

De Sa Vu



written by Ann Leonhart

Twigs snapped as he scurried down the steep incline, almost losing balance and wincing as briars reached up to grab at his ankles. Desperately he raced to reach his destination, yet afraid of what he might find when he arrived. He froze, fear knotting his insides as he came upon the still form of his friend. His nose wrinkled as he inhaled the faint odor of spilled blood.

Two pairs of eyes locked. "What took you so long?" Mark McCormick, sprawled helplessly at Milton C. Hardcastle's feet, whispered.

Hardcastle stared when the younger man's head rolled to one side, apparently passing out. *Like he was waiting for me.* Quickly, he knelt beside the injured man and with trembling hands, pushed up the soft material to examine the gaping wound beneath. Turning, he yelled to the woman waiting topside. "He's alive, Millie, but just barely. Find Harper and have him call for an ambulance. He's probably still where we left him...or looking for us."

"Wouldn't it be faster if we take him?" the psychic yelled back.

Hardcastle fought back a torrid reply. "I'm afraid to move 'im. Hurry, Millie, we're wasting precious time." The squeal of the GMC's tires as it peeled out was the only reply he received.

Satisfied that help would soon arrive, he turned his attention back to his friend. "Ah, kid, I'm sorry I got ya into this," he apologized. In the distance he heard the screech of an owl and other forest sounds that usually brought him pleasure. Now, they grated on his nerves. Suddenly, he felt a chill. Stripping off his jacket, he covered as much of McCormick's body as he could. For a moment he let his hand linger near the curly head as Millie's earlier warning echoed in his ears. "*You've lost one son, do you want to lose another?*" He clamped his eyes shut, trying to eradicate the memory those words forced to the surface.

"J-judge? You all right?"

McCormick's voice jarred him back. "I'm the one that's supposed to ask that, kiddo," he replied, forcing a smile. "How ya feelin'?"

"Well, I don't feel like...running the Indy Five Hundred if that's... what you're asking." His face pinched in pain, and he groaned under his breath.

"Just take it easy, son. Help's on the way." Claspng McCormick's hand, he cursed himself for not being able to relieve the younger man's pain. "I-I tried to make it to the road, but..." Without warning, he doubled over, gasping in pain.

"Easy, Mark, easy," Hardcastle comforted as he held onto the writhing man. All he could do was watch. And worry. "Where's that damn ambulance?" Abruptly, the struggling ceased, and Hardcastle gently lowered McCormick to the ground, then with a shaky hand, brushed back the damp curly lock that had fallen onto the young man's forehead.

"J-judge?"

The weak, pain-filled voice cut through Hardcastle like a knife. "I'm right here, kid. Try not to move too much. You've lost a lot of blood. Don't want it to start up again."

"N-not that easy," McCormick replied, looking up at him with piercing blue eyes that mirrored Hardcastle's own fear. "I-I have to...before I...die."

"Don't talk like that, McCormick," the judge ordered, fear making his tone harsh. "You're gonna be just fine."

"D-damn it, Hardcase," McCormick groaned, tears springing to his eyes. "I-I'm trying to...trying to tell you I..." Again his words were interrupted by a new wave of pain.

"Shh, shh," the judge soothed. "Don't try to talk."

"But...but I..." McCormick sputtered, attempting to rise up.

"*Will you lie still!*" Hardcastle ordered sternly, pushing the injured man back, then softened his tone. "It'll wait, son. Just try to relax 'til the paramedics get here."

McCormick looked uncertain, then whispered, his voice low and husky, "Y-you old donkey, I'm tryin' to say I love you." As if relieved he'd said what needed to be said, McCormick's body relaxed, and his eyes closed once again.

Swallowing hard, Hardcastle reached out to wipe the tears from the face of the now unconscious McCormick. Vaguely, he heard the shrill sound of an approaching siren. "I love you, too, kid. I love you, too."

The monitors connected to McCormick and the tubes running in and out of his body were frightening, but the even rise and fall of the young man's chest was reassuring to Hardcastle as he sat by the patient's bedside. Scooting his chair closer, he reached out to tuck the blanket closer about his friend. "Took a hellava lot of doing, but I talked the doc into letting me stay with ya tonight, kiddo. Didn't want to leave you alone." He chuckled. "You'd probably manage to get in trouble even after having major surgery."

Aggravated at himself, he jumped nervously to his feet and paced to and fro. "What the hell's the matter with me? You can't hear me." Taking a deep breath, he calmed himself and, returning to his seat, stared at the unconscious man in silence for a few moments before reaching out to pick up the hand near him on the bed. "Ah, kiddo, I really fouled up this time, didn't I?" he murmured, absently letting his thumb massage the top of Mark's hand. "I shoulda listened to Millie, but I was too damn stubborn to admit she might be right. Now *you're* paying for my stupidity--maybe with your life." He squeezed the hand he held, then released it awkwardly when he heard the swoosh of the door. Looking up, he saw a young nurse enter the room and go to the other side of McCormick's bed.

