

# Maelstrom

## Part II: Eyes of a Stranger

by M.D. Bloemker

---

"Don't talk to me. Get out of my face."

Jordan Kerner let a fierce glare skewer his victim, then went back to furiously paging through the material in his hand, thereby missing Edgar Benedek's confident grin. It was just as well, since it wouldn't have improved the man's mood to know that his towering indignation was being seen as the smoke screen it was. Any veteran *National Register* employee knew two things: how to read the editor's moods like a book, and how to play the game when those moods went on collision course.

Benny played the game better than most, probably because he was a Grand Master at it himself, but more likely because he had more opportunities to go a few rounds with Jordy than other *Register* employees. They had enormous respect for each other but would sooner jump off the Brooklyn Bridge than admit as much, so they instead engaged in frequent, generally raucous arguments, usually carried out in the middle of the chaotic *Register* office, where no one paid much attention to them, or anything else for that matter.

Of course, this time Jordy had every right to get huffy and bent out of shape; he was perfectly justified in telling Benny to take a long walk off a short pier, which, bellowed across the length of the room, was the suggestion (or words to that effect) that had greeted Benny's arrival in the office. But Benny, knowing the rules of the game, ignored the bluster and concentrated instead on interpreting the signals. If Jordan Kerner actually meant even half of the insults he'd been hurling into Benny's face for the better part of ten minutes, he wouldn't have bothered saying anything at all. He would have given Benedek a look capable of dropping a healthy elephant dead in its tracks, and summoned building security to escort the disfavored prodigal from the premises, perhaps with the terse suggestion that they use the 'express' exit; i.e., thirteen flights down sans stairs or elevator.

The mere fact that Jordy chose to vent his spleen to Benedek's face meant that he was willing, eventually, to give the man a chance to explain himself. It was then left to Benny to prove his worth by punching through Jordy's invective long enough to get his editor to listen. Again, long experience came into play; as long as Jordy clung to his role as grievously injured party, Benny would in turn be nonchalantly contrite, steadfastly refusing to rise to the bait.

"What can I say?" he said for the fifth time, holding up his hands in surrender. "You know me, Jordy, you know that when I get in on the ground floor of a great story, I stick with it."

"You forgot how to use a phone? Getting illiterate in your old age, pal?"

"I sent you postcards," he mocked righteous indignation.

"Postcards? 'Greetings from Michigan's Upper Peninsula?' 'Lake Tahoe At Night?' They don't fill diddley in my paper, pal." He stuck a finger in Benedek's face. "You left me high and dry, Benny."

Now they were getting to the heart of the argument, but Benny decided to throw in one more diversionary tactic for good measure. "Why are you taking this so personally?" he said with a cajoling laugh.

"Personally?" Without batting an eyelash, Jordy backhanded a paper airplane that came within a hair's breadth of crash-landing on his head, pointed an accusing finger at the culprit, and continued the argument. "Oh, I know it's not personal. I had lunch with Twinkle-Toes a coupla weeks ago. Remember him? Brad, your schlock-shock publisher? Boy, did we have a lot to talk about. Mostly we talked about what a rotten jerk you are. He's been waiting three months for you to get back to him on the galley for your next 10-weeks-on-the-best-seller-list masterpiece."

"Brad!" Benedek snapped his fingers, grimacing. "Damn, I knew I forgot something."

"Well, forget it again. He's not interested anymore. *I'm* not interested anymore. You haven't had anything in print for over four months, pal. You know what that is, don't you? That's death, that's what it is. You're washed up in this business—a nobody, a has-been, yesterday's news. Now, once and for all, Mr. 'Benedek' Arnold—get *out* of my face."

For the past five minutes, a lone voice had been trying to scramble over the tumult, and for five minutes the volume had been augmented by failure. Finally, a shriek worthy of Pavrotti cut through the chaos. "Benedek!!"

"What?!" he shouted back, irritated by the interruption.

"Phone call!!"

"Tell them I'm in Tahiti researching the migratory patterns of string bikinis!"

"Who am I, your mother? Tell them yourself!"

He growled, annoyed to have his confrontation with Jordy so rudely interrupted. "Who is it?"

"*What?!?*"

His vocal cords were starting to ache; but that wasn't unusual for a typical day at the *Register*. "Who's calling?!"

"It's Georgetown Institute! They say it's important!"

Jordy's head snapped up, eyes going wide. "Georgetown Institute?" he repeated in blank astonishment. "G.I. is calling *you*?"

"What?" Benedek stared blankly at Jordy, distracted. "Oh. Yeah, I guess—" His brow furrowed. "What's the big deal?"

"Big deal?" Jordy blinked at him. "Hey, I knew you were palsy with a coupla them professors, but—they're calling *you* now?"

Benny roused enough to claim his victory. "Oh, yeah, sure," he said, feigning nonchalance. "Didn't I tell you that I'm their official consultant now? They don't make a move without checking in with me."

Jordy swallowed it whole, his eyes alight with the prospect of a staff writer with prestigious ties to a respected institution of higher learning. "Really?"

"*Benedek!*"

"I'm coming! Jordy, hold my place, I'll be right back...."

"Yeah. Yeah, take your call," Jordy told him eagerly. "And after that—we'll talk. Okay?"

Benny barely heard him, managing a faint wave of acknowledgment as he waded into the human maelstrom in search of a free extension. He finally snagged a receiver from the hand of the startled classifieds editor, giving her an apologetic smile that got him a black glare in return. Four lines were on hold; he got lucky on the third try.

"Benny?" He recognized the voice of Dr. Moorhouse's secretary, as well as the frazzled note it held. If she had been holding on an open line for more than fifteen seconds, god only knew what had come over the long distance line from the *Register* office to her ear. "I didn't interrupt anything important, did I?"

"Nah," he assured her. "As a matter of fact, it's pretty quiet around here today."

There was a moment of silence. "Right," Liz muttered dubiously.

Someone let loose a raucous trumpet solo near his ear; he countered by clapping his hand against the side of his head. "What's up?"

"What?"

"I said...hold on." He cupped the receiver long enough to yell over his shoulder. "Hey, Herb Alpert—move your brass, willya?"

The trumpet blatted a Bronx cheer, and fell mercifully silent. "I'm sorry, Liz. You were saying?"

"Dr. Moorhouse asked me to run you to earth and give you a message."

He tensed at the note of strain in her voice. "She did, huh? What's on her mind?"

"She told me to tell you that it's raining."

It felt as though something had rammed his stomach, stealing his ability to form coherent speech at the same time. The silence on the other end of the long distance line grew. He knew perfectly well that while Liz didn't understand the full significance of the odd message, she was well aware of the fact that there wasn't a cloud in the sky in either D.C. or New York. She was waiting for his reaction to give her even the barest clue to Dr. Moorhouse's strange request, undoubtedly frustrated by his long silence.

"Thanks," he managed to stammer after two failed attempts to speak. "Ah—tell Dr. Moorhouse...tell her...."

Tell her what? Dr. Moorhouse already knew what his answer was, and anything he said now would just confuse Liz more. He should just thank her politely and hang up, but his curiosity as well as his growing apprehension finally got the better of him. "Liz?"

"Yes?" Her tone frosted over.

"What's been happening?"

Now it was her turn to frustrate him with silence. He became aware of a sharp ache in his hand and willed himself to relax his death grip on the receiver as he waited for her answer.

At length, Liz sighed. "Look, Benny. I don't pretend to understand what's going on around here, but...I think you'd better get here as soon as you can."

"I'm on the next shuttle out of LaGuardia."

He could almost see her nodding, a harbored suspicion or three confirmed. "The tickets are waiting for you at the gate."

He went on automatic to finish the call, letting Classifieds snatch back the receiver from his numb hand. Raining. It wasn't the code phrase for the worst of the scenarios he and Dr. Moorhouse had secretly theorized, but it was bad enough. And just when he'd allowed himself the comfort of believing that things could get back to normal.

Bitterness welled up inside him, but he was spared having to fight it back alone. Jordy's voice near his ear distracted him from descending into a black mood. "I've been thinking," the man said around a pencil clenched between his teeth, diligently flipping through new copy someone had just shoved into his hands. "You could really do a lot with this G.I. connection, y'know? Those egghead factories always got something jumping. And you're gonna give me first crack at whatever you get, right?"

Benedek hesitated, trying to think of a painless way to tell Jordy that he was about to leave him high and dry again, along with the more difficult admission that he didn't have a clue how long he'd be gone this time.

Jordy glanced up, nodded, then shoved a folder into the face of Classifieds. "We'll talk about it some more when you get back, okay?" And with that, he turned away to plow through the milling chaos back to his office.

Benedek, mouth falling open, watched him go. New respect for his old friend and editor brought a smile to his face, and he decided to savor the glow for as long as he could. He had the sneaking suspicion that soon he was going to be hard-pressed to find anything to smile about.

Liz looked up when the office door opened, and her standard greeting died on her lips. In her experience, Edgar Benedek bounded, sailed, hopped, jumped and otherwise announced his exits and entrances with all the subtlety and finesse of a buffalo stampede. He didn't open the door and slip in with a quiet smile and nod of acknowledgment as he did now before her startled eyes.

He paused in front of her desk to point soundlessly at Dr. Moorhouse's closed office door. Liz roused long enough to manage a nod and a quick gesture assuring him that his arrival was expected.

"Thanks," he said in a pale ghost of his usual chipper voice. With that, he rapped sharply on the inner door and entered without waiting for an answer.

Her astonishment dissolved into irritation as she slumped back in her chair, shaking her head. This was the last straw. The summer session had been awkward enough, what with her employer spending over three months in a state of nervous, albeit remarkably controlled, agitation. Liz pretended not to notice when Dr. Moorhouse casually informed her that there were certain phone calls she was not expected to screen, certain pieces of mail she was not expected to open, and certain curious actions that she was not expected to question. All in all, Liz felt she deserved an enormous amount of credit for restraining her curiosity for as long as she had. But the past three weeks, culminating in the sudden reappearance of Prof. MacKensie put a whole new light on the matter.

In recent weeks, Dr. Moorhouse had grown uncharacteristically edgy and brooding. Benedek became an occasional entry in the appointment book, usually with a cryptic shorthand notation in Dr. Moorhouse's handwriting. And Jonathan— Liz didn't know what to make of him. He seemed as mannered and polite as always, but Liz couldn't shake the impression that somehow, this was only a pale, shadowed version of the man whose disappearance over four months ago had yet, in her mind at least, to be explained.

She paused over that thought. There was no real reason to disbelieve Dr. Moorhouse's firm assertion that Jonathan had been away on some remote African dig. But disbelieve it she did. And it had something to do with the shadow that crossed Randy's face every time the subject came up, a kind of bitterness that Liz couldn't quite fathom. All she knew was that while Randy refused to discuss her opinion on any matter concerning Prof. MacKensie and his recent doings, the young coed remained troubled by the entire situation.

And now this. Dr. Moorhouse gave her an imperative request to track Edgar Benedek down, wherever he was, whatever it took, just to give him a spurious weather report; a message that had brought the man at a dead run, to boot. Liz slapped a pen irritably against the edge of her desk. Administrative assistant? She might as well be on the other side of the moon for all the trust her employer seemed to be willing to put in her. This whole business was making her feel less than useless. No—the word was frustrated. She could feel her suspicious nature rear up, sniffing the air expectantly as it waited for the first tangible signs of the danger it sensed lurking just beyond. But there was nothing more than the faintest whiff of the acrid scent of fear.

There was pain here. Liz saw it in Dr. Moorhouse's pale, taut face and her haunted eyes. She saw it in the almost palpable weight that suppressed Edgar Benedek's jaunty step and strangled his infectious *joie de vivre*. And she glimpsed it in the furtive, curiously strained face of an unusually subdued Jonathan MacKensie.

But it was not her place to question; Dr. Moorhouse had made that more than clear back when Liz voiced her first overtures of concern months ago. Even Jonathan had mildly but firmly rebuffed her casual inquiries about his health and well-being. She had to settle for remaining on the outside looking in and hope somehow she would be content with that.

The inner door opened. Benedek emerged, Dr. Moorhouse close behind him.

"Is the driver still waiting?" Dr. Moorhouse asked, pausing in front of Liz's desk.

Her secretarial instincts snapped into place; her hand went to the telephone as she replied, "In the foyer, I think. Shall I check?"

Benny, who had continued on to the door and then backed up when he discovered Dr. Moorhouse was not with him, was tugging at the woman's arm. Liz's bewilderment hit two levels at the same time: surprise at Dr. Moorhouse's obvious and uncharacteristic indecision and astonishment at Benedek's rudeness.

The third level came hard on the heels of the other two; Dr. Moorhouse allowed Benedek to drag her out the door with only enough time to say, "Have him wait just a little while longer, won't you?"

She stared at the door long after there was nothing at which to stare. Then, abruptly, her shock dissipated into growing anger. If they persisted in playing these odd little games around her then she was determined to show them, just as obliquely, exactly how she felt about that. Flipping open her department schedule, she tracked down the current day and, checking her watch, scribbled down the

appropriate information. Dr. Moorhouse and Benedek returned just as she finished, and she favored them with a taut smile as Benny leaned in the doorway.

"Ah, Liz?" he said with his friendliest grin. "Would you happen to know...?"

"He's covering Paleontology 103 for Professor Dunhill," she replied calmly. "He should be back in his office by 11:30."

There was a grim satisfaction to be had from the almost panicked exchange of looks between Benny and Dr. Moorhouse, but it had a bitter taste. She could tell that she had scored a good guess as to the root of their subdued consternation, but revealing her knowledge looked as if it had only added to their agitation.

But her deliberate parry was forgotten as Benny and Dr. Moorhouse fell into whispered conversation in the doorway. Liz stiffened to hear her employer say, "I'm going to cancel the driver."

*Cancel her luncheon speaking engagement?* She was the keynote speaker at the Alumni Association's yearly banquet meeting, an honor accorded only once, if ever, during a person's lifetime; for weeks after the invitation arrived in the mail, making plans for this speech had been the only thing that had brought a healthy flush of color to her cheeks. Liz shook her head in disbelief. The pencil in her hand nearly snapped between her whitened fingers as she went still, not even breathing less she miss what else was being said.

Benny shook his head vehemently. "No, no, go make your speech. Look...I can handle this." He hesitated at the piercing look the woman gave him. "I can," he insisted. "It's just a couple of hours, right? No crisis. Go make your speech."

She inflated to make a protest, then sighed. "All right. Liz knows how to contact me, if..." Breaking off, she glanced at her white-faced secretary, then fixed a searching look on Benny. "You're sure?"

"The trouble with you is that you don't know when to fold 'em," he cracked, giving her an impatient wave into the office. "Come on, get your stuff and make tracks before the rubber chicken gets cold." He paused to check his watch as Dr. Moorhouse collected her briefcase from her silent secretary. "Wait up, I'll walk you to the car. Liz, sweetheart—could you track someone down for me?"

---

Following Liz's terse directions, he arrived at the coed dorm on the campus fringe within ten minutes. The front desk security guard affirmed that Liz had called ahead, and that Room 102 expected his arrival.

But a full minute passed after his first knock. Frowning, he leaned closer to listen for movement behind the door. Just as he lifted his hand to try again, the door opened. Randy, a towel wrapped loosely around damp hair, gave him a long, appraising look before wheeling back, gesturing. "Come in."

He did, alerted by the coolness in her voice and manner. This wasn't the same pleasant, easy-going coed he remembered; granted he hadn't seen her for over four months, and granted he wasn't exactly the same person he'd been four months ago either, but the cloud over her face was dark, ominous—and angry.

His unease grew as he stopped in the middle of the sparsely furnished room. Waiting for her to close the door and wheel around again to face him, he gave himself a moment to appreciate how college dorm rooms had changed since his day; this one looked almost comfortable, and he felt envy to spot the door of what had to be a private bathroom.

Pulling up his brightest smile, he greeted her jauntily. "So, Randy, long time no see, eh? How's the computer biz? Still byting?"

It was a lame attempt even his genial cackle couldn't save, and she greeted it with a frosty smile. "Please. Sit down."

He took a place on the futon couch, all his cautionary senses on full alert. Even Dr. M at her most imperious had never unsettled him quite like this.

Randy moved her wheelchair closer, waiting until her hands were neatly folded in her lap before speaking. "Liz called to tell me you were on your way over," she began, her voice steady and taut, like a thread stretched to its breaking point. "She said you had some questions you wanted to ask me."

Eyeing her warily, he nodded. He knew that tone of voice quite well; knew that it presaged a careful plan of attack, and he was getting the awful feeling that he was the intended target.

"Just a few questions," he qualified with what he hoped was a winning smile. "I won't take up much of your time and...."

He trailed off, the hard gleam in her eye somehow stealing the words from his mouth. Her jaw stiffened. "Well, I happen to have a few questions of my own," she said, soft and dangerous.

This was a mistake. The jarring realization almost shot him out of his seat and out the door, but her piercing stare nailed him to the couch. He swallowed hard, mustering up the best innocent smile he could manage.

She settled back in her chair, still pinning him with her steel-hard glare. "I'll make this easy for you, Benny," she began evenly. "I did work/study over the summer session. I heard...rumors. I didn't believe them, of course; I don't think anyone really did. But the fact remained that Jonathan was gone; no one really seemed to know where he was or what had happened to him. And tenured professors do not leave for remote African digs on less than twenty-four hours notice without at least arranging for someone to cover their course load." She paused, staring down at the fingers she clenched and unclenched on the arm of her wheelchair. "I tried calling you."

He winced at the accusation. Of course he'd never returned her calls; there was nothing he could have told her then, just as there was nothing he could tell her now.

"Liz told me that you showed up in Dr. Moorhouse's office a few days later and left without saying a word to anyone else. Oh, yes—you made a brief stop at the bursar's office. I know all about the expense account," she said to his startled look. "Who do you think correlates the budgetary data for Accounting?"

Her trap was closing; he held his breath in anticipation of the bite of closing steel jaws.

"Then no one seemed to know where you were, either. I even called the *Register*. Your editor was barely coherent."

"Yeah," he forced himself to say, almost a sigh. "Jordy always did have a blood pressure problem."

"I shouldn't wonder," she snapped, leaving him to curse silently for opening himself to that one. "Seems you hadn't bothered to tell anyone where you were going. Anyone except Dr. Moorhouse. She knew, didn't she? Don't bother lying to me, Benny." Her voice rose. "I have all the receipts. I know the name of every motel, hotel, travel inn and motor lodge you stayed in; I know the make and model of every car you rented, where you picked it up and where you dropped it off. And I have all the long distance telephone bills, collect and direct. Dr. Moorhouse knew where you were the whole time. She *knew* what you were doing."

And he knew what was coming. She was going to ask a question he couldn't answer, and this whole thing was going to explode in his face. Why hadn't Dr. Moorhouse warned him about this? Unless she didn't know. For some reason she'd been unaware of Randy's relentless search for the truth; either Dr. Moorhouse had been too absorbed in her own attempts to deal with the difficulty, or Randy hadn't been overt in her ongoing personal investigation. Whatever the reason, he'd walked, all unawares, into a mess.

He reached for a bluff, found one, tossed it out with practiced ease. "Well, I guess you found me out," he shrugged. "I was saving this for my next book, but I can count on your discretion, right? See, this African thing Dr. Jon got involved in? I did this—"

"Benny," she said sharply, cutting him dead. "Don't keep lying to me. Please. He didn't go to Africa. There are no expenses for Jonathan until three weeks ago, which was just about the time Dr. Moorhouse started looking like a walking ghost. Benny—hospital emergency room charges? Ambulatory care equipment bills?" Pain grew in her eyes as a quaver threatened her voice. "It had to do with that carnival fire, didn't it?"

