

WHEN TOMORROW COMES

by M.D. Bloemker

(*Shadow Chasers/Tomorrow People* (1975))

"Ah, to be in England when the birds come home to roost." Edgar Benedek leaned forward to peer out the grimy cab window at a covey of leggy coeds. With a satisfied chuckle, he flopped back, rubbing his hands together. "Almost enough to make a guy forget why he's here."

Jonathan MacKensie, leaning against the opposite door, barely looked up from his pocket notebook as he made a non-committal noise. Benny suffered the silence for only a few seconds more. "So why are we here?"

"We?" The eyes that Jonathan snapped up held more than a little irritation. "*I'm* here to pay a social call on an old friend of Dr. Moorhouse's. I don't have a clue as to why you insisted on tagging along."

A strange smile twisted the corners of Benny's mouth as he shrugged. "Oh, I just thought I'd get a little change of scenery," he murmured as he craned his neck for another look out the window. "Who's this old fogey we're gonna see?"

MacKensie drew a breath and silently prayed for patience. "*I'm* going to see Professor Cawston. He teaches calculus here at the university."

Benny gave him a sharp look. "Calculus, huh? Now that's interesting."

Jonathan waited for further comment, but Benny looked away, again peering out the window at the passing scene. With some relief, MacKensie went back to his notes. He'd been afraid that his overly curious companion would press him too hard and force him, willingly or not, to admit the truth. He flipped the notebook back a few pages, referring to the notes he'd made when Dr. Moorhouse had briefed him in her office. While the International Parapsychology Seminar was the primary reason he'd been sent to London as an official representative of Georgetown Institute's Paranormal Research Unit, his superior had dismissed it with few words after handing him his tickets and itinerary. He studied the cryptic note he'd made during the discussion that had followed: Professor Matthew Cawston's name, followed by a question mark that had been traced over numerous times. Underneath, he's scribbled the words 'paranormal' and 'advanced calculus' connected by a scrawled arrow and another series of bold question marks. And beneath that, he'd noted dates, huge gaps of time that Dr. Moorhouse wanted Cawston to account for.

No more notes after that; he'd been too fascinated by the troubled look in Dr. Moorhouse's eyes as she'd explained the situation. While her words spoke of nothing more serious than a professional relationship that had mysteriously gone sour, he couldn't help but be struck by the genuine concern in her voice. And, he had to admit, the questions that she wanted answered intrigued him as well.

Lost in thought, he didn't notice when the cab pulled up to a large, soot-blackened stone building. Benny roused him with a jab to his shoulder, and leaned against the outside of the vehicle, staring up at the convoluted carvings crowded up and across the entire facade, as Jonathan dealt with the fare. MacKensie caught him by the arm when the cab pulled away abruptly, nearly sending him to the ground. "If I can count on you to amuse yourself without causing serious damage to life, limb and property, I'll meet you back here at—"

Blithely ignoring him, Benny started up the steps, leaving Jonathan to sprint after him, catching up in the foyer. "Benedek—"

"Hi." Benny leaned over the counter to offer the woman seated at a small typewriter table a brilliant smile. "We're looking for a Professor Matthew Cawston? We heard you might have one going spare."

She smiled, almost a laugh that she stifled with a hand pressed briefly to her mouth. "Do you have an appointment?"

"I do," MacKensie offered over Benedek's shoulder. "Jonathan MacKensie?"

The woman flipped open a small book, then looked up with a brighter smile. "Ah, yes. He's expecting you, Dr. MacKensie. Down this corridor, third door on your left."

"Thanks," Benny said before Jonathan could voice a similar sentiment. He managed only three steps in the indicated direction before Jonathan snagged his arm.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute." He leveled a searching stare at Benny's inscrutable face. "How did you know Professor Cawston's first name?"

Benny's eyes shifted, the only change in his unreadable expression. "Lucky guess, huh?" he said, breaking away to stride down the corridor.

"Lucky g—Benedek!"

His attempts to bring the man to a halt failed; Benny gave the door a single knock, and had it halfway open before the voice inside invited them to enter.

A man stood at the bookshelves that lined the wall behind an imposing carved wood desk that held papers in neat, tidy pile. He turned towards them, revealing a surprisingly young looking face marred with only a few lines of age, and the heavily-gray streaked hair fringing his balding head. Gray eyes seemed to study them closely as Jonathan shut the door behind them, then pushed past Benedek with his hand extended.

"Professor Cawston, I'm Dr. MacKensie, and this is ... " He paused, frantically searching for the right words that wouldn't compromise the situation. " ... my, ah, colleague."

"Edgar Benedek," Benny supplied readily, without extending his own hand in greeting. "Maybe you remember me."

Jonathan saw, with surprise, the color drain from Cawston's face as he stared at Benedek. "You have the advantage of me, Mr. Benedek," he said carefully, stepping back with a wary glance at Jonathan.

"Oh, c'mon, sure you remember." Benny followed his move with a strange light in his eye. "I did a whole feature article on you, back when you and maybe five other scientists on the entire planet were doing serious paranormal investigation."

Jonathan listened, his eyes going from one tense face to the other. So Benny knew why Dr. Moorhouse had sent him. On the other hand, it was beginning to sound as though Benny had arrived at this point by following his own circuitous path.

"Ah. Yes." Cawston had to force his smile. "That was many years ago. I'd nearly forgotten."

"I'd say." Benny stepped away, sweeping the room with narrowed eyes. "Quite a switch you made there. One minute you're testing kids for PK, the next you're cramming numbers and formulae into their heads. Gotta tell you, this makes for one very boring follow-up article."

"If you expect me to apologize"

Jonathan heard the anger rise in Cawston's voice and stepped into the line of fire. "Professor Cawston, I'm truly sorry. If I'd had any idea that he'd—"

Cawston stopped him with an upraised hand. "Please. I remember him quite clearly now. It's useless to make apologies for him. Now." He mustered a friendly smile. "How is Julianna?"

"She's well," Jonathan answered with relief, accepting Cawston's gestured invitation to sit down in one of the armchairs near the window. "She sends her regards. And she's, ah ... "

"She's concerned," Cawston said in the awkward silence. "I must confess, I've felt no end of guilt over the fact that I've been a very poor correspondent. You must assure her that it's only that I've been most careless and, yes, thoughtless. I have no excuses, only deep regrets."

"I was left with the impression that you once worked very closely with her on a special research project."

Cawston hesitated, shifting uncomfortably. "Yes. Specifically an international organization, to operate as a kind of central clearing house for controlled paranormal testing and investigation. But that's ancient history now." He laughed without feeling. "I'm certain that Julianna has told you that I abandoned the project rather abruptly, but the truth is ... well, I might as well say it outright. I was bored and frustrated. I'd come to a point where I wanted my work to mean something."

"Oh, yeah." Benny's interruption came from where he stood in front of Cawston's desk, studying a unpolished crystal paperweight with undue interest. "And there's nothing more meaningful than advanced calculus, is there?"

"Ignore him," Jonathan said *sotto voce*.

"But you know something?" Benny continued, turning his head towards them. "I seem to remember about 15 years ago, when I stood in an office very similar to this one and listened to someone—you, as a matter of fact—tell

me, to my face, that he was on the verge of a breakthrough. You had a subject who tested beyond your wildest dreams, and it was only a matter of time before you could present your findings and turn the scientific world on its ear." He spread his hands, arching one eyebrow. "Well? We're still waiting."

"I was ... mistaken," Cawston said, face burning scarlet. Jonathan considered it, prepared to accept that it was merely acute embarrassment, but feeling that there was much more to his discomfiture than that. "The subject had found a way to influence the outcome of my tests, my findings were completely invalidated."

"So you just dropped everything?" Benny countered. "Dumped the old Zener cards into the dustbin, wiped your hands and decided to cut a swath through the exciting world of higher mathematics." He nodded wisely, his eyes steady on Cawston's pinched face. "That's quite a career move for such a small setback. It almost doesn't sound right, you know?"

Jonathan squirmed to hear Benny speak words that were nearly a verbatim quote from his last conversation with Dr. Moorhouse. She, too, was convinced that there was something more to Cawston's sudden decision to drop his intensive paranormal research. He glanced at Cawston, saw that the man had gone very still, only his gray eyes smoldering as he glared at Benedek.

"I fail to see that I owe you any sort of accounting or explanation," Cawston said stiffly.

"That's okay," Benny said, unruffled. "I got it figured out anyway. See, I happen to know that when somebody who had that kind of wild light in his eyes that you had over fifteen years ago stops looking for something, there's only one reason for it. He stops looking because he's found it."

Benny spread his hands, an ingenuous pose that invited applause. About to protest his colleague's wild assertion, Jonathan froze to see Cawston staring at Benedek in unmistakable fear.

"That's preposterous, Mr. Benedek." Cawston jumped to his feet, moving stiffly around the desk to take his seat. "If you gentlemen will excuse me, I have much work to do. Dr. MacKensie, please give Julianna my warmest personal regards. Good day."

"Totally unconscionable!" Pacing angrily, Jonathan paused to think of another suitable phrase. "Absolutely unforgivable! I can't believe you did this to me. I cannot *believe* you did this to me!"

Sprawled in a chair by the window, Benny propped his feet up on the hotel bed. His expression was annoyingly serene, undisturbed by the diatribe he'd been subjected to for the better part of an hour. Lost in thought, he resurfaced occasionally to acknowledge Jonathan's wrath with a patient smile, just enough to send MacKensie into another tirade.

Most of his anger spent, it finally occurred to Jonathan that perhaps his companion was too quiet, too self-absorbed. For the first time since returning to the hotel, he stopped and eyed the man critically. Unaware of MacKensie's close study, Benedek stared fixedly at an object he cradled in both hands. Curious, Jonathan moved closer, making out the rough shape of an unpolished crystal.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded, his heart sinking to already know the answer.

"Weird little thing, isn't it?" Benny replied, turning it over in his hand.

"You took that from Cawston's desk." Horror cracked his voice. "Benedek, you *stole* that from the man's office!"

"Here." Benny extended the crystal as though Jonathan hadn't said a word. "Hold it. Just hold it, like that."

Numb with shock, Jonathan found the crystal in his hand, and was surprised by its unusual warmth. "I'll have to go back, apologize for you again and hope that he understands"

"What did you have for breakfast this morning?"

Jonathan stared at him, nonplused.

"Come on. What did you have?"

"Eggs, bacon and tea," he stammered. "What—?"

"How about June 5, 1983?"

"What about it?"

"Breakfast. June 5, 1983."

"I don't remem—" He choked, eyes wide. "Oatmeal with raisins and orange juice," he said in a faint voice.

"Try October 9, 1968."

"I didn't have breakfast." His legs gave out beneath him, sending him to the edge of the bed. "I was late for class. Freshman English, third section, Mr. Wagner—the assignment was to read *Bleak House* and present a written report—" His voice went to nothing as he stared at the crystal in his hand.

"Neat trick, huh?" Benny reached out and took the object from his friend's nerveless hand.

Jonathan remembered to breathe, pressing a trembling hand to his face. "I—I don't ... understand, what—?"

"Was I right or was I right?" He turned the crystal in his hands, staring fixedly at it. "He found something, buds, so he stopped looking. But this can't be all of it. There's got to be a whole lot more."

Benny's words barely made sense, mixed in with confusion. "What do you mean?"

"He's hiding something." Squinting at nothing, he hefted the crystal in his hand. "I can't figure out what it is, but it's something big. Something *really* big. Something—"

He trailed off, staring at his right hand. Following the man's strange look, Jonathan saw the crystal lying in Benny's open palm, glowing a soft, deep blue.

Jonathan sprang to his feet, fighting for calm. "Put it down," he barked. "For god's sake, put it *down!*"

Benny's mouth opened, but sound came only after a few moments of obvious effort. "I ... can't," he said in a barely audible voice. "I ... "

His breath rushed into his lungs, a ragged, fear-filled gasp. Jonathan sprang, intending to knock the crystal from his friend's hand.

With a startled yell, MacKensie plowed into the chair, sliding to the floor with a thud. He sat, stunned, for a moment, unable to comprehend what had happened. Then it came to him in a sickening flash.

"Benedek?" He scrambled to his feet, frantically probing the space that his friend had occupied only a few seconds ago. "Benedek?!"

The chair was empty. But that was impossible. *Impossible!* He looked around wildly, heart beating a painful cadence against his ribs. *He was here! He was right here!*

He staggered to his feet, staring at the chair as he backed away. "Benedek?" he said, his soft voice cracking in horror and disbelief.

But he wasn't there. And neither was the crystal.

He gulped in air, yielding to a blessedly calm part of himself that made a logical connection in the midst of his confusion. Shaking hands found the telephone, fumbled the notebook out of his pocket, dialed the right numbers on the fifth try and held the receiver to his ear as the connection went through. "Yes! Hello!" He drew a breath, summoning enough calm to continue. "Professor Cawston, please."

