and returned his attention to the folder. “You’ve done some very impressive work with humanoid robotics, Mr. Haywood. Very impressive, indeed.”

“Thank you, sir...”

“Please, call me John.”

“Sure, John. How ‘bout you call me Sam then instead of Mr. Haywood? Mr. Haywood’s my dad’s name.”

“Fair enough, Sam.” The man smiled and took one more look down at the file folder before continuing, “It’s apparent to me that you are one of the eminent authorities in your field.”

“I guess I’m alright at what I do.”

“Come now, Mr. Haywood. Sam. I would go so far as to say that in your specific field of expertise, you have no equals.”

“Well, there’s Roger over at ILM. I mean I’ve always admired the stuff he’s done with synthetic polymers.”

“No, no, Mr. Haywood. You misunderstand me. I’m not talking about the *film* industry. I’m talking about the *science* of applied humanoid robotics.”

That dreamy feeling was starting to creep back over him again. Who was this strange man and what the heck was he going on about? And why did he insist on continuing to call him *Mr. Haywood*?

“Let me explain,” the man said, reacting specifically to the confusion he saw in Sam’s eyes. “Since 1989, I’ve been in charge of the Advanced Humanoid Robotics program here at this NSC facility. During that time, we’ve identified several key areas that have become the foundation of our research model.”

Sam felt like he was going to wake up any minute and see Sally standing over him with a hot cup of cuppechinoe.

“We’ve assembled one of the finest research teams in the world with nearly a hundred scientists and support personnel in all. The best minds from around the world.” John Stewart paused to allow Sam to catch up. “All of them working in harmony. All of them working in step with one another in order to achieve our ultimate goal. The goal of creating a self-sustaining humanoid robot.”

Sam’s feeling of dreaminess was changing into a prickly kind of nervous sensation. It started at the base of his neck and was now working its way down the back of his spine in short rhythmic pulses. So why was this guy telling him all this stuff?

“We’re completely funded for the remainder of this administration. I could give you the number but it probably wouldn’t mean much to you. Suffice it to say that our budget on a weekly basis is more than the entire budget for,” Mr. Stewart glanced down at the folder, “Summer Of Pain.”

“I’d like you to join our team, Mr. Haywood. To come on board and help us achieve our goals. I understand that you are uniquely positioned within your field right now and am prepared to compensate you accordingly for that sacrifice.”

Sam realized that his mouth was hanging open, but he couldn’t figure out how to get it closed. Apparently, the muscles that controlled that particular action had just quit working.

The man drew a deep breath and looked back down at the open folder on the desk in front of him and shuffled some of the papers to the top.

“I know that you’re interested in starting your own company someday.”

Sam nodded, still trying to figure out how to get his mouth shut.

“I’d like to help you achieve that goal, by offering you a two year contract at five hundred thousand dollars a year. One million dollars in exchange for two years of your life, Mr. Haywood. Is that something that would interest you?”

As the man spoke, he lifted what appeared to Sam to be a contract and slid it across the desk toward him.

Sam’s head was spinning. He couldn’t think. Did he just say one million dollars? To do what? Work on robots? Something he did for free in his spare time? His mouth was still open and now his head was bobbing gently up and down like a marker buoy directing ships safely into the harbor.

“I have to tell that there is a catch, though.” John Stewart closed the folder and leaned back into the leather chair making it creak and groan. “For its money, Uncle Sam is going to ask that you abandon your current life. Completely. Let it vanish without a trace. This is a National Security Counsel project and absolutely no one can know what’s going on here. And I’ve found that the United States Government takes an extremely dim view, of what I would call, not playing by their rules.”

For almost a minute, the two men sat and quietly looked at each other. Sam felt as though he needed to say something but he still couldn't get his mouth to move under conscious control.

"I realize this is a big step for you and am prepared to give you twenty four hours to think about it. Mull it over and see what churns up." The man smiled warmly at Sam and rocked back and forth almost imperceptibly in his big black chair.

"We'll put you up here for the night and in the morning you can ask questions if you wish. I'm sure you'll have absolutely a million of them after you've had time to let this sink in a bit."

Again, all Sam could do was nod his head a little to indicate that he was still listening.

"And if you decide not to accept the offer...well, I'm going to ask that you forget we ever had this conversation and continue your life as if none of this ever took place. How does that sound, Mr. Haywood?"

"I don't know, Mr. Stewart." Sam finally got the muscles in his mouth to cooperate with him. "This is a lot to digest all at once. I mean...a million dollars...leave my life behind. Maybe these are things that happen to you a lot, but this really is a stretch for me. I don't know exactly what to say."

"I understand. Tell you what Mr. Haywood, if this really isn't something you'd want to pursue, then we've got a little less than two hours before the next flight back to LAX. Let me take you on a quick little tour of some of the—*less classified*—areas of the facility. Then if you're still not interested, as I previously stated, I'll ask that you speak to

no one about what's gone on here tonight and return to your life as if nothing ever happened. Fair enough?"

Although still extremely polite, Sam caught just a hint of that seriousness that had pervaded the voices of the dark suit guys earlier. That underlying tone that always seemed to border on a threat without actually coming out and saying it. He could picture the pit bulls sitting patiently, chain taut, waiting patiently for that magic word to call them into action.

"I guess there's no harm in looking around."

"Good." The man stood with authority, smiled broadly and motioned toward the door. "Let's have a little look around the joint."

His attempt at colloquial humor was lost on Sam as he passed through the doorway back into the brightly lit hallway.

2 – Day 1, Part II

They had taken an elevator down several floors and then some stairs and some more hallways. Sam was excited and scared and just a little pissed off. He'd been kidnapped by his own government. And now they were trying to coerce him into working for them. Or at least that's what it was feeling like. It didn't take a big jump of the imagination to figure out that this whole scheme was illegal. You can't just kidnap an American citizen and then force them to work for you. Sam knew his rights. Did they just think they could wave a million dollars in front of him and he'd drop everything and come running.

But they were sneaky, too. They'd never pulled a gun or ordered him to get into the car. They hadn't threatened him or verbally abused him in anyway. From where Sam stood, they had maintained complete deniability and if he just—oh, say, turned up missing—well who'd be any the wiser. After all, no one even knew he was there. Not Sally or Rolo or anyone.

After a short walk down a brightly lit corridor, John Stewart swiped a card and pressed his thumb on the front of the security device to open the door in front of him.

“This is probably the least classified of the labs we're currently running.”

They walked through a metal door and into a large room full of tables and computers and funny electrical stuff. But it was what was being assembled on these tables that stopped Sam in his tracks. He was stunned just as surely as if he'd been whacked in the head with a large chunk of wood.

“Oh my God,” was all he was able to eke out as he stood, stuck to the floor and continued looking around.

“I will remind you that all this is still classified, though. And I would ask again, that anything that you see in this room stays in this room. Do you understand me, Mr. Haywood?”

