

A Matter of Trust

By M.D. Bloemker

(Shadow Chasers/Sapphire & Steel)

This was not going to be one of Edgar Benedek's better days. He came to that conclusion as he stood before the closed office door, studying the name etched onto the painted wood. Two hours ago, he'd stood in this exact same spot. Two hours ago, the name inscribed on the door before him had been that of Dr. Jonathan MacKensie, Ph.D. Twenty minutes ago, that selfsame Ph.D had mysteriously stopped talking in mid-telephone conversation, leaving Benny to query an open line for another five minutes. And now the door before him bore the name of a complete stranger.

He spared only a moment's regret for the sumptuous room service brunch he'd abandoned less than fifteen minutes ago, and set his mind on the puzzle before him. On his way in, he'd nearly knocked the department secretary silly, and had asked for Jonathan while helping her pick up the papers scattered in a ten yard swath around them. His question had stopped her in mid-grumble. She'd stared blankly at him for a moment before uttering the deathless words, "Jonathan who?"

His attempts to refresh her memory failed miserably; she obviously didn't even know who Benny was let alone anyone named Jonathan MacKensie.

Someone else might have freaked; a lesser man might have feared for his sanity, or at least the sanity of those around him. The door before him was living proof that reality and therefore sanity appeared to be in Liz's favor. At the very least, someone else might have wasted time assuming—no, hoping desperately that this were some kind of awful practical joke.

But Edgar Benedek knew better. He'd been done this road once before, and the memory wasn't a pleasant one. No—this was real, he wasn't insane, and there was major trouble brewing.

The door was unlocked, the office beyond empty. While the basic layout remained the same, the furnishings were completely different. Whereas Jonathan MacKensie preferred his work space to reflect his love of physical comfort as well as constant mental stimulation, the present occupant indiscriminately mixed geometric shapes and bold patterns, obviously equating sophistication with visual and mental confusion. Benny dismissed the hodge-podge with a sniff, concentrating on the door.

He moved it back and forth, squinting at the inscription as he did. There—it shimmered. A trick of the light? No, it was a dark flicker, as though something else lurked just below an opalescent surface. He experimented with different angles, crouching, then stretching up, twisting his head to one side then the other. The shimmer intensified only when he looked at it from a very oblique angle. With that discovery, he pressed against the edge of the door, then inclined his head slightly. The inscription winked out. In its place he could just barely read the words 'Dr. Jonathan MacKensie'.

He sighed in relief, holding onto the door for support. "Good," he murmured to himself. "It's still open."

"Of course it's still open." The clipped, cold voice startled him more than it should have, and he grimaced in embarrassment as he turned to face the owner of the biting voice as it continued, "And it will remain open until someone closes it."

The stranger, a glowering blond-haired, square-jawed man, stood in the middle of an office that had no other entrance other than the Benny currently blocked. His eyes narrowed suspiciously as Benny returned his stare without a flinch.

"Nice to see you again, too," Benny growled.

"Again?" Head tilting quizzically, the man turned to where a woman stood by the desk, a place no one had been standing as recently as three seconds ago. "Again?" he echoed, this time for her benefit.

She smiled bemusedly. "Obviously he's met us before."

"Obviously." The man's head swiveled back as Benny, crossing his arms belligerently, stepped towards him.

"Personally, I don't think there's any reason for me to make this any easier for you since you gave me such a hard time the last time we met, but under the circumstances, I think I'd like to just get this show on the road. For those of you who came in late, we're missing one, count 'em, one anthropology professor, about yay tall"

The blonde woman smiled again, more warmly. "We're aware of the problem, Mr"

"Benedek," he supplied readily. "And you call yourself Sapphire and he's Steel, right?"

"Obviously," Steel muttered, turning on his heel to pace the office, inspecting every square inch with narrowed eye.

Sapphire, expression closed, stopped smiling as she studied Benedek. "I don't normally encourage such overt familiarity, especially when I'm somewhat at a disadvantage."

"The last time we met, you said I should call you Sapphire," Benny said, taking a confident step towards her. "Insisted on it, as a matter of fact."

Her smile returned, sincere and warm. "Well," she said softly. "I must have liked you, then."

"Where was he?" Steel demanded, his voice a little louder than necessary.

Benny stifled the impulse to snap at the man, remembering his own injunction to get things rolling. "Probably at his desk," he decided, reconstructing a mental picture of Jonathan's office. "Right about ... here. He was on the telephone, which is usually here, so he was probably either standing right about here, or sitting ... there."