Gray. Everything was very, very gray. And if he didn't know any better, he'd swear that this colorless nothingness was seeping into his brain, clogging the synapses, making it harder to think and harder to figure out where he was or what had happened to bring him here. His last attempt to put his scattered memories into some sort of coherent order had been sucked away, absorbed by the grayness like so much water to a dry sponge.

Closing his eyes turned the slate-colored nothingness to black, and the peculiar drain on eased somewhat, enough to allow him to sweep together a few fragments of memory. A voice, high-pitched with indignation, he remembered that, although the sound was distant and the words indistinct. His attempt to put a face with the voice met with failure, and he set the task aside in favor of studying clearer pieces of the puzzle. A strange shape, at first only

an irregular outline that resisted his effort to give it substance and dimension. He nearly set that one aside as well, but somehow he knew that resolving this memory was important, was in fact the key to the mystery of his being here ... wherever 'here' was.

For a moment, the outline threatened to shatter, but he held his breath and it stabilized. Organic? No. Yet not artificial, not man-made. The colors filled in with maddening slowness, until his head swam from lack of air, and for a moment the half-finished image wavered, threatening to disintegrate. But it held even as he gasped in air, and with a burst, it was there, with depth and weight and form. A crystal, uncut and unpolished, nothing more than an uninteresting curio save for the soft, blue glow emanating from its center.

He looked on it in confusion, knowing it and yet not understanding what it was or what possible importance it could be to him. For a moment, he forgot that it was only a memory and reached for it. The crystal shimmered and melted away, leaving nothing but the gray void.

He gasped, feeling panic well up inside him to be left alone in the midst of this strange, enervating nothingness. It was alive, this grayness. It resented his presence and sought to absorb him like an unwelcome parasite. He could feel it, clawing at him with invisible, ice-tipped fingers, numbing him so that he could not fight, paralyzing him so that he could not scream.

Webs of pure ice spread through him, wrapping him in a frozen, crystalline shroud. He closed his eyes and his mind, hoping that the grayness would be merciful and quick.

hello

Barely a whisper; for a moment he thought it was only a part of his own mind rebelling at his helplessness.

hello who is there

A voice not his own. A gentle, mature voice, full of concern and just a hint of urgency.

who is there can you hear me please answer if you can who is there

The ice crept up his neck, probing at his face, his eyes, his mind. In moments it would have him completely and nothing would ever answer that gentle, pleading voice.

hello?

The voice wanted so much to be answered. But he had nothing left, no voice, no strength ...

please? answer me

And for the briefest moment, the ice paused, almost as though the desperate plea in that feathery voice had touched it and halted its inexorable spread. Just the smallest part of his imprisoned voice thawed, just long enough for him to shout:

hel—

The ice surged, harsher than before, but just as it overwhelmed him, light as bright as a thousand suns swept him up, blasted his chrysalis into dust, wrapped him in warmth and held him in a tight, protective embrace. *Hold on, I've got you. You're safe now.*

And he knew it was true, knew that this voice would never lie to him. Exhausted with sudden relief, he closed his eyes, unable to open them even as the light changed beyond his eyelids and different muted voices edged into his fading awareness. *Rest now*, his savior and protector urged and his attempted thank you dissolved into a deep, peaceful sleep.

"Dr. MacKensie?"

Cawston's puzzled voice jolted Jonathan out of his thoughts and brought him to his feet in a leap. "Professor Cawston, thank god, I've been calling all over, looking for you"

"Yes, so I gather." Cawston paused to shut his office door securely behind him before turning to face his distraught visitor. "My fault, I'm afraid—I neglected to let anyone know that I'd left for the library" His puzzled frown deepened as he continued to study Jonathan. "You're as pale as a sheet, man. What's happened?"

He'd spent anxious minutes in between frantic phone calls and the long cab ride back to the university rehearsing what he was going to say, and all of it vanished the moment he opened his mouth. After a few hopeless splutters, he grimaced, paused long enough to draw a deep breath, and managed, "My ... friend. Benedek. He's ... he vanished."

"I don't understand." Cawston edged past MacKensie warily, never taking his eyes off him as he placed an armload of books on the corner of his desk. "Are you certain about this? Perhaps you should notify the police."

"No." He fought to regain his voice. "He's not missing. I mean, he is missing, he's not ... Professor Cawston, I know this sounds insane, but ... he *vanished*. Literally, he disappeared right before my eyes!"

He ended on a pleading note, hands held out beseechingly. Cawston fell back a step and, mortified, Jonathan drew away, twisting his hands together. "I know," he gulped, fighting back another promising anxiety attack. "I know how this sounds, I know ... you must think I'm mad. I think I *must* be mad, but I know what I saw."

"Dr. MacKensie, please." Cawston held out his hands placatingly, gesturing the man to be seated. "Please, try to take deep breaths, that's it. You're understandably upset, but I'm not at all certain why you came to me. Perhaps if you explained that first"

"Paperweight." Relieved to have something concrete to anchor himself on, Jonathan took special care to think through his words. "Your paperweight, the uncut crystal."

"My—" Cawston's eyes flew to his desk.

"He took it. I don't know why, but he—at the hotel, he had it and ... and"

He broke off in a gasp as Cawston's grip tightened on his arm. "What happened? Tell me what happened."

Unnerved by the strange light in the man's gray eyes, Jonathan faltered twice before finding his voice again. "He ... he had me hold it, and ... and I could remember things so clearly, and then he took it back and then ... "

Cawston waited impatiently as MacKensie brought his breathing under control. "Yes, what then?" he demanded.

"It ... it began to glow." Jonathan swallowed hard. "I told him to put it down, but he said he couldn't, and when I went to take it from him—he disappeared."

MacKensie's voice lasted barely long enough for him to finish. Cawston released him, turning as he stepped away so that Jonathan was left to stare at the man's rigid back. "You don't believe this," he sighed, rubbing wearily at his forehead. "I swear to you, every word is tr—"

"And you say you have no idea why he lifted the crystal from my desk?"

"No," he stammered, wishing he could see the man's facial expression for some clue to the reason for the sharp note in Cawston's voice. "He never answered me when I ... you *do* believe me?"

Cawston turned, a smile stretched painfully across his face. "I believe that your friend, Mr. Benedek, is the possessor of a rather bizarre sense of humor. If I may take for granted the fact that the years have not changed him, I think you'll find that he's hiding in a corner somewhere, having a very good laugh at your expense."

Jonathan's protest faltered and died as he considered the possibility. Encouraged, Cawston stepped forward to place a hand on the stricken man's shoulder as MacKensie finally managed in a weakened voice. "But how could he ... I don't see how ... he was *there* and then he"

"He's probably waiting for you back at your hotel, undoubtedly disappointed that he can't witness your reaction to what seems to me to have been a very sophisticated parlor trick."

Jonathan's last attempt died in a tired sigh. "Yes, I ... I suppose you're right. Silly of me to have overreacted like this ... jet lag, perhaps. I ... Professor Cawston, I'm terribly sorry to have disturbed you"

"No, no apologies, please," he smiled tautly, taking MacKensie's arm to lead the still-disoriented man towards the door.

"But your crystal ... I don't know what he's done with"

"Don't concern yourself, please." Cawston's smile held as he opened the door. "The crystal is ... worthless, a mere curiosity. Go back to your hotel, Dr. MacKensie. There will be plenty of time to deal with Mr. Benedek after you are more rested."

"Yes," Jonathan agreed wearily. "Yes, I suppose you're right. Thank you, Professor."

A few more reassurances later, Cawston closed the door, listened for the sound of footsteps to recede down the hall, and then engaged the lock. Reaching his desk in three hurried strides, he picked up the telephone, touched a small switch near the base of the receiver and waited for acknowledgment. "Yes," he replied to the voice on the other end of the line. "I'm not entirely sure, but ... I think there could be trouble."

Voices. Two distinctly different voices, one tenor-pitched and a bit querulous, the other mellow and patient. Inside his soft-edged dream, Benny floated halfway between sleep and wakefulness, unable and unwilling to sort out and understand the individual words.

The voices stopped. Unconcerned, Benny began to slide back into full, blissful sleep. Then the warmer voice spoke:

"He is awake."

He might have felt irritation at this betrayal were it not for the fact that he recognized the voice—his rescuer from the icy grayness.

Struggling to get and keep his eyes open, he focused slowly on the man-shaped blur standing above him. "Good morning," the male tenor voice addressed him. "How are you feeling?"

"Depends," he managed groggily, wondering why he couldn't remember falling asleep in the first place. "Who are you and why do you care?"

The question seemed to take the man aback, but he recovered his smile. "My name is Dr. Reid."

"Doctor?" A jolt of adrenalin cleared his vision, bringing details of the white-coated man's face into sharp focus. Mid to late thirties, with classic, chiseled features and a thick shock of jet black hair, strands of gray highlighting an unruly forelock. Blue eyes sparkled with the smile that twisted his thin mouth.

"What happened?" Benny cleared his throat of annoying hoarseness. "I don't remember"

"You were involved in an accident," Reid told him. "I don't know the exact circumstances. As a matter of fact, we don't even know your name—you were brought to us in an unconscious state"

"Wait," Benny interrupted, his frown becoming a pained wince when movement put strain on some strangely bruised muscles. "I'm not getting this. Jonathan can tell you what you need to know, can't he?"

"Jonathan?"

"He was there, wasn't he?" His head throbbed, sending coherent thought in a thousand different directions. "Wasn't he?"

"Someone was with you?"

He heard the sharp edge in the man's voice, but his fast-growing headache made it impossible for him to react to it. "Find Jonathan," he said, voice muffled in the hands pressed tightly against his face. "He'll ... tell you what you want to ... oh, man, it's getting all fuzzy again."

"I'd best leave you to rest, then. Please, don't fight it anymore, you've been through a harrowing ordeal. I'll send someone in with something for your pain."

He barely heard the man's voice past the pounding in his ears, and managed a weak gesture of assent. His eyes were closed for only a moment before he realized he hadn't spoken to the owner of the soothing voice, the man he needed to thank for reasons that weren't very clear at the moment.

He opened his eyes to an empty room. Bewildered, he blinked several times to make sure he was awake. Only a tray-cart, night stand, and two chairs besides the bed he lay in; no other human occupants besides himself. How could Reid have moved that fast? How could ...

The questions dissolved beneath the hard heel of pain and he sank willingly into sleep knowing that the answers would wait until he was ready to find them.

"That didn't go well at all." Reid swung into his desk chair, swiveling around to adjust a monitor screen to his eye level. "Tim, do you have anything for me yet?"

"I believe I have a positive identification." The answer came from every direction at once. High on the walls, a strip of light circling the edge of the ceiling reverberated with each syllable, sparking gold on the emphasis, violet on the pause, and every imaginable color in between. On the monitor screen, an image resolved: a digitized likeness of Edgar Benedek along with several lines of closely packed text. Reid nodded, satisfied. "Good work, TIM. That's our man" His voice trailed off as he scanned the data lines. "Can this be right? TIM, re-check the natal date, please."

"All data has been verified," the voice replied, unruffled. "The date of birth is correct."

Releasing a breath in a soundless whistle, Reid leaned back in his chair. "I think we're really in for it this time," he muttered, shaking his head grimly.

"I have a communication from Professor Cawston, pertinent to the problem at hand."

"Yes, go on."

"It appears that Mr. Benedek visited the professor some hours ago, in the company of one Dr. Jonathan Mack-ensie."

"Ah, yes. He mentioned someone named Jonathan. Well? I assume this is something considerably more than a strange coincidence. Does Cawston know what happened?"

At Reid's elbow there was a shimmer of light, resolving slowly into the solid form of a raw, uncut crystal. He frowned at it, recognizing it only when he picked it up for closer inspection. "Where did you get this, TIM?"

"At approximately the same hyper-spacial coordinates as our unfortunate new patient. In fact, it was the high-frequency disturbance emitted by this crystal that alerted me to his plight."

Reid hefted the weight thoughtfully, undisturbed by the bright blue light glowing in the heart of the crystal. "Well. That answers that question. The next question is—where did it happen and who possibly witnessed it. TIM, contact Cawston for me. Have him come here to brief me in person. And put Andrew on alert, we may need him soon."

"Yes, John," the voice replied. "But I've already taken the liberty of sending for Annilise."

"Annilise?" Reid's head snapped up, a reaction that he unsuccessfully covered by clearing his throat. "Do you really think that's necessary?"

"I believe that her special talents may indeed be required."

Reid stared up at the flickering light strip, his mouth closing slowly as his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Do you really? You know, TIM, I think it only fair to warn you that what you think passes for subtlety is, in reality, painfully obvious."

"I don't understand," TIM said calmly.

"You don't understand," Reid scoffed. "Don't you think I haven't noticed that you send for her at the least excuse?"

"Really, John," TIM protested mildly.

"This has to stop, you know. You can't keep sending for her when Andrew and Luwanna are perfectly capable counselors, you'll undermine their confidence."

"I believe you will find that both Andrew and Luwanna ... understand."