The trap sprang, catching him off-guard with its swift strike. He jumped from the couch, only partially covering his violent flinch by pacing the small room. Watching him closely, she continued, "The fire made the AP wire. It wasn't hard to put the pieces together after that. You see, I was scheduled to coordinate that sample testing with Jonathan. I knew where he was going the day he disappeared. It was the same carnival, Benny. It's not a coincidence." Her voice softened; steely, but hinting a heartfelt plea. "And don't bother trying to convince me it is. And don't tell me it was some kind of nervous collapse. I would've known, Benny. I have a psych minor, my mother is a psychiatrist, I *know* the danger signals. They just weren't there. He was looking forward to the summer break, he had plans to finish his thesis, he was going to a seminar in Wisconsin, he...." Her voice broke; tears glimmered in her eyes. "Benny, he had *plans*. It wasn't a nervous breakdown, the facts just don't fit. And I know...."

This time she trailed off, as though the words eluded her. Her eyes unfocused as a memory painfully unfurled within her. "The last thing he said to me, just before he left to meet you, was: 'I'll call you tonight about lunch tomorrow.'"

She fell silent, covering her face in the hand propped against the wheelchair arm. Benedek was left in silence too, strangely enervated. How easy it would be if he could laugh off her pain as the pouting of a young woman who'd been stood up for a lunch date over four months ago. But it was too late for that; he could sympathize with that pain, knowing how much of it he still had left inside him despite his best efforts to exorcise it. He knew what an ordeal it was to put together a puzzle piece by painful piece, only to have the answer remain maddeningly elusive. The difference was that he had found his answer; she was still searching. And he couldn't help her.

"I didn't find out he was back until his name turned up on the computerized class schedule," she said, her voice under control once more. "He wasn't in when I called his office, so I went there to wait for him. He...." She hesitated, her fingers moving slightly as though she were willing them to help her gather her thoughts. "Benny, he wouldn't talk to me. He said pleasant things, made a few remarks about his new schedule, and then excused himself. He ran away from me." Now her tears flowed freely. "Benny, please. Tell me what happened. Make me understand what's happened."

He forced his head to move, to deny that there were reasons for her tears, and felt nauseous doing it. "He's fine, believe me," he heard someone using his voice say. "Maybe still a little stressed-out, but...."

"Don't lie to me!" Her wet eyes blazed at him. "And don't treat me like some hysterical child, either. He's not fine, he's not just a little stressed-out. Benny—it's as if he's not even *there*; it's as if a stranger came back in his place. He looks the same, sounds the same—but he's not the same."

She punctuated the last word by slamming her hand against the arm of the wheelchair, and he flinched at the blow. Her emotion-laden insights were threatening to unnerve him completely. "Listen, I've got to make tracks here," he lied, smoothly controlling a nervous stammer. "Now look, don't worry about Jonathan, okay? I'm telling you, he's just going through a little bad stuff right now, but it's nothing to get upset about...."

"Then why did you come here?"

He slumped. *A mistake*, he cursed, *this was a mistake*. Here he'd blithely thought he could wangle a few harmless questions past her, and instead he'd crashed head-on into her emotional involvement with Jonathan MacKensie. If he'd given it any thought, he might have guessed something like this would happen, but then again no one could accuse him of thinking clearly these days.

"I can see you're a little upset," he tried again. "Why don't we do lunch sometime and I'll...."

He deliberately strangled the rest of his words to see a shadow steal the light from her eyes. As much as he desperately wanted to leave, the strained silence was like a hooked rope, holding him fast. He couldn't bring himself to turn his back on her, not like this. Her months of pain and frustration had been just as real and just emotionally destructive as his had been, only in her case she still had no peace.

And he still had none to give her. Turning back from the door, he moved to her side, reaching down to cover her trembling hand with his.

She reacted, looking first at him and then at his hand. Her muscles tensed at the contact, as though she were still deciding whether she was ready to accept anything, even a small expression of comfort, from a man she knew was deceiving her.

Hesitantly, he began, "Look, Randy. I realize you want some answers, and I don't blame you."

"But you don't think I deserve them. You don't think it's any of my business."

"No," he said, wincing at her cold, clipped voice. "No, that's not it."

Her eyes burned fire at him. "Then what *is* it? Why did he run away from me?"

"He didn't run away from you," he managed after two attempts to speak failed. "He...just can't handle the questions right now. That's what he was running away from, not you."

She stared at him, defying his lie. "All I want to do is help," she insisted stubbornly.

"I know, I know you do," he said with a wan smile.

"Then why won't you let me?"

The answer was so simple, so direct, and impossible for him to give voice. He couldn't let her help because he couldn't get her involved. There were too many people involved already, and the cloud hanging over all three of them was growing too fast. And when it came down to cases, there was nothing Randy could do to help. He had to continue deceiving her, for her own sake as well as his own.

"Look, there's nothing to worry about. Jonathan's just fine." The words sounded almost right, surprising even himself. "Don't worry. Trust me, okay?"

"So that's it? Trust you and keep my mouth shut?"

Her brutal frankness had hit him square on so many times that he could swear he was getting punch drunk. All he could manage was a mute nod.

Her hand was like a cold stone under his; her eyes were fixed on some distant point within herself. When she spoke, it was from that faraway place, thin and still. "Benny, why are you still lying to me?"

He'd brought that pain to her voice and he cursed himself for it. No more half-hearted reassurances came to him; his deep sigh brought up the truth. "Because I have to."

And with that, he rose quickly, averting his eyes from the sharp look of question he knew would stop him dead in his tracks if he allowed himself to see it. He mumbled a curt goodbye, and sought freedom beyond the door, steeling himself to shut it on the plaintive cry: "Benny?"

His heart didn't stop pounding until he turned down the last corridor toward Jonathan's office. Outside the door, he paused to check his watch. Only 11:45 in the morning, and already he felt like one of the walking wounded. Granted, shuttling from New York to D.C. at the drop of a hint, then hopping around G.I. at a dead run could be considered a contributing factor, but only if he were a normal person. As it was, he'd spent most of his life at a dead run, and it had never exhausted him like this. One emotionally charged confrontation after another—Dr. Moorhouse, Randy, even Liz after a fashion—had him tapped out. He'd trade them all for a rousing, relaxing row with Jordan Kerner right now, because he had a feeling he was about to step into what would either be a breather—or the worst confrontation of all.

And he still didn't know much more beyond what little detail Dr. Moorhouse had provided. Before departing for her speaking engagement, she'd given him a rundown of all the strange incidents culminating in her decision to call him in, and while he could certainly share her apprehensions, there was still nothing concrete to grab onto. She'd affirmed that Jonathan had settled easily into the light work schedule she designed for him. He showed up on time every day, completed his workload, and went home at the same time each afternoon. His attitude was polite, if subdued, and he'd borne the expected questions with remarkable aplomb, fending them off with a smile and a carefully rehearsed reply. The episodes causing her concern were few, but potentially alarming. MacKensie suffered from occasional memory lapses, once in the midst of a class lecture. In that particular case, the report was that Prof. MacKensie stopped, stared around at the class as though he'd never seen them before, then turned on his heel, leaving the room and twenty puzzled students behind. Other incidents included reports of MacKensie exhibiting uncharacteristic flashes of temper with students, when ordinarily he enjoyed a reputation as a patient and tolerant teacher. Minor points, but telling, since when pressed by Dr. Moorhouse for explanation, Jonathan vehemently rebuffed her concern.

Those facts forced Benny to admit to her and to himself that Jonathan *was* behaving erratically, but, given the ordeal he'd barely managed to survive, the question was whether those behavioral aberrations were acceptable within certain limits, or whether there was a deeper underlying problem that had nothing to do with Jonathan's mutilated psyche.

The thought sent a chill through him. How ironic that he should be standing here actually hoping that MacKensie was exhibiting nothing more than residual psychosis.



Taking a deep breath and mentally crossing his fingers, he knocked briskly and poked his head in without waiting for an answer. Jonathan MacKensie stood by his desk, bent down to search through a pile of folders. At Benedek's entrance, he glanced up and a smile etched onto his face.

Benny entered with a diffident nod, his smile of greeting masking the intensity with which he considered the odd expression on his friend's face. It wasn't a greeting, of that much he was immediately certain. It was anticipatory, the smile of someone whose expectations had been fulfilled. Even as he kicked back into the recliner, pretending that he'd just dropped by on a whim, he knew that Jonathan had been waiting for him to show up.

"How's it going?" he began breezily. "They got you hopping already?"

Jonathan looked up as he extracted a folder from the pile. "Going fine," he nodded, stepping around the desk to take his seat.

Benny tensed, eyes narrowing. MacKensie settled in the chair like someone experiencing a luxury for the very first time.

He waited to see if Jonathan would continue the conversation but the man pretended interest in the contents of the file before him. That gave Benny time to think of something to say, something that would cut to the heart without wasting any more time or putting more wear and tear on his already frazzled nerves.

He composed himself, making sure he was reasonably calm before venturing, "Just thought I'd stop by to see if you wanted to go fishing this weekend. Spin-casting for rainbow trout, maybe?"

Jonathan glanced up with mild disinterest. "Fishing?" He shrugged, returning to his reading. "No. I don't think so."

Benny felt nothing. There was nothing left to feel, no part of his being free from the sudden flash of cold. He stared at Jonathan, wondering if it was too late to wake up and scrub the nightmare from his burning eyes.

And here he'd thought it was over. Although even that wasn't completely true; if he'd been that naive, neither he nor Dr. Moorhouse would have spent hours closeted together putting together scenarios for possible repercussions and devising code phrases to cover them. But he'd prayed it was over, prayed with a fervency he hadn't felt since his disillusioned youth. And now his heartfelt prayer had just been sledge-hammered into oblivion.

Jonathan was doing a poor job of pretending nonchalance; his quick darting glances colored by a faint smirk betrayed him as he bent over the open folder. He seemed perfectly content to wait for Benedek's next move.

Benny realized his only hope was that Jonathan's recent ordeal had engendered a warped and perverse sense of humor in the man. If this was MacKensie's idea of a sick joke, he wasn't amused; but he would, conversely, be immensely relieved. He let anger heat his voice as he said, "So. How's your *Australopithecus* thesis coming along?"

MacKensie blinked disappointment at the calmly voiced question. Then he crooked a smile. "Wouldn't know," he shrugged before dropping his gaze again.

Benedek watched his fingers go white around the arm of the recliner. "Wouldn't know what? Whether you've made any progress on the paper—or what *Australopithecus* is?"

The slow, bright smile Jonathan gave him drained the color from Benny's face. "I don't even know what a thesis is," MacKensie laughed, a low chuckle. Then, with a sudden, violent gesture, he swept the papers from the desk, his laugh growing into a full guffaw. Settling back with his hands locked behind his head, he grinned at Benedek. "You're better than I would've given you credit for."

"You're not a very good actor," Benedek muttered bleakly.

He pulled a pout. "You mean I didn't have you going for just a little while?"

The world tilted, threatening to spin him off into a beckoning blackness. Benny closed his eyes, seeking refuge in the temporary haven of blindness. He fought the sickness in his churning stomach, fought the assault of despair pummeling his battered senses. He fought with everything he had, clinging to one last shred of hope—that there would be a positive answer to the single question he was able to form. "Jonathan?"

The low chuckle hit him like a physical blow, punching the breath out of his lungs. "You know, for a guy who's supposed to be so smart, you keep making the same mistake, don't you?"

He wanted to scream. Paralyzed, unable to move or open his eyes, he became aware that Jonathan rose and approached the recliner.

"Want me to tell you where your buddy is?" Lon's voice, soft and sibilant, thick with well-fed contentment. "He's in a hole. A real deep hole, nice and dark. I made it just for him. He can hear us, y'know. But I don't think he's listening right now."

And Benedek, cold, knew why. He forced his eyes open to see for himself. Lon stood over the chair, his face suffused with the sleek glow of sated hunger.

He stared until he found enough anger with which to function. "Damn you," he growled, shaking his head numbly. "Damn you."

Lon laughed shortly. "Nice try, but you're too late."

Fury propelled him out of the recliner, an explosive movement Lon managed to anticipate. He snagged Benny's arm, throwing him back into the chair. Leaning in, he pinned Benedek, holding his wrist in a crushing grip. "You know what your problem is?" Lon hissed inches from his face. "You got too comfortable. You walked right in here and sat down like you owned the place, didn't you? Didn't have a clue, did you?" His eyes narrowed. "Or did you? Yeah. Yeah, you did." He snorted. "Then you're just as stupid as I always knew you were."

"Let go," Benny grated.

Lon obliged by tightening his grip until Benny winced in pain. "Let go?" he mocked softly. "I should kill you."

The threat didn't give him pause, but the implied indecision did. If Lon didn't mean to kill him, then his words hinted at some darker purpose. "Why don't you, then?"

"Because I don't feel like doing you any favors," Lon sneered. "But I'll tell you what you *are* gonna do. You're gonna pay for what you did to me and Harmon and Billy and all the others. You're gonna make it right again."

"And you're going to tell me how that's supposed to happen?" Benedek growled.

Lon met his sarcasm with a sneer. "How it *will* happen."

He backed down, unwilling to provoke Lon any further on that point. "What is this wonderful miracle you expect me to pull off for you?"

Lon released him roughly, shoving a finger into Benedek's face. "You," he breathed, eyes glinting hatred. "You destroyed Harmon. He was the focus that gave us what we needed, and now he's gone, and you're the one who did it."

"What do you want, an apology?" Benedek spat. "Then you might as well kill me now, pal, because I'm gonna die of old age before you can get me to say I'm sorry for offing that bastard."

Lon closed his hand on Benedek's throat. "Apology?" Lon laughed in his face as he struggled, briefly and in vain, to free himself. "Nah. When it comes right down to it, we don't need Harmon. All we need is a focus...and you'll do just fine."

Benny stared at him, the choking hold on his throat forgotten in a flood of stark horror. He had only a dim idea of what purpose Harmon served as a focus for the demonic forces Lon represented, but even that vague understanding was enough to send his stomach into heaving convulsions. To become the receptacle, the conductor and receiver of such unvarnished perversion and evil.... His mind recoiled, refusing to process the thought. "No," he cried despite his best efforts to remain mute. A part of himself slipped his control, descending into panic. "No!" it cried again, desperation coloring what little of his voice it took with it. He squeezed his eyes shut, but instead of regaining control, panic unexpectedly overwhelmed him. "*No!*" he screamed, clawing at the arm with which Lon still held him down.

His struggle lasted until Lon choked him into near-unconsciousness. He fell back with a gasp, oddly grateful for the pain supplanting hysteria. Lon's smirk swam before his blurred eyes, taunting him. "I'm glad you're keeping an open mind about this," he said, his voice gilded with delight. "But since you're having a little trouble making a decision here, let me lay it out for you, okay?"

He straightened, leaving Benny to slump into the depths of the chair, glaring up at the malefic grin above him. "You can walk out that door if you want. I won't stop you. Of course, that's easy enough to say since I've got a pretty good idea that I won't *have* to stop you. You wanna know why? Because I know just how really stupid you are. Because if you walk out now, you're never gonna see your little pal again."

"Maybe I'm not as stupid as you think," Benedek rasped. "Maybe I've figured out that it doesn't matter one way or the other."

Lon feigned surprise. "Doesn't it? Come on, Benny." He laughed to emphasize the sarcastic twist he gave the name. "Think about it. I said we needed a focus, but I'm doing okay without one for now, right? And I'll keep doing just fine, for however long it takes."

"Takes?" Benny studied him, narrow-eyed. "Takes for what? Until I fold? Turn blue, pal."

"You're still not thinking, are you? What do you suppose I could do with poor Dr. MacKensie while I wait for you to make up your mind, hm? I know." He pressed a finger to his mouth, eyes dancing. "I could get him a part-time job. Exotic dancer? Wouldn't that be interesting? I'd have to make sure it was a place the police raid on a regular basis. You know, I could get our honored professor a really impressive rap sheet. How about if he became the local campus 'candyman'? Of course, he'd have to sample his wares; wouldn't be much of a salesman if he couldn't vouch for his own goods. As far as that goes, I have an even better idea—a street pimp. Oh, yeah, I like that. Has an eye for the ladies, doesn't he? He could recruit right out of his own classes, couldn't he?" The light in Lon's eyes died abruptly. "Of course, that would take too much time. I think I'll try for something more immediate."

Benny tensed. If what went before proved a teasing prelude, the real threat was yet to come.

"Poor Dr. MacKensie," Lon clucked in mock pity. "No one really knew how ill he was. Was there something they could have done to prevent this terrible tragedy? How did they miss the signs? Or—oh, no, could it be? Yes—yes, it must have been Edgar Benedek's fault. It must have been his influence, yes, that must have been it. It's all his fault. If it weren't for him, Jonathan MacKensie wouldn't have killed Dr. Moorhouse, and in front of all those people, too."

"No." His cry was sharp, only a hint of the anguish cleaving through him like a burning blade. "No. Leave her out of this."

"Oh, I intend to," Lon smirked. "Permanently."

"This is between you and me." His voice rose, shaking with rage too long suppressed. "Just you and me, dammit—she has nothing to do with this!"

"If I say she does, she does," Lon snapped. "And if it gets me what I want, then that's what I say. Of course—it's all up to you, isn't it?"

"You bastard," Benedek hissed between clenched teeth.

Lon acknowledged the curse with a nod. "And what are you gonna do about it? Come to think of it, what *can* you do about anything at all? Can you stop me from going out that door right now? I don't think so."

"You don't, huh?" Benedek growled. "Try it. You might be in for a big surprise."

"Hey, that *would* be interesting," Lon chuckled. He leaned forward, crushing Benny's wrists against the arms of the chair, his smile spreading at the man's hiss of pain. "Go on. Surprise me. What do you wanna try first? Rabbit punch? Half-nelson? A well-placed kick in the solar plexus? And what happens then, huh? How are you gonna stop me without attracting attention? And when campus security shows up, who do you think they're gonna believe?" He let his smile grow in Benedek's ashen face. "You'll do her a lot of good rotting in jail, won't you? Face it, pal—there's only one way you're gonna keep her breathing. Give up."

Benedek stared at him, feeling only the heaving exertions of his lungs fighting against the crushing weight of despair. He was left with no options, no alternatives, no where to turn. Nothing but the unacceptable choice Lon forced him toward.

Panic, despair, anguish and anger jockeyed for position, trampling his composure underfoot in the melee. Then, from nowhere, hatred and revulsion clawed through the storm. With Lon still trapping him in the recliner, Benedek expressed the explosion the only way he could and spat in Lon's face.

For a moment, Lon remained motionless, a tense smile quivering on his lips. Then, with a snarl, he reared back, slamming his fist against Benedek's head.

The hands Benny brought up to defend himself were grabbed, twisted, used to yank him out of the recliner and shove him, hard, to the floor. Senses shattering in a thousand pain-racked pieces, Benny clung for support in the carpeting, gasping for the breath his stunned nerves denied him. One part of him, unbowed by the violent assault, screamed at him to defend himself, but it was too late; Lon landed a vicious kick in Benedek's side, doubling him over in agony.

Lon snagged his collar, snarling the material tightly into his neck. "Do you want more?" he hissed in Benedek's face. "I'll give you more. I'll break you within an inch of your pathetic life and leave you there. What do you think about that, huh?"

He swallowed the blood pooling in the back of his throat. "A fat lot of good I'll be to you that way."

Lon laughed his indifference. "Hey, I only need you alive. You don't have to be functional."

Released, Benedek collapsed on the floor while Lon straightened, still chuckling. "I'll tell you what I'm gonna do," he said, his voice sweetly soft. "Since you're looking a little under the weather, why don't you stay here and rest up a bit while I take care of some business, okay? If I get back, we can continue this discussion. If I don't get back, maybe they'll let you in for a visit after the arraignment."