He measured with his hands, leaning over a black and white striped sofa to place everything for Steel's watchful eye. At a peremptory gesture from the blond man, Benny moved back to allow Sapphire to step forward. She stood still for a time, only her hands moving in a kind of miniature emulation of Benny's gesticulations.

"He's still there," she decided, bringing her hands together as she nodded with satisfaction. "There's confusion and some fear, but fortunately he hasn't panicked."

"Good show, Jonny," Benny breathed, relieved. "So, what are you guys waiting for? Get him back here."

Steel glanced at Sapphire. "I believe we must have left Mr. Benedek with the impression that we could work miracles."

"Whoa." Benny caught Steel's arm as the man turned away, and refused to wither under the warning glare. "I don't wanna hear from miracles, pal. I just want you to do what you do best and do it right now."

Sapphire was staring contemplatively into the space where Jonathan's desk should have been. "The object is concave," she said suddenly. "The interior surface is reflective, the exterior holds runic markings of some little significance. And it is old. Very old."

"You're talking about that thingamajig Jonny got by special messenger this morning," Benny decided, frowning. "He said it was some kind of pre-historic soup bowl."

"It doesn't matter what purpose the object once served," Steel informed him stiffly. "What matters is that it has become the focal point for this disturbance."

"So what's the big deal? You know where he is, and you know what sent him there—bring him back, okay?"

"It's not quite that simple, Mr. Benedek," Steel said.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "What do you mean?"

Steel paced the office, oblivious to Benny's anxious scrutiny as he narrowed his eyes in thought. "The breach is a serious one, the damage quite extensive. Best to seal it from this side, I think."

Sapphire frowned, troubled. "Are you certain?"

He shot her an affronted look. "Of course I'm certain. Why are you questioning me?"

"I'll tell you why." Benny confronted Steel, eyes blazing. "Because your idea stinks, that's why. If you think you're going to seal up that breach with a bewildered anthro prof sitting on the wrong side, well—you're gonna have to go through me to do it."

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Benedek," Sapphire interjected, saving him from the dire promise smoldering in Steel's glare. "Steel, the problem is not so easily solved."

Irritation gave way to surprise as Steel arched his eyebrow at Sapphire. "Indeed?" he intoned coldly.

"Yes." She moved gracefully, coming to stand behind Benny. "As matters stand now, it is as if that unfortunate man never existed, and sealing the breach as you suggest would, in effect, seal his fate. But he does exist, as he will continue to exist ... " She placed her hand softly on Benny's shoulder. " ... in this man's memory. To sacrifice one life for expediency would be to place his sanity in grave peril; indeed, his very life."

Steel's face betrayed his indifference, but he said nothing as Sapphire continued, "He has proven to my satisfaction that he has met us once before, a meeting which is not yet part of our timestream. To me this suggests that he may be destined to play a much larger role."

"What are you saying?" Steel demanded sharply, unnerved.

"You said that last time," Benny told Sapphire with a frown. "When you knew who I was, but I didn't know you from a hole in the wall, you said something about my destiny." His finger waved back and forth between the two. "I remember now. Sapphire told you that she was right, that our paths were converging." His eyes widened. "And you agreed."

"I have only your word for that," Steel sniffed, but irritation grew in his eyes as he glared past Benny at Sapphire.

Benny scowled at him. "At least you're a lot more gracious than you were last time."

"Obviously, I knew you better." Steel dismissed him, addressing Sapphire. "Is that the only possible repercussion?"

"No. But it is the most serious."

Steel's glance carried a tacit comment on how he felt about the seriousness of keeping Benny's sanity intact, but he conceded the point with an impolite noise. "All right. We'll attempt to extricate him first."

Grinning in relief, Benny found Sapphire's hand and gave it a grateful squeeze. "So, what's next? You have to go in after him or what?"

"A very good question, Mr. Benedek." Sapphire moved back to the spot where she'd identified Jonathan's phantom presence, missing the glares exchanged by the two men. "He is very frightened. I'm not sure if we'll be able to coax him out on his own. And I'm not certain if my attempt to approach him might not send him out of my reach."

"Don't worry about that," Benny said. "Jack's a sucker for a pretty face, you won't scare him."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," she demurred. "Are you willing to take the risk?"

"I didn't know this was multiple choice," Benny frowned.

She smiled reassuringly, offering her hand.

"Whoa." Benny chewed his lip as he stared at her beckoning fingers. "I don't know about this...."

"You won't be in any danger as long as you don't let go."

He opened his mouth to protest, but swallowed it, bringing up as much courage as he could find instead. "Okay, if you're sure this is the way to go." And as long as I'm pretty sure you don't intend to dump me in there with Jonny to save yourself a headache. The thought almost retracted his hand, but he closed his fingers around hers. But you won't do that because I trust you. Steel—no farther than I could throw him, but you, I trust.