John reacted to the unmistakable tone of smugness in TIM's cultured voice. "So you admit it, do you? And now you've got everyone else in on it as well?"

"John, do I take this to mean that you object to Annilise's presence?"

"No!" Reid gulped, realizing he'd protested a bit too vehemently. "I mean, no, of course not. Don't be absurd. What I object to is this ... this *conspiracy* that seems to be solely designed for the purpose of throwing us together on the flimsiest of pretexts"

"Without dignifying such an absurd accusation, may I respectfully remind you that the current situation is not, as you suggest, a flimsy pretext. I believe that the circumstances warrant making Annalise's particular talents available to us on site, rather than risk sending for her and losing precious time in the waiting."

Reid deflated, unable to argue with TIM's calm logic. "Yes, yes, you're right. Damn you," he added under his breath. "But let's not have a replay of her last visit, all right? Arranging our dinner schedules so that she and I were the only ones in the dining room was bad enough. I really thought the candles and the soft music were going just a bit far, don't you? No, don't bother, I already know that answer, thank you."

"Professor Cawston has arrived."

"And not a moment too soon. Bring him in, please, TIM."

Reid glared broodingly at the crystal on his desk, not looking up at a column of light coalesced before his desk, fading into the unsteady form of a very pale-faced Professor Cawston.

Grabbing briefly at his stomach, Cawston swallowed hard, and opened his eyes slowly to see Reid seated at the desk before him, holding up the raw crystal.

"Yours, I believe, Professor?"

Cawston moved closer, stumbling only once as he struggled to overcome his disorientation. "Yes," he said, frowning in confusion. "But ... where did you get it?"

"Apparently, it came to us with an unexpected bonus. You met him earlier today, I believe. A Mr. Edgar Benedek?"

His face lost all trace of color as he groped his way to a nearby chair. "What's happened to him?" he demanded tautly.

"I was rather hoping you could tell me."

"All I know is that his friend returned to my office in a panic, with some barely coherent story about Mr. Benedek stealing the crystal from my desk—"

"He *stole* it?"

"I had no idea it was gone until Dr. MacKensie drew my attention to it. And I have no idea why he took it." He paused long enough to get his shaking voice under control again. "You assured me that the crystal was harmless."

"It *is* harmless," Reid snapped, bristling at the implicit accusation. "In the hands of a Sap, the crystal merely enhances certain brain functions such as memory and perception. In the hands of a *nova*, it is something else altogether."

Cawston stared at him. "What are you saying? How could he be a *nova*? He's ... he's too"

"Old?" Reid leaned back in his chair, his jaw set in a tight, angry line. "Two months younger than I am, according to his data file."

"Then he should have broken out years ago," Cawston protested, badly confused.

"Should have," John agreed emphatically. "But didn't. Don't look so horrified, Professor. It's happened before. There are potential *novae* whose will is so strong that they can successfully suppress the maturation of their powers. With luck, they continue to live their lives as Saps, relatively unharmed by their self-induced handicap. Mr. Benedek, however, is not quite so lucky."

"What do you mean?" Cawston demanded, voice sharp with dread.

"I mean that the crystal has started a process that should have begun years ago."

"What has happened to him?"

John looked at him without sympathy for the fear and guilt that shook his voice. "Don't worry, Professor, he came to no harm. Fortunately, TIM detected an intrusive presence during a routine sweep of hyperspace and rescued him."

"Hyperspace?" Cawston gasped. "What—how ... ?"

"An uncontrolled jaunt," John informed him crisply. "The crystal focused and magnified his latent *novae* powers; powers that have, unfortunately, become stunted, corrupted. Powers that would have been better off left dormant. As it is, there's no telling what damage has been done."

"And you blame me," Cawston realized, horrified.

"A wholly unfair accusation," TIM interjected, the light strip glowing in shades of green. "If I had anticipated a situation such as this, I would have never allowed Professor Cawston such unguarded use of the crystal."

"And you assured me that the crystal was harmless," Cawston reiterated stubbornly.

John bristled, his brief glance at the ceiling making it very clear that he didn't appreciate TIM siding with anyone but himself. "Let's put aside the question of responsibility for now, shall we?" he said icily. "You said this man's friend came to you in a panic. What did he tell you, exactly?"

Mindful of the careful emphasis Reid had placed on his last word, Cawston gathered his breath and his wits. "He had been present when Mr. Benedek disappeared"

"Oh, wonderful," John sighed, closing his eyes with a disparaging shake of his head.

"I managed to convince him that his friend was a very resourceful prankster," Cawston hastened to add. "You see, I met him—Mr. Benedek, that is—a number of years ago. He's a writer of some repute, although his body of work tends to highlight the, ah ... well, the sensational."

Understanding drew hard lines into John's already angry face. "And this Dr. MacKensie?"

"He's a professor of anthropology at the Georgetown Institute of Technology." Cawston swallowed, adding weakly, "A department chaired by a former colleague of mine: Dr. Juliana Moorhouse."

"Moorhouse?" John said sharply. "I know that name. TIM?"

"Correlating, John."

Even as TIM spoke, the image on the screen changed. Cawston craned to see the image of a gracefully aged woman, her salt-and-pepper hair cut short and softly styled, her lined face set severely, yet softened by a surprisingly youthful twinkle in her blue eyes. "Yes, that's her," the professor offered. "We were involved in a kind of thinktank organization"

"The International Symposium of Parapsychology," John said, reading the text as it poured onto the screen next to the photo image. "Disbanded after only eight months. Your doing, Professor?"

"I did nothing intentionally," Cawston said, looking miserable. "But it appears that when I withdrew my support and destroyed all my notes, there was nothing for the other members to work with. They'd been depending on my reports of ... of a wonderful breakthrough. But what could I do? I don't regret my decision, of course, but I do regret the trust I betrayed."

The sorrow in Cawston's voice affected John, giving him a distracted moment before he re-summoned his resolve, reading the new information still forming on the screen. "It appears she doesn't give up easily, Professor. Ten months ago she formed a new department under the aegis of the Georgetown Institute. The Paranormal Research Unit, Dr. Jonathan MacKensie, PhD, director."

"I had no idea," Cawston said weakly.

"Then what was the stated purpose of their visit to you this morning?"

"Purely social. At least ... I thought so at the time, I had no reason to disbelieve him. I had no idea that he even knew Benedek, let alone that he'd show up with the man in tow. And as I've told you, I have no idea why he took the crystal."

"Excuse me, John," TIM interrupted smoothly. "Annalise has arrived."

Again, color crept into Reid's face as he opened his mouth to speak, emitted an ungraceful squawk and cleared his throat. "Have you briefed her, TIM?"

"Not yet. I had assumed you would like to do so yourself."

"You assumed," John repeated carefully, with a wise nod. "Well, all right. I might as well make this official. TIM, alert all the department chiefs that I would like them in the briefing room in ten minutes." He checked his watch as he spoke. "Might as well have dinner sent in, this could take a while."

"Do you need me here?" Cawston said, head cradled tiredly in his hands.

"I'm afraid we do, Professor. Would you like coffee or tea?"

"Brandy, actually," he sighed, managing a rueful smile that wobbled into a grimace before disappearing completely. "Tea will do nicely, thank you."

Benny emerged from a deep, dreamless sleep to the instant awareness that he wasn't alone. He opened his eyes slowly, blinking away the film blurring his vision to find himself looking up into the face of a stranger. At least it was an attractive face, fine-boned and well-formed, accented by crystal blue eyes veiled by a fringe of bright golden hair. A warm smile greeted his hoarse but appreciative exclamation.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Benedek?" she asked in a soft, accented voice.

"Lots better, now." He turned his head as far as his stiffened muscles allowed, finding the other presences that he'd sensed. A young man, his shoulders bowed in self-conscious defense of his height, shook straight brown hair out of his eyes in an attempt to mask the fact that Benedek had caught him staring. Next to him stood his white-coated visitor of before, the same stiff half-smile on his patrician face as he addressed the woman on his left, a petite dark-skinned woman with a quick smile and a pleasant laugh for whatever had been whispered to her.

"My name is Annilise," the woman at his side said, regaining his full attention.

He took in the fact that she wore a beige sweater embroidered in delicate pastel threads over a dark skirt, not hospital whites as he would have expected. "You can call me Benny," he offered with a smile.

"Thank you," she smiled. "Do you have any pain, Benny?"

He frowned, not sure why she would be interested, but decided there was no harm in answering what seemed to be a relatively innocuous question. "Some. Stiff muscles, I guess. Headache's pretty much gone. I didn't break anything, did I?"

"No, nothing is damaged," she assured him. "You were very lucky."

"Lucky." His frown deepened. "Look, you sound like you know what's going on here, so would you mind filling me in?"

She tilted her head, puzzled. "I do not—"

"Good morning, Mr. Benedek." Reid joined Annilise, nodding to her as she moved aside for him. "We met briefly yesterday. Do you remember?"

"Yeah, I think. Dr. Reid, was it?"

His taut smile was a tacit affirmative. "And I remember that you had some questions."

"Whoa, what's this?" Benny lifted his arm, and poked at the object circling his wrist. He'd assumed that it was merely a plastic I.D. bracelet, standard hospital issue. But closer inspection revealed it to be some sort of dark metal, highly polished and featureless. It fit his wrist snugly and a quick tug proved that it couldn't have been slipped over his hand. Yet the surface of the band was perfectly smooth without lines or breaks.

"It's nothing," Reid said, his smile widening without any increase in warmth or sincerity. "Merely a monitoring device, nothing to worry about, Mr. Benedek."

He eyed Reid for a full three seconds before realizing why he was suspicious. "You got hold of Jonathan okay?"

"Actually, no." Reid shifted uncomfortably. "We had no address or telephone number, so"

"Then how do you know my name?"

Annilise and Reid exchanged uneasy glances. "Your wallet," he offered. "I'm afraid we took liberties, I apologize."

"My wallet, huh? That's interesting." Benny forced his tensed muscles to relax as he settled back against the pillow. His eyes went to the bracelet, which he tugged at again without effect, and then to each face in turn. The youth and the younger woman stood near the foot of the bed, heads inclined towards each other as though in conversation, but both pair of eyes fastened warily on him. Reid's face remained masked, but Annilise's betrayed a flicker of anxiety, as though she sensed that he knew John was lying.

"Interesting?" Reid ventured when Benny remained silent. "How so, Mr. Benedek?"

"I wasn't carrying a wallet. I left it back at the hotel. Now let's try this again, okay? Where am I and how did I get here?"

Annilise placed her hand on John's arm. "Perhaps I'd better," she said in a low voice.

"Is that one too hard for you?" Benny's expression hardened as Reid hesitated. "Try this one, then. Yesterday, you said you had no idea what happened to me, but then you mentioned something about a 'harrowing ordeal'. I think you know a whole lot more than you're letting on, pal."

"All right," Reid said to Annilise. "Let us know when you're ready to begin."

"This isn't even a real hospital, is it?" Benny lifted himself up to send his accusation after Reid as the doctor nodded and moved away to join the others. "Who are you people? And what did you do with Jonathan? You're not getting away with this, you know. I've got—"

"Benny." Annilise's quiet voice capped his rising indignation, leaving him voiceless as he met her steady gaze. Her hand rested lightly on his arm, a mute appeal for him to relax. He managed a dark glare in Reid's direction before some strange and irresistible urge drew his eyes back to stare into her impossibly huge blue eyes.

And though he didn't want to let go of his anger and its underlying foundation of fear, he felt both slip away like fine sand through his fingers. When she smiled at him, he could do nothing but smile back at her, and realized that anything she asked of him, anything at all, he would do—and without hesitation.

"You have nothing to fear from us," she told him earnestly. "We are all here to help you."

"Help me?" His frown faded, half-formed. Normal skepticism went with it, leaving nothing but mild confusion and a strange willingness to trust her completely.

But when the last of his darker emotions drifted away, he became aware of what they had masked from him. There was a low thrumming at the edge of his awareness, rising and falling in pitch like the buzzing of a thousand angry bees in flight. He recognized it as the root of his headache and felt his scalp tighten in anticipation of renewed pain.

Annilise reacted to his wince, curling her fingers lightly around his wrist. The sound abated to a bearable hiss in his ears. He opened his mouth to voice his surprise, and froze. Beneath her fingers, the metal band circling his arm glowed a deep blue.

It's all right. There's nothing to fear.

He stared at her in disbelief. She continued to smile at him; her lips hadn't moved, yet he'd heard her speak. The voice had been distorted, as though transmitted over a weakened link, but it had been unmistakably her. Part of him latched onto the desperate hope that she was a ventriloquist with a bizarre sense of humor, but even as he tried to get words past his shock-frozen vocal cords, the Scandinavian-accented voice in his mind spoke again.

Please, you must trust me. We want only to help you. Do you understand?

He tried to answer, but shock still held him fast. The question he wanted to blurt stuck in his throat and he spent a frantic moment trying to coax it out. *What's happening? What's going on around here!?*

I will answer all your questions. Please, don't be frightened.

