

## JACK McDEVITT

### VARIABLES

Big Al was very good at his chosen line of work. He provided protection to small businessmen, created gambling opportunities, and was respected for his many services as peacemaker among the Chicago families. The latter activity had got him indirectly involved in various money laundering activities, and that in turn had got the feds interested. Nevertheless he was cautious and would probably have continued to prosper for years had Tony Bullets not cut a deal and traded him in. Tony went into protective custody, and Big Al headed for open country.

He had planned originally to retire to a little place in Oregon that nobody knew about. But a Nova special caught his attention, and two days later he arrived with two associates at the Orin Randall Physics Laboratories outside Minneapolis.

Big Al did not like to show hardware. The practice was heavy-handed and lacking in taste. In the social circles through which he customarily moved, it was rarely necessary. Enlightened people generally understood a tightening of the jaws or a sudden silence. Significant communication is always implied.

But among those not sensitive to the diplomatic niceties, it is sometimes necessary to be more direct. Al knew instinctively that nonverbal communication would not work with the people at Randall. The receptionist blinked at him as if he were looking for a handout, told him Dr. Seabright was busy, and did not respond in a positive manner until Henny explained that he hoped he wouldn't be forced to shoot her. She responded by leading them into a lab where a man and a woman stood in front of a bank of computer screens. Both turned and stared.

The receptionist mumbled a frightened apology.

Big Al took an instant dislike to Archie Seabright. He could see immediately that the man was not polished. He was nondescript, much like Rat Silvana if you could imagine Rat in bifocals and a white lab coat. He wore a lot of pens in his breast pocket, he tended to look over the tops of his bifocals, and his hair was going fast. Dunk took his cue and showed him a piece. Seabright's mouth opened and closed. Henny brought in the luggage and locked the door.

"What is this?" demanded Seabright in a voice that had a lot of squeak. "Please get out. The general public is not allowed in here."

It always amazed Al that certain types of persons will go out of their way to

annoy an armed man.

The woman who was standing beside him laid a hand on his arm, cautioning him. She had black hair and good features and she was trying not to look scared.

"Lady," Al said, "what is your name?"

She looked steadily back at Al. A good babe. "Janet Keel," she said.

"Okay, Janet Keel. Nobody has anything to be afraid of. We are only here to conduct a little business, and then we will be leaving."

The lab was a long whitewashed room ringed with desks piled high with printouts and binders and magazines. Posters with illustrations of atomic cross sections and occluding gases and other abstractions covered the walls. There was a vague noxious smell, as if a fire had just gone out.

The device that Al had seen on Nova occupied the center of the room. It looked like a ten-foot-high bell jar made of steel struts, cable, wire netting, plastic and glass. It was raised on a low platform and open in front. A table, crowded with computers and electronic gear, wrapped around the other three sides.

"Just relax, Doc," Al said, switching his attention back to Seabright. "I have a proposition for you."

Seabright's eyes had locked on the gun. "You don't need that."

Dunk caught Al's glance and put the weapon away. Seabright started breathing again. "The boys and I have a problem," Al said. "There are certain parties about fifteen minutes behind us, and we don't want to be here when they show up. It is in fact essential that we move out of their jurisdiction." He took a long satisfied look at the bell jar. "Tell me about this thing." A signal passed between Seabright and the woman, by which Al grasped that their relationship was more than merely professional. His respect for her declined.

"I don't know what you mean," Seabright said.

"Doc, we are not going to get anywhere with that attitude. The boys and I would like to use this little exit that you have. If I understood you correctly on TV the other night, we can clear out of here and go to another Chicago, right? One that's like ours, but isn't quite the same."

Seabright's jaw tightened. "Not to Chicago. Minneapolis, maybe. But not Chicago."

"Why not? If you can do the one, why not the other? What's the difference?"

Seabright started to push his hands into his pockets, saw Dunk's piece appear again, and changed his mind. "The Tunnel opens onto this exact spot. No matter which terminal universe we look at, it's always here. Of course, most of the time, here is only empty space."

"Why is that, Doc?"

"Because in the vast majority of cosmic sequences, there is no definable structure of any kind. Just a few gases."

"Oh."

"Where there are worlds, there is rarely an Earth. But the point is, Randall Labs is located on a couple of hills outside Minneapolis. That's the only place we can send you. At least, the only place where you'll be happy."

Al ignored the attempt at sarcasm. "Let's get to it. Get me a place that's a lot like this one, Doc, and we'll make it worth your while." He fished out a roll of hundreds about six inches thick, showed it to him, and laid it on a chair.

"It's not a good idea."

"Turn it on, Doc."

Seabright bent over the wraparound table and toggled a couple of switches. Lamps began to blink. Janet sat down at a keyboard. "You have to understand, Mr. -- ?"

"His name's Big Al" said Henny. He had wandered over close to the window, where he could watch the parking lot. Dunk stood behind Janet.

"You have to understand, Big Al, it's unrested. We've never sent anyone through it. I don't know what might happen. You could be killed."

"Don't worry, Doc. We'll take our chances."

"No. If something goes wrong, God knows what might happen to the project."

"Doc, I could shoot you now and let Janet try. Whatever you want." Dunk began screwing a silencer ostentatiously onto his muzzle.

"It would have been easier," Seabright said, "if you'd given me advance notice."