"How's he doing?" he asked gruffly.

"There's no change, sir," she returned, never taking her eyes from the IV she was checking. When she finished, she looked over at him. "He'll be asleep for some time. Can I get you some coffee or anything?"

"No, thank you. I'm fine."

"Are you sure? You look exhausted. Would you like me to bring in a cot so you can get some sleep? You've been here all night."

Hardcastle shook his head. "No, that's okay. I'm used to going without sleep, honey. But thanks for asking."

She nodded, then after checking the various dials that required routine monitoring, quietly left the room.

Yeah, I'm used to it all right, but the worrying doesn't get any easier. His mind drifted back to another time, another hospital room.

"Milt, you look like you're about to drop. Why don't you go home and get some rest? I'll stay with Nancy."

Hardcastle knew his sister-in-law had his best interest at heart, but he found it hard to keep his tone civil. Doesn't she know I can't leave? I belong here, nowhere else. "Thanks, DeeDee, but I'm fine. Why don't you go down to the cafeteria and get something to eat?"

"No, I'm not hungry. But you must be. Milton, you haven't eaten anything since yesterday at noon. You're not doing Nancy any good sitting here like this."

His temper at last flared, and jumping to his feet, he shouted, "Woman, I'm not going anywhere! Now, leave me alone!" With a start, he checked to be sure his outburst hadn't awakened his wife. Satisfied she was still sleeping soundly, he turned around to face DeeDee and immediately wished he could take back the angry words that had been spoken in haste. "DeeDee, I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't take it out on you."

Her astonished expression changed to one of pain, and she went into the outstretched arms he offered.

"Oh, Milton. I know what you're going through. I love her, too." Her thin shoulders started to quiver, and she buried her face against his chest. "It's so damned unfair," she managed between sobs. "Why Nancy? She's never done anything wrong in her entire life."

He held her tenderly, hearing her muffled cries of anguish. "I don't know the answer to that, DeeDee," he murmured, patting her back in comfort. "Guess some things just aren't meant to be understood." Feeling her pull away, he released her.

"It's just so hard to believe," she exclaimed, looking up at him with reddened eyes. "She came in for a simple gall bladder operation, and now they say she has inoperable cancer. My God, Milton, how are you going to tell her?"

He couldn't answer. That question had been going through his mind all night long. He shook his head. "God help me, DeeDee, I just don't know. She was too groggy last night to understand me, and Dr. Barker said it'd be

better if I waited till she wakes up this morning. He offered to do it for me, but Nancy wouldn't like that. She'd rather hear it from me."

"Hear what?" a sleepy voice inquired from the bed beside him. "Milt, what're you and DeeDee talking about?"

Hardcastle heard the fear in her voice and berated himself for letting his wife overhear their conversation. Moving immediately to her side, he leaned over and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "It's nothing, honey. Just relax." He took his seat beside her once again, praying he could forestall telling her, but seeing by the look on her face that it wasn't going to be easy.

"Something's wrong. I can see it in your eyes," Nancy accused. "Milton, for God's sake, tell me."

He couldn't bring himself to speak.

Her eyes sought out her sister. "DeeDee, you tell me then," she beseeched, her tone rising to near hysteria.

Hardcastle felt a light touch on his shoulder.

"I'll leave you two alone."

The hand was gone, and as he heard DeeDee's light footsteps existing the room, he wondered if he had the courage to say what had to be said.

"Milt, talk to me. Y-you're frightening me."

"Darling, just calm down," he ordered, taking her hand in his and squeezing it reassuringly, "and I'll tell you."

Her widened eyes never left his, but after a short span of time, she appeared calmer.

"Now, that's better," he praised, slowly lifting her hand to press it against his lips. The ache in his heart threatened to rip him asunder, but he knew he couldn't stall any longer. "Nancy, the doctor found something when he operated." He paused, trying to muster enough courage to get the words out.

"Milt, what?" she begged.

He wanted to look anywhere but at her terrified face, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from hers. "Darling, it's...it's cancer. The doctor says it's gone too far to operate." Helpless, he watched as her mouth went slack, and she stared at him in disbelief.

"C-cancer?" she echoed his words, her lip quivering. "Oh, God, Milton. It can't be cancer." Immediately, she was in his arms, clinging to him like a drowning person might cling to a life preserver.

He held her close, whispering words of comfort as bitter sobs wracked her frail frame. Tears stung his own eyes, but he wouldn't allow himself the luxury of releasing them. Even though his world was slowly crumbling around him, he had to be strong...for her sake.