Through a red mist of throbbing pain, he heard the steel in Lon's voice. This wasn't a taunt; he was going to do it. He was going to attack Dr. Moorhouse, he was going to kill her, and there was nothing, nothing Benny could do to stop it. Nothing. *Nothing.*

Lon's shoe against his throat cut his weak cry of protest. "Well, Mr. Benedek?" he mocked, eyebrows arching. "If you don't have anything else to say, then I guess I'll be on my way."

Lon's bellowing laughter continued out the door and echoed all the way down the corridor.

Unable to move, Benedek huddled on the floor, paralyzed by pain and the evil sound of that mocking laughter, mocking him, mocking his pain, mocking his helplessness. His physical pain didn't matter so much save where it made it difficult to think. The hammer blows to his psyche were the telling ones. *It's not fair.* A little voice cried out in the darkness of his mind. *It's supposed to be over, it's not fair, it just isn't fair.* He'd fought to the very limits of his endurance and beyond, and still the evil returned. Only now it spread like a bitter stain, curling its sinuous fingers around others, tainting and corrupting their lives. He'd fought so hard, and still he'd lost. That wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. He deserved to win; if he couldn't win, what was the use of fighting, then? What was the use of anything any more?

Black despair beckoned seductively. How easy to just give up, slip into the comforting embrace of oblivion. If only, if only he could be sure that he would never wake up....

That thought alone caused him more pain than any of Lon's savage blows, snapping him out of his morass of self-pity. He hissed his denial out loud. He wouldn't give up. He couldn't give up. He'd never allow himself to give Lon that satisfaction.

Precious time was being lost; he had to get a warning to Dr. Moorhouse. Fixating on that thought, he ruthlessly pushed all other considerations and their accompanying emotions from his mind. He had to get to her before Lon did.

Every pain-racked movement threatened to shut down his entire nervous system and take his consciousness with it. Teeth gritted, he used the edge of the desk to pull himself up. Clutching his bruised ribs, he paused long enough to control his ragged breathing, then snared the telephone, punching out the numbers for Liz's extension.

"Liz, sweetheart," he greeted her, cursing the spasm of pain breaking his attempt to sound normal. "Do me a favor, okay?"

"Benny?" Her voice was tense, alert. "You sound funny. Are you...?"

"Liz, listen to me. This is important. Get hold of Dr. M, pronto. I don't care if she's in the middle of her speech or the second course, just get a message to her, whatever it takes. Tell her—" He paused, closing his eyes as pain having nothing to do with his injuries stabbed through him. "Tell her the storm is headed her way, and so am I."

"Benny—"

"Liz, just do it. No questions, okay?" He hesitated. "Liz, her life depends on it. Please."

"Okay," she stammered. "I'll...I'll call...oh, god, Benny—what's happening?"

"I wish I knew," he sighed. "No time left, Liz—I gotta run. Just get that message to her, and...keep your fingers crossed. Thanks."

Hanging up, he tried to put her confused and hurt voice out of his mind. She wouldn't panic, no matter how frightened he'd made her. He could count on her to get the message through, and with that thought, he pushed himself to his feet. He had to get to the hotel, and could only hope that a brief stop at the chem lab wouldn't prove a fatal delay.

---

He left a trail of nonplused bystanders in his wake, starting with the students in the chem lab, continuing with the cab driver and hotel doorman, and culminating with the banquet attendees. Bounding onstage, he slipped the charge of two uniformed security guards, gaining Dr. Moorhouse's side to whisper urgently in her ear. Ashen, she clutched at his arm, regaining just enough composure to wave off the approach of the angry guards. Then, without a word to the distinguished scientists seated on either side of her, she let Benedek drag her from the podium, ignoring the collective confusion rising behind them.

They were in a utility corridor somewhere near the kitchens when Dr. Moorhouse yanked Benedek to a halt, gesturing frantically that she needed to regain her breath. He acquiesced reluctantly, glancing around with a nervousness that she didn't miss. But her apprehension dissolved into puzzlement, then outright astonishment to finally get a good look at the bruise swelling Benny's eye, and blood staining his jaw. "Dear god," she breathed. "What happened?"

"I'll explain everything once we get out of here. Liz got hold of you okay? Then you know most of it already."

She stared at him, shaking her head numbly. "I thought I did, but I'm not so sure anymore. He...he did this to you?"

"It wasn't him, Dr. M," he said, averting his eyes from her open anguish. "It's...important to remember that, okay?"

There was no color in her face nor in the lips she pressed tightly together. With trembling hands, she produced a handkerchief from her handbag, offering it to him. "You're bleeding again," she said quietly.

He thanked her soundlessly, dabbing at his cut lip with the cloth. "Come on. We've got to get out of here."

"Why?" she demanded, exasperated. "Why is it so urgent for me to leave?"

"You want me to tell her?"

Dr. Moorhouse started with a gasp. Frozen with shock, she made no protest when Benedek took her arm, sliding to interpose himself between her and the softly smiling man who had appeared at the top of the corridor.

Lon chuckled, approaching them with a casual step. "You made good time," he congratulated Benedek with a nod. "Of course, I was a little delayed myself."

From his pocket, he produced a small pistol and briefly checked the bullet chamber. "Not very fancy, but I expect it'll get the job done," he smirked.

Behind him, Benny heard Dr. Moorhouse utter a small sound and nothing more as she pressed against him, clutching his arm. He reached across to cover her taut hand with his own, willing her to remember that this was not the Jonathan MacKensie she thought she knew.

Lon glanced around, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "I'd kinda hoped for a lot of eyewitnesses, but this'll do, I guess. It'll be real interesting to see what you have to say to the police, eh? How are you going to explain that you just stood by and let it happen? Of course...." he shrugged with exaggerated nonchalance. "Nothing really has to happen, does it? Not if you want to continue our discussion in a more, ah...positive way?"

"What's he talking about?" Dr. Moorhouse demanded tremulously, ignoring Benedek's attempt to shush her. "What discussion?"

"That, lady, is none of your business," Lon informed her stiffly. "You're out of this—one way or the other. Isn't that right, Mr. Benedek?"

Dr. Moorhouse's reaction to Lon's malevolent chuckle distracted Benny. Her grip tightened on his arm as she whispered near his ear. "What's happening?" she pleaded. "Dear god, tell me what's happening."

"If I were you, I wouldn't think you've got any kind of stand-off going here," Lon sneered, brandishing the pistol. "I've got a full load of bullets and a few spares for good luck. But all I really need are two. That's one for you, Mr. Benedek—in the shoulder, or maybe the foot; just enough to distract you. And that leaves one for her. In the head, I think; clean, no fuss."

The smug grin on his face froze as he fixed a hard look on Benny. "I'm calling the game now. You have until the count of three to either move out of the way or go down with her...or tell me something I want to hear." He paused to flash a mocking smile at them. "One. Two...."

"How do I know you won't kill her anyway?" Benedek broke in desperately.

Lon shrugged. "You don't. What difference does it make?"

"It makes a difference to me. If you want your damned focus so badly, then she leaves, unharmed—right *now*."

Lon's eyebrows shot up in genuine surprise. "Just so we don't misunderstand each other—why don't you rephrase that for me?"

He forced himself to form the bitter-tasting words. "You win, Lon. Let her go and...and I'll do whatever you want."

Dr. Moorhouse was a statue behind him, only her crushing fingers around his arm and the ragged sound of her labored breathing telling him that she knew what was happening.

Lon considered the situation, lips pursed reflectively. "Fair enough. She goes, you stay—we talk."

Relief washed his voice. "Okay. Okay, just...give me a minute." To the impatient flush that sprang to Lon's face, he insisted, "Just a minute, all right? Let me at least say goodbye."

He nodded reluctantly, growling.

Benedek steeled himself to turn his back on Lon. It wasn't much easier to meet Dr. Moorhouse's terror-filled eyes and see the deep lines of strain etched into her colorless face. Sighing, he bowed his head. From the back, he hoped it looked like an attitude of defeat; from the front, he drew Dr. Moorhouse's attention to the hand he raised slightly, making a quick spinning motion with his finger.

She stared a moment, her mouth closing in a grim line as soon as she understood.

"Look, Dr. M...." he began with a tired sigh. "I want you to go back to the ballroom and...."

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on," she said, her quavering voice held together by anger. He closed his eyes briefly, an affirmative answer to the questioning look in her eyes. Encouraged, she continued heatedly, "You can't expect me to endure this treatment without explanation."

He tapped her arm and pointed up, reminding her not to betray them by staring at what he held in his left hand. Under cover of Dr. Moorhouse's indignation, he'd slipped a plastic bag out of his jacket pocket. Inside was the chloroform-soaked cloth he'd cajoled out of the puzzled chemistry students. Slipping his fingers into the bag, he said, "Dr. M, please. There's no time for this. Just go back to the ballroom, now. Please."

"No." More than mere pretense lurked behind her defiant voice and flashing eyes. "I've had quite enough of this from you, young man. I demand answers."

Lon's sharp voice intruded jarringly. "Time, Mr. Benedek."

Dr. Moorhouse's gasp choked off when Benedek raised a warning finger, sending her into paralyzed silence. As expected, Lon moved toward them when Benny didn't turn around.

The pistol jammed into the side of Benedek's neck. He stifled his flinch successfully, but Dr. Moorhouse could not manage to do likewise. She clutched at the base of her neck, struggling to compose herself behind closed eyes.

"You got one last chance, lady," Lon hissed. "Get lost before I change my mind."

Her eyes came open, staring at him in abject despair. With a start, Benedek recognized the word she formed soundlessly: *Jonathan?*

Her terrified gaze flew to Benedek, searching for a glimmer of hope. He remained still, mindful of the gun pressed tightly against his neck and of Dr. Moorhouse's palpable terror. Only seconds were left; any miscalculation would, without question, turn into instant, hideous tragedy.

He mouthed a single word to Dr. Moorhouse: *Go*.

She blinked, started to shake her head, then stopped, drawing a deep breath. Haltingly, she backed away.

The pressure against his neck eased. From the corner of his eye, he saw Lon lower the gun.

He made his move at the precise moment he calculated Lon's arm was waist level. Twisting, he threw his entire weight against the man, slamming him to the wall. The gun flew from startled fingers, skittering across the floor. Dr. Moorhouse scrambled to retrieve it even as Lon's retaliatory blow to the throat cut off Benedek's warning shout.

Somehow Benny kept his advantage, plowing his elbow hard into Lon's stomach. The air in the man's lungs escaped in a convulsive gasp; stunned, Lon slid down the wall, clawing at Benny's arm as he fell.

Benedek braced his knee into the hollow of Lon's neck, twisting his fingers into the man's hair, yanking back. He clamped the soaked cloth over Lon's nose and mouth, gritting his teeth for the struggle yet to come.

Strong hands gripped his wrists, fingers threatened to crush his bones, and still Benny held on. Lon had to breathe eventually, and it was fast becoming an even bet whether his arms would break first.

Then it happened. Lon's chest heaved, sucking air and fumes into oxygen-starved lungs. Still conscious but defeated, he slumped, his arms slipping like dead weights to his side. Benny hung on, unwilling to claim victory until the man was safely overcome.

Lon's eyes, blazing hatred at him over the cloth, changed abruptly. Benny choked on his own gasp. Lon was gone. Jonathan looked his torment up at him now.

His muscles froze, manic strength deserting him. The cloth slipped from shock-numbed fingers before a little voice inside his head warned him that this was probably a trick. Before he could recover, Jonathan's hands flew up. But instead of pulling the cloth away, he clamped his hands over Benny's, holding them firmly in place. The watery eyes, strangely peaceful, stayed steady on Benny's white face until his eyelids slowly closed.

Benny yanked the cloth away, flashing on the warning a well-meaning chem student had tossed after him on his dash out of the lab—misused, chloroform was lethal. He didn't breathe until he was sure Jonathan's respiration remained steady and unlabored. Then, carefully, he eased the unconscious man back, propping him securely against the wall.

He became aware that Dr. Moorhouse stood near him, the gun held in trembling hands. He didn't want to think of what must have been going through her mind if she'd given any thought to being forced to use the weapon in self-defense.

He couldn't speak yet; his exertions had drained him, and he still couldn't figure out why Lon released Jonathan at the last moment. Had it only been a tactic designed to break Benedek's nerve? In that regard, it would have worked—*had* worked, as a matter of fact. Only one thing had ripped victory from Lon's grasp—Jonathan.

Benny shook his head, frustrated. *What does it mean? Does Jonathan really have any control left, or is Lon still using him?* In either case, the thought was startling. There'd been cognizance in that brief re-emergence, Benny was sure of it. Jonathan wasn't lost to insanity as Lon would've had him believe; he'd been fully aware of what he was doing by keeping the cloth in place.

Dr. Moorhouse knelt at Jonathan's side, gathering the man's limp hands in her own. Her eyes were empty and haunted as she stared down at the man, and Benny's apprehension grew. He wasn't sure what she was thinking, and only prayed that she understood what had happened.

"You told me, I know," she said quietly, startling him to suspect she knew his troubled thoughts. "But I didn't... didn't realize how...." Her words strangled in a shuddering sigh. "Dear god in heaven," she murmured, closing her eyes in pain.

Her deep distress gave him an odd sense of relief to realize that she wasn't frightened of MacKensie, as he'd feared—she was frightened *for* him. And Benedek knew that small distinction made all the difference in the world.

More practical concerns beckoned; this was merely a respite lasting only as long as the effects of the chloroform. "The gun?" he asked, suddenly realizing that she no longer possessed it.

She nodded tersely in the direction of her discarded handbag.

"Dr. Moorhouse," he urged quietly. "I left the cab waiting; find me someone who doesn't know chloroform fumes from after-shave, and get them to lend me a hand. Remember, he's just had a little too much to drink and I'm taking him home, nothing to worry about. Can you handle it?"

She flashed him an irritated look for daring to doubt her. "I'm coming with you."

"No." He put enough in his voice to warn her he would brook no argument. "You have to stay here and square things unless you really want more questions than you can handle. Tell them...tell them I'm your driver and the police towed your car."

Her glance was dubious, obviously debating the advisability of claiming a chauffeur dressed in red deck shoes, blue jeans, yellow dress shirt and a flamboyantly parti-colored sports coat with contrasting tie. But to her credit, she acceded with a firm nod. "What now?" she asked quietly.

"Plan B." Her ragged intake of breath told him that she'd been expecting and fearing that answer. "I can't think of anything else to do," he assured her hastily. "You saw him yourself, it's the only...."

"I know, I know," she said, unwilling to hear any more. "I'll...I'll contact Jerry right away and ...make the arrangements."

Her voice cracked, ending on a threatened sob as her head bowed. He had only a moment to wonder how best to show her comfort before she regained her composure. Reluctantly releasing her white-knuckled grip on Jonathan's hands, she accepted the support of Benedek's arm to get to her feet. Her hand remained on his wrist as she turned a searching look on him. "What does he want from you?"

He shook his head tiredly. "It doesn't matter now."

Accepting his answer with a resigned nod, she fixed him with another long look. "It will be all right, won't it?"

He hesitated over the calm note in her voice, knowing it masked a deeper distress to which he couldn't bring himself to lie. Neither could he tell her the truth, so he settled, with a long sigh, for the only answer he could give. "I hope so, Dr. M. I really hope so."

---

An open book lay propped against Benny's knees, and he stared at it, but for more than an hour he'd done no more than make a vain attempt to decipher the first few sentences. His attention repeatedly dissolved away, setting him adrift in memories he'd thought safely



exorcised. A strong sense of despair gripped him to recall a similar vigil, not so long ago, when he'd waited for Jonathan MacKensie to return from the shadows that held him in a prison of silence. But this was different, markedly so. That grim time he'd been waiting for healing; here he waited to see how badly the wounds had been savaged open. He kept shying from worst the thought, yet it returned again and again to haunt him: when consciousness returned, who would return with it? It was possible that Lon would allow Jonathan to surface as a kind of cruel taunt; in a way, Benedek hoped that would happen if only so he could ease his own mind about his friend's condition. But conversely, he found himself praying that Lon would emerge from the drug-induced sleep. It would make the difficult task ahead that much easier to bear.

His chaotic thoughts kept slipping back to the same, insistent chorus: it wasn't fair. This obscenity had no right to exist, let alone return to shatter their lives before they'd put all the pieces back together again. He couldn't shake the feeling that he and Dr. Moorhouse had planned strategy for a battle doomed to failure from the start.

His reverie ended abruptly to hear a low moan coming from the direction of the bed. Discarding the book, Benedek eased out of the chair, retrieving a glass of water before settling carefully on the edge of the mattress. He willed himself to wait in silence while Jonathan roused from his drugged sleep.

Groaning again, MacKensie tried to turn over on his side only to be brought up short by the handcuffs securing his right wrist to a bedpost.

Fighting to full consciousness, he probed with his free hand, his forehead creasing in a vague frown of irritation vanishing the moment his searching fingers found the cold metal circling his wrist. Realization brought him instantly awake and aware. His head twisted to fix a steady, accusative glare at Benedek, who met it passively, determined not to betray any reaction until he was sure who was glaring at him.

"Benedek?" Jonathan's voice, questioning and confused.

He let himself breathe again, offering the water glass. "Here," he said quietly. "You need this."

Jonathan made no move, his eyes flickering to look around him. "My room," he breathed. Then he glanced over at his imprisoned arm and his face clouded.

Grabbing his free arm, Benedek urged him to sit up. "Come on, drink up. Chloroform doesn't do wonderful things to a person's throat."

He accepted the glass with a grimaced acknowledgment of Benedek's comment, probing his blistered nose and mouth with his forefinger before forcing water down a raw throat. The pause gave Benedek enough time to gather his courage to ask the one question to which he desperately needed an answer.

"Why did he let you go?"

Jonathan froze, staring at some distant point before him. After a long moment, he managed an almost imperceptible shake of his head. "He hasn't."

Benedek closed his eyes, his worst suspicion confirmed: Lon was still using Jonathan against him.

And yet there was no hysteria, not a trace of panic. He'd feared Lon's reappearance would shatter Jonathan's sanity beyond all repair, but that hadn't happened. Instead, there was anger; dangerous but at the same time malleable. It could be dealt with and used. How, he wasn't sure; but just that thought alone was enough to give him hope.

"Is he listening?"

Frowning, Jonathan's eyes searched a place deep inside his own mind. "I'm...not sure. He's there, but I can't tell if he...." He swallowed hard. "I don't know. There's a...a barrier I've never been able to see beyond except when he wants... something." A shudder of marked revulsion ripped through him, and he looked away to bring it under control.

Benedek forced himself to the next question without comment. "Do you at least have some idea why he wasn't destroyed with Harmon, or how he managed to find you again?"

Jonathan remained silent a long moment, studying the opposite wall blankly. "He never left."

Some part of him actually expected that answer. Even so, it was several seconds before he could speak. "Did you know?"

Confusion flickered briefly, melting back into the stone-cold mask. "Maybe...a little. Just a faint touch, like...a bad memory. I thought...hoped it was normal." He let out a short, harsh laugh. "Normal," he muttered, shaking his head. "Headaches, blackouts—how could I have been so...."

The words faded, hanging in the tense silence as Jonathan lowered his head. Benedek was left to his own arid thoughts, unable to find or offer comfort no matter how hard he searched within himself.

He became aware that Jonathan was speaking, his gaze as well as his voice even and distant. "I saw her eyes. I saw the way she looked at me. She—I've never seen her look like that before. I always thought she was the most fearless person I've ever known, and I admired that so much. But today...."

Panic flashed through him to realize what the man was saying. "She knows it wasn't you."

"It doesn't matter!" Jonathan flared. "Don't you see? It doesn't matter anymore if it's him or if it's me, it's all the *same!*"

"What the *hell* are you talking about?" And then it dawned on him. "Wait a minute. You're giving up, aren't you?"