Again with the borderline threat thing. Except this time, it didn't seem so borderline. In fact, Sam had the distinct impression that it had turned into almost outright hostility. But he was now totally immersed in the room and the wonders that it had to offer. The

thought of a passing threat was dwarfed by the beauty of this mysterious new world. Sam wandered around like a little kid in a very big toy store.

“Yes, sir. Not to leave this room,” Sam mumbled and glanced quickly back at the man with a look that asked “Can I touch this?”

“Be my guest,” the man said softly, indicating his understanding of the unspoken question.

Sam Haywood was in the middle of the facility’s Articulated Hand Lab. The tables that surrounded him were covered with mechanical human hands in varying stages of development. Some were completely unsheathed, exposing some of the most intricate and complicated mechanisms that Sam had ever seen. Others were completely covered in lifelike human skin. Sam reached his hand toward one of these finished hands and again looked back at Mr. Stewart. Again, the elderly gentleman nodded his head, indicating that it was okay for Sam to *touch* that object too.

Sam picked up the hand, handling it as if it were made out of the most delicate leaded crystal on earth. Carefully he held it up to his face and squinted as he inspected its surface. He could see where they’d attempted to emulate hair follicles and even the faint appearance of painted on blood vessels. But it wasn’t the skin that was fascinating Sam. It was the sheer detail and delicacy of the whole thing. For several minutes, Sam turned the manmade artificial device in the light and studied it from every conceivable angle.

“But, how did you solve the problem of...”

“That’s the R5 unit, our latest. You have a good eye for detail, Mr. Haywood,” the man’s careful dodge of the impending question went unnoticed by Sam.

“But...”

“Please, Mr. Haywood,” again the man cut him off in mid-sentence and redirected, “feel free to look around. But, as you can understand, I’m not prepared to answer any questions at this point in time.”

The words he used were “this point in time,” but Sam could already hear the negotiation beginning. The guy was really saying, “Until we have your commitment, Mr. Haywood.”

Sam had been involved in the business world just long enough to know that the value of anything and everything was set by negotiation. They push, you pull. Then you both settle on something in the middle somewhere. It was old fashioned horse trading.

Sam put the mechanical hand down just as gently as he’d picked it up then he turned his attention to his host.

“You’ve got several million dollars invested in this room.”

The man smiled and gave Sam a look that said “As far as you know, Mr. Haywood. As far as you know.”

“It’s more, isn’t it?” Sam could read the smug response all over his host’s face. “And you said there’s other labs, too?”

“Thirty-five in all. There’s one for legs. One devoted to feet. Then there’s skin, hair, eyes...four of the labs are devoted to *verbal negotiation* and AI.”

Sam started doing a quick little tally sheet in his head. Shit, these people had some serious money. And then he remembered what Mr. Stewart had said earlier about them spending in a week what the entire budget was for ‘The Summer Of Pain’. It was no secret what they spent on that film and as Hollywood goes, it wasn’t one of the biggest, but it was pretty well funded. At least in a time when a *cheap* movie came in at ten-million bucks.

Sam turned back to the table and, again picked up the marvelous piece of science and technology. Again, he studied it carefully, looking it over from top to bottom. It was beyond anything that he’d ever thought was possible. And even if he’d been able to conceive of something like this, there was absolutely no way that he’d ever have been able to build it. The technology just didn’t exist—or the expertise to manipulate it. For the first time, Sam was starting to feel like his feet were on the ground.

“I had no idea this kind of technology existed.” Sam babbled in amazement as he stared up into the inner workings of the hand.

“His name’s Gustav and he’s from Denmark, oddly enough. His father was a cruise ship architect. Very successful until the accident.”

Now Sam’s head was spinning again. He had a thousand questions and he knew that Mr. Stewart, if that was in fact his real name, wasn’t about to crack loose with any of them. Bastard.

There were so many connections coming from the wrist. How could it ever be attached...or powered...or controlled? Sam looked around for anything that looked like a control device but it looked like the only devices in this room were hands and fingers.

He wanted desperately to formulate just a few well thought out questions. Skim just enough information...but there were too many of them. They were pouring through him like a raging torrent. His head was reeling with plans and questions and fantasies...

“How many people...on the project?”

“About a hundred and ninety-five. Give or take.”

Sam leaned against the table behind him, almost dropping the precious device in the process.

“Wow.”

What was in the other labs? How far had they gotten? How many scientists were working on this? How far had they gotten at getting one to walk on its own? What kind of AI had they developed? How many software engineers did they have? How much money was the government throwing at this project?

“Why the NSC?” Sam turned to face Mr. Stewart. “And why me?”

“I think it’s quite obvious how something like this could be used in National Security. Especially with the rise in global terrorism. As a courier. As a drop. As an almost indestructible bodyguard. We’d never have to question their loyalty or wonder if they’d gone over to the other side. Obviously we can’t replace humans in real thinking,

speaking, scenarios, but there's hundreds of places where we could take advantage of a 'smart' dummy. Its combat potential is open ended."

"And me?"

"It's the skin, Mr. Haywood. I've seen you're work on the big screen and it looks amazing. Frankly, my guys have come up with nothing but crap in comparison."

Sam looked down at the artificial hand that he was still cradling in his palm. It was exquisite in every detail—except for the covering. Mr. Stewart was right, this was the weak link.

"You can make anything look good in the movies."

"Trust me on this one, Mr. Haywood. I know exactly what you're capable of."

Sam wasn't really sure if that statement made him feel better or gave him the creeps, but he could see why they needed him. And he was starting to feel more comfortable. Feel more as if he was in his own environment.

Sam looked around the room again. It was empty except for himself and Mr. Stewart.

"You said a million bucks?"

"For an exclusive two year contract...no outside contact. No communication with anyone. Your old life vanishes without a trace. It's a big commitment."

Sam knew that if he was offering one million he was probably prepared to go higher. Maybe as high as two million. He knew that that kind of money would go along way toward setting himself up with his own business. And two years wasn't that long. Hell,

he'd wasted four years in college and that seemed to blow by like nobody's business. If he could just negotiate this thing properly, he'd be set.

All he had to do was horse trade. You pull, I push. Offer and counter offer. Ask for something higher and settle for less than that—which will be more than what they originally offered anyway.

“Okay, I'll do it.” As the words left his mouth, Sam felt like a teenager having his first sexual experience.

“Fine, Mr. Haywood. If you'll accompany me back to my office, we can finalize the paperwork.”

3 – The Foot Guy (Week 3)

It had been three weeks since Sam had been *persuaded* to join the Advanced Humanoid Robotics project at the National Security Counsel and he was still as excited as the first day. Everything had happened so quickly that he hadn't, as of yet, had a chance to slow down and catch his breath.