Finally, the weeping slowed to mere hiccupped intakes of breath, then silence, but he continued to hold her as she rested her head against his shoulder. Lightly he stroked her hair, wanting to keep her safe in his

arms forever.

"H-how long?" she asked, her voice a rasping whisper.

He squeezed her tightly to him. "Three to six months. They...they can't be sure." His voice broke, and a tear slowly etched a hot trail down his cheek.

Nancy leaned back, then caressing his face between her hands, bent over to kiss him lovingly on the lips. "My poor darling. This isn't easy for you, either, is it?"

"Nancy, I...I love you." He struggled to keep his emotions in check. "I can't...can't picture life without you." He pulled her into his arms again, lightly planting kisses on her hair as he held her close.

"Milt, will you promise me one thing?" she asked, returning his caress.

"Anything, my love. You know that." At that moment he would promise her the world, even his life for hers if it could be in his power to do so.

"Promise me you won't let this destroy you; that you'll go on with your life after I'm gone."

Mutely he held her, content to just have her near, not wanting to think beyond this moment. At last he released her and looked deep into her eyes. "Nancy, I...I can't. I might not be able to keep it."

"If our love has ever really counted for anything, you'll try. Oh, Milt, I want our last few days together to be happy. They can't be if I'm not sure you'll be all right."

Abruptly, he released her. "Well, I'm not going to commit suicide if that's what you mean," he growled, purposely misunderstanding her.

"That's not what I'm talking about, and you know it," she returned sternly, staring at him intently. "You're not the type of person who could ever do anything like that. Darling--": She softened her tone. "--I know you, and I know how much you love me." She laughed, but there was no humor in it. "I suppose some people would think I was conceited for saying that, but we've been together for so long, I know how you think, how you feel, everything about you. Mourn me, but then pick up the pieces and go on."

He smiled, then kissed her passionately, drawing her into his arms yet another time. "Nancy Hardcastle, I love you," he whispered in her ear before backing away to look at her. "It'll be the hardest thing I've ever done, darling, but I promise I'll try--for you."

She returned his smile. "That's all I can expect, I suppose. Milt, do me one more favor, please."

"What?"

"Take me to the lake* I want to spend the time I have left with you to be special--something you can look back on with fond memories."

Caught off-guard by her unexpected request, his mind was a maelstrom of conflicting emotions. "Sweetheart, the doctor said if they start chemotherapy immediately, it might

(*) Edge of Darkness, published in EVERYTHING BUT THE KITCHEN SINK #1 and reprinted in this issue

buy us a little time. I want that time." He determined to be firm, but the unspoken appeal in her blue-green eyes soon weakened his will, and unable to defend himself against them any longer, he cast his eyes downward.

"Milt, look at me," Nancy insisted, tears overflowing as she tilted his face up to meet hers. "I'm not in a hurry to die, my love, but if I have to, I want it to be with dignity, with you--and you alone--by my side. I don't want to die in a hospital bed, hooked up to machines, surrounded by people we don't know. Can you understand that?"

Reaching out, he let his fingers rest upon her cheek, the warm, smooth skin so familiar to his touch. "All right, sweetheart. We'll do it your way. I'll call Clyde and make the arrangements."

Barely able to discern her smile through his tears, he felt her warm touch as she covered his hand with hers, then gently moved it to her lips, affectionately kissing his fingers when they arrived. He knew in that moment, he'd made the right decision.

"Judge Hardcastle?" A strange voice seemed to be calling out to him. "Judge, are you all right?"

Coming out of the fog, he looked up to find McCormick's surgeon studying him, a worried expression marring his youthful, yet mature face. Immediately, his gaze flew to McCormick. "Something's happened to Mark!"

"No, no. Relax. Mark's fine," the doctor assured him. "In fact, I have some good news for you. His vital signs have markedly improved. He's still not completely out of the woods, but I think I can say with reasonable certainty, he's going to make it."

His heart started to beat again.

"He'll have to stay here for several days, then bedrest for a few weeks after that, but he should recover completely if he takes it easy for awhile."

Hardcastle rose from his chair, offering his hand to the physician. "Thank you, Doctor. Thank you *very* much," he said, enthusiastically pumping the other man's arm.

"You're quite welcome," the younger man replied, smiling. "I'm glad to be the bearer of good news instead of bad for a change. Now, if you'll excuse me, sir, I'm due back in surgery. I'll look in on Mr. McCormick again later this morning. Why don't you try and get some rest. You've been here all night, haven't you?"

It was more of a statement than a question. Hardcastle glanced at his watch. "Yeah, I guess I have, Doc. Thanks again." He suddenly realized just how exhausted he really was. The door shut with a quiet thud, and Hardcastle stretched his arms above his head in a relaxing pull, then returned to McCormick's bedside. He smiled to himself as he looked down upon the peaceful face of his sleeping partner, then dropped heavily into the chair behind him. Offering a silent prayer of thanks, he gently lifted McCormick's hand. "Well, kid, looks like we got a second chance."