The room filled with mist, enfolding them in a white-grey embrace. Sapphire turned, holding his hand in both of hers as she faced him, a quiet smile on her lips. "Give me a moment," she said softly. "He's moved, I must ..."

Her blue eyes darted to the side. "He's here. Frightened—he hears me, he's preparing to run. Quickly!"

"Jonny?" He swallowed the embarrassing quaver. "Hey, Jonathan. Over here, buds!"

The mist shivered slightly, nothing more.

"It's me, your old pal Benny. No joke, it's really me. Come on, where are you?"

Sapphire's eyes were closed, searching. "He's coming," she whispered, a smile blossoming on her face. "Again."

"Yo, Jonathan, step on it, willya?" Hope steadied out his voice. "I ain't got all day, y'know."

"Benedek?" The uncertain call came from somewhere near, behind the curtain of fog. "Where are you?"

"Just follow the yellow brick road, buds. That's it." He strained in the direction of the voice, but Sapphire tightened her grip on his hands, warning him still with a shake of her head. "Shake a leg, Jack. What do I have to do, send up a flare?"

"That would be nice, actually." The miserable voice came suddenly clear and Benny twisted his head around to see Jonathan MacKensie, dazed, stumble out of the mists.

Benny, grinning in wild relief, extended his hand, but Jonathan drew back, staring suspiciously at Sapphire. "Who's she? Benedek, what's going on? What's happening, where are we?"

Sapphire shot Benny a look of warning, and he responded by urgently beckoning Jonathan forward. But MacKensie drew back a step, fear growing in his eyes.

Desperate, Benny blurted, "Jonathan—do you trust me?"

"Do I what?"

"Trust me, you idiot. I don't mean what I write in my books or the stories I tell. I mean get down and dirty trust, know what I mean?"

"No. I don't."

"Well, you don't have much time to figure it out, so make a decision. Forget about the who, what and where and just come here, dammit. I'll explain everything later, I swear."

Jonathan hovered, indecisive and the urgency in Sapphire's eyes grew stronger. Benny stretched his hand out, the muscle shaking under the strain. "That's all I'm asking, Jack. Trust me. Just this once—*trust* me."

The fog seeped around Jonathan, seeking to claim him once more. But slowly at first, MacKensie pulled free, stepping forward to extend his hand towards Benny.

He gave Benny a bad moment when he hesitated, staring warily at Sapphire. "Who are you?" he demanded tremulously.

Her smile was a gentle glow as she assured him, "A friend."

Jonathan glanced at Benny for confirmation, and he gave it in a terse nod. Tension drained from MacKensie's face, and seeing it, Benny waggled his fingers. "Come on, Jack, don't get shy on me now. You've got a class in ten minutes, remember?"

Chagrin supplanted fear as the teacher and the professional took over. "That's right. I'll be late, I ... I don't have my notes, where ... ?"

"Just give me five and I'll show you where your damned notes are, okay?"

Distracted, Jonathan nodded and closed his hand over Benny's.

The fog disappeared and Sapphire with it, leaving nothing but a lingering warmth on the hand she'd held so tightly. Disoriented, Benny blinked hard, bringing the room into focus. The garish decor was gone, replaced by the familiar, comfortable trappings of Jonathan MacKensie's office, with themselves the only occupants. A small sound next to him brought his head around just as Jonathan's senses cleared enough to realize that he was still holding Benny's hand, which he dropped with a yelp. Hyperventilating, Jonathan rubbed his forehead. "I ... what ... who ... ?"

"Sit. Down. There." Benny maneuvered him into the recliner, prying the strange concave object with the reflective interior out of his hand as he did. "Don't move. Just breathe. That's it. I'll be right back."

Satisfied that Jonathan was too confused to notice, he skittered over to the window, opened it, leaned out to make sure that no innocent pedestrians were in the way and dropped the object five stories, grinning as it smashed into a million pieces on the sidewalk below.

"Benedek?" Jonathan's voice, shaky and thin. "I was just talking to you on the phone—wasn't I?"

He slammed the window shut, turning back with a brilliant smile. "You bet. I offered to buy you lunch at Antoine's and you went into terminal shock. If you think you're up to it now, I hear the trout almandine is highly recommended by the AMA for treating trauma."

Jonathan looked up at him dubiously. "You're really buying lunch?"

"Of course I am," Benny said, pressing a hand to his heart in mock effrontery. "What's the matter, Jack? Don't you trust me?"