Hardly daring to believe, he summoned what little presence of mind he had left. *You can hear me?* he ventured. *Like this?*

She smiled warmly. *Like that.*

His breath escaped in a rush, all his nervous energy leaving with it. Falling back against the pillow, he found himself straining to pull his arm from Annilise's grip, but she held on until he relaxed and looked up at her with eyes filled with confusion and returning fear. "Is that why I'm here?" he said in a voice pitched only for Annilise's ears.

She hesitated, then nodded.

"Oh, wow." He closed his eyes tightly, then snapped them open as he swallowed hard. "Any idea where I can pick up a pair of ruby slippers, cheap?"

Her smile, lost in a cloud of open anxiety for his distress, began to edge back. There are many of us, Benny. You are not alone. And we will help you as best we can.

"What happened to me?" He stared up at the ceiling, finding pieces of a memory that, fitted together, were forming a startling image. "I was ... in someone's office"

I will explain everything to you, in time. There is nothing to fear, we will not allow you to come to harm.

She clung tightly to his hand, and every attempt he made to hold on to the memory faded into the calmness that he could have sworn radiated from her. Gradually, the tension eased from his body. He closed his eyes with a quiet sigh and nodded agreement. "I don't know why I'm getting so uptight, anyway. I mean, this is great! I can read minds!" He laughed weakly, summoning a faint sparkle to his eyes as he tugged lightly on Annilise's hand. "I've heard about things like this before, you know—people waking up after accidents with extra-sensory powers and precognition. Just never thought it would happen to me." He frowned suddenly. "I don't remember having an accident. The last thing I remember—"

"Benny?" Annilise leaned in for a closer look at his clouding expression.

His unfocused eyes flickered, searching for a memory. "I remember—there was something" His frown deepened. "A rock. No—a crystal. And it was glowing and then Jonathan, he ... he disappeared? No, that's not"

This time he fought the urge to let his panic go, pushing away her attempts to calm him. "It was me. I disappeared. I was ... someplace else"

"I promise you, I will explain everything to you," she urged reassuringly.

"What happened to me?" The expression he turned on her had no anger in it, only helpless confusion. "I remember ... someone found me?"

"Benny ... "

"Someone ... *saved* me."

A tremor went through him as the memory hit like a bolt of lightning. "It wasn't a dream," he whispered, horrified. "It *wasn't*, was it?"

"Benny, it's over. It will never happen again. We can make certain it will never happen to you again."

The room and Annilise's concerned face dissolved in a sharp blur of panic; all he was aware of was his lungs laboring in vain to take in air and the relentless memory of grayness and cold and imminent death

Benny

Annilise's gentle telepathic whisper was joined by a voice he recognized—the same voice that had once before led him out of the gray, clawing madness.

You must trust us. We are your friends. No one will hurt you. No one will let you be hurt.

He cowered behind the darkness of closed eyes, listening. He wanted to believe them. He *needed* to believe them, because if he didn't, it would all end here in the silent darkness, hidden from even himself.

Who are you? What do you want from me?

Annilise will tell you everything. Trust her. Trust us.

Indecision tore him. *I can't. I ... I*

You must. Your life depends on it.

Fear surged to somehow know that the gentle voice was right. This wasn't a threat designed to force his cooperation; it was a statement of fact, phrased simply and sincerely and with a note of pleading threaded through it. The grayness was waiting for him, patient and hungry. If he refused their help, it would find him again and this time it would win.

It took everything he had left to force his jaw to unclench, to lift his head and open his eyes. Annilise hovered above him, clutching his hand so tightly that his fingers had turned white. The youth now stood on the opposite side

of the bed, one hand extended into Annilise's grasp, the other held tightly by the smaller woman, who in turn had the fingers of her other hand entwined with Benny's, completing a rough circle. Reid hovered in the background, looking mildly annoyed.

The grayness in Annilise's face lifted slightly as he turned his eyes towards her. "I don't know what's going on," he said slowly, answering her unspoken question. "And I'm not real sure whether I'm gonna like it very much when I do know, but one thing's for damned sure—you'd better get it right first time out because one chance is all you get."

All of Cawston's energy went into stifling yet another yawn as he passed the reception area on his way to his office. John's briefing session had lasted well into the night, and it was at least three in the morning before he, with TIM's help, finally convinced Reid that every conceivable detail had been wrung out of him. Once Reid grudgingly dismissed him, Cawston had, with severe reservations, accepted TIM's offer of a 'lift' home, which entailed another thirty minutes of sitting on the edge of his bed, battling nausea. Even if it took another ten years of his life, he'd never understand how the *novae* did it, transporting themselves from place to place without a thought, or even the slightest protest from their stomachs. No matter how many times he made a 'jaunt', with the help of TIM and a specially designed device hidden in his watch, it never got easier on either his digestive system or his nerves.

"Professor Cawston?"

He turned, noting foggily that the receptionist seemed to be eyeing him strangely. "Yes, Melinda?"

"I have five messages for you, and the service forwarded six more." She pushed a neat pile of notepaper across the surface of her desk at him. "The gentleman seems to be quite eager to speak with you."

The identity of the 'gentleman' Cawston surmised quickly enough as he found only one name on all eleven pieces of paper. "Thank you, Melinda," he murmured, mind racing as he turned down the hall towards his office. This was one confrontation that he should have anticipated, although he'd hoped it wouldn't have come to this quite so quickly. From the clock time noted on the earliest message, Jonathan MacKensie had first attempted to contact him barely thirty minutes after leaving Cawston's office.

Which had been five minutes after TIM relayed John's peremptory summons, four and a half minutes after Cawston, teeth set in anticipation, had been jaunted away. He cursed himself for doing nothing more intelligent than locking the office door and ringing the receptionist's desk to inform Melinda that he was not, under any circumstances, to be disturbed.

The last message had been taken only an hour ago by the answering service; an impatient hand had appended the word 'urgent' underlined several times. He drew to a halt a few paces from his office door, considering it. Perhaps he should get a message to John that there could be trouble. No, Reid would just point out, undoubtedly in an ice-covered tone of voice, that several contingency plans had been presented to him during the briefing session, and it was now up to Cawston to see to the 'problem'. The implication had been, of course, that the 'problem' was entirely Cawston's fault, and the solution was therefore left to him while the others tended to more important business. Dr. Jonathan MacKensie was, after all, only a mere Sap.

"Professor?"

He glanced back over his shoulder to see Melinda at the end of the corridor, holding a raised hand up to block the path of a very agitated Jonathan MacKensie. "He's very insistent, professor," the woman said apologetically.

"It's all right, Melinda," he forced himself to say calmly, shoving the messages into his pocket and fishing for his keys. In the process of unlocking the door, he didn't bother looking up as he said, "Good morning, Dr. MacKensie. I apologize for not returning your calls, I only minutes ago received your messages."

Stepping into his office as he spoke, he sought the safety of his desk, seating himself behind it before daring to look up. His smile wavered to see Jonathan turn from shutting the door, revealing a pale face lined with fatigue ... and fear.

"He didn't come back to the hotel." Moving cautiously, Jonathan made his way to an armchair and eased down as he spoke. "He left no messages. Neither his editor nor his publisher has heard a word, and the regulars at the pub next to the hotel were rather puzzled when he didn't show up as promised for their weekly darts competition."

Cawston attempted a sincere frown. "I'm very sorry to hear that, Dr. MacKensie. But I'm not entirely sure why you're so anxious to speak to me about the matter."

"Because you lied to me, Professor."

Caught in the middle of trying to remember some of the contingency plans, Cawston looked up sharply. "Pardon me?"

"I wasn't sure until just now. I only suspected that you knew more about it than you were willing to admit, but now I'm certain that you know exactly what happened to Benedek yesterday."

Cawston's protest died in his throat as he followed MacKensie's stare to the uncut crystal lying on one corner of his desk.

"Okay." Benny, sitting up against pillows that Annilise had thoughtfully arranged for him, held his hands up as a plea for him to be given some time to think. "This is a lot to take in all at once, so you're just gonna have bear with me, all right? Now, if I've gotten any of this straight—you're telling me that there's this new kinda mutation going on in the old gene pool, moving *Homo sapiens* a notch up the evolutionary ladder? And that I'm one of these *Homo novae*?"

Annilise nodded encouragingly. "The *novae* powers also include the ability to physically transport from one place to another in the blink of an eye; we call it 'jaunting'. In addition, some of us possess some rather unique talents. Andrew here can create full three-dimensional visual images. Luwanna's special talent is the ability to re-arrange and transmute the molecular structure of inanimate material. Both are experienced healers and *novae* counselors." To Benny's questioning look, she replied, "Most *novae* manifest their powers upon maturity, usually during puberty, sometimes later. A counselor is one who is able to communicate with a person who is in the process of 'breaking out', as we call it. Once contact has been established, the counselor then provides support and guidance."

"Yeah, I understand now. But there's something I'm not real clear on"

Annilise inclined her head, tacit encouragement for him to overcome his hesitation. "When I, uh ... had my problem and you guys talked me down off the ledge, I heard four voices. That's you, you, you" His finger paused, directed at Reid. "And not you. So where's the other guy, the one who sounds like a color commentator for the British Open?"

All eyes went to John, who until now had remained in the background as a silent observer. For the first time that Benny could remember, the doctor quirked half a genuine smile as his eyes flicked upwards. "Shall I do the honors, TIM?"

"If you would, please."

Benny's eyes widened in surprise as the light strip circling the ceiling perimeters flashed in shades of green and blue in perfect rhythm with the warm, cultured voice. "Mr. Benedek, I believe you've already met TIM under somewhat ... ah, awkward circumstances," Reid was saying.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Benedek."

A moment of silence passed as Benny squinted up at the ceiling, which was conspicuously devoid of speakers or monitors. "I get it. This is some kind of sophisticated audio-visual system you've got integrated into the building?" he guessed warily.

"In a manner of speaking," TIM chuckled benignly. "I *am* the building."

"Tim," Reid murmured, a mild chide.

"For lack of a more descriptive term, Benny, TIM is a computer," Annilise enjoined quickly. "Though much more incredibly advanced than anything you would know by that term. He is a fully integrated artificial intelligence, capable of analytical thought and informed choice."

"A computer?" Benny's expression melted into one of respect. "You're not yanking my chain, are you?"

Andrew laughed. "Tim's a lot of things, but a practical joker isn't one of them."

"I'm afraid Andrew is right," the voice sighed, flashing a doleful orange-red. "I still experience great difficulty understanding the concept that humans refer to as 'humor'."

"Yeah, but" Remembering the presence that to him had seemed more human than many who laid genuine claim to the title, Benny shook his head, bemused. "This is incredible. How've you been keeping all this secret for what, fifteen years? And this computer of yours"

"You may call me TIM, Mr. Benedek."

"Tim. Right. I mean, the last time I checked into the state of the art, the best that the most sophisticated one could do was crunch a whole lot of numbers very fast—and that was only four months ago. So where did it—" He hesitated, glancing up. "So where did you come from?"

"I was commissioned and developed by a special sub-committee of the High Council, ruling body of the Galactic Trig."

Benny sat up straight, eyes wide. "Galactic ... Trig?"

"A special envoy delivered my component parts to John shortly after he 'broke out' and made contact with a representative from the Trig. John in turn completed assembly and made a few critical adjustments in my programming. Over the years, I have assumed many physical forms. This building, constructed 2.4 years ago, was designed around my special circuitry."

"Literally, he *is* the building," Andrew offered with a grin.

"Years?" Benny's eyes glazed over. "You've been in contact with extraterrestrials—for years? All the things I've been writing about and investigating, like psychokinesis, teleportation, telepathy, UFOs—it's all true, isn't it? I've been banging my head up against a brick wall that *you* built, haven't I?"

Irritation strengthened his voice and put color back into his pale face. He yanked his arm away from Annalise's attempt to take his hand. "Excuse me, but I don't feel like calming down right now, okay? Not until I get some answers, anyway. Now, look—"

Annalise's sharp intake of breath distracted him. He glanced at her, then followed her wide-eyed stare to his wrist. The surface of the metal band glowed pale red. Benny poked tentatively at it, finding that it was no warmer or colder than before.

"What is this thing?" he demanded sharply, tugging at the band with no effect. "What's it doing?"

"As I told you before, it's merely a monitoring device," Reid said sternly. "The color changes are influenced by fluctuations in body temperature, indicating emotional variances. In simplest terms, blue is fear, red is anger"

"Listen, when I'm angry, I let people know about it, so this little trinket is kinda unnecessary, okay?" He trailed off, watching the color fade away, back to the dull blackish surface of before. "Okay, I'm calm now. See? Now, answer the question. Why are you hiding? What are you hiding from?"

