

## DOCTOR SAM

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I sank needle-tipped buckyfibers into the boy's naked chest, connecting the Steel Diagnostician to his metabolic system. Outside the transparent dome of my floater, fragmentary blue sky parted the storm-clouds that had forced my landing. Now that the turbulence had passed, I should resume my flight back to the city, but the boy's sickness demanded my attention. He had been brought to me pale and shivering, weak-muscled, although not flinching when I inserted the sensor needles. All he knew about me was that I was Doctor Sam; all I knew about him was that he was half-grown, and sick. His mother's anxious face peered into my small cockpit as the boy squatted within the fiber-net, and the black upright cylinder of the Steel Diagnostician clicked and flashed LCD colors to reassure me that it was busy.

Why was I doing this, checking over a scrawny silent boy in a forest community not even on my list? On my tour, I had made little use of my own medical skills, merely serving the Steel Diagnostician as it assessed the villages. But here, in this unrecorded huddle of tree-dwellings discovered by accident, treating this sick boy was an act of my own free will.

As a very new doctor in the City I was chosen for the five-yearly medical tour of England's green and pleasant land. I felt honoured. Normally, the two or three doctors graduating each year were assigned straight to the Central Committee or outlying districts, but I was selected for this special flight to last six months, bringing the latest health knowledge to scattered villages, checking the efficacy of sample-monitoring, and gaining experience unique among recent graduates. The Steel Diagnostician on board would be able to synthesize and administer every conceivable bioremediation. Yes, I was very proud.

Flying out at the beginning of summer, my disk-shaped floater skimmed thrillingly over green oakwood canopies. Beyond the City large clearings were rare, but on my control panel the pulsing brain – which I could maintain, being a doctor – knew the locations of all our small villages. The post-industrial debris had been levelled and reseeded long ago, and the new forests sheltered numerous ecologically sound settlements, so unlike the self-destructive urban nightmares of the old Financial Age. Now, freed from the demands of money for ever more commerce to reproduce itself, people could live together undistracted in an infinite variety of sustainable ways.

Wonderful people filled my first months.

One village was of airy thatched huts whose folk gathered reeds or set willow fish-traps in the estuary. Others spoke to me from tents amid sheep pastures, potato fields or walnut groves. I was delighted to meet cliff-dwellers whose round wattle-and-daub cabins clung to sun-warmed ledges. Everywhere people welcomed me, their faces smiling and healthy. Once I treated the children of glassmakers – their kilns arose huge amid yellow dunes – and returned weeks later to confirm that the flea-infection had gone;

the boys and girls came running to my floater: “Doctor Sam! Doctor Sam! We knew you’d come back!” In these isolated lives, visitors were rare. Their only contacts were boundary exchanges with the next village, such as sending out mycoprotein and receiving metalwork or patchgoo in return. Most dwelt in round timber huts, but some lived in stilt-cabins above flood plains, or built high masonry towers still rising gradually after a hundred years of stone on stone. I was fascinated by the variety of buildings, biotech and people. Tall, long-legged runners chased food animals, while squat little folk tunnelled for metal or sifted through old landfill dumps. Thus, my summer passed amid sights that not one City-dweller in a thousand ever saw. Now I understood the true meaning of a word spoken sometimes by the highest City officials: *pleasure*.

By mid-autumn I was far north under grayer skies, where drizzle became frequent and the people less sociable. I would land in one cluster of low damp huts after another, bringing sullen men and women to the Steel Diagnostician for the ceaseless medical checks. By routine, I did my duty of keeping these sombre villages healthy, and would fly onward with longing memories of laughing pigeon-breeders in sunlit spires, or herdsmen singing across summer pastures. Perhaps I was thinking too much of the sunny season on my return journey, failing to notice the dark cumulonimbus ahead until sudden blue-white discharges lit up the floater cockpit. Swept along by the storm I was thrown sideways, yelling at the half-sentient brain for landing co-ordinates, but our long arc south was traversing uninhabited forests. I could only seize a calm moment and drop the floater into the nearest tiny clearing. After landing clumsily I recovered my breath, and through the dome glimpsed strange egg-shaped shadows that could only be tree-houses.

As the storm passed, the inhabitants emerged and surrounded me with spears, which they lowered on seeing me apparently unarmed. I came out to talk.

When I identified myself as a doctor travelling by, the villagers in their crudely woven cloaks soon lost interest. Only one woman stayed; middle-aged, she explained that her people seldom saw strangers but kept to themselves growing ground-nuts and flax, herding semi-wild swine and moving to fresh forest every few years. Clearly, they were unknown to our committees or to our brains. The discovery disturbed me. Should I ignore them, or should I deviate from the list to check someone here? This dilemma intensified previous doubts of mine. In the gray autumn I had come to suspect that the real doctor aboard was the Steel Diagnostician, not I, who seemed merely a shadow doctor bringing the people to it for examination. I longed to perform some task that was unequivocally my own. As the woman described her forest village I saw her people to be simple and self-sustaining, typical of the folk our tour had helped that summer. So, I was tempted to stay, and continued talking with her.

Her name was Heleth. Dressed in close-woven cloths clipped with bone pins, her long black plaits unharvested, she looked capable and caring. Perhaps these people too might know *pleasure*. I asked how her village had begun, but she replied only that they had always been travellers, moving on every few seasons. They had no specialisations, no trade goods, not even a name for themselves. Their purpose was living in harmony with the soil and the trees, ecologically and sustainably as we of the City would say. Their one lack was for a choice of partners, since their customs only permitted children

between the most distant relatives. I could sympathise with this, for City couples were selected by the brains, and that was another detail of my future beginning to occupy my thoughts.

“If you are a doctor,” said Heleth, “you could help my son.”

We sat on the flat rim of my floater, in the little grassy clearing, ignored by other villagers but not by my control panel with its increasing buzzes and flashes. I reached inside and for the first time ever paused the reminder.

“I bring health,” I said.

Her family was mostly grown-up, her husband dead by drowning a year ago, but one son still lived with her. The boy had never been strong, and this autumn had developed a wasting sickness. I explained to her how the Steel Diagnostician could check the symptoms of any patient and always find a solution. But this village was not on my list, I said.

The storm was almost gone, now only an occasional distant thunder. I felt that I should follow my flight plan now and proceed southward. That was one duty upon me. What of my other duty, the medical assessments for which I had been trained? I had graduated with the highest pass mark; no trip to the euthanasia centre as unfit for purpose, not for me. I had a duty to myself, my fellow students and my community to use my training. And Heleth was pleading with me to help her son.

“You’d better bring him to me,” I said.

So the boy came into the floater, pale and so silent compared to Heleth’s busy tongue that I knew he must be seriously ill. Fibers grown in the carbon webs of southern villages connected him to the Steel Diagnostician, while his mother waited outside. Tiny lights flickered across the black metal, yellow and orange and deepening into red. The Steel Diagnostician analysed his metabolism, and performed the actions I had seen it perform before. Swiftly, it shut down his systems.

“Euthanasia,” I told Heleth. “There is no point in prolonging unhealthy life.”

She was still screaming and beating on the hull as I lifted off, but soon fell back. I skimmed across the trees, speeding south, knowing that the decision to treat the boy had been mine, entirely mine. I knew with pride that I was a real doctor at last.

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