"There's nothing to give up," he snapped. "It's done."

"No." He held up his hands, shaking his head in violent denial. "No, you don't. Don't do this to me, Jack, I'm warning you right now. I didn't go to hell and back just so you could throw it all back in my face."

"I'm not...."

Benedek smashed Jonathan's irritated protest. "Let me tell you something, pal," he growled. "You didn't come this far to throw in the towel now, so don't kid yourself *or* me. You know what's at stake here as well as I do. It's not just you and it's not just me, because if that was the case, we could solve this whole damn problem by swallowing the contents of your medicine cabinet. But what the hell would it solve? Come on, think about it—it was bad enough when Harmon had Lon on a short leash. On his own, who knows what he's capable of doing?"

Jonathan's voice echoed softly from the dark place into which he still stared. "I do."

He sighed, gripping MacKensie's arm in silent apology. "Then you know I'm right," he continued, calmer. "There's no passing the buck—we're the ones who have to fight him. And if we come up losers in the end, then at least we'll know that we went out fighting."

"I'm tired of fighting." Exhaustion rubbed his voice raw. "Oh, god, I'm so tired of fighting."

He gave MacKensie a long, searching look before asking, softly, "Tired enough to let Lon win?"

The sharp look that snapped Jonathan out of his black reverie made Benedek feel better even before his friend hissed a vehement, "No."

"There you go," he congratulated the man with a wan, forced smile. "I'll make a deal with you, okay? You don't give up before I do, and I'll do the same for you."

He pressed the heel of his palm against his forehead. "Just promise me one thing."

Benedek nodded readily. "Sure, name it."

"I can hang on as long as...." He broke off with a sigh, closing his eyes. "Benny, promise me, please—don't let him hurt anyone else."

"I won't." He allowed no hesitation in his voice. "Scout's honor."

Jonathan accepted with a tired nod and a nearly voiceless, "Thank you."

"I knew you wouldn't let me down," he said, cracking a rueful smile that faded under the weight of the moment. "Although you had me going there for a while. When you kept that cloth in place, I wasn't sure whether you were helping or...." He stopped, the words catching in his throat. Even as a dry joke, he couldn't bring himself to say it.

But Jonathan's glance was sharp and quick—too quick. Benny silently cursed himself for provoking an answer to one question he would've done well never to ask.

"I considered that an acceptable risk," Jonathan told him evenly.

"Was it?" Anger coiled up inside him, allowing him to meet MacKensie's startled look. "Was it really? Or were you thinking of it as less of a risk and more of an alternative?"

Jonathan's hand jerked up to physically shove Benedek's accusation aside, but the animating irritation flashed away as quickly as it came. His arm dropped back to his side. "Alternative?" he murmured, closing his eyes again. "What alternative? What happens now? You don't propose I stay like this until Lon gets bored and decides to move on?" His head moved slightly; whether denial or a flinch of anguish, Benny couldn't tell. "It doesn't work that way." He tugged lightly on the handcuff. "He doesn't consider this an obstacle. He doesn't need this hand."

"I know," Benedek admitted with difficulty. "That's why...Dr. M and I have...."

Jonathan's eyes came open, reacting to the strained note in his friend's voice. Benny drew a deep breath and tried again. "She has a friend; he's the director of the Elgin Memorial Hospital. She's making arrangements with him now."

Jonathan made no reply, but the sudden, silent horror on his face told Benedek that his friend recognized the name of the private psychiatric hospital.

"It's the only option we have left," he insisted when MacKensie averted his eyes. "You said it yourself—we can't keep you like this. At least in Elgin, there'll be trained professionals to keep Lon from hurting others—or you."

There was nothing more to say, and even if there was, he wouldn't have been able to get it past the gathering thickness in his throat. With lowered head, he waited for Jonathan to speak.

For a time, he heard nothing more than his friend's attempts to control his rapid breathing. Then, softly: "So. This is how it ends, I suppose. Maybe you were right after all. Maybe you would have done me a favor leaving me behind in the fire."

Fighting back an insane urge to scream denial at him, Benedek held his breath, a barrier keeping his anger contained until the dangerous tide receded. "All right, you listen to me," he said, his voice thin and dangerous. "Get rid of this idea that we're packing you off to the loony bin and then dusting you off our hands. It doesn't work that way. I'm going to find an answer. I swear, I'm going to find a way to blast that bastard out of the park once and for all."

The torment in Jonathan's eyes softened. His head shook slightly, disbelieving. "How?"

"I don't know," he admitted, his jaw hardening. "I figured to start in Chicago. Maybe I can get something by picking up Lady Carmen's route again. And I've got the notes I'd been making all along—it's a start."

"Benedek...." He stopped abruptly, as though common sense clamped down on impulse. Eyes lowered, he began again. "You don't know what you're looking for, you hardly know where to begin, you might not recognize the answer even if you do manage to stumble on it...." The words quickened, then faltered once more. "I can't ask you to do this."

"You didn't."

Jonathan stared at him, searching his calm expression. "Why then?"

And that was a question for which he couldn't wring an coherent answer from his most deep-rooted emotions, so he settled for a light shrug and a wry smile. "Because we made a deal. Remember?"

Whatever reply Jonathan would have made to Benedek's insouciant remark was lost when he started violently at the sound of the doorbell. Benedek checked his watch, determining that it was still too early for the Elgin people to arrive. Making a calming motion, he said, "It's probably Dr. M."

"No!" Jonathan hissed. "Benedek, don't let her in here."

"It's okay," he soothed, realizing too late that it wasn't all right. The last thing Jonathan wanted was for Dr. Moorhouse, the one person in the world whose respect he actively sought and cherished, to see him chained like some mad dog to his own bed. But another ring summoned Benedek like an imperative command. Torn, he rose, crossing the room with his hand held up, a plea for Jonathan to understand what he had to do. At the door, he paused, saying, "Back in a flash, Jack," before carefully closing the door behind him.

Dr. Moorhouse greeted him with a curt nod as she entered, waiting for him to shut the door behind her before informing him, low-voiced, "The arrangements have been made. Jerry should be here in approximately half an hour."

Benedek nodded, massaging the taut muscles of his neck. "He...came out of it without the warden in tow."

"Good news?" she asked, not daring to hope.

"Afraid not," he admitted with a long sigh. "Lon's a canny bastard, I'll give him that. He's playing a war of nerves on top of everything else."

She nodded her understanding. "Does he know?" she asked, staring at clasped hands.

"Yeah. I told him." At her questioning look, he continued, "He's taking it about as well as can be expected, I suppose. He understands. At least, I think he understands."

"You'll forgive me if I don't accept your word on that," she informed him quietly.

It was his turn to look a question at her, puzzlement clearing as he followed her line of vision to the closed bedroom door. "No," he said, more sharply than he meant. "I mean...I don't think that's really a good idea."

Anger blazed in her eyes. "Thank you for your considered opinion on the subject," she said icily.

He wet dry lips, realizing too late that he was fighting a doomed battle. "No, really, Dr. M, it's not a good idea. He ...asked me not to let you in."

He expected perhaps understanding, but not pure anguish crushing her in its grip. With a brittle voice she said, "Please. Get out of my way."

He did, stumbling back as though her quiet words physically shoved him out of her way. Sending up a silent apology to Jonathan, he recovered his wits to follow her to the door.

MacKensie stared, ashen, as Dr. Moorhouse entered. His wide-eyed gaze swiveled to Benedek, who winced at the open accusation in his friend's eyes. The light died in Jonathan's face as he drew into a huddle, turning away from them.

Dr. Moorhouse approached the bed slowly, making an effort to keep her expression composed and emotionless. For a time she stood, unmoving, staring down at the top of Jonathan's bowed head.

"MacKensie." Her voice was soft, commanding. "Look at me."

He remained a statue, locked behind his barrier of silence.

"Look at me." A desperate plea colored her even tone. "Please."

The same verbal force that had pushed Benedek out of her path worked to bring Jonathan's head up, revealing his devastated face to her.

She tried to speak, but the sight of his abject humiliation stole her voice. Reaching down, she curled her fingers around the hand with which he tried to hide his manacled wrist. Words finally came, thin and splintered. "Do you think you could ever forgive me?"

Astonishment shattered his stony facade. "Forgive you?" he echoed incredulously.

She flinched, closing her eyes. "I...suppose it was too much to ask."

"No!" he protested. "No, Dr. Moorhouse, you...how—?" Faltering, he shook his head in helpless horror. "There's nothing to forgive. How could you even think...?"

Her eyes opened to search his face. "I sent you on that investigation. You resisted and I overruled you. None of this would have happened—"

"No!" he cried, almost a full shout. "Dr. Moorhouse...." His anger dissolved as fast as it had flared. "Dr. Moorhouse, please. There's nothing to forgive. This is no one's fault. It happened. I don't blame you, I don't blame anyone. It happened, that's all."

He tightened his grip around hers, willing her to accept the truth. Her lapse into grief-stricken silence broke when she said quietly, "When you disappeared, all those months ago, I was furious with you. I...thought you were playing at some childish game of revenge. Then Benedek came to me with his bizarre tale, and...I no longer knew what to believe."

Jonathan listened, pale and still. "Dr. Moorhouse," he whispered, shaking his head numbly. "Please. Don't."

"I have to say this, MacKensie," she said, mustering strength to her voice. "You won't let me apologize, so I have to say this. I have to tell you that during those long months of uncertainty, I never once gave up hope. I may not have shown that to you as I should; all of us were so busy pretending everything was normal. But I'm telling you now. I didn't give up on you then, and I most certainly will not give up on you now."

Jonathan's eyes flicked over to Benedek, accusing him of complicity, but his friend denied all charges with a thin, knowing smile.

"I saw that...that thing," Dr. Moorhouse continued, bitterness edging her voice. "It wanted me to run away screaming, it...wanted me to hate you." A rueful smile tugged faintly at her lips. "Not very intelligent, is it?"

Benedek's brow furrowed, flashing back to a time, an eternity ago, when he made a similar observation about Lon. Jonathan distracted him from the altogether unpleasant memory, saying in a hoarse whisper, "I wouldn't blame you if you...."

She tugged sharply on his hand, stopping him. "No apologies. No blame. Agreed?"

He acceded with a reluctant nod, but Benny caught the brief flare of hope and gratitude in his eyes.

"I can't help you fight this battle," she told him quietly. "Though god only knows I wish I could. But I won't let you face this alone. Please—don't shut me out. Don't ever shut me out again."

His mouth opened to speak, but something intense spasmed through him, and he squeezed his eyes shut against it. This time he lost the battle. Emotion too long denied burst through in heaving gasps for breath. Clinging to her hand, he convulsed in dry, soundless despair. She settled on the edge of the bed and gently drew his head onto her shoulder. Curling within her protective embrace, he finally and completely gave himself up to grief for his lost life and wept.

Benedek fought a panicked impulse to warn her away from a potentially dangerous situation. It would be too easy for Lon to surface; he'd be hard-pressed to save Dr. Moorhouse from a sudden attack. He edged his hand into the pocket where he'd replaced the chloroformed cloth. Behind closed eyes he listened for even the barest hint that Lon was about to seize his advantage.

But he heard nothing more than Jonathan's ragged gasps and the soft sounds of comfort Dr. Moorhouse repeated over and over again. Benedek found himself drawn to her voice, seeking his own solace there. With a sharp twinge, he realized that Lon was probably content staying right where he was: silent and invisible in their midst, happily drinking in their despair.

Sinking his chin against tightly clasped hands, he left one part of his consciousness on alert while the rest sought a calm place within himself. After a time, the roar of his pounding heart in his ears subsided into the silence of the room. Only then did he open his eyes

again, to see that Dr. Moorhouse had soothed Jonathan into exhausted sleep, easing him back onto the bed. She clung tightly to his hand, as though yet unwilling to let him go.

Becoming aware of Benedek's gaze, she turned reddened eyes toward him before lowering her head again. He blinked in open surprise. He'd glimpsed raw emotion in that glance; cold hatred for the malignant thing ripping Jonathan MacKensie from her protective grasp.

And that left him troubled by vague doubts, wondering again why Lon was content to remain aloof, instead of verbally taunting them to new lows of despair. But then, he had difficulty imagining how much lower any of them could sink.

The oppressive silence lingered, broken too soon by the doorbell chime. This time Benedek didn't have to consult his watch.

Dr. Moorhouse paled, shooting him a look of pure panic. "You get the door," he told her. "Give me...five minutes, okay?"

She nodded mutely, rising to her feet. Benedek ushered her out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Jonathan roused, blinking groggily. He followed Benedek's progress, watching in silence as his friend moved to the bedside table, removing the plastic bag from his inside jacket pocket.

Benedek concentrated on his task, unwilling to look up to see the eyes he felt upon him. Laying the chloroformed cloth on the table, safely within emergency reach, he fished a key out of his side pocket, using it to free Jonathan's arm.

The silence held as Benny dropped the cuffs into another pocket, watching out of the corner of his eye as Jonathan massaged his wrist. With a start, he realized that he actually hoped that Lon would resurface now. He'd get a certain grim satisfaction seeing Lon dealt with by experienced psychiatric orderlies.

But Lon remained silent; Jonathan spoke in a soft, arid voice. "Do me a favor."

"What's that?" he said, forcing himself to look at his friend.

"Don't...say anything, okay?" His lowered eyes came up to give Benedek an earnest look. "Nothing. All right?"

Benedek nodded, understanding. He would say nothing. No half-hearted reassurances, no banal clichés—and no goodbyes.

Dr. Moorhouse returned, followed by three men; one in a dark suit, two others in hospital whites. Benedek heard MacKensie's sharp intake of breath, and nothing more when he saw the white cloth bundle lying atop the stretcher that the orderlies carried between them.

The doctor introduced himself to Benedek, and hesitated when Jonathan looked away. A gesture and significant look was all Dr. Fuentes needed to ask Benedek to move aside. But as he stepped back to allow the doctor to take his place at the bedside, he heard the whispered words: "You're a fool, Mr. Benedek."

He snapped around in time to catch a glimpse of Lon's malefic smile. But the next instant, Jonathan gasped softly, as though released from a strangling grip. His head bowed, turning from Benedek's searching gaze.

He stumbled back, retreating to Dr. Moorhouse's side. One glance at her pale face rerouted him from his moment of shock. She wasn't breathing; there seemed to be no life left in her at all as she watched the doctor address Jonathan in low tones, getting a terse nod and a whispered reply in turn. Without hesitation, MacKensie accepted a pen and signed a form presented to him on a clipboard.

One of the orderlies unfolded the straitjacket, sorting out the opening. Beside him, Dr. Moorhouse gasped air into her depleted lungs, and Benedek responded by putting his hand on her upper arm. She accepted his support, leaning against him in grateful silence.

Jonathan leaned back against the headboard, closing his eyes as Fuentes carefully prepared and administered an intravenous sedative, then stepped back to consult his watch.

Several tense minutes passed, with Dr. Fuentes giving Dr. Moorhouse sympathetic glances from time to time without finding anything he could say to ease her obvious distress. At length, he nodded, motioning for the orderlies to take over.

Dr. Fuentes approached, giving Benedek a brief look of shared sympathy. "Juliana? I'll need you to sign this too."

With a stiff nod, she took the clipboard. Pen touched paper and froze.

Benedek's grip on her arm tightened just in time, guiding her to a chair as he took the clipboard from her nerveless hand. She huddled in the chair, pressing a shaking hand to her colorless face. "It's all right," Benedek hastily assured the alarmed doctor. "She just...needs a minute."

Her paralysis lasted until the orderlies quietly wheeled the stretcher from the room. Releasing her death-grip on Benny's arm, she reached out again for the clipboard, signing with grim determination.

She waved off her friend's concern, thanking him with a warm squeeze of his hand. With the assurance that Fuentes would see himself out, Benedek remained behind to watch over Dr. Moorhouse as she bowed her head into her hands.

He used the back of her chair for support, only that and sheer nervous energy holding him together. Closing his eyes, he sought a calm place within himself, but his tentative composure shattered to hear Dr. Moorhouse's quiet, broken, "What have I done?"

There was no need to reply; they both knew the answer. She had done the only thing she could, but knowing that was no longer comfort enough.

"Come on," he said quietly. "Let me see you home."

"No." She forced her shoulders straight. "I have to go back to the office."

His hand clamped on her arm, pressing her back into the chair. "No."

"Yes." Fire burned in her eyes. "Don't presume to be solicitous of me, young man. I'll deal with this in my own way, after my own fashion. If that means returning to more mundane responsibilities, it is and will remain my decision to do so."

Her anger dissipated in a flash. "I'm sorry," she faltered. "I didn't..."

He waved her to silence, his nod assuring her that he took no offense. Without looking up, she sought and found his hand still resting on her arm and covered it with her own.

"Promise me," she breathed, a forlorn sigh. "Promise me you'll find an answer."

He hesitated, torn. In all good conscience, he couldn't make her that assurance when he still didn't have a clue where to start. So he gave her the one heartfelt promise he knew he could keep. "I won't stop until I do."

A wan, grateful smile flickered across her face and for a moment, he glimpsed regret in her eyes for all the past times she had scorned and insulted him. To his relief, she didn't try to voice her apology, content merely to know that she was forgiven.

---

The sun slipped behind the Administration Building, sending blue shadows shooting across the deserted campus quadrangle. He'd thought a brisk walk would restore his flagging energy, but his muscles made a poor guesser of him, and it was all he could do to reach the central fountain and ease down before his strength deserted him altogether. Lowering his throbbing head against his hand, he concentrated on the soothing burble of water splashing from the mouths of marble whales.

He had left a silent, gray Dr. Moorhouse in her office and Liz, bursting with questions yet sensitive enough not to broach them, to stand guard over the closed door. And now he sat here, completely lost. Where was he supposed to go from here? Chicago was only a faint hope, not nearly enough to energize him with new resolve. Lady Carmen's trail was a year and a half cold by now, and even so there was no assurance that he could stumble upon the same answer she had.

Still, it was something concrete, a starting point, and he needed that to cling to right now. It wasn't as if he could expect the answer to walk up and introduce itself.

"Sometimes it happens that way, you know."

The amused feminine voice shot his head up out of his hands. He found himself staring at a stranger, a tiny black-haired woman just past the first blush of middle age. Dressed in a trim beige suit, tastefully ruffled white blouse and sensible pumps, she somehow reminded him of every woman teacher at P.S. 48. And there was something else very familiar about her, something that twinged maddeningly at the back of his mind. She distracted him from his attempt to resolve the question by extending her hand. "My name is Gus."

"Gus?" he echoed in open surprise, automatically shaking her hand.

"Augusta. I understand you're looking for me."

He blinked, bewildered. "Looking for you? Lady, I've never met you before in my life."

"Perhaps not." With that enigmatic comment, she settled on the fountain ledge next to him. "And you can be forgiven for hoping that you'll never have to see me again."

He stared at her, beyond confusion. "I don't understand a word you're saying."

Her smile was benign and patient. "Of course you do, dear. All you have to do is think about it calmly. You asked for help, and I'm here to do what I can for you. Which, I fear, is precious little under the circumstances."

He made an impatient motion with his hand. "Wait a minute. Suppose you tell me what kind of help you think I need?"

Her eyebrows arched coyly. "That's entirely up to you, I'm afraid. You see, there is no simple and straightforward answer to this situation. What must be done has yet to be determined."

"Determined by what?" he ventured carefully.

"By you, of course."

He pressed his fingers hard against his throbbing head. "If you're supposed to help me, why are you confusing me?"

"Your emotions are in disorder, I understand that," she told him with soft sympathy. "That's to be expected, of course, but you would do well to take a few deep breaths. It does help. Here—take my hand."

He did before he fully realized what he was doing. With a start, he felt something tangible flow into him from the point of contact, a cool wash dispelling the fever burning in his mind, bringing gentle relief to his frayed nerves.