Again all eyes went to John, who seemed more uncomfortable with the question than with the attention. "More appropriately, 'from whom are we hiding', Mr. Benedek," he admitted. "And the answer to that is, we hide from those who do not understand us, those who fear us. All of us have experienced that fear first hand. Luwanna's parents were badly frightened by the powers she manifested when she 'broke out'. Fortunately, they were able to overcome their terror enough to hide her from those who could not, those who wanted to harm her because she was 'different'. In Andrew's case, there were people who wanted to use his hallucinatory powers for their own purposes. That is why we 'hide', Mr. Benedek. Because we have learned not to expect to be accepted as a human being first, and a *nova* second."

"You mean ... nobody knows?" Benny shook his head, having obvious difficulty with the concept. "All these years, all those thousands of *novae*, and it's still one big secret?"

A thin smile tugged at John's mouth. "I didn't mean to imply that we are complete isolationists. That would be absurd, as well as impossible, given the number of parents and siblings who have witnessed 'break outs' in their own family. But you will find that, without exception, they respect the need for silence. Their own experiences usually convince them with very little need for persuasion from us."

"Cawston," Benny realized. "He's one of you, isn't he?"

"No," John said. "He is not a *nova*. He does, however, share our secret and keep our confidences."

"Ah." Realization lit Benny's face. "He's known for about twelve years, right? That's it! That's the reason he gave up looking, he found *you*."

John inclined his head. "Pardon?"

"Look, there's something here I still don't get. Why don't you try to make people understand that you guys aren't some mutant race from outer space scheming to zombify the population and take over the world?"

Reid's expression changed, going inscrutable. "It's been tried," he said coldly.

Benny stared at him, then decided that, given the look on Reid's face, the subject would be better off dropped. "So, what happens to me now?"

"I'm afraid that you have a lot of rehabilitation therapy ahead of you yet."

"Rehab—" Benny squinted at him. "What for?"

John shifted uncomfortably. "According to TIM's bio-scans, you 'broke out' when you were seventeen years old."

Benny blinked, then blinked again. "Seventeen? You mean, I've had these super powers all these years?"

"Yes and no. The potential was there; unfortunately, without recognizing what it was and how to control it, you instead ... stifled it, quite successfully."

"Seventeen," he echoed hollowly. "That was when" His hand went to his head in remembered pain. "Oh, yeah. They thought I was o.d.'ing, then they thought I had a brain tumor or something" He swallowed, rousing out of the memory with an embarrassed smile. "Seventeen wasn't one of my better years."

"Nor one of mine," John admitted sympathetically. "Your powers are still viable, but they've lain unused all these years, and it may prove quite difficult to 're-activate' them, as it were."

Benny frowned. "All of a sudden, I don't like the sound of that."

Annalise successfully captured his hand, offering a reassuring smile. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Benny. We're all here to help you."

He relaxed with a sigh, returning her smile. "Now *that*, I do like the sound of."



"I wanted to believe that you were right. Your scenario made sense until I actually had time to think about it."

Cawston heard the bitterness in Jonathan's quiet voice and winced. Reaching over to pick up the crystal, he fought past the urge to call damnation down on TIM for returning the thing to him without warning, and scrambled for something to say in his own defense.

"What's happened to him?" Jonathan asked quietly, breaking the taut silence. "What did that thing do to him? Where is he?"

Cawston opened his mouth to speak, but the defensive chide he tried to form died in a sigh of frustration. "I'm sorry. I can't tell you anything."

Jonathan stiffened, eyes flaming. "Please, you must understand," the professor said hastily. "This is an impossible situation for me. I would like to help you. I *want* to help you, but ... I simply cannot."

"That's it?" MacKensie glared at him. "That's all you're going to say? Or would you rather explain everything to the authorities?"

"And what will you tell them?" Hating himself, Cawston hardened his voice. "You yourself were experiencing great difficulty believing your own story—how do you suppose the police will react?"

Seething, Jonathan stared fixedly at his fist clenched against the chair arm until he'd regained enough control to speak. "At least tell me if he's ... all right."

"He's fine," Cawston offered, careful of how much he could ethically say. "Unharmful and well. And that's all I can tell you"

"No." MacKensie shook his head vehemently. "You're going to tell me a lot more than that, because if I go away from here without knowing where he is and what happened to him, you'll be borrowing more trouble than you can handle. I may not be able to convince the police, but Benedek has friends who will listen to me with great interest, and I think the last thing you need right now is a muckraking tabloid's editorial staff in the opposite corner. And you're going to start by telling me about this."

He rose, leaning over the desk to pluck the crystal from Cawston's fingers. Backing away a step to foil the professor's attempt to snatch it back, he stared at it, his jaw set in a grim line. "I didn't imagine this," he said levelly. "When I held this, I could remember the tiniest detail of things that happened months and years before. But when Benedek held it—it glowed. And then he was gone." He looked up. "What is it?"

"Dr. MacKensie—please."

Ignoring Cawston's obvious distress, Jonathan continued in a deadly voice, "He was right, wasn't he? Twelve years ago, you abandoned all your testing and research, not because of some early mid-life crisis; you stopped looking because you found what you were looking for. Didn't you? And this crystal is part of it, isn't it?"

"I cannot tell you anything more," Cawston insisted, hands held open in tacit plea. "It's simply impossible. Please, I beg you to respect my assurance that this is for your own protection as well as Mr. Benedek's."

Jonathan glared at him a moment longer, then returned to his chair. Once seated, he held the crystal up to eye level and considered it in silence. "You've given your word to someone else?" he said at length.

"Yes," Cawston answered reluctantly. "My word of honor."

"Then I would suggest, professor, that you contact this someone else and either have them release you from your promise, or have them talk to me directly, because I am not leaving here until I get the answers I came for."

Cawston challenged MacKensie's stony expression for only a moment before giving up with a heavy sigh. Picking up the telephone, he made a show of dialing numbers, then leaned back as he unobtrusively activated the switch on the handset. "Cawston. We have a problem."



Only Reid heard TIM's summons, but Benny, in the midst of an animated conversation with Andrew and Annilise, noticed the man's sudden distraction and continued to eye him with interest.

Professor Cawston has a visitor in his office and indicates that this is a matter of paramount concern to us.

Ah. Would this visitor's name be Dr. Jonathan MacKensie, by any chance?

Yes. Apparently he is no longer mollified by Professor Cawston's explanation of Mr. Benedek's disappearance and is demanding answers.

Reid turned away to hide his exasperated grimace from the others. All right, then. It's time I took matters in hand. Tell Cawston I'll attend to this ... unpleasantness myself. Make certain that Dr. MacKensie does not leave that office until I arrive.

Without giving TIM time to question or confirm, he switched contact to Andrew, who broke off in mid-chuckle to look up questioningly. *Come with me*, Reid directed with a peremptory motion of his head. *I'll explain on the way.*

Excusing himself with a quick smile, Andrew moved to join John on the other side of the room. The puzzled looks of the others followed them as the pair, without another word, vanished from sight.

"Whoa!" Benny whispered reverently, eyes wide. "That's ... that's just ... I can do that, too?"

"Well, not at the moment," Annilise assured him with a smile. "It takes quite a bit of time and practice, but—yes, that is one of your new talents."

"What else?" His face glowed with delight. "Can I read minds? Pulitzer Prize, here I come!"

"Gently, Benny," she soothed, still amused. "There's plenty of time to learn everything. You still have your recovery and rehabilitation period to get through safely."

"Safely?" His ebullience faded away as he regarded her warily. "Does that mean—something could go wrong?"

Caught, she forced a smile back onto her face. "You've been through a difficult ordeal. Your new powers are still in a state of flux. They are raw, unchannelled and, yes—dangerous. But don't worry, you're safe with us now. We won't let you come to harm, you must believe that."

He nodded uncertainly. His expression was closed and something about the way he continued to stare at her unsettled Annalise. "How long do you think this recovery and rehab will last?" he wanted to know.

Annalise exchanged glances with Luwanna. "It's ... difficult to say. There are so many different factors involved. A week, two weeks, perhaps a month or more."

He settled back with a pained wince. "A month? I hope you guys at least have a game room."

"You can't be serious."

Cawston looked up nervously as he spoke, one hand pressed to his forehead as he spoke into the telephone receiver. "Is this really necessary? No, I understand that, yes ... yes, it's a very difficult situation, I know, but ... surely there's another way."

His agitation increased as he became aware that Jonathan had moved to stand before his desk. "What do you mean by that?" His mouth widened, but no sound emerged for a long moment. "I ... I see. Yes. All right. I understand."

His last word was a sigh. Replacing the receiver with unusual gentleness, he leaned back in his chair, and rubbed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Dr. MacKensie," he said tiredly. "You should have gone when you could, I did warn you."

Sensing resignation without malice in the man's voice, Jonathan studied Cawston through narrowed eyes. "Is that a threat?"

"No." Dropping his hand, Cawston met Jonathan's gaze with great difficulty, and forced a laugh. "Heavens, no."

A moment later, Cawston stiffened, his eyes shifting to the right. But Jonathan was already turning, alerted by a subtle intrusion on his senses, nothing more than a sudden displacement of the air near him. He stared at the tall, darkly handsome man who stood by the windows, nowhere near the only door in or out of Cawston's office.

"He's right, you know," the stranger said with a dry smile. Jonathan fell back a step as the man approached, hands shoved firmly into the pockets of his white jacket to pointedly avoid extending one in greeting. "He did warn you. And you really should have listened."

"Who are you?" Jonathan demanded, his further attempts at retreat blocked by Cawston's desk. "What's going on here?"

"My name is Reid." He spared Jonathan a mildly annoyed glance as he passed him, reaching across Cawston's desk to pick up the crystal. The object glowed faintly as Reid studied it with open distaste. "Why was this here?"

Cawston's seemed to bristle at the man's imperious tone, but sagged back in his chair and shook his head. "I don't know. Perhaps TIM" He sighed heavily. "I honestly don't know."

Reid glared at him a moment more, then grunted softly as though reluctant to accept that Cawston spoke the truth. Then his eyes went to Jonathan, a challenge in them that was echoed in the way he extended his hand to display the soft blue light glowing in the heart of the crystal. "Yes, it is quite amazing, isn't it?" he said, smiling tautly. "Despite its appearance, its molecular structure is organic, not mineral."

"That's ... not possible," Jonathan said numbly, unable to tear his eyes from the crystal.

"You're right. It's not possible—for an object of terrestrial origin."

Cawston looked up sharply. "John."

Ignoring the obvious warning, Reid tossed the crystal lightly, then set it back on the desk, waiting until the glow died completely before turning back to Jonathan. "It's called prandri, a rare but highly prized cash crop from the Elpathu system in the third Galactic Quadrant. I picked it myself."

"John!"

Reid directed his glare at Cawston, all pretense at amiability vanished. "You said he demanded answers, Professor," he said harshly. "I'm here to provide them."

"This can't be the way," Cawston protested.

"Is this some sort of sick joke?" Voice shaking with anger, Jonathan retreated another step, fists clenching tightly at his side as Reid moved towards him.

"It's not a joke, Dr. MacKensie. It's not a game. What it is, is a very dangerous situation. Professor Cawston did his best to warn you, but since you refused to listen to him" He shrugged. "I'm sorry."

"What—?" Again, that subtle sensation of air displacement alerted him; he spun, brought up short by a strong hand grabbing his upper arm. Twisting his head, he caught a glimpse of a tall, brown-haired young man behind him, and someone else standing nearby. But the next instant, his cry of alarm was cut off as a hand closed on the back of his neck. Before he could gather another breath, something pressed firmly at the base of his skull. Without a sound, he slumped, unconscious. Andrew caught him in time to keep him from hitting the floor, and with his companion's help, managed to brace Jonathan between them.

Reid removed an object from his pocket, a featureless cirlet that Cawston remembered all too well; he had owned a similar one for years until TIM had finally perfected the miniaturization of the teleportation enhancer to a size that fit inside his watch. Holding up the bracelet, Reid said, "TIM, if you please."

In response, the band disappeared from Reid's hand, reappearing almost instantaneously on Jonathan's wrist. "All right, TIM. Take them back."

Cawston approached Reid as the trio faded into the curiously iridescent jaunting effect. "That wasn't necessary," he said, voice shaking with anger. "He could have been reasoned with."

"Forgive me, Professor, but I really didn't see where you were making any progress along those lines," Reid said coldly. "He's deduced too much about us; he's become dangerous. Consider this my small effort at damage control."

"Damage control," he repeated hollowly. "What does that mean? What do you intend to do with him?"

John gave him a brief glance that communicated his awareness of the fear in Cawston's voice, as well as his utter unconcern. "Nothing, for the moment. Everything now depends on Mr. Benedek, doesn't it?"

A flicker of time passed, it seemed; almost as if he'd merely closed his eyes, except that a moment ago he'd been standing, and now he was sitting on something soft, with his head raised slightly. His heart still hammered in his chest, powered by the panic that had surged up in response to his sudden attack. Without opening his eyes, he sensed that his surroundings had changed; no longer the relative darkness of Cawston's office, but a smaller, more brightly lit place. Nearby he heard two voices in earnest argument, and he held his breath to hear the words.