The morning after his first conversation with Mr. Stewart, all of Sam's belongings had been relocated to an apartment on the roughly twenty acre grounds of the facility. It was amazing how that was done. It wasn't just all thrown into boxes and piled in the rooms. Everything was where it belonged. The clothes were hanging in the closets or folded neatly and placed in the drawers of the dresser, exactly the way they'd been back in Orange County. And in the same arrangement—underwear in the top drawer, jeans in the bottom. All the articles from his medicine cabinet and bathroom closet had been positioned accurately down to the exact shelf they had come from. It was truly an eerie

feeling to walk in and feel instantly at home. Almost like he'd lived there all his life. Like he innately knew just where everything was by instinct, without having to think about it.

Sam figured that was the plan, anyway. So he wouldn't get cold feet and change his mind. Not that he'd be able to after the battery of paperwork they had him sign. Man! He had no idea what you had to go through to come into the security fold and disappear from existence.

His biggest regret was not being able to get a hold of Rolo or Sally. He had assumed that he would at least be allowed to get a message to them, but that was not the case. Still, though, he held out the hope of somehow getting in touch with them. Maybe when things slowed down a little and he wasn't caught up in the whirlwind of activity on the project.

But now he was a part of the team. He was officially a Level-III, something or other. All it meant to Sam was that he had a blue ID badge and that would let him in (along with his thumb print) to most of the labs and certain areas of the complex. He really hadn't figured all of that out yet. A lot of it had to do with colored plastic squares hanging from the walls in the hallways. If there was one that matched your badge, generally you could go there.

On his third day, he'd accidentally walked into an area he didn't belong in and a couple of real scary looking guards with automatic weapons were nice enough to *help* him find where he was going. One thing he was finding out was that no one around there seemed to have a sense of humor, but they were all very polite.

But after three weeks, Sam could navigate pretty well through the maze of corridors and tunnels. Most of the time, though, all he really needed to know was where his lab was. Oh, and the cafeteria. But the lab was where he spent almost every waking moment of his day. He only went back to his apartment to sleep and brush his teeth after eating in the common area.

He referred to it as *his lab* because it was. Sam had been given his own lab—actually it was just a big empty room prior to his arrival—and his own budget. He also had access to the research team administrative staff as well as most of the other researchers. He was in charge of getting his lab set up the way he wanted, including requisitioning all the supplies and materials that he was going to need.

Once a week he filled out a detailed report on his progress and submitted it to Mr. Stewart. Every other Monday, Sam had his one-on-one with the lead scientist where he explained his written report and supporting material. He thought of the lead scientist as the Director and Mr. Stewart as the Producer. It was much easier to think of the whole thing as a movie project than a top secret project for the government. It just seemed more real that way.

And all the rest of his time he spent trying new formulations and colorings. He ate, slept and breathed his work. He was immersed in it like a wick in a candle. Surrounded by its comforting mass as he burned through it with his passion and drive.

“So you’re the skin guy.”

The tall man with the big sideburns was leaning against the side of the open doorway into Sam’s lab and looking around inquisitively. He had one of those funny accents that

you just can't quite put your finger on. It had almost a southern twang to it but it was from farther over—like maybe Louisiana or something. Anyway, it was obvious that he'd spent a lot of time elsewhere because there was only a hint of the accent left.

"Pardon me?" Sam, as usual was so buried in thought that he literally hadn't heard the question.

"The skin guy. You make the skin, right?" The stepped into the room and extended his hand to Sam. "Name's Childers. Doctor Raymond Childers."

"Sam. Sam Haywood."

"Nice to meet, ya." The man shook his hand vigorously and then, with an almost child-like delight, returned to studying the room.

"I knew a Roger Haywood at MIT. Any relation?"

"No, sir. Not that I'm aware of."

"Good thing." The man picked up a beaker full of a creamy white substance and twirled it between his fingers. "Never seen another human being drink that much Wild Turkey and live to tell about it. Used to wash it down with Corona. So how are you liken' it so far? Met everyone, yet?"

"Well, I've mostly been dealing with Horace."

"Ah, my man Horatio! Head of procurement. The *Expiditor*."

"And Mr. Stewart has been very nice."

The man set the beaker down and turned to look directly at Sam. “You’ve talked to John Stewart recently?”

Sam thought for just a second and then added, “Well, not since the first day...”

“Hhm. That’s what I thought.” The man returned to his exploration of the lab. “What about the other scientists?” Although he was facing directly away from Sam, the man paused and stared straight ahead as he waited for the answer.

“Well . . . actually you’re the first.”

“Uhm.

“I guess I’ve been kind of busy since I got here, but now that you mention it, it does seem kind of odd that no one else has even popped their head in.”

“And why do you think that someone with the skill and expertise to design the world’s most sophisticated human eye would want to talk to you?”

“Well...” Sam didn’t know if he should be put back with the question or if the guy was just pulling his leg.

“Or how about the guy that wrote the code for the most advanced artificial human intelligence on the planet? You think he’s dying to meet the skin guy?”

If Raymond Childers’ intention was to make Sam feel small and insignificant then he had most certainly accomplished his objective beautifully.

“Are you involved with the AI code?” It wasn’t much of a question but it was all that Sam could eke out.

The man spun around on one foot and locked his eyes onto those of the newbie.

“Feet.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Feet. I design feet. Podiametrics. Fully functional, capable of inertial balance, complete with a full set of toes. Feet. I was in prosthetics before this.”

Raymond Childers had come back up to where Sam was seated and stopped directly in front of him. “They won’t talk to me either. I was here a month before I got the nerve to go looking around.”

Sam couldn’t help but smile. It was all pretty clear now. He’d taken the place of the low man on the totem pole. The *newbie*. The one with the least importance in the overall scheme of things. And that was okay. Sometimes, just understanding some things made those things okay.

“I understand, Raymond Childers.” Sam stood from his stool, still smiling. “And do you have a need for some of the most human-like artificial skin on the face of the planet to cover your means by which the *stuck-in-one-place* AI is going to get out and see the world?”

Raymond Childers laughed out loud and knew immediately that he was going to get along just fine with this one.

4 – The Eye Lab (Week 5)

At week five, Sam had actually begun to meet some of the other scientists on the project. He was coming to see that there certainly was a pecking order and a political

structure in place. The AI guys were at the top of the heap. They commanded the most respect and had very little social interaction with the others. The foot-guy and the skin-guy, on the other hand, were on the bottom of the list and that had given Sam and Raymond an opportunity to bond in a way that was foreign to most of the other team members.

But, as with any patriarchal *good-ole-boy* networks, inroads could be made through the structure by simply exhibiting the proper respect and homage to those higher up the ladder. As long you knew your place and understood where you fell in the big picture, well...then you were okay.

And Sam had a pretty good feel for the way the game was played. In fact, it was funny how much it resembled what went on in Hollywood. Same thing: big guns and want-a-be's, newbies and freaks.