Augusta wasn't human. The realization jolted but did not frighten him. She was, in fact, something very much like Lon, yet nothing like him. He understood; she existed because he existed. Dark and light; despair and hope; opposites and equals.

And he gained yet another startling insight. "You...you helped Lady Carmen, didn't you?" he whispered incredulously.

"I did what I could," she demurred.

"You gave her the crystal?"

"No. The pendant belonged to her already. I merely helped her to understand how to use it."

"Help me," he pleaded quietly. "Help me understand."

She smiled, giving him a nod of calm reassurance. "You may think of us as the anthropomorphic residue of human emotion, millennia of intense passion emanating from millions of minds and hearts. The dark things such as Lon exist by feeding on primitive fear; our sustenance is hope. They take by force; we give willingly and without question. And yet we are the same, two sides of the same coin."



Neither can exist without the other; conversely, we are evenly matched and could never hope to subdue the other. And so it goes; we are forever locked in battle, with humanity our blood-soaked field. Simple irony: we are born of humanity, and in turn prey upon it."

Benedek listened, surprising himself at how easily he accepted what she told him. "The carnival," he said, shaking his head. "I don't really understand that."

Her smile was strained, edged with bitterness. "Think of it as a spider's web. As the appointed focus, Harmon had to keep his charges well-fed and so created the carnival as his lure. There are other focuses, you know; they all have their different venues, but Harmon's was ingenious—quite ingenious."

Benedek reached a new depth of horror with understanding. "He took what he needed and used the excess to...." He stopped with a hiss, his mind violently shying from the stark image of a Ferris wheel, such innocent amusement, driven relentlessly on by the shrieks of tortured souls.

"Tell me how to destroy this thing," he said, quietly desperate.

She inclined her head apologetically. "I'm afraid that's the one thing I can't tell you."

"But you gave Lady Carmen the answer."

"I said I gave her understanding. She found the answer herself, which is what you must do."

"Why?" Frustration cut his voice to shreds. "Why can't you tell me?"

"Because there is no right answer." Her steady, unruffled gaze drained his anger away. "The only answer is the one you find yourself. I will tell you this much. Never let your faith in yourself waver. Never turn to despair as your only alternative. And, most importantly—learn what your adversary fears most. That's where your answer will be."

She rose, clasping her hands before her as she gazed down at him with something close to affection in her eyes. "In a way, I wish I was able to do more for you," she told him with soft sincerity. "I feel your pain, and I weep for the torment of you and those touched by this evil. Please, remember—have faith. There are no other guarantees. Never lose sight of yourself, and you will be led to the answer you seek."

He stared at her, the sense she was familiar growing stronger. Unexpectedly, she leaned over and placed a soft kiss on his cheek. "My thoughts are with you," she said near his ear.

His face suffused with a gentle warmth where her lips had brushed him, and to his surprise, a smile blossomed under the persistent glow. Her words, seemingly innocuous, held a deeper meaning that imbued him with new resolve. "Thank you," he breathed fervently.

She pressed her hand briefly against the side of his head, smiling her farewell into his eyes. "Rest now."

His eyes closed of their own accord and he felt mild surprise when his chin drooped heavily to his chest. Familiar, he thought fuzzily. She was so familiar....

"Betty?" His head came up with a snap to stare, wild-eyed, around the deserted quadrangle. Gus...Betty?...had disappeared.

But the glow lingered, a warmth prodding exhaustion out of the depths of his bones. Her hand was on him yet; he had been touched by new hope.

---

Dr. Moorhouse stared blankly at the aimless pattern she traced on her desk top. "What does it mean?" she asked thinly.

Seated on the edge of her desk, Benedek spread his hands. "I'm not really sure. But it's a hell of a lot more than we had before."

She nodded without reply. His return and strange tale seemed to have sparked some life back into her dull eyes. He decided to concentrate on that and push out the memory of the gray, thin-lipped grimace with which Liz had greeted him and his black eye.

Benny stared down at the fingers he drummed against his knee. "So. We figure out what Lon is afraid of."

She glanced up, frowning slightly. "What was Harmon afraid of?"

"Pardon?"

"If we are to assume our answer lies along a similar path—tell me what Harmon was afraid of?"

He swallowed, steeling himself to rip at the barrier behind which he'd stashed the unpleasant memories. "He freaked when he saw the pendant," he recalled, speaking slowly as he searched the fragments floating in his mind. "But he started getting edgy when I pressed him about...." The answer flashed startlingly clear, stealing his breath. "Lady Carmen. He was afraid of Lady Carmen."

She leaned forward expectantly, encouraging him to continue. Tapping his finger against thin air, he cast further. "He was afraid of her because—he couldn't control her?"

"She defied him," Dr. Moorhouse offered. "Perhaps that defiance is what finally triggered his destruction."

He stared at her wide-eyed as the concept seized his imagination. It sounded right. It *was* right. He flashed again to the image of Dr. Moorhouse fiercely clinging to Jonathan's hand. Maybe he'd been wrong about Lon preferring to remain hidden; maybe Dr. Moorhouse's relentless anger and hatred, communicated through touch, had kept Lon from surfacing.

Light returned to her eyes when she noted the change come over his expression, brightened by a slow smile. "Dr. M, I think you may have something there. We've been assuming all along that Lon feeds off all violent emotion. Maybe that isn't true; maybe he can't handle anger.

"Yes," she murmured, her voice stronger. "He attacked you physically in MacKensie's office...."

"...when he could have just as easily taken me out the way he did when we first met." His hand curled into a fist, pressing briefly to his mouth before turning palm up. "And we're back to square one. What does it mean? How do we find out for sure, and if we do—how do we use it?"

"It's a start," she declared firmly. "And as you already said, it's more than we had to go on before. I'll call Jerry tomorrow. Perhaps he can arrange for us to...."

"Wait, wait," he demurred. "Too fast, Dr. M. I'm not even sure I didn't dream the whole thing out there. It's just not enough to go raising anybody's hopes, especially Jonny's—providing the warden steps out for lunch long enough to let us talk to him in the first place."

The office door flew open. Liz stood in the doorway, face ashen, eyes wide in horrified disbelief.

Benny came off the desk in an instant; behind him, Dr. Moorhouse rose to her feet. "Liz? What...?"

She shook her head mutely, and Benny, sensing the woman was close to collapse, reached her side in two quick hops, taking her arm to guide her into a chair. Dr. Moorhouse hurried to gain her secretary's side, and met Benny's alarmed gaze over the top of the woman's bowed head.

Liz was gasping, pressing clasped hands against her chest. Touching her trembling shoulder, Benny ventured, "Liz? What's wrong?"

She swallowed, fighting to stammer out the words. "I...I know you asked not to be disturbed, so I...I took a phone message for you...." Her voice tapered off into an anguished whimper.

"What was the message?" Dr. Moorhouse urged, face paling.

Liz blinked back the unshed tears shining in her unfocused eyes. "Dr. Fuentes. From...from Elgin."

Out of the corner of his eye, Benedek saw Dr. Moorhouse's face crumple. He pushed panic aside, encouraging Liz to go on with a terse nod. Her voice rose thinly, crackling with a threatened sob. "They asked...asked me to tell you that the patient you committed to

their care escaped from the hospital and...." The words came between ragged gasps. "...they wanted to know if they should contact the police and have them put out an APB on J-Jonathan MacK—"

A heaving gasp ripped the rest of the word from her throat; she clutched her hands tightly against her mouth, shuddering. "Somebody, please," she begged tearfully. "Tell me what's happening."

Dr. Moorhouse stared helplessly at Benedek. "Escaped," she breathed. "Oh, my god...."

"Benny...." Liz dug her fingers into his arm. "Just before that call came in—I took a message for you. From...from Jonathan."

Some part of him survived the brutal assault of cold fear enough to ask, "What did he say?"

"He...." She fought for control. "He asked me to have you meet him at Randy's dorm."

He and Dr. Moorhouse read the same realization in each other's eyes. The woman roused first, her expression going hard. "Go!" she hissed.

He went, bolting out the door with only the briefest regret for leaving Dr. Moorhouse the unenviable task of calming her devastated secretary.

The dorm security guard favored him with a puzzled look at his explosive entrance, but readily answered his questions. Yes, Dr. MacKensie had signed in as a visitor to Room 102; no, he hadn't noticed anything amiss. Benny checked the signature, his jaw tightening to see the scrawled mess bearing no resemblance to Jonathan MacKensie's handwriting.

"If I'm not back here in an hour, contact Dr. Moorhouse. Anthropology Department, right. Just tell her...damn. Tell her I told you to call. She'll know what it means. Thanks." Leaving the guard to frown his confusion after him, Benny took off down the corridor for Randy's room.

He skidded to a halt at the door, debating how best to proceed. But a closer examination revealed that the door stood slightly ajar. Reaching tentatively for the knob, he froze to hear a voice from within.

"Please. Come in, Mr. Benedek."

Fury flooded him at the sound of Lon's mocking voice, bringing his foot up to smash the door open.

Lon stood near the center of the room, turning at the crash. Greeting Benedek with a smug smile, he held up a cautionary hand, completing the gesture by indicating the other occupant of the room.

Randy sat rigidly in her wheelchair, staring at him from a pale, frightened face. He could tell only that she knew something was wrong, but given the lack of true hysteria or panic in her manner, Lon had obviously not revealed anything more than the barest glimpse of his true self to her.

Benny kicked the door closed, fixing his blazing glare on Lon. There was no sense doing or saying anything to provoke the man further; Lon had just proved how easily and completely he could defeat their most careful plans. And the more important consideration was his promise to Jonathan not to let Lon hurt anyone else.

That thought alone brought him to a decision. He held up a warning hand. "Before anything happens—you and I leave here. Now."

Lon laughed, shaking his head. "Really," he murmured chidingly. "Do you honestly think it's that simple?" He moved with feigned casualness to stand behind Randy's chair, placing his hands on her shoulders. She flinched at his touch, the remaining color draining from her face. "Besides—she doesn't want me to leave, does she? We haven't been properly introduced."

Randy's eyes searched Benedek's carefully emotionless face. She formed his name without sound, a plea for help.

He forced himself not to react, concentrating his defiance in the blazing glare he shot at Lon. "Get away from her."

Lon tightened his grip possessively until Randy winced in pain. "In time," he nodded with mock politeness. "But first, I want her to take a good long look at a fool."

"Damn you, get *away* from her," he hissed.

"A fool," Lon spat, jaw hardening. "You took your best shot and lost, didn't you? Now what? Hm?" His grin spread, lighting his eyes with a salacious glow. "Tell me what you plan to do now. Tell me what you *think* you can do. Go on, tell me. I could use a good laugh."

His finger snapped up warningly at the change he saw come over Benny's face. "No deals. You lost your right to bargain back at the hotel. I'm calling all the shots now. And the first thing you're going to do is empty your pockets."

Benedek swallowed his protest when Lon moved his hand to the base of Randy's neck. "Put everything on the desk, there," he smiled.

Working against uncooperative muscles, Benny removed the contents of his pockets, including the plastic bag and the set of handcuffs, placing them on the study desk. He began to step away, but Lon stopped him. "I'll take those."

Lon was indicating the handcuffs, and remained uncowed by Benny's defiant glare. Randy remained immobile, frozen behind closed eyes as Lon's fingers pressed into her throat.

Benedek swept the cuffs off the desk, delivering them stiffly to Lon's waiting hand. But instead of accepting them, Lon grabbed Benny's wrist.

"It's my game now," he said as Benny struggled briefly and in vain to free himself. He straightened, sidestepping the wheelchair. Taking the cuffs from Benedek's numbing fingers, he snapped a circlet open in a deliberate, threatening gesture. "My game," he repeated smugly, dropping the manacle around Benny's captured wrist.

He yanked, giving Benedek no time to react or defend himself. Pain splintered up his arm and shoulder, doubling him over in unexpected and helpless agony. Lon had his other wrist, twisting it behind his back. The other cuff snicked into place.

"Jonathan!" Randy screamed, a hoarse wail of despair. "Jonathan, *no!*"

Laughing his triumph, Lon sent Benny sprawling to the floor. "Now we can continue this discussion without further interruptions," he chortled, moving to stand over the gasping man. "You know, this is really more trouble than it's worth. Maybe I should forget about getting a new focus. I'm doing just fine as it is, and you're getting to be a real pain."

Benny mustered new anger to fight back verging panic. He harbored no illusions about Lon's intentions; there was no way he could help Randy now, except maybe give her the understanding he'd denied her all along. "Randy," he gasped, hoping that the girl could hear him in the dark place in which she huddled. "Randy, listen to me. It isn't Jonathan. This is what I couldn't tell you, it isn't Jonathan. *Randy!*"

Lon glanced back at the girl, sobbing quietly into the arms cradling her head. "I don't think she's interested," he smirked. "Besides, in a little while it won't matter to her who I am, will it?"

"Damn you, you're not doing this just to get to me, are you?" he rasped. "You're desperate. It's harder and harder to hang on, don't bother denying it. You're getting weaker all the time. Jonathan is fighting you and you can't handle it. You need that focus and you need it soon. Otherwise, you're going to end up nothing more than a nasty echo in the dark."

Lon, his face suffusing with fury, reached down to yank Benny up by his jacket lapels. "Would you like me to show you how weak I am? Would you like to see how easily I can destroy your little pal's life and the lives of everyone around him?" He gave Benny a bone-jarring shake. "*Would you?*" With a growl, he hauled the bound man to his feet, letting him hang in the choking grip. "Three words, Mr. B," he hissed into Benny's face. "That's all it takes. And let me warn you now that if you say or do anything else, including a repeat of your little expression of respect from this morning, it's going to cost you your teeth and more pain than you or anyone else can handle. Now. Say it. 'I give up'. That's all you have to do— *say* it!"

Benny stared at the distorted, hate-suffused features and mentally offered a heartfelt apology to Jonathan for not keeping his promise. "Go to hell, you bastard," he muttered.

Lon's eyes flared with the promise of death. "Fine. Why don't I take you with me?"

The first blow cracked across his jaw, and his senses exploded into a thousand jagged pieces. Helpless to defend himself, he tried to fall away, but Lon held him fast, allowing him no escape.

From some distant place he heard Randy's scream, but now his mind disintegrated, retreating from the steady barrage beating him mercilessly back toward the blackness verging at the edge of his consciousness. Another blow, then another, until he lost count, until they became nothing more than a nudge against all-encompassing numbness. Now the darkness leapt forward with its promise of surcease. "No," he groaned, but his mouth was gone, lost in the red haze of pain. He was slipping, falling, fighting and losing until the darkness won.

Randy cringed behind closed eyes, screaming soundlessly into hands crushed against her mouth. *This was a nightmare, please, god, only a nightmare, make it go away, please, make it go....*

Benny's last tortured gasp spiraled into silence. Her relentless scream broke loose, rising to a shrill audible whimper. *No*, she cried into the unheeding blackness. *No, no, no, no, no....*

"No!" Her eyes flew open to stare with stark terror into Jonathan MacKensie's glowing eyes.

He leaned in, his hands on her arms. "I'm tired of playing games with him," he breathed. "I'd much rather play them with you."

She jerked her head away, desperately trying to escape the hands crushing her wrists. "No," she cried, squeezing her eyes shut. "Jonathan, please, *no*."

"He can't help you now." His sibilant voice beat at her, a relentless assault. "But if it makes you feel any better—he may actually enjoy this."

"No!" Her shriek slid sharply into a wail of despair as he lifted her effortlessly from the chair, oblivious to the fists she beat against his shoulders. "Benny! Benny, please! Oh, god—*Benny!*"

Laughing, he tossed her carelessly onto her bed. His hand closed on her throat, pressing her down, choking off her broken cries. "I did warn him," he mocked. "I told him what would happen if he didn't start seeing things my way." His expression changed, lighting up with a new thought. "I should let him watch. He made a promise, you know. He promised not to let me hurt anyone. I'd really like to see his face when I make a liar out of him. You wait right here, okay?"

She cried out her protest, but he was gone. Fighting back blind panic, she clutched at the bed covers, cursing the useless legs twisted awkwardly beneath her. Never before had she allowed herself to think of her paralysis as a liability, but now it was a restraint stronger than steel; her immobile limbs mocked her helplessness.

Jonathan lifted Benedek's unconscious form, dumping it ungently into the wheelchair. He gave the man's blood-streaked face several sharp raps, with no response. Shrugging, he glanced over to meet Randy's terror-stricken eyes. "Don't worry, he's not dead. Not yet, anyway. And he'll have an interesting surprise waiting for him when he wakes up, won't he?"

Randy bit back her scream as he settled on the bed to lean over her. He ran a teasing finger along her chin, his amused chuckle deepening when she recoiled with a ragged moan. Eyes squeezed shut, she fiercely concentrated on the memory of Benny's battered face, anything to use as a weapon to fight against the hysteria threatening to possess her. She searched for the strange thing Benny gasped in his last moments of defiance. *It's not Jonathan. Not a breakdown, not an illness...it's not Jonathan. Fighting...Jonathan is fighting you and you can't handle it....*

*It's not Jonathan!*

The startling realization forced open her eyes to stare into the eyes of what she knew now was a stranger. "You," she said, voice stolen by terror. "You're not Jonathan."

He blinked mild surprise, but his eyes still danced with manic light. "But I am. Or what's left of him, and that's what's really important, isn't it?" He slipped his fingers through her hair, clinging roughly when she tried to pull away. "You're making this harder than it has to be," he said, his voice hardening. "Not that I mind. It's up to you, really."

"No!" she hissed, eyes aflame with sudden hatred for what she knew he was and what he had done to Jonathan MacKensie. "You *bastard!*"

Her fists flew at his face, but he snared her wrists with studied calm, crushing them until her back arched in agony. "All right," he snarled between clenched teeth. "That's the way you want it—fine. You set the ground rules, now you play the game by them."

He shoved her arms aside, clamping the palms of his hands over her eyes. She clawed frantically for the moment it took her to realize that something moved in the darkness he forced on her.

It slithered up out of the black depths, oily and sleek, a creature born of disillusion and despair, all claws and flashing teeth bared to tear and rend.

She screamed, and the darkness stole her cry, tossing it like paper in the wind, mocking her with it. The void held her fast, denying her escape from the inexorable approach of the hell-spawned demon. She saw without eyes, and so did not have even that small respite, could not shut out the horror as its fetid breath caressed her, its slavering jaws opening greedily to engulf her....

She screamed. And screamed. And it fed on the sound of her scream, growing fatter, growing hungrier and still she screamed....

...until a new sound shattered the nightmare: a scream not her own. In that moment, the pressure against her eyes was gone, leaving her to sink helplessly back against the bed.

Through eyes blurred by mingled tears and sweat, she saw that Jonathan had stiffened, looking over his shoulder at the doorway. She moved her head, but his hand slipped to her neck, pinning her in place.

"Well," she heard him smile. "Looks as though all the guests have finally arrived."

"Get away from her."

Randy jolted at the sound of Dr. Moorhouse's voice; Jonathan quietly tightened his grip at her convulsive movement. Tight...too tight, she couldn't breathe....

"I see you remembered to bring my gun. Remind me to thank you before I use it on you."

"I don't believe that's the way it works," she informed him tautly.

"Really." Releasing Randy, he rose and moved, step by step toward the woman holding the gun in her trembling hands. "Well, now. Maybe you're right about that. It would be a mistake for me to kill you now—the party's only just started."

"Stay where you are." The woman's voice quavered. "Don't come any closer or—"

"Or?" He reached out, twining his fingers around her wrist, squeezing until the pistol dropped into his other hand. Smiling thinly, he bent her arm back, pushing her against the wall roughly. "Or what? Oh—I'm sorry, did you mean to use this? Well, since you don't seem to need it, maybe I'd better hang onto it." His laughter filled the room; Dr. Moorhouse closed her eyes tightly against its promised threat.