"... not necessary, Professor." The voice belonged to the stranger who had mysteriously appeared in Cawston's office, and it was clear that the man was growing impatient and angry. "The situation is in hand."

"Please, let me do this much, at least." Cawston's calm voice was fraying. "I think it would be best. He'll listen to me, I'm sure of it."

Jonathan's lungs caught, convulsively expelling stale air. "Go," Cawston said tersely. "Just go."

MacKensie started to protest, but the angry words died when his opened eyes finally focused enough to see that he and Cawston were the only ones in the small room, empty of all furnishings except the stuffed armchair he found himself slumped in. "Where is he?" Jonathan demanded groggily.

"Who's that?" Cawston approached him, a guarded look belying the painted-on smile of greeting.

"That man. The one who—" He winced, rubbing the aching spot between his shoulders. "What did he do to me?"

"Pressure applied to a nerve near the base of the skull rendered you temporarily unconscious," Cawston said quietly. "I'm ... sorry."

Jonathan's anger edged away as he considered the genuine emotion in Cawston's tired voice. "What's going on?" he said. "Where am I? How did I—?"

For some reason, he glanced at his watch. He'd arrived at the university at seven am, confronted Cawston at seven-fifty. It was now five minutes past eight. A quick check of the watch's date function added to his bewilderment. "Where am I?" he demanded again.

"You are in a high-security complex located on small island one hundred miles off the west coast of Africa."

Jonathan stared at him. "That's impossible," he said flatly. "I've only been out for less than fifteen minutes."

"It's not only possible, it's true," the man sighed, his voice heavy with fatigue. "Please, Dr. MacKensie. I will explain everything to you, I promise. But what I need from you is for you to stay calm. You will come to no harm here."

Jonathan stared at him, an inward battle between panic and reason reflecting on his face. Suddenly, he jumped to his feet, took two steps and then stopped, staring about him frantically. "No doors," he gasped. "This room has no doors."

"Dr. MacKensie—."

Jonathan sprang for the nearest wall, exploring it with his hands. "There must be a hidden opening somewhere—."

"There is no hidden opening." The sudden rise in Cawston's voice level commanded Jonathan's attention. "There are no windows, there are no doors. The people here do not have need of them."

"The people here?" Pushing away from the wall, he took a step toward Cawston. "What kind of people don't need doors?"

"Please. I assure you that I will answer all of your questions, if you'll just sit down and listen to me."

Visibly shaking, Jonathan looked around helplessly. Finding no other alternative, he took a moment to gather his composure. With a stiff nod, he returned to the armchair and eased himself down. "All right," he said quietly. "I'm listening."

"It's hard to know where to start," Cawston began slowly. "Perhaps a good beginning would be for me to introduce you—to TIM."

John stared grimly at the monitor before him, filled with tiny print, colorful graphs and unpleasant news. "This is unacceptable," he muttered darkly, bringing his clenched fist down on the desktop.

"The results are conclusive," TIM informed him serenely.

"The results are unacceptable!" He flung himself back in his chair, glaring blackly at data that refused to change by the sheer force of his will. "Run each scenario again, starting with the initial brain scan."

"I have done so three times already."

"Then do it again. There must be something we're missing, something—." He broke off in helpless frustration.

"Have you reviewed the recommendation summary?"

"Yes," he snapped angrily. "Unacceptable."

"I believe it is our only alternative."

"Then find another!"

TIM reacted to the heat in Reid's voice by hesitating before saying, "John—."

"Have you searched the galactic databases?"

TIM hesitated again. "Search is 72% complete."

"And?"

"No information has been found that match the search parameters."

John's facial muscles tightened. "There still may be something in the last 28%."

"Unlikely. The databases pertinent to humanoid life forms have already been searched."

"There has to be something," he murmured angrily. "There *has* to be."

"Scenario processing complete," TIM said, almost a sigh. "Again."

John leaned forward again as his monitor screen refreshed, his angry frown deepening as he scanned the closely-packed text. "No," he said, tight-lipped.

"John—."

"Run it again."

"John—."

"I said, run it again!"

TIM emitted a patient sigh. "Commencing process—.again."



"This—this is incredible."

The softly spoken words brought Cawston's head up, ending a long silence. Glassy-eyed, MacKensie shook his head in numb shock. "Incredible. How long has this been going on?"

Cawston considered his answer. "Since the dawn of mankind, I imagine. Evolution is inevitable—."

Jonathan held up his hand, a silent plea for him not to continue. "How long have you known about this?"

"Nearly twelve years now."

"When you abandoned your paranormal research," Jonathan realized. "But why? Why give up just when you found conclusive proof?"

Cawston shifted uncomfortably. "That is an explanation best saved for another time."

MacKensie's eyes suddenly flicked up. "You weren't—forced to—"

"No," Cawston said emphatically. "No, it was my decision alone, I assure you."

"Then why?"

Cawston took a long time to answer, studying the hands he had folded between his knees. "Because I discovered how dangerous it can be for *novae* to exist in this world. To continue my research would risk exposing them and—I believe they would not survive the experience."

"How can you be so sure?"

Cawston lifted his head to reveal eyes filled with pain. "Because I've seen what can happen. What *will* happen. These *novae* are young. The eldest of them is only 36. Most of them are children under 18. They can't defend or protect themselves without the use of their special powers, which are no match for the weapons the rest of the world would not hesitate to level against them."

His voice cracked. He did his best to cover with a cough, but the subtle change in MacKensie's expression told him that the effort was wasted.

"You've seen that?" Jonathan asked, voice subdued with sympathy.

Cawston nodded, eyes closing against the sharp pain of memory. "And the worst of it was—it was my fault."

"No, Professor Cawston," TIM interjected firmly. The disembodied voice caused Jonathan to flinch and swallow, but Cawston noted that MacKensie no longer hyperventilated nor clutched the chair arms with whitened fingers when TIM entered their conversation. "You were not to blame."

"I published my preliminary findings," Cawston returned, impatient with what was obviously a rehash of an old argument. "The *novae* would have never come to the notice of the military if I hadn't—"

"You cannot blame yourself for actions beyond your control."

Cawston made a vague, dismissive gesture, lowering his forehead into his hands to rub his eyes tiredly. Jonathan watched him for a time, finally daring to ask, "What happened?"

"It's not important right now." Cawston straightened, visibly collecting his wits.

"But important enough for you to abandon a promising line of research," Jonathan noted.

"And return to a safe, comfortable niche in the mathematics department," Cawston agreed. "Yes. It was that important."

"And where does Benedek fit in all of this?"

"Ah, yes. Your friend. I confess that I 'm not clear on all the details. Perhaps TIM should do the honors?"

TIM replied immediately. "As you wish, Professor."

Benedek frowned at the bracelet encircling his wrist, poking at it in a futile attempt to discover where it opened. "Is it supposed to be glowing like this? I mean, it seems brighter than before."

Annilise, seated at his bedside, leaned over for a closer look. She seemed about to speak, but hesitated, as though considering her words. "I believe so," she answered carefully. "I'll check with John—Dr. Reid, just to be sure."

"Tell him to bring some aspirin while you're at it."

"Are you in pain?" She studied him worriedly as he massaged his temples.

"Ah, it's nothing, nothing—."

She chewed her lip anxiously. "We still don't know much about the effects of prolonged exposure to hyper-space. I'd better ask John to look at you."

"Not just yet, okay? I'd kinda like to see as little of old stick-in-the-mud as possible, know what I mean?"

She unsuccessfully suppressed a smile. "John's actually a very nice person."

Benny snorted softly. "I'm sure that if I looked like you, he'd be very nice to me, too."

"You have a lot to learn about us," she told him, still amused.

"And I can't wait for the lessons to begin." He rubbed his hands together in exaggerated glee. "Where do we start?"

"With you getting some sleep."

"Aw, no, I can't sleep!" he protested. "I want to see what I can do! Show me how. C'mon, please?"

"It's not as simple as that—."

"Ok, ok, just tell me why we could read each other's minds a while ago, but right now I can't even raise static."

She responded by placing her hand on his arm. *Your powers are still not strong enough to communicate with another telepathic mind without physical contact.*

Benny looked up at her with a grin, placing his hand over hers. "Greatest excuse for hand holding I ever heard." The next moment, his eyes widened. "Whoa! I gotta hand it to you, you sure light up my life!"

Annilise looked down, gasping audibly to see that the faint blue glow of Benny's bracelet had flared in intensity. She snatched her hand back, backing away a few steps. Confused, Benny watched the brilliant glow fade, then eyed Annilise's obvious alarm with suspicion. "I thought Reid said this was some kind of monitor. Blue was for—what? Fear? I'm not feeling particularly petrified at the moment, so what gives?"

"It's ... it's nothing," Annilise recovered, although her voice was still too shaky for Benny's liking, and she made no move to approach him.

Benny's suspicion deepened. "You know, if you expect me to trust you guys, you're gonna have to start telling me the truth."

"It's nothing," she insisted, mustering a smile. "I was just startled, that's all."

"That's all," Benny repeated, still dubious. "So what's with this monitor?"

"I'll have to check with John." She settled back in the chair at Benny's bedside, sitting unnaturally straight. "He's busy right now, but he says that he'll come to see you shortly."

Her eyes were still on the bracelet, and Benny had no trouble detecting open worry in her gaze. Although the brilliant flash had faded, what remained still seemed brighter than before. And he detected a fluctuation that looked too much like the prelude to a city-wide blackout for comfort. From the look on Annilise's face, though, he was sure he wouldn't be getting any answers from her. He'd have to wait until Reid made an appearance and shake the answers out of the man if he had to.

"Listen, have you guys got a telephone I can use?"

Annilise hesitated. "Not ... nearby. Why?"

"I need to call Jonathan, let him know what's going on. I must have disappeared right in front of him. Wouldn't I have loved to see his face! He gets kinda cranky if I let him go nutzoid for too long, though, so I'd kinda like to straighten things out with him. Before he puts out a hit on me, anyway."

"I believe your friend Jonathan is already aware of the situation," Annilise said after a moment spent listening to an inner voice. "He is being given a full explanation right now."

"He is?" Benny sat up straight, leaning forward eagerly. "He knows?"

At Annilise's nod, he whooped and clapped his hands. "Life is good!" he crowed. "The Crown Prince of Skeptics has met his match! I've got to see his face. Can you bring him here for me?"

"That's not wise," she frowned.

"No, you don't understand. This has nothing to do with wisdom and everything to do with the innate human urge to say 'I told you so' to his little academic face. And it's me—me that's got the powers he's been scoffing at all this time! C'mon, please. Please?"

"Benny, I can't. Not without John's permission. I'm sorry."

He deflated, instinctively knowing that any argument or plea presented to Reid would fail by virtue of falling on deaf ears. "You're no fun," he muttered dispiritedly.

Jonathan slumped in his chair, the fingers of one hand pressed against the side of his face, as he digested all of the information that TIM had imparted to him over the course of a half-hour. Cawston looked on sympathetically, remembering his own struggle to accept such stunning revelations.

"Edgar Benedek ... is a *nova*."

It was the third time in several minutes that MacKensie had broken his stunned silence to utter the same sentence. Cawston remained silent, recognizing the behavior as a needed assimilation process. This time Jonathan continued, saying, "You're telling me that he ... he has these special powers. Telepathy, psychokinesis ... " He paused, gulping hard. "He's going to be impossible to live with."

Cawston relaxed when it became apparent that MacKensie had given up trying to reject everything he'd been told, and was in fact beginning to accept that both Cawston and TIM were telling him the truth. "He is in good hands here," the professor assured Jonathan. "They will provide the training he needs to survive as a *nova*. Perhaps they will also succeed in instilling a much needed sense of tact."

"That would be a miracle," Jonathan agreed, smiling wanly. Suddenly, he winced, bringing up his other hand to press against his temple.

"Are you all right?" Cawston leaned forward, concerned.

"I ... I don't know." He opened his eyes, blinking rapidly. "Something ... ah!"

"Dr. MacKensie!" Cawston left his chair, gaining Jonathan's side. "Dr. MacKensie, what's wrong?"

Hands still pressed tightly to either side of his head, Jonathan looked up. As he did, the lines of pain disappeared, replaced by open shock. "Benedek," he breathed in disbelief. "I ... I heard him."

Cawston blinked. "But that's impossible. You're not a *nova*, you can't ... you couldn't. TIM?"

"I tell you, I heard him." With an exasperated sigh, Jonathan let his hands drop. "It's gone now. But I know I heard him."

"I have no explanation," TIM replied after a pause, his voice worried.

"I want to see him," Jonathan informed Cawston tersely.

Cawston looked to TIM for help that didn't come. "I'll see what I can do," he stammered unconvincingly.

"Now." MacKensie glared warning at the professor. "I want to see him now."

"I can't do that," Cawston flared, at wit's end. "I'm only a Sap, just like yourself."

"Sap?" Jonathan echoed, eyes narrowing.