"Yeah. Well, unfortunately, the feds didn't call me for an appointment, either." Al glanced at Henny. Henny shook his head no. Nothing yet. "If I understood you

right, Doc, the same people live in these other places. But stuff is different. Janet there for example might be a redhead."

"That's right. The variables will change."

"So Big AI might not be so big?"

"In some places they might call you Little AI."

Al smiled. He appreciated a sense of humor in a man standing on the wrong end of the artillery.

Seabright played with the keyboards, Janet helped, and they both tried to look as if there was no chance it would work.

"If the feds get here before you two are finished there's going to be some shooting. Probably nobody will walk out of this room. In fact, I could guarantee it."

Seabright nodded, and walked into the bell jar. He poked at cables and tapped gauges and pronounced himself satisfied. The floor inside was covered with a black rubber mat. "It's not a good idea," he said again.

Henny caught his eye. The feds were in the parking lot. They had five minutes. "Okay, Doc. Show me how you do it."

"It's simple enough." Seabright came back out and pointed at the keyboard. "Amber light means it's still powering up."

"How long will it take?"

"Another minute." His fingers moved across the keys. Four sets of twenty zeros blinked onto a monitor. "Coordinates," he said. "They determine what's at the other end of the tunnel." He entered numbers and most of the zeros converted to positive values. When he was satisfied, he pushed back from the terminal. "Okay, I think we're ready." The amber lamp turned green. More green lights blinked on around the system. "If you want to step inside, we'll get going."

Al pushed down beside him. "Which button, Doc?"

"What do you mean?"

"Which button makes it work?"

He pointed at a large square press pad that was as white as his face.

"Okay. Let's try it with you first." He nodded toward the bell jar. "Get

"You can't do that," said Seabright. "You don't know how to bring me back."

That was true. After all, they needed somebody to operate the thing. "Tell you what. Why don't we push Janet there through? See what happens?" Janet's eyes narrowed. If looks could kill, that little babe would have had them all for dinner.

Dunk eased his right hand into his pocket. (This was the kind of elegance that Al appreciated in his people.) Janet got up and the moment froze while they all waited for something to happen.

Seabright had come half out of his chair. But he slipped back down and tapped his fingers nervously on the table. "Let me make some final adjustments." He began to poke in a new set of coordinates.

Al grinned. "If there's anything I can't stand, Doc, it's people that aren't up front with me. I am not happy with you. You are lucky I am essentially good-hearted."

Seabright was trying to return the smile. "No," he said. "I just realized there was a better terminus. I'd forgot about it. We found it last night. It's a lot like here."

"I hope so. But I think it would be a good idea if you came along, just to reassure me."

Seabright opened his mouth to argue but thought better of it.

"Al," said Henny, "they're coming in the front door. Whatever we're going to do here, we better do it."

Big Al nodded. Henny picked up the bags and dragged them into the bell jar. Dunk said something to Janet. Al couldn't hear the specifics, but he knew she was being told her life depended on sitting still for the next minute or two. He looked at Seabright.

Seabright traded nervous glances with Janet. "You've got the con," he told her. He got up, walked into the bell jar, and stood beside the baggage.

Al and Dunk followed him, and when they were all inside, Seabright signaled Janet.

"Good luck," she whispered. Big Al noted with pleasure and with some disquiet

that a tear was rolling down her cheek.

She touched the white presspad. Power flowed into the system. The lights dimmed and the bell jar filled with a brick-red glow. It came in like a rising tide and Al's feet and ankles began to feel as if a mild electrical current were running through them.

Janet Keel raised one hand to wave goodbye. Al watched her, admiring her exquisite appearance and thinking how good she would have looked on his arm. Her shoulder-length black hair swirled as she got up and came around to stand directly in front of the bell jar, just outside its energy field, her dark eyes locked on Seabright.

Henny and Dunk no longer appeared solid. Henny, fading into the red light, was looking at his watch. Dunk's eyes were squeezed shut.

The room faded, flickered, and stretched. It was as if they were watching a reflection in a distorted mirror. All definition flowed out of it, and the floor no longer existed. Al drifted in a fiery cloud. He felt a surge of vertigo and then tumbled forward and fell hard on his face.

He was back in the lab.

Janet stood off to one side. She walked past him and out of his view. "Archie," she said, "are you all right?"

The walls had changed color: these were light green. And the room was smaller. Most of the desks were gone. The bell jar had become a cube, its tangle of glass and wiring had disappeared inside metal walls. He twisted around so he could see Janet. She had thrown herself into Seabright's arms. But she wore a yellow lab coat, and her black hair was cut short.

"Doc, I think you did it."

The boys looked a little shaky, but they were okay. And the luggage had come through.

Al was still trying to get his bearings when the lab door broke open and a half-dozen feds spilled into the room, guns drawn. At least, Al thought they were feds. They were dressed in brightly colored suits with hand-painted red ties and yellow hats. He recognized Frank O'Connell, the Chicago SAC. O'Connell looked so funny Al laughed out loud.

"I'm glad you're amused, Al," said O'Connell. "We should be able to provide you with a lot of laughs over the next thirty years."

"I don't get it," said Al. "What happened?"

O'Connell's confederates slapped cuffs on him and they read him his rights.

"Doc?" Al glared accusingly at Seabright, who seemed preoccupied with the cube.

"Doc, you said everything would be different here."

"I said the variables were subject to change. But human nature? I wonder."

O'Connell took him by the elbow and pushed him toward the door. "Say, Al," he said, "you need to cut back a little. You've been gaining weight."