She made a sudden, determined effort to break free, but he thwarted her with ease, favoring her with another mocking chuckle. Eyebrows arched pointedly, he gave the pistol a half twirl, pressing the muzzle briefly to her beaded forehead. "Welcome to the party," he smirked. "But I wouldn't push my luck if I were you. I could change my mind about extending your invitation."

Behind him, Randy emitted a shuddering cry of protest, and his only reaction was to let a satisfied smile grow in Dr. Moorhouse's ashen face.

She glared up at him. "I know what you are," she hissed defiantly. "And you don't frighten me."

He snorted, unimpressed. "If that were really true, you'd be more than frightened, lady—you'd be screaming. Count on it."

"I know what you're afraid of. You can try to terrorize me, but it won't get you what you need any more. Neither will killing me, so what's left for you to do? How can you get what you need to survive? Not here. I'm not afraid of you, not now. There's nothing left for you to feed on—only hate. Hate, sticking in your throat, choking you, driving you back into your loathsome pit—*killing* you." She shook her head with a harsh, derisive laugh. "You've *lost*."

"Lost?" His fingers around her throat slammed her head against the wall. "I'll tell you who's lost, lady. You, that's who. You lost. You *lost*."

The growl became an animal cry, animating the crushing grip denying her breath, strangling her last defiant scream. Clawing frantically, she felt her struggles fade with the rising roar in her ears, the pressure building behind her eyes, threatening to explode....

His hands tore away from her neck. Released, she sank to her knees, lungs heaving in violent protest. Dizzy and nauseous, she fought back to consciousness, gasping, clutching at her burning throat. Her red-filmed eyes cleared with maddening slowness, and the spinning room slowed enough for her to look up and see Jonathan collapsed on the floor nearby. Sprawled atop the body was Benny, gulping in short, pain-racked breaths, blinking groggily. Her wits snapped back into place, stitched together by blank astonishment. To have covered such a distance in one leap, Benny must have come out of the wheelchair propelled by strength close to superhuman.

"Dr. M," he rasped between gasps. "Quick. The key—in my side pocket. *Quick*."

On her hands and knees she gained his side, producing the key from his jacket pocket with trembling hands. Releasing the cuffs, she helped him into a sitting position, solicitous of the sharp intakes of breath greeting his every movement.

"I'm...I'm okay," he assured her, waving aside her attempt to check his facial injuries. "Randy. Go, go."

Thin-lipped, she rose to her feet. Benedek took a moment to breathe through a spasm shooting up from his abused muscles before pushing up to his knees.

He turned Jonathan onto his back, noting the thin trickle of blood where his head impacted on the corner of the study desk. Recovering the discarded handcuffs, he secured them carefully around MacKensie's wrists.

Jonathan's eyes flickered open, faint pain creasing his forehead. He focused on Benedek leaning over him, the frown becoming confusion. "What...?" His attempt to speak slid into a low moan; he raised his hand to his injured temple, and stared in abject horror at the cuffs binding his wrists.

"Oh, god." His face crumpled. "Oh, *god*."

"Come on, buddy." Benny, stoically ignoring his screaming muscles, urged Jonathan to sit up. "We gotta get you out of here."

Jonathan bowed his head into trembling hands. "And go where?" he murmured brokenly. "Back to the hospital? Did they tell you?" He raised his head, revealing eyes filled with tearful desperation. "Did they tell you what he did to an orderly?"

Drained, Benny felt his shoulders slump, despair dragging his energy away. Beneath the hand he had on MacKensie's arm, he felt the muscles pulled taut by remembered horror, and somehow his own physical injuries seemed insignificant.

"We'll think of something," he heard someone using his voice say. "Swear to god, Jack, we'll think of something, but for now, let's get out of here. Come on."

But Jonathan had been distracted by the one thing Benedek hoped to spare him. His horror-filled eyes stared up at the bed, at Dr. Moorhouse cradling a sobbing Randy in her arms. "No." His head moved, froze; his breath shuddered, splintering his thin voice. "No...."

Benny couldn't budge him. "Come on," he breathed near his ear, a quiet plea.

"No." His paralysis broke, and now something cold grew in his eyes, hardening his face. "There's no place to go. Benedek—" His eyes flamed. "There's no place to *go*."

The truth slammed him in the gut. The truth—no place to go, nowhere to hide, no way to escape. So where was Lon? Why wasn't that thing from a Grade Z chomp-and-stomp movie here to laugh and mock and gloat over his victory? Why wasn't he drooling over the corpses of their savaged psyches, bellowing his triumph?

Frustration lifted his silent rage into words muttered behind clenched teeth. "Where is he? Damn it, he says he wants his damned focus so much, why isn't he here?"

Jonathan's head jerked slightly, a subtle change softening the torment in his watery eyes. A frown deepened on his forehead as he stared at Benedek, suddenly confused. "The barrier...he—"

"Jonathan?" He gasped, going still at the sound of Randy's voice, thin and lost. Benny tightened his grip on his friend's arm, a tacit request to leave now, in silence and without looking back. With a sharp motion of his head, Jonathan denied him. "I'll leave," he said softly. "But not like this. Please—not like this. I—I have to...please."

The quiet, desperate plea speared his soul; all practical considerations splintered under the assault. Mutely, he nodded; silently, he prayed he was not making yet another serious error of judgment.

Helping Jonathan to his feet, he steadied the man's hesitant approach to the bed where Randy, huddled tightly within Dr. Moorhouse's protective embrace, stared up at him from her tear-swollen face. He stopped; Benny felt his muscles tighten, recoiling from the pain in her red-rimmed eyes. Eyes closing, he moved his head in single, jerky motion. "Randy, I...."

"No." He flinched from her desolate cry, tried to turn away, but Benny stopped him. Jonathan opened his eyes to see his friend give him a strange look, inclining his head tersely toward Randy.

He forced his gaze back, freezing to see that she reached a trembling hand out to him, a mute plea for him to stay. Bewildered, he stared at her, his mouth opening to form some weak protest. But then his eyes dropped to the handcuffs binding his wrists.

Humiliation pulled at him, but again Benny stood firm, and this time Randy leaned forward, catching one of Jonathan's hands in hers. Dr. Moorhouse's protective embrace became a supportive one, bracing the girl's shoulders as she clung, curling her fingers around Jonathan's other hand. Her eyes stared at him, searching. "My god," she whispered in soft horror. "This is what you couldn't tell me, why you ran away, why you...." The words caught, wafting away in the shuddering sigh. "I saw it. I saw that...that *thing*, oh god—I saw it."

Jonathan winced faintly, bowing his head. He barely reacted when Dr. Moorhouse's hand touched his arm, a mute gesture of comfort.

But that reaction, however brief, was intense. Benny's eyes narrowed, considering it. For just a moment, it was though a light had flashed over his friend's gray face, illuminating the darkness. It was gone now, leaving Jonathan cold, silent and still. His blank eyes stared into the depths of his own private horror.

Lady Carmen. The flash of insight jolted him. Lady Carmen's eyes had been cold and lifeless, yet something flickered in the depths when he touched her, when he silently showed her his anger at the evil shadowing her broken life. His hand enfolding hers released her, too briefly, from her prison of darkness. His anger gave her fleeting respite.

He leaned to search Jonathan's face for a reaction to his carefully phrased question: "Where is he?"

His eyes moved; nothing more.

"What were you going to tell me about the barrier?"

Concentration flickered, took hold; Jonathan's head came up slowly. "He's there," he said thickly. "Behind the barrier. Hiding...."

"Hiding?" Benny let anticipation color his voice. "Or trapped? Come on, Jack, this is the last chance we get. Tell me, once and for all—is he back there because he wants to be, or are you boxing him in?"

There was no overt reaction for a moment, but abruptly Jonathan convulsed, his breath escaping in a pain-racked gasp. Benny had him by the shoulders, easing him down onto the side of the bed; Randy tightened her grip on the man's hands, her jaw hardening as though she intended to draw off his pain and make it her own.



But the eyes Jonathan lifted up to them glowed; a thin smile cracked the deep lines of strain on his face. "You're right," he rasped. "The wall—it isn't his. It's *mine*."

"Anger." Dr. Moorhouse spoke for the first time. "*Our* anger. I was right—it's poison to him. We provoke him with it, and he turns on us like an animal, attacking us—trying to turn our hatred back to fear."

Benny gave her a level, accusatory look. "He almost killed you."

She shook her head slowly, serene. "He came close, as close as he came to killing you and harming Randy. But he couldn't have done it. Jonathan wouldn't let him."

He stared at her, but understanding didn't come until he darted his gaze to see the strange gleam in Jonathan's eyes. She was *right*. MacKensie was fighting Lon, had been fighting him all along. But blinded in the darkness Lon forced on him, Jonathan had no idea just how debilitating his resistance proved—until now.

Lon wasn't hiding. He'd been hurled away; drained by his attacks on Benny and Dr. Moorhouse, poisoned by their defiance, and finally driven back by Jonathan's resistance. And Benny remembered now that he'd been holding on to the man's arm as he regained consciousness and since that moment, MacKensie hadn't stood alone. Lon *couldn't* get through. Their anger, communicated to Jonathan by touch, served as an impenetrable wall trapping him. It was the only explanation that made any sense.

All this time, he assumed Lon had been systematically attacking them to prove how omnipotent he was, and to force Benedek to submission. But that wasn't it at all—it was mere bluff and bluster, all of it. His attacks weren't solely malevolent; they were born of desperation. Lon was trying to drive them away, trying to isolate Jonathan by reducing those who cared about him to fear and terror. Instead, he'd inflamed them, stoked their anger and hatred. Lon had miscalculated badly; the advantage was suddenly within their grasp.

But an unsettling thought stole his courage. Lon was an invisible evil, existing in the darkest reaches of a nightmare. He cowered in the depths of Jonathan's mind, and to confront him, they would have to go to him. And there was only one way he could think to do that.

He crouched down beside his friend, willing him to see the plea in his eyes. "Jonathan, listen to me, okay? I'm not really sure how this is going to work, or...or even if it's going to work at all...." He paused to wipe the nervous sweat springing up around his mouth, then sighed heavily. "You're going to have to go in after him."

Jonathan flinched, a panicked reflex, but Randy's hands held him still as did the mute support she stared at him.

"That barrier," Benny continued quietly. "You're going to have to break it down and drag him out. We'll be right here. We'll help you."

*If we can.* The thought haunted him. The battle had to be joined inside Jonathan's already bruised psyche—what kind of help could they be to him there? All they could do was stand by him, offer him what they could, and hope to god that would prove enough.

"Can you do it?" he said, voice fading under the weight of new fear.

Jonathan stared at him a moment, then nodded almost imperceptibly. The answer was not that he could do what Benny suggested; the answer was that he *had* to. There were no more choices left.

"Wait." He pressed his hand against Jonathan's arm, lost in another sudden thought. A talisman, an object to serve the same purpose as Lady Carmen's crystal pendant...he found himself staring at MacKensie's small gold tie clip. Without apology, he reached over to slip it off under Jonathan's startled eyes. "Where'd you get this?" he asked, studying the incised pattern closely.

"My father," he stammered his confusion. "It was a graduation present."

Elegant in its simplicity, with a cluster of tiny diamonds mounted to one side, it was something Jonathan obviously wore with pride. A gift symbolizing a rite of passage, it bore meaning far beyond that of the alloy and minerals comprising it. It was a small, gleaming symbol of Jonathan MacKensie's life; a leitmotif.

Benny's throat closed as he stared at the clip, mindlessly letting light prism out from the diamond cluster. What was the understanding Augusta had given Lady Carmen that had enabled her to turn a hard, cold crystal into an weapon? Was it that a sacrifice was required, one that Lady Carmen gladly made?

And is that what was required now?

His dark thoughts scattered when a hand closed briefly over his, gently prying the clip from his fingers. Jonathan met his startled gaze calmly, letting the small gold ornament slide into the palm of his own hand.

He knew. Benny felt his jaw tighten with grim realization. Jonathan knew, as he had known about the crystal pendant; he knew and now he was accepting the risk.

But Benedek suddenly wasn't certain that he was prepared to accept anything. From nowhere, panic leaped up to threaten him. What was he *doing*? Risking all of their lives rattling around in the dark, that's what he was doing. All he had to go on was guesswork and raw instinct, two very frail commodities at this point. Given his frazzled state of mind, he wouldn't trust himself to cross the street, let alone orchestrate this blind turkey shoot. And Augusta—how could he believe in her? It could have all been a dream, some sort of desperate wish fulfillment. He had nothing tangible, nothing concrete, nothing to justify the terrible risk he was asking Jonathan to take.

He stopped himself dead. Why was it so impossible for him to believe in Augusta? She was just as real as Lon, in her own gentle way. And, after all, she had appeared just in time. If she hadn't turned him back, he would this moment be on a flight to New York or even Chicago, leaving Randy and Dr. Moorhouse...he forced himself away from the thought with a shudder of revulsion. No, Augusta *was* real, he had to believe that. And by the same token, what she told him was also true. He couldn't afford doubts anymore. The only answer was the one he found in himself.

Benny rose to his feet, fighting stiffened muscles all the way. He placed his hands lightly on Jonathan's rigid shoulders, took a deep, steeling breath. At a prompting look from him, Dr. Moorhouse placed her free hand on Jonathan's arm; Randy needed no encouragement to recover the hand in which Jonathan clutched the tie clip.

"Okay, there it is, Jack—all players in position," he said quietly. "Go get him."

Jonathan drew a long breath, and released it slowly as he closed his eyes. For a time, he was still, head tilted up slightly; only a slight movement behind his eyelids betrayed any sign of internal struggle.

Then he stiffened, as though nudged by a sudden blow. And in that moment, the room dissolved.

Benedek recoiled with a voiceless cry, arms flying up to protect himself from black wings beating at his face. A shriek split his eardrums, shattering his sanity. Panic seized him, terror took him in its cold grasp. Stumbling back, he slipped, found no foothold, began to fall....

Something snared him, holding him fast, something soft and non-threatening. *Hang on*, it whispered soothingly, cutting through the hell-born screams pounding his senses. *Hang on*.

He hung on, huddling in the unexpected shelter until the attack receded, until he recognized it for what it was— sound and noise and lights and flashes. A distraction; harmless.

Warmth twined around him, dispelling the last of his pounding terror. In wonder he felt it sink into the depths of his soul, nudging out exhaustion, and with the glow suffusing him, he turned to face his savior.

Randy. Astonishment lifted him. She hovered near him, little more than a dazzling yellow light, bursting with raw youth; a life at its beginning, full of hopes and dreams. Behind her burned a deeper golden glow, a life matured and fulfilled: Dr. Moorhouse. And he was....

Dark. A weak flicker, strained and shadowed, was all that greeted his search. Here and there something flared, but that was merely what Randy shared with him; he was drained, nearly extinguished.

A weak link. He suppressed a stab of fear at the thought, stifled the springing doubts about whether his depleted condition threatened them. Randy seemed to sense his apprehension, and curled him more tightly in her grasp. He felt Dr. Moorhouse's presence too, a soft, no-nonsense touch soothing his fevered mind. No starch, no stiff and prim schoolmarm here. He submitted to her infusion of calm with growing wonder at how he ever could have misjudged her.

The maelstrom from which Randy had rescued him still blazed, licking hungrily and vainly at the edge of their collective consciousness. Benny forced himself to look at it, forced himself not to recoil from it in sick revulsion.

It defied every attempt he made to resolve it; it defied description of any sort. It was evil; the antithesis of light and life; the manifestation of grief and guilt and every destructive emotion known or unknown to man. It was the thing that had ruthlessly possessed Jonathan MacKensie and sought to destroy them in his guise; it was the thing that called itself Lon.

A heaving black bulk, leathery skin ripping under the stormy blasts swirling around them, it flailed, dripping black tentacles slashing in mindless fury. And near it, dodging the blows, a pale light flickered in the crushing shadow.

*Jonathan!* Randy's echoing cry reached out to the thin glow, dashing against the rising wind.

The distraction cost. One of the tentacles snaked out, touched Randy, and recoiled with a hiss. But as it snapped back, it found Benedek, and curled itself implacably around him. With a cry, he fought, but his support snapped, and his scream rose as it dragged him down into the gaping maw.

*No!* Twin cries of defiance, two shining lifelines swirled around him, pulling him back until his progress either way slowed, stopped. Two forces evenly matched trapped him in their embrace, immobile.

The tiny light floated up, flickering as though trying to reach him. But a black on black shape swatted at it like a bothersome insect, causing it to retreat back to safety.

More light speared out from the twin glows, lashing out at the darkness. It whimpered, flinching under the assault, but when it retreated, it again dragged Benedek with it.

Golden warmth clawed at the grip, tried desperately to pry the fetid fingers from him, but he slipped away from them, his last despairing cry mingling with theirs as he slid inexorably toward the waiting blackness.

And then light exploded, sparks flying out to fill the void with dazzling fluorescence. The tiny, ineffectual glow suddenly flared, stabbing shards of itself into the bulbous black mass.

Convulsing with a shriek, it clawed, but splinters of gold clung, spitting and hissing. For every spark it managed to dislodge, three more sprang up in its place. Vapor burst up from gaping wounds spurting blackish bile, and the fire grew, eating its way into the stinking bulk until it subsided into shuddering agony.

Released, Benny allowed the two women to wrap him in their protective embrace. They watched, three together, as the faint light, dangerously dim now, seemed to dance its triumph. It stopped, trembled and flickered, almost gone.

*Jonathan!* Randy speared out, but even her strong life force could not reach the tiny spark through the roiling black mist of destruction. Benny, closer, tried and failed, his own weakened light falling far short.

The thing that was Lon sighed, shivering in its last throes. But the last killing sparks were dying, and life stirred in the black bulk yet. In moments, it would draw into the depths of darkness, and find what it needed to renew itself.

Benedek sprang, throwing himself against the hulk. It shrieked, slammed at him desperately, but he clung with fierce tenacity, steeling himself for what he knew he had to do. But just as he prepared to send his own light stabbing into the black thing's heart, something yanked him back.

*Jonathan—no!* He closed his fingers, but the tiny light darted, eluding him. It trembled; goodbye. And then dashed itself against the heaving bulk.

"No!" The scream ripped out, tore in, split his body and his mind. The evil exploded, tumbling up in a brief, brilliant flash of vapor and flame, and was gone, leaving only the darkness, silent and empty.

*No. No.* Randy and Dr. Moorhouse receded from his awareness, and he let them go. He was alone, alone in the dark, with a single plaintive cry echoing in the unheeding void. *No. No.*

The evil was gone. He had witnessed Lon's destruction and knew without doubt that it was complete. He should feel relief, sweet and glorious triumph; but how could he feel anything when his heart had just been torn out of his chest?

A thin cry of denial shuddered, unvoiced. The evil was gone—but so was Jonathan.

*No.* He clutched desperately at some kind of hope, but behind closed eyes, he heard the truth. He heard Dr. Moorhouse's sharp gasp, her quickened breathing; he heard Randy's anguished cry, dissolving into soft, heart-wrenching sobs. Only he was left without release, held fast in an icy grip.

Every shred of strength he had left went into forcing himself to relax his convulsive grip on Jonathan's shoulders. Bereft of support, the man slumped forward, and Benny eased him down, letting Randy take the lifeless body into her arms. He straightened, watching with curious detachment as she bent over him protectively, clinging as she gave full vent to her grief.

Dr. Moorhouse was trembling, hands pressed tightly to her mouth. She barely reacted when Benedek silently moved to her side, but then she reached out, blindly seeking and finding his hand, clinging to it like a lost child.