One of the not-so-newbies, bordering on big gun, was a man by the name of Jason Fitzgerald. Jason was over the synthetic eye project and had five people working for him. That was another measure of one's stature at *the project*; the size of one's staff. The lead AI guy had something like fifteen or twenty and the ear guy had three. Raymond Childers had a requisition in for a helper but it hadn't been approved yet. Sam just had Horace, who was really everyone's *go-to* guy. He was head of procurement and if you needed anything from paperclips to a quarter of a million dollar ruby laser, you'd go to Horace. Of course all purchases were approved by 'the big man', John Stewart himself.

"This stuff just amazes me." Sam was leaning on a kind of metal scaffolding and watching Jason Fitzgerald gently cradle one of his latest eyes into a hanging basket of tubes and wires.

Sam had originally approached Jason with an overly subservient; *I'm not worthy* kind of approach that had seemed to work well for getting to know just about any of the other scientists. Jason had responded, as expected, and in subsequent weeks had actual become something of a friend to Sam. He was roughly Sam's age—early thirties or so—but he acted much older, with a very businesslike air about him at all times.

“What we're doing today is testing for projected bandwidth propagation.” Jason spoke without taking his eyes from the small glassy shape between his fingers.

Sam did actual know that by saying ‘projected bandwidth propagation’, Jason was actually saying ‘how much signal can we get from here to there.’ But he often found it useful to act dumber than he was. People opened up to him easier that way.

Sam liked the game. It reminded him of his first year at DigiWorks. All the old-timers—the guys that had been there for over two years—were some of the biggest snobs he'd ever met in his life. He swore that he'd never end up like they had. And for a long time he didn't. But, in the end, it's kind of like the day Sam realized he *was* his father. It was the day he'd barked at some of his friend's kids playing on a jungle gym.

“You get down from there before you break your...”

Sam never got out the word ‘neck’ because it echoed in the back of his throat from about twenty years earlier. He wandered for just how many generations had that phrase been passed on and recycled.

So, too, was the cycle of life at DigiWorks. One day, without warning, it just sneaks up on you. One day, after you've spent nearly a hundred and fifty hours in front of a terminal, retouching a dog's upper lip so that he had just the right snarl for all of his three seconds of on screen time. Fourteen hours a day for the last week and a half for three

lousy seconds on film. Fourteen agonizing hours of dot by dot rendering and animation. Pixel by tiny pixel. Move, color, render, preview, mistake, re-do, render, preview. On and on until your butt was swollen and your eye's were so red that they looked like little cherry tomatoes stuck into your skull.

Then, as you sit unshaven and bathed in your own reeking body odor, previewing your three seconds of on air footage. "Snarl," (wow). Could anything be any more anticlimactic than this? You click the play button with the mouse cursor once again. Snarl. And all you can think about is a shower and a soft bed.

"Wohooo, that's cool, man. How'd you do that?"

The excitement and energy exuded by the newbie standing behind you is infuriating.

"How'd you do that?"

The question bounces through your head like a racket ball slamming against the back of each ripened cherry tomato looking eyeball. Your eyelids twitch as you flashback uncontrollably to each and every of the last one hundred and fifty hours. Your cheek tick's upward as you relive hour number twenty something when your boss said, "I'm sorry, Sam," as he sipped a cup of Jamocan Almond Coffee, "the director's changed his mind. He wants the snarl on the left side."

So you turn slowly to face the newbie, as if possessed by some deep dark malevolent evil; you turn and face the pimply faced young kid all bright eyed and bubbly.

"That's what I wanna do, man. But, bigger . . . like Jurassic Park," he says.

And then you snap. "Do you know how many friggen hours I've spent hunkered down in front of this God forsaken terminal for this stinking three seconds of footage? Do you have any goddamn idea what I've been through? Of course you don't."

Then, as you slowly rise from your chair, the old-timers (any one that's been there longer than you) smile. Not a big smile and they don't turn to look at what's happening. They keep working, but now with a smile and a sense of empathy toward their tenured colleague. You've come of age. You're one of them now.

So Sam understood the relationships inherent in any hierarchical social system. Time and position were to be respected and that simple act could take you far.

"Bandwidth prop-a-gation?" Sam tried not to sound too stupid. "That sounds complicated, Jason."

"Not really. We're simply going to be testing to see if we can achieve the signal flow that we've calculated."

"Yea, I know," Sam thought to himself and smiled.

As Jason finished connecting and carefully positioning the artificial eye, he turned his attention to the color television monitor to one side and flicked on several switches. The display popped on and Sam immediately recognized the image of himself leaning against the metal frame.

"Hey, it's the 7-Eleven cam."

Jason raised his eyebrow and shot Sam an extremely disapproving look.

"Oops," Sam thought and then tried to regroup. "I guess that would be a lot of sophisticated hardware to waste on a security camera, uh?"

Jason's eyebrow went back down and he returned his attention to the image on the screen. As Jason began typing into the keyboard next to the monitor, the image came in and out of focus.

"Is that some kind of auto focus mechanism?"

“No,” Jason’s tone was short and condescending, “the lens we’re using has an almost infinite depth of field. What I’m setting is the signal bandwidth or the amount of compression we place on that signal.”

“You mean compression like an MP3 file or something?”

“Actually, it’s very similar to the Mpeg Layer-3 encoding scheme.” Jason seemed surprised that Sam understood not only the terminology, but the content of what he was talking about. “And what you perceive as simply an out of focus problem is actually a phenomenon known as *compression blow*. It gets successively worse as I increase the compression ratio applied to the original signal.”

“So you’re trying to find a mid-point between the amount of data you have to deal with and the ability to clearly see and define objects.”

Jason stopped what he was doing and turned to face Sam. “I thought you were the skin guy.”

“Yea, well I know a little bit about a lot of different things. Kind of a jack of all master of none sort of thing.” Sam’s attention returned to the monitor screen. “So, that fuzzy halo around everything is caused by that *compression blow*?”

“Technically speaking, by compressing the signal to this degree, we’re actually removing part of the useable data stream. And in doing so, we end up with the digital artifacts that you refer to as ‘a fuzzy halo’.”

“Uhhh. Looks kind of like what you see around traffic lights late at night when you’re eyes are tired.”

Jason returned his attention to the work, adjusted one of several small dials and then typed a string of commands into the keyboard in front of him. Sam sat quietly watching the display, mesmerized by the fuzzy images coming from the tiny artificial eyeball.

5 – Integration

“Why so glum?” Sam had just walked into the foot lab to catch his friend Raymond sulking in front of stainless steel foot skeleton.

“Ahhh, we just had a four hour meeting with *integration*.”

Integration was a special team who was responsible for how all the parts of the project interfacing with all the other parts. In Raymond’s case, that would be the legs. Sam had been involved in the project now for a little over two months and in that time, Raymond had had three integration meetings. Three opportunities to find out that no one had a clue how things were going to inter-operate effectively together. Three opportunities for finger pointing and semi-polite name calling.