Caught, Cawston sighed, returning to his armchair to sink down into the cushions. "It's short for *Homo sapiens*. It's how the *novae* sometimes, rather crudely, refer to those of us who lack their special talents."

"Then how did both of us get into a room with no doors?" MacKensie challenged.

"With TIM's help." From his pocket, he produced the bracelet that had been removed from Jonathan's wrist after his teleportation from Cawston's office. "And this."

"If TIM can bring us thousands of miles in less than five minutes, then he should have no trouble taking me to Benedek."

"Dr. MacKensie"

"I believe I concur," TIM said suddenly, gaining Cawston's surprised look. "I cannot explain the curious communication that just took place between Dr. MacKensie and Mr. Benedek. I do know that at the moment Dr. MacKensie experienced contact, Mr. Benedek was in fact inquiring about him. I do not believe this to be coincidence, but such contact between a *nova* and a non-*nova* should be physically impossible. Yet Dr. MacKensie bears none of the genetic markers necessary for development into a *nova*. Until I can find an explanation, I believe it would be wise to bring them together."

Relief washed over MacKensie's face. "Then take me to him, now."

"Professor Cawston?"

Cawston responded to TIM's address by sighing, rising to his feet and offering the bracelet to Jonathan. MacKensie was frowning at it, unable to find a latch, when the bracelet suddenly vanished, reappearing almost immediately around his wrist. To Cawston's relief, MacKensie recovered quickly, only a swallow betraying his reaction.

"Whenever you're ready, gentlemen," TIM said.

"I find it helps to keep your eyes closed until the buzzing sound in your ears goes away," Cawston informed Jonathan *sotto voce*.

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind," was the shaky reply.

"No, really, I need to know," Benny persisted, provoking an exasperated sigh from Annilise. "How long do I have to stay here? You must have some idea. I've got to get back to NYC eventually. Deadlines to meet, ficus to water, you know."

"I don't know," she repeated with exaggerated patience. "Honestly, I don't know. It all depends on how long your recovery lasts."

"Recovery?" he frowned. "Recovery from what?"

She hesitated, considering his answer. "At the moment, your special powers are manifesting ... oddly. You're experiencing some difficulty in controlling them. We've got to help you get them under control, or else you'll end up doing yourself unintentional harm."

"Like that, uh, hyperspace episode, huh?" Benny recalled with a shiver. "Well, okay, but—how long is that going to take?"

Her eyes dropped to the bracelet and the slow swirl of color suffusing its surface. "Not long, I hope," she said, forcing a smile.

His eyes narrowed. "What is this thing, really?"

TIM rescued her, interrupting, "Mr. Benedek. You have a visitor."

Before Benny could react, twin columns of sparkling light appeared near his bed, resolving into the forms of an ill-looking Professor Cawston, and a utterly bewildered Jonathan MacKensie.

"Hey, Jack!" Benny spread his hands in greeting. "Did you bring me flowers?"

Jonathan blinked, slowly focusing on the source of the ebullient voice. "Are you all right?" he asked worriedly, gaining Benedek's bedside to place the back of his hand against the grinning man's forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Never better! Did they tell you the great news? Telepathy, psychokinesis, the works! Uri Geller, eat your heart out! Just wait 'til I get back to New York, there's a Pulitzer out there with my name on it, I can see it now—"

Jonathan shushed him urgently, bringing a confused frown to Benedek's face. "What? What?"

With a warning look, Jonathan held up a pleading hand. Benny subsided with an impatient sigh, prepared to wait for the explanation the gesture promised.

Cawston approached uncertainly. "Mr. Benedek. My apologies for any undue stress you may have suffered."

"Apologies?" Benny scoffed. "Are you kidding? Do I look stressed out? This is a dream come true, pal. This is—ow!" Benny clutched his arm and scowled up at Jonathan.

"How have they been treating you?" Jonathan asked, furtively glancing at Annilise, who appeared to be holding back until noticed.

"Better than you," he growled. "Here, let me introduce you. This little angel of mercy is Annilise. Two other kids were here for a while, but they disappeared about ten minutes ago. I mean, literally disappeared," he cackled. "Anni, this is my pal, Dr. Jonathan MacKensie."

"Hello," Annilise said politely with a smile, guiding her hand into Jonathan's extended one.

"Yes, they do look quite 'normal'," Cawston said, leaning in to speak lowly near Jonathan's ear.

Caught, Jonathan flinched. "I didn't"

"Yes, I know," Cawston's amusement was tinged with sympathy. "I understand."

"Welcome, Dr. MacKensie," Annilise enjoined. "I take it from your expression that the professor has already told you about us."

"Yes," he said, clearing the nervousness from his voice with a cough.

She smiled at him and winked. "You'll get used to us."

"Yes, yes, I'm ... sure," He returned her smile, but a faint shadow of doubt still lingered on his face.

"Great timing, Jack," Benny told him exultantly. "I was just telling Anni about you. Some of it I can actually repeat to your face, too."

Jonathan's hand went to his forehead in remembered pain. "I ... I heard you."

"I wasn't talking that loud, was I?"

"No ... I mean, in my head."

"Whoa!" Benny exhaled, eyes wide. "You're one, too!"

"No. No, I'm not. At least they say I'm not." Jonathan shook his head in confusion. "I don't understand a lot of this, but ... I did hear you."

"Well, now." A new voice intruded. Jonathan turned to see the man who had confronted him in Cawston's office glaring stonily at all of them in turn. His accusatory look fell hardest on Cawston. "I don't recall giving permission for this little gathering."

Jonathan opened his mouth to protest Reid's imperiousness, but Cawston stopped him with a gesture. "You didn't forbid it, either."

"I take full responsibility," TIM informed them serenely. "The decision was mine. I thought it best."

"You thought it best." John inflated with indignation, but said nothing. A moment later, he let it go with a controlled exhale. "Well, there's nothing to be done about it now. We can always do a memory wipe before we send him back."

Paling, Jonathan retreated a step. "A what?"

Cawston touched MacKensie's arm. "I'll explain lat—"

"A memory wipe." Reid spoke impatiently, as to an inattentive child. "One of our special talents, though some of use are more proficient in its use than others. It's quite painless, and there are no harmful side-effects if that's what has you worried. Your memory of your time here will be erased, and replaced with something ... more suitable."

"John," Cawston pleaded as he felt Jonathan trembling under his hand. Lost, MacKensie struggled to control his breathing before marshaling his shock-dulled senses. "What happens to Benedek?" he demanded.

"Yeah," Benny piped up, frowning. "What happens to Benedek?"

"He'll remain here, of course." Reid busied himself with the contents of his clipboard. "He is a *nova*. He belongs with us."

"Whoa, whoa, hold on here," Benny demanded, alarmed. "Nobody said anything about putting down roots here, least of all me."

Reid ignored him, looking up to sweep them with a disdainful glare. "Now, if you wouldn't mind, I would prefer to discuss this matter with Mr. Benedek privately."

Annilise reacted to John's raised voice by placing her hand on Jonathan's arm. He resisted, but found that his muscles wouldn't cooperate. Something about her touch wouldn't allow him to struggle against her.

"No, wait," he said. "Don't—"

"Don't go!" Benny cried, suddenly panicking. "Jonathan! Don't leave me here with him!"

"We'd better go," Cawston told him lowly.

MacKensie opened his mouth to protest, but the jaunting effect overwhelmed him.

"Really, Mr. Benedek," Reid sighed. "I'm not your enemy."

"Where'd she take him?" Benny demanded shakily.

"To the dining hall, I imagine. For a nice cup of tea."

Benny's panic eased slightly. "Why should I believe that?"

"Because it's the truth?"

"And why should I believe you?"

Reid sighed heavily, taking a moment to rub his eyes. "Mr. Benedek, there is no need to make this more difficult than it already is."

"Difficult," Benny echoed hollowly. "What's difficult? What are you talking about?"

Reid took the chair at Benny's beside recently vacated by Annilise, and placed the clipboard carefully on his lap. "I'm afraid that some ... complications have arisen."

With no little difficulty, Annilise and Cawston managed to calm an irate and badly frightened Jonathan MacKensie, finally getting him to set down at a table in front of a steaming cup of tea provided without prompting by TIM. "It's all right," Annilise assured him again, feeling him tremble under the hand she held to his. "John knows what he's doing. He won't harm your friend. He couldn't. None of us could."

"The *novae* have an innate prohibition against engaging in any act of violence," Cawston replied to Jonathan's questioning look. "They cannot harm, they cannot kill—not even in self-defense. It's not hard to see why they cling to secrecy. Ultimately, it is their only real defense."

"He's not really going to keep Benedek here, is he? Against his will?"

"I ... I couldn't say," Cawston said uneasily.

"We would never do that," Annilise said, faintly horrified at the thought. "John will explain the situation to him. I'm sure everything will be fine after that."

"I'm not." MacKensie shook his head ruefully. "And I've known Benedek considerably longer than you have."

Cawston seemed about to say something, but instead settled a strange, appraising look on Jonathan before suddenly quirking a faint smile and returning his attention to his own cup of tea.

"What happens with this memory wipe?" MacKensie asked tentatively, already prepared to fear the answer.

"It's a very simple procedure, really," she assured him. "And completely painless. Two of us would scan your mind and reset certain memory-related synaptic connections through the use of psychokinesis. Your memory of your time in this place would be replaced by another memory, say—sightseeing in London. You won't remember us or this place—"

"Or Benedek." He swallowed. "How do you propose to remove all proof that he accompanied me to England, or at least explain why I don't remember what happened to him?"

Annilise tightened her grip on his hand. "There's no point dwelling on it. A memory wipe may not even become necessary."

"If I cooperate, you mean?"

"Would that be so difficult?"

He subsided a little under the warmth of her cajoling smile. "No. No, I don't suppose it would." He drew a deep breath. "I don't know why I'm reacting like this. This place, the people here—it's an anthropologist's dream! Concrete evidence of human evolution in progress"

The uneasy glances shared by Cawston and Annilise stopped him. "And I won't be allowed to pursue any part of it, will I?" he realized.

"Please understand," Cawston said. "It's for your own good as well as their protection. Once, years ago, the *novae* agreed to use their special powers at the direction of certain world governments. For a time, the alliance was mutually beneficial, but then—it all fell apart. The *novae* were being asked to cause physical harm to others, and ... they couldn't. Even if they had wanted to, it was simply impossible. When they refused, the *novae* were threatened, coerced, imprisoned, tortured—killed." His voice faded under the weight of memory on the last word. "That's when they went into hiding for the last time. It took years to remove the memory of the *novae*'s existence from the minds of those responsible for atrocities committed in the name of world security. Even more *novae* were lost in the attempt. But they finally succeeded. No more of these children will have to suffer pain or death for refusing to carry out

the orders of world leaders more concerned with wealth and power than the welfare of their own people. And ... I believe this is how it must be."

MacKensie was silent for a moment, his expression closed. "And what would happen if I refuse to submit to this memory wipe?"

Annilise and Cawston exchanged glances again, both clearly preferring that the other answer the question. Annalise finally accepted the task, clearing her throat softly. "I suppose that would depend upon what you intended to do with your knowledge."

"And what would it take for you to be convinced that I was telling you the truth? You have no reason to trust me. You're more frightened of me than I am of you, aren't you?"

"They have more cause," Cawston said quietly.

MacKensie nodded grimly, his suspicions confirmed. "I have no choice, do I? If I refuse, you'll just throw me into one of those doorless rooms until I change my mind."

"No!" Annalise protested, aghast. "Please, you can't believe that!"

"What else can you do? You can't trust me, and you can't stop me should I suddenly decide to betray your existence. It doesn't matter that I would never do something so abhorrent, all that matters is that you can't trust me. I'm only a—a Sap, after all."

Annilise shot a glance at Cawston, knowing that the faintly derogatory term could have only come to Jonathan's attention through him. "Please, Dr. MacKensie"

All looked up as the jaunting effect formed into two young people whom Jonathan didn't recognize but who were obviously well known to both Cawston and Annalise. The young man was tall and gangly with a thick shock of brown hair obscuring his face; his companion was a petite, dark-skinned young girl whom Jonathan judged to have only recently entered her teens. Their smiles of greeting faltered upon seeing Cawston's reaction to their appearance. He'd grabbed Jonathan's arm, gripping tightly as he regarded the newcomers with open fear.

"Oh, no," Annalise murmured. "Luwanna, Andrew—please, not now."

"I'm sorry, Anni," the girl said, sympathetic to Annalise's obvious distress. "John's orders."

"What—what's happening?" Jonathan demanded querulously, tensing as Luwanna and Andrew approached him, moving to stand on either side of his chair.

"It's all right," Luwanna assured him gently. "We're sending you back, that's all. You'll be fine."

To his horror, Jonathan found that he couldn't move. His mouth was open for an angry protest, but no sound emerged. Torn, Cawston reluctantly released MacKensie's arm at Luwanna's silent request. Paralyzed, Jonathan pleaded with his eyes for help, but Cawston only turned his head, bowed heavily.