He was two parts now, separate and cold. One part tried to reciprocate the woman's silent cry by tightening his hand around hers; but the other part won, pulling from her grasp. Bitter resentment filled him, pummeling all other emotions to dust. Even the desolated look Dr. Moorhouse stared at him from brimming eyes failed to move him.

Some force outside himself took him through the motions. Numbed fingers fumbled the key out of his pocket, unlocked the cuffs, and let them fall to the floor with an accusatory chink. That tiny sound pushed him away like an invisible hand against his chest. Remorseless, he turned his back on them, moving away until there was no more distance to put between him and the pain. Somewhere in the gray mists smothering his awareness he glimpsed the fact that he was at a window, staring with blind eyes past the four walls, out into a larger reality he no longer felt part of. His reality was trapped here; this room, his entire being. Anger boiled like corrosive acid, eating away at him, bit by small bit. For a moment something tightened in his gut and he tensed, expecting it to give him the release he needed. But the twinge subsided, leaving him in the cold hands of anger.

His fist balled against the window frame, pounding softly. *Damn you. You didn't have to do it. I was ready, I would have done it, why did you stop me? Four months. I wasted four months of my life to have it end up like this? I could've cut my losses back in Lannerton. I could've done us both a favor and let that fire take us out and been done with it—damn you. I don't want to be here, I can't take your place. Why did you stop me, why didn't you let me do it? They would've shed a few tears, but you'd have been alive and safe and in a while I wouldn't have mattered and that's how it should have been, damn you, why did you stop me? I wasn't trying to be a hero. I was trying to escape—the only way I knew how. And now you've left me like this. This—this is just about the most selfish and unfeeling thing you've ever done, so don't expect me to shed any tears for you, pal. I'm not sure I can ever forgive you for this.*

He closed his eyes, denying a flutter of emotion begging for release. *Damn you. I'd almost managed to forget how much it hurts to care. Thanks for reminding me, pal. Don't expect me to forgive you for that, either.*

A soft touch on his arm started him violently out of his bitter reverie. Dr. Moorhouse stood next to him, studying him intently. He tried to avert his eyes, but her strange serenity held him. She pressed something into his hand; a handkerchief. Unbidden, a wry smile touched his lips. "I must be a mess, huh?" he sighed, taking a desultory swipe at the dried blood crusting his chin.

Her hand tightened on his arm in silent sympathy. But suddenly her touch irritated him. He didn't want comfort or to share her grief. He wanted cold anger, silent solitude.

But she wouldn't leave his side, so he braced himself for the banal words he was sure he'd have to endure. He would nod where appropriate, make the right noises, and let her well-meaning words fall on deafened ears.

"He had to do it, you know."

He blinked, shaken to his soul. She knew what he was thinking; somehow, she *knew*.

"No," he heard himself protest. "He didn't *have* to. He didn't."

"And if he hadn't, would he feel any differently than you do now? Were your positions reversed, do you think he would be standing here blessing your nobility—or, more likely, cursing your stupidity?"

He stared at her, voice gone. She nodded shrewdly. "Yes, I thought as much. Not that I blame you —your perspective is rather skewed, which is to be expected. But please—consider this. In the end, it was his battle and his alone. If you had claimed the final victory for him, he would have won nothing."

He clutched at the window frame for support. Again. Again she was right. Once more her startling insights cut through his barriers to stab deep to his soul. He closed his eyes, leaning his head against the glass, letting its coolness reach in to uncurl the knots in his stomach. A tired smile burgeoned on his face under the nudge of a quiet, wry laugh. "The wedding's off, Dr. M. Am I too old for you to adopt me?"

Genuine amusement sparked light in her dull eyes. On impulse, he reached out to put his arm around her shoulders. To his surprise, she drew into the embrace, her head coming to rest lightly on his shoulder. He sighed, content to let the new warmth wither the last remnants of his anger.

A tiny flash of light caught his eye, and for a panicked moment, he was back in the nightmare, pleading with a frail glow not to leave him alone. This time the light stayed, glinting more brightly, and now he saw the object Dr. Moorhouse caressed with her fingers.

Confusion banished the black memory; the woman was holding Jonathan's diamond tie clip. It must have fallen from his hand when he'd ripped from Randy's grasp during the last moments of battle, leaving Dr. Moorhouse to recover it.

He took her hand, gently prying open her fingers. The ornament glowed in the palm of her hand, taunting him with a whisper. What purpose had it served, after all? Had it only been a useless distraction? An eternity ago, Lady Carmen's crystal pendant had brought fiery destruction to Harmon, but that had been a tangible object against a substantial form. Jonathan joined battle as an amorphous soul against formless evil. The talisman hadn't been necessary. And now it was all they had left.

She sensed bitterness welling up in him. Dropping the clip to her fingers, she held it up, considering it with veiled eyes. Then, cupping his hand, she pressed it into his palm.

It burned. Only her firm grip on his hand kept him from jerking back. Astonished, he stared down at the object until he realized that the strange heat was bearable; just. He gave Dr. Moorhouse a bewildered look, but her puzzled reaction was lost in the flood of startling realization. She hadn't noticed anything peculiar; only *he* felt the fierce warmth emanating from the tie clip. And only he heard the sibilant whisper near his ear.

He recognized the delicate voice. Augusta. Hope.

Without warning, he grabbed Dr. Moorhouse's arm, dragging the nonplused woman back to the bed. Randy, still holding Jonathan, looked questioningly at them from her gray, silent grief.

She started to protest when Benedek took Jonathan's shoulder, but his sense of frantic urgency got through to her. Together they eased the man onto his back, his head and shoulders cradled in her lap. For a moment, Benedek considered moving him to the floor, but Randy defied him with a steady look.

"Dr. Moorhouse." He waved her in. At his nod, she gripped Jonathan's arm while Randy twined her fingers around the man's cold hand. Benny took a moment to consider the tiny gold object pulsing in his palm. *Be right*, he prayed to the part of himself listening to Augusta's voice. *Please—be right*.

Taking Jonathan's other hand, he carefully placed the clip into his palm, covering it with his own.

Heat spurted, pure agony spasming up his arm, spearing deep into his brain. He hissed, convulsing at the brutal assault, but somehow he managed to hang on. Tendrils of fire shot through him, webbing out to touch every nerve ending with raw pain. Then, suddenly, the growth ceased. Instead of sending heat, it drew from him.

Panic. Light and life sucked from the depths of his bones, spiraling through his arm, drawn greedily to his hand and beyond. Verging darkness closed on him, the implacable hand of death; cold, silent, remorseless.

He formed only a single cry before ice crystallized around his senses. *Stop.*

It stopped, leaving him numb, drained, inches from the brink of oblivion. But the inexorable pull had ended, and the faint traces of warmth and life remaining within him caught and flamed, determined to fill the void once more. Slowly, his senses thawed, and the first thing he became aware of was the sharp, keening pain of a hard, cold object cutting into his palm, kept in place by the warmth of...

He gasped, abruptly blinking back to reality. Cold and warmth...reversed.

For a moment he was blind; nothing met his desperate search save a wet gray mist. He wiped hastily at his eyes and his vision cleared a little, enough to let him stare down into the open, tired and fully cognizant eyes of Jonathan MacKensie.

He kept staring, unable to react. Jonathan blinked, dazed; his chest rose tentatively, as though he were learning to breathe all over again. He seemed to be trying to focus on the faces hovering above him, but suddenly winced, face creasing in pain.

He tugged at the hand Benedek still held in a white-knuckled grip. "It hurts," he complained groggily. "Let go."

Benny's paralysis shattered. He jerked his hand open and the clip tumbled out onto the bed. Lifting his arm, Jonathan scowled at the angry red imprint on his palm. But the mild irritation dissolved when he reached out to take Benny's hand back, turning out his palm to inspect the matching dent. Returning awareness brought understanding; Jonathan gave him a look of silent wonder.

"Jonathan?" Randy broke her own awe-struck silence, her hand fluttering near him as though touching him would shatter the illusion. He gave her a tired smile, closing his hand over hers to give it a brief squeeze. She gasped softly, pressed her fingers to her mouth, suppressing a smile reflected in her dancing eyes. Next to her, Dr. Moorhouse drew a deep breath, closing her eyes. Benedek could have sworn he heard her silent, fervent prayer of thanks.

A red flush of embarrassment crept into Jonathan's pale face as he looked at the three faces above him in turn. Plaintively, he murmured, "Could someone please help me up?"

Benedek braced him by the arm and with the help of the two woman, he levered Jonathan up to a seated position.

Jonathan paused to rub at his eyes, gathering strength with a deep breath. He looked up as though to speak, but stopped when Randy held up the tie clip in her trembling hand.

The gold object was mutilated, blackened and twisted by an incredible blast of fire, or some other unfathomable force. Whatever that force was, it had somehow affected only the tie clip, leaving both men unscarred. Randy and Dr. Moorhouse stared in silent, frightened awe at the anomaly, unwilling to question. Jonathan took the clip from Randy's hand, regarding it with veiled eyes.

Thinking he recognized the emotion behind the man's silence, Benedek cleared his throat. "I'm...I'm sorry, I know how much that meant to you."

Jonathan silenced him with a sharp, hurt look. Benny backed down, embarrassed at having misunderstood. The clip was only a thing, a cold object; meaningless. The emotion it symbolized could never be lost as long as they were alive to keep it safe.

The silence grew, each left with their own internal tangle to sort out. And then Jonathan spoke, regarding Benny from narrowed eyes. "Benedek, you look like hell."

Benny's head snapped up to stare at the soft, amused light in his friend's eyes. "Thank you," he replied in a voice sharpened by amazement. "I feel like hell."

A giddy chuckle made a liar out of him. He suppressed the first volley, but the second spluttered and the third broke loose, doubling him over in helpless, choking laughter. Barely managing to collapse against the end of the bed, he gave up trying to control the spasms burbling up inside him. Finally, release; he embraced it with abandon. And through eyes blurred by joy-spawned tears, he saw his laughter infect the others, releasing them all.

Randy interrupted Jonathan in mid-guffaw, flinging her arms around his neck in a joyful embrace. He returned it just as fiercely, reaching out to take Dr. Moorhouse's hand in a tight, grateful squeeze.

Recovering after a moment, Benny decided it was time to make a discreet departure, but his attempt to slide quietly off the bed was promptly foiled. At a sharp cry of protest from Randy, Jonathan leaned back, snagging the man by the collar. Off balance, Benedek stumbled back into a tangle of arms, and it took him a dazed moment to realize that Jonathan, with a dangerous gleam in his eye, was delivering him bodily to Randy's full-nelson embrace. "No fair!" he yelped as the girl, mocking a triumphant cackle, wrapped her arms around his neck. "Aiding and abetting a hug, that's not murfph...!"

"I'm sure she'll let you up for air in a couple of minutes," Jonathan told him as his hand curled around Dr. Moorhouse's to share once more a silent communication. "If not, we'll send in the National Guard—eventually."

A muffled curse met his chuckle. But in the midst of the breathless tumult, a timid knock sounded on the door. Everyone froze in sudden, startled silence.

Benedek pulled Randy's arm out of his face, glancing up at each in turn. "You invite anyone else to this orgy?" he whispered.

Dr. Moorhouse gasped softly, her hand flying to her mouth. "Liz?"

"Liz!" Benny shot to his feet. "She's ready to kill me as it is!"

"Benedek!" Dr. Moorhouse chagrined hiss brought him to a skidding halt halfway to the door. "Do you want to give the poor woman heart failure? You're a *mess*."

He swiped at his face, scowled at the flecks of dried blood clinging to his hand. Pulling out Dr. Moorhouse's handkerchief, he scrubbed, mouthing a yelp of pain when his careless ministrations set off a bruised nerve or three. "No, no, I'll get it," he waved Jonathan back as another knock, more insistent, sounded.

He cracked open the door, peering out. "Liz!" he greeted the pale, apprehensive woman cheerily. "How's it going?"

She gulped, blanching. "B-Benny? You're *hurt*."

Feigning surprise, he poked at his face. "Me? Nah. Must have cut myself shaving. Hey, listen...." He slipped out into the corridor, carefully shutting the door behind him. "Liz. I owe you an apology. We're talking mega-mea culpas here."

Visibly shaken, she retreated from his open sincerity, distrust shining from hurt eyes. He sighed. "Okay, so maybe an apology isn't exactly what you want. An explanation—yeah, you deserve that. We can talk later about what I deserve for putting you through all this."

"Explanation?" She gave him a long, doubtful look. "I don't want...I don't...." A shiver went through her, stealing her breath. "Benny, all I ever wanted was the truth. You're hurt, everything's upside down, now you're talking nonsense— what's *wrong*?"

"Wrong?" He stared at her, genuinely puzzled. Nothing was wrong as far as he was concerned; not anymore. "Wrong?" he repeated and felt a twinge heralding the return of giddy exhilaration. And before he knew what he was doing, he grabbed Liz up in a laughing embrace, swinging her off her feet in his explosion of joy. "Everything's fantastic!"

Behind them, the door opened again. Dr. Moorhouse peered out, eyebrows arching at Benedek's exuberant display. The moment he set her down, Liz stumbled back, staring open-mouthed at Benny and her employer in turn. "Dr. Moorhouse? Are you all right?"

"Oh, I'm fine, dear," she smiled brightly. "How are you?"

She swallowed, too confused to react to the silent nod Dr. Moorhouse gave Benedek as she stepped back, opening the door for them.

Benny grabbed Liz's hand, pulling her with him into the room. "Liz, sweetheart, you are just in time for the feast of your life," he exulted. "How does take-out Szechuan sound? I know this great place on E Street that'll deliver to the moon for the right tip, but I gotta warn you about the Number 11 chicken and peanuts—don't try it unless your medical insurance covers sinus transplants."

Randy, back in her wheelchair, was speaking in low tones to Jonathan, who crouched by her side with his hand held tightly in hers. Benny's tumultuous entrance distracted them; Jonathan looked up with interest. "Did someone mention food? I'm starved."

"Another vote for gastronomic suicide!" Benny crowed. "Where's the phone book? Everybody call out their favorites. No, forget that. I'll order doubles of everything on the menu. Hey, anybody got some bucks on them?"

"Give me that." Dr. Moorhouse snatched the receiver out of his hand. "Double portions on *my* departmental budget? I'll handle this."

He skittered away, hands held up in surrender. "No sweat, Mom—you're the boss."

"Mom?" Jonathan arched his eyebrows questioningly at Randy, who shrugged with a laugh.

Benedek, at the peak of pure manic energy now, searched the room with a narrowed eye. "Randy, sweetheart, tell me you break dorm regulations with wild abandon and you've got service for five stashed around here somewhere."

"Liz!"

Randy's alarmed cry alerted Benny just in time. He caught the woman before her faint carried her to the floor, and supported her to the futon couch, waving frantically to Dr. Moorhouse, still on the phone, that he had things under control.

"I'll get some water," Jonathan offered, heading for the bathroom.

"Liz, come on, stay with us," Benedek urged, bracing her with an arm across her shoulders.

"I'm...I'm fine," she insisted weakly, close to tears. "I just...I just don't *understand*."

"I know, I know," he soothed, feeling her shiver accuse his wrenching guilt. "And it's my fault and I'm sorry and there's no way I can expect you to forgive me...."

"It's not you," she interjected, tired and exasperated. "It never was. Don't you see? If it had been any of my business in the first place, you would have told me. I know that. And I accepted that. At least—I thought I did. But you were all hurting so much, and I could see that, and I didn't know what was happening and all I could do was imagine the worst..." She bowed her head, accepting Benedek's gentle squeeze of comfort, but missing the look that passed between him and Jonathan. Both felt the sharp sting of black memory twinged by her words. Given a choice, they would have gladly exchanged that memory for Liz's imagined worst.

Jonathan recovered first, reaching out for Liz's hand to guide the water glass into it. She tensed, pulling back, and stared at him with suddenly frightened eyes.

"It's okay," Benedek assured her hastily. "Liz, it's okay now. Everything is fine."

"He's right." Randy moved to join them, leaning forward to put her hand on the woman's arm. "Everything is fine."

Liz's eyes darted between Randy and Benny, but the dark light remained. Dr. Moorhouse, replacing the telephone receiver, responded to the pleading look her secretary directed at her. "They're right," the older woman said. "There's nothing to worry about any more. Except perhaps what we're going to use to eat all this food."

"Organic chopsticks," Benny told her, wagging his fingers. "You remembered duck sauce and hot mustard, right?"

Her lips pursed in mock disapproval, but her eyes pointed him back to Liz, who huddled miserably in the shelter of his bracing arm, unable to look at Jonathan. For his part, MacKensie was staring pensively into the water glass, and after a long moment said softly, "Liz—they're right. For a long while there, I didn't think I'd ever be able to say this again, but—everything is fine." A smile edged onto his face. "Everything is more than just fine. It's absolutely wonderful."

Something in his voice drew her unwillingly; she stared at him, and her eyes flickered with changing emotion. Fear, distrust, doubt, confusion, and finally, blossoming under the gentle warmth of his smile, belief. She took the glass from his hands with a grateful murmur of thanks.



"There you go," Benny grinned his own relief.

A wave warned him she had something else to say once she'd finished swallowing. "You're not off the hook yet, buddy. You promised me an explanation, and I'm holding you to it."

He opened his mouth to protest, but caught himself in time. She was right; she deserved an explanation for all the torment she'd suffered right along with them.

"Okay," he acquiesced with a sigh. "An explanation. But..." His voice turned plaintive. "Could we eat first?"

---

From that point on, the conversation strayed no farther than an appreciative comment on the egg rolls or a laughing reaction to someone's tentative discovery of an unidentifiable entree and subsequent desperate grab for water. Only once did Benedek break his own resolve. Under cover of annoying Dr. Moorhouse by persistently taste-testing the contents of her cardboard cartons, he ascertained from her that the handcuffs as well as the gun and chloroformed cloth had been recovered, stashed safely in a drawer where she would later retrieve them to make proper disposition. She also informed him that her earlier disappearance from the room, ostensibly to check on the progress of the delivery man, covered a phone call to Elgin. Dr. Fuentes was mollified, and the orderly left gibbering nonsense in the wake of Jonathan MacKensie's peremptory escape seemed to be recovering with the help of a very strong tranquilizer. Benedek listened, feeling curiously energized by her quiet, efficient disposal of the last shreds of their nightmare ordeal.

With a long look of open admiration, he pointed his wooden chopsticks (thoughtfully provided in one of the dozens of bags littering the floor of Randy's dorm room) at the contents of the carton in her hand. "Watch this stuff, it'll curl your socks. After all this, we wouldn't want to lose you to the Hunan pork and cabbage, would we?"

The feeding frenzy abated at length, becoming a comfortable, sated silence. Benny nestled among the debris, cross-legged on the floor with the desk supporting his back, and felt the soporific effects of his first decent meal in over twelve hours twine around his senses. The room was warm; he could have sworn it glowed, and everyone in it touched by the golden light. Probably the ginger chicken, he thought fuzzily, closing his eyes.

Time jumped, swirling into the golden mist. His next foray out of his drifting dream brought him the awareness that something light and warm cradled his head, pressing him against a pillowing comfort. He fought to clear the haze, but the contact against his face soothed him back. A couple of hard blinks brought three figures into enough focus for him to decide who was missing from his line of vision; with a smile, he then closed his eyes, letting himself drift back to sleep against Randy's knees.

The next time he awoke, he found himself curled up on the floor. A light went off somewhere; he heard a gentle burble of voices, impinging on his senses like a soft breeze. Then, something fluttered and wafted over him, a brief gust of cool air dissolving into a warm blanket covering him. A warm blanket...he found the fleecy material, pulled it up snugly to his neck with a grateful sigh. He cracked his eyes open just long enough to identify the blurred outline of his benefactor and smiled groggily. "Thanks, Mom," he sighed, sliding back into his dream.