In Raymond’s case, the gist of the matter seemed to be the ankle. There wasn’t a department for that so it wasn’t expressly assigned to anyone. It was kind of a crossover area. A gray region of ambiguous definitions and responsibilities. And nobody was really anxious to jump in and take that responsibility. But there were other problems too. The control system information wasn’t exactly the same between the two systems and the number of control variables wasn’t constant. All in all, the two systems weren’t going to be able to communicate until something was changed.

Sam moved closer and could see Raymond sitting in front of a sketch pad with a couple dozen different drawings of ankles and feet. Sam new from experience, that it wasn’t as easy as bolting the foot to the bottom of the leg and announcing that you were good to go. The human ankle was in control of a dizzying array of forces that all have to

work together in concert to keep us from tumbling over every time we walk or move or just lean forward. The mechanical problems encountered in designing and implementing something like that were enormous.

Sam leaned over Raymond's slouched shoulders and grabbed the legal pad setting in front of him on the work bench. Along the margin, next to the drawings were a succession of notes and mathematic formulas. There were equations and numbers and a lot of it was either partially erased or just plain crossed out with big fat Xs.

"Hmm," Sam studied the drawings intently. "Looks like a couple of workable ideas here. What's the problem?"

"I just can't believe it. I mean, this is one of the most important parts of the project—biped mobility. And no one's willing to step up to the plate and coordinate this."

"Yea, we really need an ankle guy, don't we?"

Raymond looked up at Sam and saw the tired look in his eyes intensify. "No, that's not it at all. Don't you see? There's no one orchestrating this thing. There's some good ideas on both sides of the fence but nobody want's to step forward and do anything about it 'cause it's just going to be a royal pain in the ass. And without official sanction, it might all be for nothing."

Sam smiled at his friend. "So you're saying that we need someone to spearhead the ankle-to-leg connection project and take on the responsibility of biped balance and motion."

"And while you're at it, could you go ahead and cure cancer?"

Sam was formulating an idea in the back of head. An idea that would be a win-win for the project, his friend Raymond, himself and the friends in his old life that he'd been forced to leave behind.

"I'll see ya, Raymond." Sam turned, walked toward the door and then looked back with his hand poised on the doorknob. "I've got to talk to the old man about this one."

"Oh, yea. Great, Einstein. Bring me a cheeseburger while you're at it—no onion."

6 – The Sally & Rolo Pitch

"I do understand what you're saying, Mr. Haywood. I just don't understand why we wouldn't have these people in any of our lists."

Sam had gotten an audience with John Stewart much easier than he had anticipated. For some reason, Mr. Stewart held a fondness in his heart for the newest member of his team. Maybe it was because he wasn't like the others. They we're all stuffy scientists and he was an exciting special effects guy from the movies. Or maybe it was because he'd seen something in Sam Haywood. Something kind and human. Maybe he'd seen an intelligence that transcended book learning and encompassed the emotion of the human spirit.

Whatever the reason, anybody else at Mr. Stewart's door that afternoon would have been turned away and curtly asked to make an appointment next time.

"They're like Gypsies. Nomads, Mr. Stewart. They live from job to job and then move on. I've worked with them for years and I'm telling you, this leg ankle thing is already in the bag."

"She's a mechanical engineer and he's got some kind of degree in software something or other?"

“He’s certified in everything. I’m not sure if he even finished college, but he’s been going to school ever since. I’m telling you, we’ve already done this. On ‘The Pirates of Black Cove’ we had to come up with a one tenth scale model of a walking man and we went through all the same things your guys are butting up against now.”

“If you’ve already accomplished this, then why don’t I just put you in charge of this *new* department? Why would I need to bring anyone else on?”

Sam looked sullenly at John Stewart and took a deep breath. “When they worked for me I allowed them...a great deal of autonomy.”

“So you don’t know how they overcame these obstacles?”

“Exactly.”

“This is not the kind of decision I will make lightly, Mr. Haywood.”

Sam shook his head in agreement and thought about how the first name basis stuff from the first meeting had gone out the window after he’d become an employee.

John Stewart stared intently at his skin-guy. “But since I’ve been dealing with this issue for a month now, I do long for some closure. There are people that I must answer to.”

Sam’s head movement changed from side to side to up and down.

“There’ll have to be background checks and security profiles run. And *if I decide* to do this, what is this new expenditure going to run me?”

“Well, they’re used to working for me, so I figure I’ll just make the arrangement with them...for, say five hundred a piece for the contract period.” Sam tried to maintain his best poker face. He knew that Sally and Rolo would come to work for him for next to nothing. They’d be too intrigued by the nature of the project to turn anything down. So,

anything else he could get would go into the new business. It's not that he was cheating his friends, that wasn't it all. In fact this was the best thing for them all because it put them closer to working for him on a permanent basis.

"If everything else checks out, I'm willing to allow you to negotiate five hundred for *the pair*. And there will certainly be a non-performance release clause built in up front on this one."

Sam was eager to do some more horse trading but he could see by Mr. Stewart's expression that the bidding was now officially closed. Closed at about ten times what he'd hoped on getting.

"Thank you Mr. Stewart." Sam extended his hand and then quietly left the office.

7 – The Ear Lab

"It sounds kind of muffled."

"Yea, we've tried MP3 and AFM and all different kinds of commercially available codecs."

The man talking was the head of the ear lab, Sid Mosure. Sam had stopped across the hall to see Raymond, when he'd heard the metallic noises coming from inside of Sid's lab.

"So you're trying to figure out a way to reduce the signal rate to a minimum while retaining an acceptable degree of quality?"

Sam almost smiled as he gave his little summation. Mostly because he was just echoing what Jason had taught him in the eye lab. Apparently they were both working on ways to do roughly the same thing. They were both trying to limit the amount of digital information that needed to be processed. Just that one of them was doing it with video information and the other with audio.

“Yea, that’s right. We’ve been told that we had to keep the data rate down to less than 2 or 3k. If we don’t then the circuits and storage needed to process all that information are just too unruly. Anyway, it’s the AI team that’s dictating all this compression and data flow stuff. Say, how do you know so much about this stuff? Aren’t you the skin guy?”

Sam nodded. “When you’re ready, I’ve got some great looking outer ear stock you can use.” Sam listened to the sounds coming from the small loudspeaker on the bench and made face. “That sounds like when your ears get plugged up.”

“It’s because most of the intelligence is contained in the upper frequencies. Problem is that’s where most of the data is too. So when we start cranking down on the compression, we lose a lot of the high end. So it gets *muddy* sounding.”

“And that ringing? Is that caused by the *compression blow*?” Sam figured it was a stretch, but if the term worked for video artifacts, maybe it would apply to audio as well.