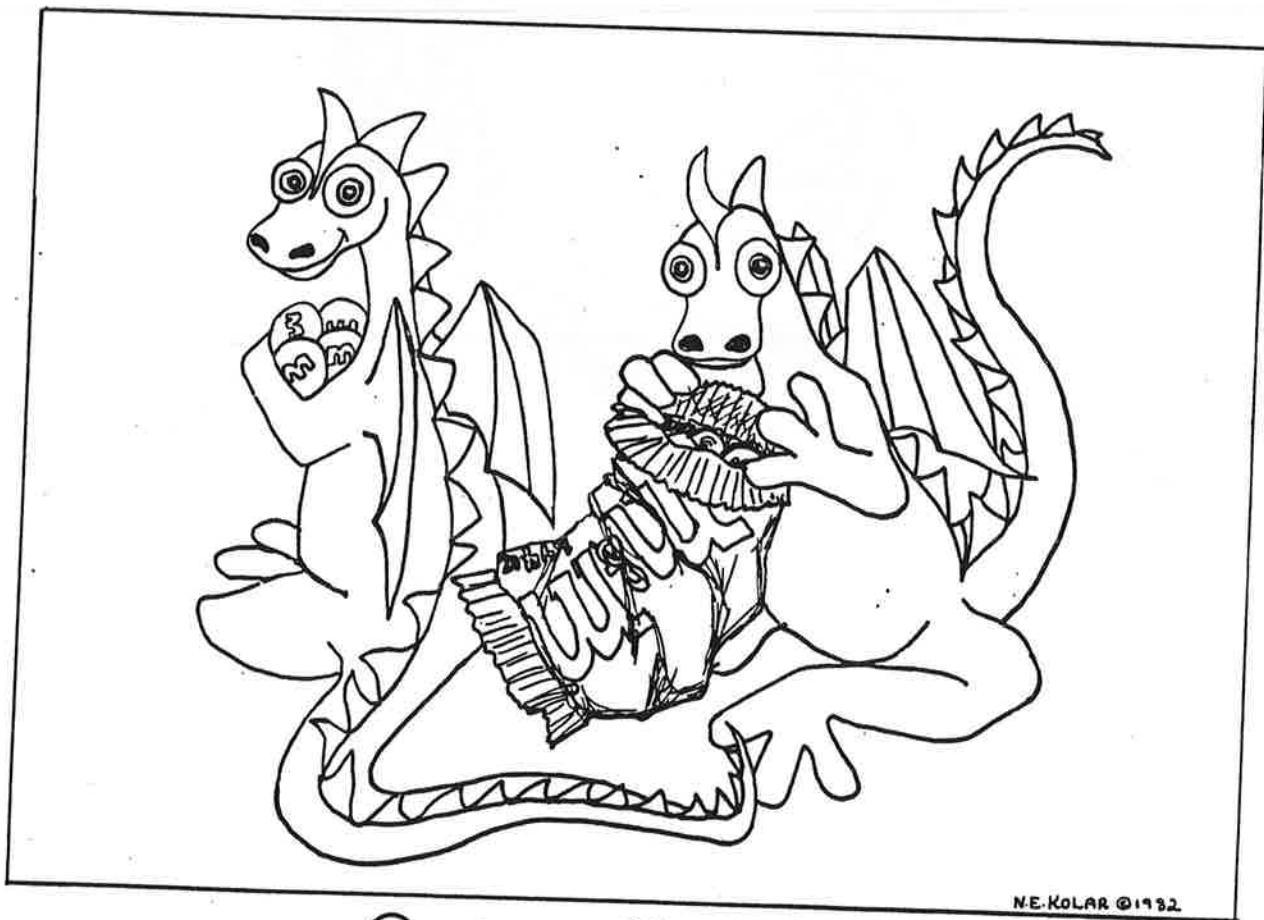
Tears unexpectedly sprang to his eyes, and although he resisted, they refused to be held back. Weary, he rested his forehead against the metal guard rail, too exhausted to deny his body the release it so desperately needed. He jerked up suddenly, however, when he heard the door glide open across the carpeted floor, and swiftly brushing the tears from

his eyes, turned to find Millie standing in the doorway, a strange expression crossing her face. For a fleeting moment he thought she'd seen him crying, but when she smiled and walked toward him with outstretched arms, he immediately felt at ease, and returned her embrace.

"He's going to live," she said in wonder. "He's really going to live."

He held her as she wept tears of joy, and his mind returned once again to that other hospital room so many years ago. *I did it, Nancy. I found a reason for living again.* His eyes fell upon the sleeping face of the young man who'd come to mean so much to him, and he smiled. "He's going to live."

H&Mc



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Stealing Snacks