And the last time he came awake for good, blinking back the painful assault of morning sunlight on his burning eyes. Liz and Randy looked up at his groan, meeting his puzzled, disoriented look with smiles. "Wha—where...oh, brother." This last muttered into a hand pressed to his head. "Major MSG hangover—I knew there was something about Szechwan I should've been remembering...."

The two women managed to get him to his feet and to a cup of coffee in relatively short order. They kept talk to a bare minimum, solicitous of the persistent wince with which Benny greeted every sound. The dull ache in his head eased during his second cup of coffee, enough for him to notice that Jonathan and Dr. Moorhouse were gone, and someone had cleaned the debris from the floor, all without disturbing his exhausted sleep. He refrained from saying anything until his head cleared and until he was sure he was ready to hear what else his sudden nap caused him to miss the night before.

He had a pretty good idea already; Liz was giving him strange, affectionate smiles, and at least twice reached over to give his hand a squeeze. By the time he was sure his brain was finally working, she glanced at her watch with a start and hastily excused herself.

"Where's she off to?" he said, clearing the rough edge out of his voice on the second try.

"With any luck, home to get some sleep," Randy said, maneuvering her chair next to where he sprawled on the couch. "Between you and me, though—I think she's going to the office."

He considered her words and her tired eyes with a slow nod. "Aha. You two didn't get any sleep last night, did you?"

She gave him a mischievous smile. "Do you know your nose twitches when you snore?"

"Ya," he drawled, all suspicions confirmed. "So—Jonny get home okay?"

"Dr. Moorhouse took him in hand," she nodded.

He let his eyes sparkle at her over another sip of coffee. "You sure he got any sleep, then?"

She swiped at him playfully, laughing. "You're one to talk."

"Hey—just think of what I've done for your reputation," he preened.

"Please," she groaned, mocking disgust.

"And Liz's reputation...."

"Stop it!" she giggled, slapping the back of her hand against his arm. "Are you always like this in the morning?"

He started to form a cheeky answer and then stopped, staring at her with an odd smile. "By the way," he said quietly. "Good morning."

Her smile warmed him as she replied softly, "Good morning."

"Can I take this to mean I'm forgiven? For yesterday," he prompted at her confused look.

Her expression turned disparaging. "Give me a break," she muttered, shaking her head. "Sometimes you can be such a jerk, you know that?"

"What? What did I say?" he protested.

"You think I let just anyone sleep on my floor?" The mocking light in her eyes softened as she reached over to put her hand on his. "Benny—thank you."

He eyed her warily, wishing he could read minds. "For what?"

"Dr. Moorhouse told us everything."

He stared at her, seeing the truth in her eyes. Finally, he forced himself to nod, accepting her sympathy and gratitude with a wan smile. "Everything, huh?" he murmured, shooting another sip of coffee down a suddenly dry throat. For some reason, it troubled him to realize that two more people shared knowledge of his and Jonathan's hellish ordeal, but on the other hand, he felt a deep sense of relief that Dr. Moorhouse had taken the burden of explanation from him.

Randy tightened her grip on his hand sympathetically. "I'm sorry I gave you such a hard time yesterday, I really am."

"No, no, it was my fault, I deserved it...."

"No self-effacement, please," she cut him off sternly. "It's not your style."

He met her sly smile with one of his own. "Okay, fine. I'm completely blameless. How's that?"

"Perfect," she laughed, releasing him to settle back in her chair. "I just wanted to tell you that I understand now. I know what you did and I know why you did it."

Lips pursed, he stared into his coffee mug a long moment, then looked up to give her a tired smile. "You do, huh?" He sighed, shaking his head. "Well, that's good. Maybe you can explain it to me someday."

---

Jordy had been wonderfully unreasonable. After a wasted minute parrying terse questions about Benny's facial bruises, Jordy let him have it with both barrels. Twenty minutes of bellowing insults and high-decibel harangue later, Jordy welcomed Benny back into the fold, with the promise of three feature articles in the next two months, going rate, no negotiation. And that was a small price to pay for the rejuvenating flood of adrenaline putting the spring back into his step. Already he had the ingredients for his next blockbuster expose—something to do with Mayan warrior ghosts avenging themselves on hapless archaeologists. The outline should take him less than a half hour, then a quick call to Research to get a few real names to slot into appropriate places....

Better yet, a fast dive into the G.I. library, which was bound to have archeological case histories up the wazoo. The facetious thought twinged an odd effect; something heavy formed into his stomach, dragging his jaunty step to a halt. He looked around at the campus quadrangle, stared for a long moment at the marble fountain splashing sun-gilt water. Two days ago he sat there, his abject despair lifted by a visitation, and it felt like a dream from some other life.

Another life. He shrugged deeper into his jacket, seeking warmth against the chill autumn wind. Maybe he should have brought a camera to capture this scene for posterity. Idyllic; students lazing in the grass, seeking the last chance for warmth until the cold chill of winter settled over the land. Peaceful; couples walking hand in hand, oblivious to everything save the secret things they saw in eyes of their partner. And happy; students laughing and cavorting, secure in the knowledge that tomorrow there would still be something to laugh about, and the day after that....

He shook his head, freeing himself from the rueful thought. There was no percentage in envying youth, save wishing he could preserve its unflagging energies and its infinite capacity for wearing the rough edges smooth. Youth meant naiveté, and that meant disillusionment. And he'd had quite enough for this or any other lifetime.

He was actually going to miss the old place. That thought provoked an open laugh of incredulity. No one had bolted faster than he when his undergraduate degree had been slapped into his hand; back then, college was an ordeal to be endured for the nebulous promise of success it dangled like a carrot on a stick. But, he had to admit, some of his most rewarding friendships had been forged in the shadow of academia. There was something about pulling the same hard load, quaffing from the same keg of beer and grousing about the same inequities of life that bonded people, a lifetime commitment that distance, both physical and emotional, could only dim, never kill.

But that had little to do with the odd wrenching twinge in his gut now. G.I. wasn't his alma mater; in fact, it personified the inflated intellectual snobbishness Benny had spent most of his life stabbing with sarcastic pins. These students were someday going to be the scientists and engineers who were in turn going to use the *National Register* to wrap fish and turn his best-sellers into door stops. They would have little use for him, and he in turn wouldn't have the time of day for them. But they were only window-dressing as far as he was concerned. What this place meant to him had nothing to do with its purpose in the real world. This was the place where he'd managed to carve out a tiny niche for himself, something beyond his puff-of-smoke life, something substantial—something real. And something he was going to miss...a lot.

He checked his watch against the clock tower. Jonathan asked him to stop by the office anytime after 2:30 on any weekday that proved convenient. And that request had made up the extent of the one telephone conversation they'd had since Benny left Randy's dorm to return to New York. His friend's laconicity tended to trouble Benny, but no more so than his own unwillingness to think, much less talk, about anything relating to the past three days. But the subject couldn't be deferred forever.

He successfully avoided wondering what Jonathan wanted to discuss, preferring instead to perfect his own speech. He had his words, he had his reasons, and he had a sneaking suspicion that MacKensie wasn't going to offer an argument on any point. And for some reason, that one thought caused him the deepest distress of all.

Squaring his shoulders, he hopped up the steps of the Sciences building and even managed a cheery greeting to a particularly flirtatious coed on the way.

His knock on MacKensie's office door was greeted promptly by an invitation to enter. He did, poking his head in to peer at the man seated behind his desk. "You rang?"

The smile Jonathan gave him with was genuine, and any nebulous apprehensions Benedek harbored melted away. With a grin, he slipped in, nudging the door closed behind him. "I'm only in town for a few hours, and then it's back to the Big Apple to...."

His words choked back, slamming against an unexpected wall of fear skidding him to a halt inches away from the reclining chair. Unbidden, his muscles retracted, sending him stumbling backward into a straight chair near the bookcase. He sank his head into his hand, cursing himself for a fool. Jonathan lowered his gaze to his desk briefly, pretending not to notice.

He'd just blown his own careful plan right out of the water, and as a result, he had no kind thoughts for Jonathan's overt non-reaction. But his black mood nudged aside when he heard MacKensie say, quietly, "I was thinking of replacing it with a stationary bicycle."

He stared until the image of Professor Jonathan MacKensie unathletically peddling away triggered a convulsive laugh. Jonathan's eyes sparkled with success as he suppressed his own smile, and for the first time Benny could see that the haunted shadows were gone from Jonathan MacKensie's face.

"You're looking pretty good," Benny said, sniffing back his last chortle. "What did I tell you about the restorative powers of black bean sauce?"

"Black bean sauce notwithstanding, I'm doing all right," Jonathan nodded with a smile. "I'd be doing even better if Dr. Moorhouse and Liz stopped treating me like a Dresden doll."

Benny felt a frown form despite his best efforts to treat the remark in the spirit it was obviously meant. Smile dimming, Jonathan inclined his head questioningly.

Benny cleared his throat. "Give 'em a break, Jack—they know you went through a lot."

Lips pursed slightly, Jonathan nodded. "So did they. But it's over now."

Benny gave him a sharp look and regretted it instantly. Jonathan saw the look and pensively nodded his understanding. "It really is over," he told Benny quietly. "I'm not kidding myself this time."

"Yeah," Benny sighed, staring down at the hand he slapped angrily against the chair arm. "Kidding yourself that nothing happened. Kidding yourself with some cockamamie story about spin-casting for rainbow trout...."

"Cut it out."

Jonathan sharp cry brought Benny's head snapping up. Anger clouded the man's face as he glared at Benedek's confusion. "I don't believe this," MacKensie hissed. "You really don't understand, do you? After all this, you still don't understand."

Benny held up a defensive hand. "Hey, from where I'm sitting, I understand plenty. It was my stupid idea to get you to forget the last four months ever happened, and if I hadn't done that...."

"I would've never left Lannerton."

Jonathan's flat statement fazed him for only a moment. "And Lon would've never tried to get Dr. M and Randy...."

"And both of us would've been dead."

He gave up, completely bewildered. "You...you've been thinking about this, haven't you?" he protested weakly.

"No more than you have." Jonathan smiled wryly, a silent apology. "Benny—listen to me. Lon would've shown up sooner or later; here or back in Lannerton. Your fishing fantasies didn't bring him back. They kept Lon away long enough for me to get my feet on the ground again. They got me back here, among people who helped me—helped *you*—send him where he belongs. Come on, think—how differently would things have turned out if we'd tried this alone?"

Benny listened, wearily rubbing his forehead. "If you don't mind, I'd rather not think about it."

"Lon did us both a favor."

Another shock jerked his head up, this time leaving him completely nonplused. Jonathan held up a clenched fist. "We fought him. We fought him and we won. And when I remember the past four months, *that's* what I'll remember.

Benny nodded, understanding thawing cold fear. In a way, it was similar to the feeling that had kept him from slipping into the dark embrace of despair. So long as there had been a ray of hope, he had fought and he had fought to win and winning against that kind of enemy was the most satisfying reward of all.

Jonathan smiled to see the shadow lift from Benedek's face. "Good. Now, maybe you can help me convince Dr. Moorhouse."

Impressed, Benny chuckled. "You don't need my help for that, Jocko. You've been taking 'gentle persuasion' lessons at her knee, haven't you?"

But MacKensie wasn't sharing the joke, fixing Benny with a strange look. "I was counting on you."

He blinked. "Counting on me? For what?"

Brandishing a red-labeled folder, he said, "The reason I asked you to stop by. I'm going to ask Dr. Moorhouse to reinstate the Paranormal Research Unit."

This time Benny clutched at his heart, sure that it was going to jump out of his chest. "Whoa," he coughed, gulping in air. "You're yanking my chain, aren't you?"

"I'm serious," Jonathan protested, affronted.

"Back up." Behind closed eyes, Benny struggled to compose himself. "Rewind. I missed something here."

"I don't understand."

He choked on the derisive laugh, still short of breath. "Yeah, I'll say you don't understand. You think *I'm* having problems with your little bombshell—did you really think you were going to waltz into that lady's office and lay this one on her with only your bright smiling face as the first line of defense?"

"Well...that's why I wanted you to go in with me."

Benny's panic subsided enough to see the light dancing in MacKensie's eyes. He burst out laughing, shaking his head. "Sorry, buds—as a diversionary tactic, I don't qualify. If you really want to give the lady heart failure, sign me up as an alternate instructor for your anthro classes next year. Beyond that...."

He ended with a bright grin, but his hands dropped heavily to his knees to see the intense, unamused look Jonathan gave him. "You're serious," he realized bleakly. "You...I don't believe this."

Sinking back into the chair, he rubbed at his temples, fighting to coalesce his thoughts. He was sure Jonathan was waiting for him to speak again, but just as he realized he had nothing else to say, MacKensie broke the awkward silence.

"You came here to say goodbye, didn't you?"

Benny sighed, covering his burning eyes with his hand. "If I knew you were going to drop this on me, I'd've sent a card from Madagascar."

"That's why I didn't tell you over the phone. I didn't see any point giving you a chance to run away before I've had a chance to explain."

Benny grimaced. "You sound like my grandma."

"Do you ever listen to her?"

"Over a heaping plate of pierogies—sometimes, yeah."

"Okay, fine. If I have to bribe your stomach to get you to listen to me, name your price."

It was almost too good a deal to pass up, but sudden weariness stole his incentive. "Before we go anywhere with this, you gotta answer a question for me," he said with a long sigh. He waited until Jonathan acquiesced with a nod before continuing, "Okay. Say I retired from the spook hunt biz as of, oh...as of right now. Say I decided to go back to something safe, like interviewing hit men or mercenaries on the front line. Say that I opted out completely, end of discussion. Would you still ask Dr. M to start up the Unit again?"

And Jonathan's clouding expression warned him that his was not only a fair question, but a troubling one as well. Touching his forefinger to his lips, he settled back in his chair, deep in reflection. Benny waited, sure that his entire future depended on the truth of Jonathan's answer.

"I'm not sure what you want me to say," MacKensie admitted at length.

"I don't *want* you to say anything," he insisted. "Except the truth. That's important, Jack. It's gotta be the truth."

"The truth," he sighed, nodding once. "All right. The truth is—I don't know. Probably not."

He ducked his head, unwilling to let MacKensie see any sign of his worst suspicions being confirmed. Jonathan was only willing to plunge back into his old life if Benny were along to provide a crutch to lean on. And that couldn't happen. His responsibility toward the man ended two days ago; Benny had his own life to get on with and the simple truth was that he wouldn't be doing his friend any favors continuing to play buffer between Jonathan MacKensie and reality.

He almost missed what Jonathan was saying, but MacKensie's earnest voice broke through his brown reverie. "Don't you see? All those investigations we did together—what good would I have been working alone? We succeeded because we worked together, we backed each other up, and we argued until we were blue in the face. It wouldn't work any other way. You don't believe me? Where would Billy Pence be if you hadn't broken into the Briarwood house? What would have happened to Kilkowski and Fredericks and Hawthorne if we'd left the Edwards case where I wanted to leave it?"

He blinked, whistling soundlessly to remember how close he'd come to a real garden plot in the latter case. Jonathan really came through for him there, and only now he remembered a stray thought he'd had at the time about how useful having a partner was.

Jonathan was just warming up. "You want to know why we work so well together? Because we're both incredibly stubborn, that's why. Who else could I find to keep me on my toes the way you and your awful anecdotes can? I want to stick with what I know works, without having to figure out why it works. We're a team. We worked well together once. I know we can do it again."

Falling silent for a moment, he continued in a softer voice, "But if you don't think you're up to it, I can accept that —on one condition. Tell me why. Under any other circumstances, I'd accept any decision you made without question. But this is different. You can't walk away without telling me why."

"What you want is a chance to talk me out of it."

"No." He met Benny's challenging stare calmly. "I just want to understand. That's all."

"After everything that's happened, you can still sit there with a straight face and ask me that?" He rose to his feet, pacing restlessly. "What don't you understand? That I'm tired? That I want out?"

"That you're running away." His eyes blazed at him, at patience's end. "You know what your problem is, Benedek? You want to be a ruthless bastard and your conscience keeps getting in the way."

Weariness muddled the words, denying him understanding; he sagged against the bookcase, shaking his head. "Come again?"

"You've got such a thick shell built up that it's a wonder any of the real you gets through at all," MacKensie growled, not unkindly. "But you had to let that facade go for the past few months and now you can't cope without it. You're running away because you can't afford to get hurt. If you don't care, you won't hurt, and if you aren't around, you won't care."

Benny stared at him agape for a long moment, wondering vaguely if MacKensie had had a little out-of-body experience of his own back in Randy's dorm room. "Has that little computer maven with the psych minor been talking to you?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Oh?" Jonathan's eyebrows shot up in interest. "Has she nailed you to the wall recently, too?"

"Never mind," he scowled. "And let's leave my id and superego out of this discussion for now, okay? You tell me why you want to go back to chasing shadows and then maybe I'll let you know if I'm interested in re-upping."

MacKensie spread his hands as though the answer was obvious. "Because of Billy Pence. Because of Kilkowski and Hawthorne, because of Gwen and Tony Page. Because we made a difference. That's important to me—especially now. Because I know what it's like to need help. And I already told you why I can't do it alone."

He nodded with a dry smile. "You need that homicidal edge my bad jokes give you, I remember. So that's it, then. You want me to help you save the world from the bad old shadows." The words rolled out with some of his old panache, and he chuckled at the mild disparaging look Jonathan gave the attempt. "Well—I dunno. There was this ad in *Soldier Of Fortune* for a correspondent to cover a couple of minor insurrections in warmer climes, but...what the hey. I'm allergic to Uzis."

Jonathan squinted at him. "You're confusing me again. Was that a yes?"

"As close as you're gonna get until you feed me, Jocko." He pushed off the bookcase, slapping his hands together in anticipation. "I have it right here in my personal book of preventive medicine that I don't face Dr. Juliana Moorhouse with anything less than a Porterhouse digesting in my stomach. And for what you're planning to spring on her, we're talking surf and turf, pal."

"Done," Jonathan nodded with a pleased smile.

"Oh, geez...." Benedek threw up his hands. "This isn't going to work unless I make you squeal, Jonny. You wanna try this again? Lobster and steak? With feeling, now."

Understanding, Jonathan wiped the grin off his face. "Chef's salad. That's my final offer."

"There you go," Benny congratulated him. "We'll get you back into the swing of things yet. Let's go, my stomach is already sniffing the air...."

Jonathan pulled up short halfway to the door, turning to give Benedek a long, curiously strained look. "I, uh...I wanted to...."

Benny tensed, suspecting he knew what was coming. "Whatever it is, it can either wait, or you can take care of it down the hall, second door on the left, okay?"

"No." Jonathan's firm shake of his head confirmed Benedek's thought. "I wasn't being completely honest with you."

"If I thought complete honesty was essential to a well-rounded life, I'd be in a monastery right now. Don't sweat it, okay?"

"Benny, come on. Let me finish, all right?"

He backed down with a sigh and a reluctant nod, steeling himself. "Okay."

"When I was throwing names at you—Billy, Gwen, Kilkowski—I, uh...well, I meant every word I said. I don't even want to think where they'd be right now if we hadn't stuck it out for them. But when it comes right down to it, the only thing that matters to me, right this minute...is that I didn't go to that carnival alone."

Benny held up a hand. "You don't have to say any more."

"Just...just one more thing. One more thing, and I promise I won't ever embarrass you or me by bringing it up again." He waited until Benny reluctantly acceded before continuing, "Ordering the most expensive entree on the menu aside, well...for what you went through for me, there's not a whole lot I can say or do that would even come close to thanking you properly."

Benny hid his smile, successfully suppressing it as he raised his head to give Jonathan a long, appraising look. "That's okay, Jack," he said, letting a cheeky grin follow the hand he clapped to his friend's shoulder. "You've got the rest of your life to figure it out."