“If you’re referring to the audio artifacting, then yes. As the compression increases, the amount of extraneous garbage surrounding the signal increases too. Funny, I’ve never heard the term ‘compression blow’ before though.”

“Yea,” Sam turned and walked toward the door, “anyone that’s been around compression algorithms for as long as I have knows all about compression blow. See ya ‘round Doctor.”

8 – Sally & Rolo’s Success (Month 5)

Sally and Rolo had been on board for nearly three months and everything Sam had claimed had happened. An ankle had been designed and built from the ground up. The integration between the foot and the leg had been rethought and reworked and Sally had

gotten everyone to work together like a well oiled machine. There's just something about a woman's charm.

"Gentlemen," she'd cooed with an overtly condescending tone that only a pretty woman could get away with, "I think it's important to remember what it is that we're all trying to accomplish here."

Then she'd given all the scientists in the room a little look of scorn, like she was their mother disapproving of their table manners. Besides not being used to having women around, the scientists were totally unequipped to deal with a very good looking, very intelligent woman.

"I'd like you all just to listen to what it is that Rolo here has to say. Please." The word 'please' was drawn out and covered with syrup.

From there, Rolo had jumped in and made enough sense with his first presentation that everyone in the room was impressed. In fact, it was kind of exciting for them—almost like they'd discovered something. Where did this guy come from? How come no one had ever heard of him? How come he'd never been published anywhere? It was like finding a diamond in the rough.

For the unveiling in front of Mr. Stewart, Sam had covered the mechanism in his best yet skin compound. He made sure that every detail was perfect. The mechanical part had been tested time and again and nothing was left to chance.

When the big day arrived, John Stewart was escorted into the large room to find, what looked like, a pile of computer hardware and gadgets mounted on top of a severed human torso. The mound of hardware at the top of the legs was tethered on three sides by guy wires and an umbilical cord of control cables. And when they turned on the treadmill and

watched the monster take its first unruly steps, the whole scene was so surrealistic that it was hard for John Stewart to do much more than stare in amazement and disbelief.

“Well, gentlemen...and ladies, congratulations. I’m very proud of the way that you’ve pulled this one together. I’d say a celebration was in order.”

9 – Drunk

Sam was walking, if you could call it that, back from the main building to the dormitory. The punch that Raymond had whipped together, a combination of vodka and Dr. Pepper and lemons, was so powerful that Sam had had one too many—about five shots ago—before realizing that he was plastered.

It was the first time since Sam had come on board and the first time in a long time that the scientists had all gotten together just to blow off some steam. And it was long overdue. Everyone had too much to drink a little too quickly and most everyone was content to talk about anything other than humanoid robotics. The distraction came easily for them as they forgot about the daily pressures and deadlines and just got numb.

Rolo and Sally turned out to be the stars of the show, not just for their work on coordinating and designing the ankle, but for their brilliantly choreographed demonstration on how to drink an entire beer at once by poking a hole in the top of the can while sucking on a hole in the bottom.

Now, Sam was having a hard time navigating the sidewalk as it ran along the flower bed in front of one of the large brick dormitories. Without thinking about it, Sam stepped over and puked into the flower tops. Not just once, but four times. Until there was nothing but noise coming out. That dry raspy sound generated by your diaphragm and esophagus as they spasm together in perfect harmony.

Sam stood and leaned against a corner of the building. He wiped his face with his sleeve and then looked around awkwardly to see if anyone had seen him. But it was kind of hard to tell. He couldn't seem to focus on anything. The world was covered with haze. He squinted, blinked and then stretched his cheeks down, trying to get a clearer view.

But through the night air, everything was draped with an eerie green glow. Sam leaned forward against the cold brick and sucked as much air as he could hold into his lungs. The night air was felt cool on the back of his neck as he blew the air out slowly through his mouth. It had been college since he'd been this drunk.

"I'm never drinking again." Sam looked up at the sky and tried to cross himself but all he could manage to do was touch his forehead and left shoulder before his arm fell limp to his side.

As he studied the sky above and the horizon beyond, he could see the lights that framed the exterior of the buildings in the compound. They were all surrounded by huge lime-green halos. Glowing as if they'd been contaminated by radioactive waste from all the bomb testing that occurred in the fifties.

Sam spun around to the other side and then back again. He felt like he was looking through the TV monitor in the eye lab. Everything was fuzzy. Like his whole field of vision was distorted with compression blow.

With *compression blow*? What an odd thought that was? Sam covered up one eye and looked up and down the street, then shifted his hand to the other eye.

"Ooooh, I need to go to bed."

Sam leaned forward to spit out a mouthful of sour tasting saliva.

"Oaaaachh! Pewey."

Then he leaned back against the side of the building. He turned his head so that he cheek came in contact with the cool hard brick on the outer wall. But the soothing effect of the cold stone was soon replaced by something else. Something rather annoying. Now there was a ringing in his right ear and he shook his head a little trying to clear it.

“Crap.”

Frank shook his head back and forth and stuck his finger in his ear. As if sticking your finger in your ear really ever did any good for any kind of ear ailment. But he stuck it in and wiggled it around nonetheless.

And after he pulled it out, he could hear sounds in the distance but couldn't make out any of them. There were other's, in the distance, leaving the cafeteria. Laughing and shouting. But to Sam, their voices sounded thin and crackly like the sound coming from the little portable radio back at the party. The voices floated through the air and mixed in with the ringing inside of his head. Unintelligible strands of speech drifted in from all around him.

“You all right, Sam?”

“Rolo, shit. You scared the crap out of me.” Sam swayed, hand firmly planted on the side of the building for support.

“You look a little...green, pal.”

Sam looked over Rolo's shoulder at the green halo surrounding the street lights. From one side of the barracks to the other, all neatly out of focus and bathed in their green fuzzy hoods. Sam kept his hand planted against the wall as he rocked gently back and forth.

“Rolo?”

“Yea, Sam?”

“Do I look fuzzy to you?”

Rolo grabbed Sam’s shoulder in an attempt to keep him steady. “You look like you need some help getting back to the room, buddy?” Rolo chuckled as he flung Sam’s arm over his shoulder and began to pull him by the waist.

“I think I’ve got a severe case of audio artifacting in my right ear,” Sam cocked his head toward Rolo, “and my visual channel’s compression algorithm is set way too high...”

With Rolo’s assistance, Sam staggered off into the dormitory and was asleep moments after hitting his pillow.

10 – Animated Projection

The next morning, Sam rolled out of bed around nine o’clock and for some strange reason, was plagued by the odd happenings from the previous evening. Even though he had obviously been drunk beyond belief, he still remembered vividly the sensation of blurred vision and muffled hearing. It hadn’t felt like any other time he’d been drunk before. Maybe it had something to do with the chemical combination of Dr. Pepper and vodka. Maybe with the fact that he hadn’t had anything to eat before the party. What ever the reason, Sam found himself thinking about it all morning.

It had seemed so real and so annoying and something else...so utterly like the images in the lab. Sam guessed that he was fixating on what had happened and tried to just shake the feeling off.

Around noon, Sam met up with Raymond in the cafeteria. It was Saturday and most of the scientists hung out in the cafeteria drinking coffee and shooting the shit. Some would head to the labs for a while, while others would end up in the library of the rec hall.

“Hey, Ray.”

“Sam.” Ray looked up from his plate. “Didn’t expect to see you up this early. You were pretty lit up last night.”

“Yea, I know.”

“Still looking a little green. Why don’t you grab some eggs?”

Sam belched and winced before shaking his head back and forth. “No thanks.”

“Look, Ray?”

“Uum?” Ray returned his attention to the tray in front of him.

“Something strange happened last night.”

“I know,” Ray said without looking up from the plate, “Rolo told me about the flowers. Sure don’t want some eggs.”

“No eggs.”

“Suit yourself.”

“I mean something strange...strange.”

“Yea?”

“Yea.”

Sam sat for a minute and tried to recapture the feeling from the night before. The creepy feeling that he was viewing his life from behind the monitor in the synthetic eye lab and that he was listening to the world through one of Sid Mosure’s artificial ears.

“Hey Ray, have you ever...” Sam looked around the hall and leaned a little closer to Ray, “well, I don’t know. Thought that you had...some...?”

Raymond stopped chewing and looked up from his plate. He looked carefully over Sam’s face, from top to bottom. Then he dropped his head back down and scooped up

another pile of mashed potatoes. With a mouth full he asked, “How long you been here now?”

Sam thought for a second before answering. “About six months, I guess. Why?”

Raymond started nodding his head. “That’s about right. I was here for almost seven before it happened to me for the first time.”

“Before what happened to you?”

“Inner ear problem.”

“Inner ear problem?”

“Yea, it was a balance thing.” Raymond stopped eating just long enough to look at Sam for a second and then dove back in. “I got to the point where every time I walked, I felt like I was going to fall over. I was nauseous and dizzy all the time. It was terrible.”

Ray glanced up at Sam just long enough to see the ‘I don’t know what that has to do with anything’ look on his face and then returned to the chow.

“It happened when I was several weeks behind on X7, my first articulated foot. I was having a real hard time with the math surrounding the forces on the toes. You know it changes as you shift your weight? Our brain makes millions of computations a second just to keep the weight distributed across our toes properly. Without toes, you can’t balance. You’d fall over.”

Sam watched intently as Ray mopped up the rest of the gravy with a swatch of bread.

“I was convinced that my own feet were having the same problem I was fighting with on X7. I couldn’t seem to stabilize the distribution of weight across my toes and the more I thought about it the worse it got.”

“What’d you do?”

“Ended up talking to the counselor.” Raymond shoved the last piece of bread in his mouth and looked at Sam. “You did know that we had a counselor here, right?” Then Ray turned his attention to the green beans. “Anyway, turns out that it’s a pretty common problem for those of us in this line of work. Got some name like *Phantom Animated Projection* or something like that. Basically it happens when you spend too much time on your work and it gets to the point where it kind of takes over your subconscious.”

“So what happened with the counselor?”

“Talked to him a couple of times. Basically said that I needed to get outside more. You know, go throw a Frisbee around or something like that. Anyway, eventually it went away. I guess it helped just having someone explain it to you. You know, knowing that you’re not crazy, that kind of think.”

“Did it ever come back?”

Raymond stopped eating, pursed his lips and took a long hard look at Sam. “Na...I wouldn’t say that *it came back*. I’m going to get some more potatoes. You sure don’t want any eggs?”

“No thanks, Ray.”

Sam stood slowly and walked off in search of a Frisbee.

11 – The Nightmare

“What the hell?”

Sally checked the clock on the end table beside the bed; 4:30am. She had been in the lab with Rolo until almost midnight and then gone straight back to the dormitory to crash. Now, here it was 4:30 in the morning and someone was pounding on her door. Back in

Orange County that would be a little scary, but here, within the confines of a secured government facility...well, it just about had to be someone that she knew.

“Coming.”

She pulled the robe from the chair and pulled it on over her t-shirt as she walked over to the door, looked through the peep hole and then yanked it open. “Sam? What’s the matter? Come in.”

Sam was standing at the door, shaking and covered in sweat, his clothes dirty and torn. He was panting heavily and kept turning his head and looking in quick spurts, over the railing and down the stairs behind him. Sally stepped aside and let Sam come into the small living area before looking around outside and then pushing the door shut.

“Tell me what’s going on. What happened?” Sally asked as she walked toward the attached kitchen.

“They’re trying to take me in. They’re trying to take me apart. Don’t let them take me, Sally. You’ve got to get me out of here. Don’t let them take me back.”

Sally pulled a water glass from one of the cabinets and filled it with tap water from the sink. She walked back into the living room where Sam was standing—shivering. She handed him the glass and helped him steady his hands as he brought it to his lips.

“Slow down, Sam. I don’t understand what you’re saying. Start at the beginning and tell exactly me what happened, step by step.”

“They found out who I was. *I found out* who I was. They want to bring me in. To take me back.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about, Sam. Who’s trying to take you in? For what? Why?”

Sam finished off the glass of water with one huge gulp, handed the empty glass to Sally and then turned and glanced toward the drawn curtain behind him. Then he turned back and looked straight into Sally’s eyes.

“Sally, you’re my friend. You’ve got to believe me.”

Sally studied his face, searching for the meaning behind what he was saying. “Of course, Sam. You know that I will.”

“It was two days ago, on Monday, when it hit me for the first time. Some kind of attack or something. I couldn’t breath, everything went blurry. I must’ve passed out. And when I woke up, I was in a padded cell talking to the staff counselor. He was explaining to me that I’d suffered some kind of episode. That I’d had some sort of *animatronic projection* or some shit like that. Saying that because I’d been too involved in my work that I was starting to think that I had the same problems as the robotic parts that we’re working on.”

Sally sat across from Sam and watched him carefully as he spoke.

“But even while the counselor was talking, it was happening.”

“What was happening, Sam?”

“The...the projection thing.” Sam’s delivery was picking up speed and he was on the verge of crying as the emotion poured out from within. “Everything was green. The

counselor was green, the room was green. Everything was green and blurry—glowing. Glowing like *compression blow* on Jason’s monitor.”

“Sam, let me get some help for you?”

Sam snapped to his feet and turned to peer out the edge of the curtain. “No help,” he cried sharply. “No help.”

Then, overcome with emotion and exhaustion, he began to cry. Slowly at first, shoulders bouncing softly, then harder until the sobs came in thick pulsating waves.

“They want to take me apart. They want to disassemble me and start over. They think I’m defective.” As Sam spoke, he sunk down along the wall and ended up sitting on the floor and babbling to himself. “Don’t let them take me apart. Don’t them take me back...”

Sally had slipped into the bathroom to get him another glass of water, this time laced with three sleeping pills. After swirling the water around in the glass several times, she walked over and knelt down beside Sam and began gently running her hand through his hair.

She set the glass into Sam’s hands as he turned and leaned against the wall clutching it tightly to his chest.

“I’m not defective. Tell them I’m not, Sally. I’m not.”

She knew that Sam needed help. She knew that she had to get a hold of someone to come and help her with him. Sally nodded and then brought her hand slowly to the bottom of the glass, helping Sam bring it up to his lips.

“Everything’s going to be okay. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

But before he could take a drink, he set the glass on the floor beside him and abruptly stood, swaying back and forth as he leaned against the wall.

“I’m going to be sick,” he said as he shot for the open bathroom door.

Behind the closed door, Sally could hear the horrible retching sound followed by the sound of flushing and then that of running water.

Inside the tiny restroom, Sam splashed cool water on his face and then looked at himself in the mirror. He felt like he was going insane. It was like a scene from a movie. A scene from a poorly written screenplay about something that a mad scientist would do.

As Sam leaned forward and turned off the water, he heard the sound of a door opening and Sally saying something. He shoved the door open to see Rolo at the door with Raymond. The look on their faces was that of shock and amazement.

Sam stood motionless.

“Sam, everything’s going to be alright,” Rolo spoke first.

Sam took one step toward the door and Rolo and Raymond countered with a step to their right.

“Hey, buddy,” Raymond said sounding more like he was talking to a puppy dog than to one of his best friends.

Again, Sam stepped slowly toward the door and again, Rolo and Raymond countered. Suddenly Sam bolted straight at Rolo and knocked him hard in the chest with his outstretched elbow, knocking him into Raymond. As he shot out the door, he vaulted over the railing and disappeared into the darkness.

Rolo frantically pushed himself up, but as he reached the open door, Ray called out and stopped him.

“Hold up, man. No need for that. They’re already tracking him.”

12 - Chase

Stricken with panic and with no idea about what he was going to do next, Sam ran down the darkened corridor between two of the barracks before emerging on one of the side streets a block away.

As he ran down the sidewalk, all the street lights were hidden behind lime-green plumes. The entire landscape was bathed in a monochromatic green haze that pulsed and throbbed behind his eyelids.

He could hear voices. Thin metallic voices—almost muffled sounding. They were getting closer...and everything was getting brighter. He heard dogs barking and people where shouting.

“I see him! Over here!”

There was a loud popping sound and all of a sudden Sam was surrounded by blinding white light from all directions. He turned to run but his legs bugled and he collapsed hard with his face hitting the dirt. Sam tried desperately to regain his footing but he couldn’t

get his legs to work. It was if they were defective and were no longer of any use to him. Squirring there on the ground like a broken toy, Sam could manage nothing more than crawling in a circle.

In a matter of seconds, he was surrounded by screeching car tires and a the sound of armed guard brandishing their lethal hardware. Guns drawn, all pointing at him. In the blinding glare from the green headlights, Sam could see the outline of those that towered over him. Blurred around the edges and shimmering in the eerie light, they moved closer.

From the shadows appeared Mr. Stewart and then someone else. It was Rolo and Sally, both standing there looking at him with a sad, almost disappointed look on their faces.

Sam's own face was contorted in pain and laced with utter confusion. He had no means for comprehending what was happening to him. No means by which to process this new flood of information. He was trapped and helpless.

13 – The Counselor

“Do you remember me Number-7?” The man spoke as Sam pulled and yanked at his arms inside the straitjacket.

Sam woke up to find himself in a small room securely lashed to a chair, arms held in place by a straitjacket. His ankles were bound tightly to the legs of the chair. Across from him, behind a small wooden, table sat a man cradling a glass of water in his hands. On the table sat a legal pad and a yellow pencil.

“I’m Dr. Hancock, the counselor. We’ve spoken before, do you remember?”

Sam was breathing heavily and pulling harder at the straps, almost to the point of moving the chair.

“I assure you, there is no place to go.” The man watched Sam as he struggled helplessly against the restraints. “I would suggest that you calm down before you injure yourself.”

“Where am I?” Sam huffed as he stopped struggling and sat still.

“You’re inside the NSC’s Nevada testing center for Advanced Humanoid Life. Do you remember how you got here?”

“Of course I do. I was hired. What the hell kind of question is that? Why am I tied up? Let me out of this thing.” Sam jerked sideways and gave the chair a quick bounce.

“All in due time, Number-7. All in due time. There are some details that we’ve got to get straight first.”

“What kind of details?” And why the hell do keep calling me Number-7? Is that some kind of code number or something? Why am I tied up?”

“How long have you worked at this facility?”

“I don’t know...six months, maybe. Why?”

“Do you remember your name?”

Sam sighed deeply. “Of course I do, it’s Sam. Sam Haywood. I live in Orange County and I work in the movies. Or I did until I got this gig.”

“I’m afraid your recollection is not quite correct Number-7.”

“Well, I’m afraid that my recollection is just fine, thank you very much.”

“Because you are not Sam Haywood.”

Sam’s eyes started to water and he didn’t quite know if it was because he was angry or scared. This whole thing was way too freaky. Who the hell was this guy and what was with all the question? Sam starting breathing faster.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, very simply, that you are not who you claim to be. You are not Sam Haywood.”

And with that Sam erupted into a frothing tantrum as he bounced the chair from one side of the room to the other.

“I am Sam Haywood,” he yelled at the top of his lungs, “you filthy ffff...”

His rant ended in nothing more than a hissing sound like that of air escaping from a punctured tire as Sam curled up his face turned beet red.

14 - Finale

From behind the mirrored glass panel that took up one entire wall of the room, Sam Haywood sat with John Stewart, observing the scene playing out on the other side of the window. They had been sitting there quietly for the last ten minutes, watching as the counselor quizzed his unwitting patient.

“What do think went wrong?” Mr. Stewart asked without much emotion.

“Not exactly sure. But we did get a lot farther than we did last time. We’ve still got a problem with the simulation degrading as soon as we let it run on its own.”

“I’m not seeing much improvement over Number-6.”

“Well...on the surface maybe. But I can assure you that this is a major step forward. We’ve been successful at implanting the memories and then having the process perpetuate, even for a short period, on its own. I’m really very encouraged.”

“Is it going to be something that we can fix, Mr. Haywood?”

“Oh, sure. It’s just another minor setback in a series of many. We’ll get it right. It’s just going to take a little bit of time, that’s all. Don’t you worry about a thing, Mr. Stewart.”

“I hope that you’re right, Mr. Haywood. For both of our sakes, I do hope so.”