Andrew placed one hand on Jonathan's shoulder, the other, with fingers splayed, against the side of his face. Luwanna did likewise. Jonathan squeezed his eyes shut, prepared to battle their efforts every step of the way.

Suddenly there was a shrill cry, followed by a startled shout and a loud crackling sound. In his mind, pain exploded in a million different colors as something howled in discordant voices filled with fury and despair, shattering his senses. He pitched forward in his chair, clawed hands clutched over his face until the agony gradually subsided and he could breathe again. When he looked up, it was to see Andrew and Luwanna on the floor, moaning groggily. Annalise was doubled over with her hands covering her face, hyperventilating. Only Cawston, hovering over Andrew and Luwanna with frantic concern, seemed unaffected.

"What happened?" Jonathan managed to gasp.

"I've never seen anything like it," Cawston said, some of his distress relieved by the nod with which Andrew confirmed that he was all right. "Some sort of energy, it ... it seemed to come from you."

"Me?" Jonathan echoed, bewildered.

"TIM?" Cawston looked up at the ceiling expectantly "What happened here? TIM?"

"We are experiencing an emergency," TIM finally replied, voice grim. "Dr. MacKensie, we need your help."

"My help? What can I—" Realization hit him. "What's happened to Benedek?"

"Quickly! There's no time to waste. Jaunting now"

Jonathan blinked, his disorientation clearing too slowly for his liking. He first saw Benedek, sitting up in his bed, staring fearfully at a bracelet on his wrist that was glowing a brilliant, pulsating purple. Nearby, John was moaning softly, sprawled on the floor by the wall, as if he'd been tossed there like a rag doll. Annilise rushed to his side. "John! What's happening?" she begged.

"Benedek!" Jonathan started forward, but Benny's violent flinch stopped him in his tracks.

Gulping hard, Benedek extended his arm to show MacKensie the bracelet, the glow of which was still growing in intensity even as he watched. "I think it's gonna blow!"

Still on the floor despite Annilise's efforts, Reid cried, "TIM! Hibernation mode, stat!"

"Initiating hibernation mode," TIM confirmed.

A soft white beam fell from the ceiling to completely encircle the bed. Almost immediately, Benedek slumped. Fear and panic drained from his face as he fell back against the pillows.

"What did you just do to him?" Jonathan demanded, panicking.

"He's asleep." Reid, finally on his feet, gave Annilise a terse nod of gratitude. "Mind you don't enter the hibernation field, or you'll be affected as well."

"Kinetic energy levels returning to normal," TIM intoned.

"I don't understand this," Reid muttered darkly. "The damper must be defective."

"The damper is functioning normally," TIM told him. "The kinetic energy released by Mr. Benedek far exceeded its tolerance."

"What did you do to him?" MacKensie demanded furiously.

"John," Annilise interjected, eyes filled with fear. "The damper—hibernation mode isn't working."

They followed her gaze to the bracelet around Benedek's wrist. The glow had diminished slightly, but even as they watch began to once more grow in intensity.

"I warned you this could happen," TIM said ominously.

"All right, you told me so," Reid snapped. "Now help me to get him under control."

"I'm increasing the frequency of the sigma waves. We should know whether this course of action is effective within 60 seconds."

Tense silence fell in the room as everyone, not daring to breathe, watching the bracelet until its glow noticeably dimmed. Reid was the first to exhale in relief. "Thank you, TIM."

"This is a temporary measure at best," TIM said sternly. "The problem must be addressed quickly and decisively, or the next kinetic convulsion may prove fatal."

"Fatal?" MacKensie whispered, paling.

"Then get me an answer," John demanded irritably.

"You already have my recommendation."

"And I've already told you that your recommendation is unacceptable!" John's face flushed with anger. "I will not lose another *nova*, do you understand me? I will *not*."

"I want to hear his recommendation," Jonathan spoke in the stunned silence that greeted John's outburst.

"No," Reid said tersely, regaining his composure. "It's irrelevant."

"I want to hear it," Jonathan persisted. "That bracelet—what is it? Why does it frighten you?"

Reid looked away, lips pressed together tightly in barely concealed irritation. "Get him out of here."

"No!" Jonathan retreated as far as he could, hands held up in defense. "I'm through with being treated like a minor annoyance. You're playing with our lives here, mine and Benedek's. I have a right—"

"You have no rights!" John flared, his dark eyes filled with fury. "Not here, not among us. Your kind as persecuted us for years, forcing us into hiding like so many frightened rats just to survive. This man is one of us. It is his birthright. I cannot—*will* not strip those special powers from him, condemning him to live the rest of his life as a mere Sap."

Cawston stepped forward in the stunned silence. "Condemn?" he whispered incredulously.

Annilise reacted to the deep emotion in his voice, coming forward to clutch the professor's arm. "He's tired, Professor. Overwrought. Forgive him."

"I'm not certain I should," Cawston murmured, shaking his head numbly. "I think I'm finally hearing the truth after all these years."

John straightened, turning to them with a carefully neutral expression. "Please leave now. TIM and I have work to do."

"I'm no going anywhere," Jonathan stated flatly. "I don't know what happened to us a few minutes ago, but I do know that I heard him in my head again. And this time, he was begging me to help him."

"You?" John repeated in astonishment. "That's not possible. TIM?"

"It appears that the phenomenon is indeed possible, although I am still at a loss to explain how. The kinetic overload appears to have activated certain neural pathways that are normally dormant in non-*novae*. *Novae* in close proximity experienced only the backlash of the kinetic implosion."

"Tell me what's happening to him," Jonathan pleaded.

"The ability to modulate and control the special abilities possessed by *novae* is centered in a section of the brain dedicated to that purpose. A series of specialized neurotransmitters and synaptic connections are required to properly use and manipulate the *nova*'s fully matured powers. Unfortunately, it appears in Mr. Benedek's case, these necessary components have irretrievably atrophied from disuse. As a result, his special powers are out of control."

"What can be done?"

"My recommendation—"

"No!" John cried, raising furious eyes to the ceiling.

TIM continued, unperturbed. "... would be to perform a simple operation, to remove that section of the brain responsible for his special powers."

"TIM!"

"How dangerous would that be?"

"There is very little risk involved. I am capable of performing the procedure without the use of invasive techniques. He'll be fully recovered within hours."

"And if he doesn't have this operation?"

TIM's reply was simple but chilling. "He will die."

"You don't know that," John protested angrily.

"I do," TIM rejoined emphatically. "The damper is turning part of the uncontrolled kinetic energy against himself. If it isn't stopped, he'll start losing molecular integrity within a matter of minutes. But if you remove the damper, the resulting shock will kill him outright."

Jonathan drew a deep breath, praying that he wasn't confused about anything he'd just heard. "Do it," he said on the exhale.

"You have no right to make that decision!" John spat.

"When you're endangering his life because of a deep-seated prejudice that prevents you from seeing that you must do what's right for Benedek instead of what is right for *you*—you bet I do," Jonathan flared.

"You have no idea what you're doing." Reid's rage shook his voice.

"I think he does," Cawston interjected unexpectedly, his expression strangely inscrutable.

"I refuse to lose another *nova*, not again. Not this way!"

Annilise spoke in the awkward silence, "John, I know we've lost too many *novae* in the past. But their loss was never your fault."

"I'm responsible for the *novae*. I should have protected them." Reid's anger suddenly faded, his voice cracking with emotion. "They should have never been lost. I should have saved them."

"What are you?" MacKensie asked quietly, eyes narrowed. "God?"

Reid glanced at him, but only irritation broke through the gray pallor of his face.

"You've never forgiven me, have you?" Cawston realized suddenly. "All these years—you've lied to me. You do blame me for what happened to you and Elizabeth."

"No more than you do yourself," John replied stiffly, avoiding eye contact.

"But I wasn't the one shot point blank by machine gun fire, left lying in a pool of blood—*dying*—on the floor, if Timus hadn't intervened when he did ... "

"We'd both be dead, yes, yes," John said impatiently. "We've been over this before, Professor, I see no point —"

"You've never really forgiven me for my part in the incident, have you? You can't forgive anyone who isn't a *nova*. I'm right, aren't I?"

John's face tightened. "Crude, violent, sadistic," he muttered, each word a fervent curse. "We were almost killed as a result of their ignorance and fear. And you—what could you do against them? Oh, wait, I remember." His voice rose, filled with disgust. "Nothing. You could do *nothing*. And what would have become of the *novae* who came after us if we had died? Who would have been there to help them, guide them?" He laughed shortly. "You?"

"There hasn't been a day in the last twelve years that's gone by that I haven't thought about what happened," Cawston said quietly. "But I thought at least ... "

"You thought you have my forgiveness?" Reid paused, eyes staring inward at distant memories. "Truthfully, Professor? I'm not sure I can. I'm not sure I ever could."

Stung, Cawston turned away, rejecting Annilise's attempt to reach for him.

"Listen to me," Jonathan stepped forward to confront Reid. "Whatever has happened to you in the past—I'm truly sorry. I know that doesn't mean much coming from a Sap, but it's the best I can do. It's time to let go. You may have special abilities, but you're still a human being. So is Benedek. You're endangering his life because of you refuse to let go of past hurts and injustices. He's no threat to you as a Sap, and you haven't failed him if he can't become a true *nova*. It's just the way it has to be. Please, I'm begging you. Don't force him to pay a debt he doesn't owe."

John shook his head, desperately torn. "I swore I'd never lose another *nova*," he murmured, lost. "I swore—"

Annilise moved to his side, waiting until he finally acknowledged her presence to say softly. "He's right, John. You have to let it go. Please. You know he's right. It's time to forgive yourself."

A marked spasm shook John's body, as though he'd finally forced himself to look at something he'd desperately been trying to avoid for years. He turned from them, shoulders slumping in defeat.

MacKensie, one eye on the pulsating bracelet, addressed TIM. "How long will this operation take?"

"Less than thirty minutes. I'm afraid I cannot allow you to observe; I'll need to maintain a sterile field."

"Fine, fine," Jonathan said, feeling relief loosening the knots in his stomach. "Do it."

He half-expected John to object again, but the man didn't react. The fight had gone out of him, replaced by a blank, lost expression. Annilise gently encircled his arm with hers. "I'll take care of him, TIM," she said.

"Thank you, Annilise," TIM replied gratefully as the two disappeared. To the others, he said, "I will begin the procedure as soon as you all have left the room."

"You're sure it's safe?" MacKensie hesitated. "Is there any danger at all?"

"None whatsoever. Mr. Benedek will be exactly the same as he was before this unfortunately incident occurred."

"I see," Jonathan breathed. Under his breath, he added, "Although there are a few improvements I'd like to see."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing, nothing. Thank you for standing up for him—for us."

"You are most welcome."

Jonathan touched Cawston's arm, rousing the other man from his gray thoughts. "We have to go now."

"Of course," Cawston agreeing, gesturing to Andrew and Luwanna to follow. "Good luck, TIM."

"Thank you, professor. Preparing to jaunt ... "

Andrew poked disconsolately at the ice cream float sitting on the table before him. "I never knew," he said. "I don't think any of us did. I can't believe he was able to hide it so well. From us!"

"I think I did know," Cawston replied, his voice and expression tired and drawn. "I kept hoping that it was merely my own guilt coloring the perception."

"You talk as though you believe John truly meant those awful things he was saying," Luwanna pouted. "He was tired, he wasn't thinking."

Cawston responded to her distress with a gentle smile. "It's all right, Luwanna. We do understand."

MacKensie, seated across the table from Cawston, watched as the three subsided, losing themselves in their own morose thoughts. Then Cawston drew a deep breath. "Andrew," he said lowly, gaining the boy's startled attention. "Is it possible to effectively erase twelve years of memories?"

"Professor, no!" Luwanna cried, horrified.

Andrew leaned forward, eyes filled with concern. "You don't mean it, did you? You're not going to leave us?"

"I ... I don't know, Andrew," he confessed reluctantly. "I think it may be for the best if I did."

The two youths chorused emphatic protests, to which Cawston shook his head. "I can't do anything for you anymore. I'm not sure there ever was anything I could do."

"You're wrong, Professor," Luwanna said stubbornly. "You're our friend. You've always been our friend, and I don't want to lose you."

"Nor I," Andrew affirmed.

Visibly moved, Cawston ducked his head long enough to recover. "Thank you, both. But ... "

"I don't want to hear it," Luwanna declared. "Promise me you won't even consider *thinking* about leaving."

"I can't promise that," Cawston said apologetically.

Annoyed with the answer, Andrew sat back, scowling over folded arms. "Well, don't expect me to do the memory wipe."

"Nor I," Luwanna enjoined with matching belligerence.

Cawston looked at them both in turn, torn between gratitude and irritation. "Even if I asked you to? Would you deny me that simple request?"

Andrew's face crumpled. "Please, Professor. Don't take about leaving anymore. You can't. You just can't."

"I think you should listen to them."

Cawston gave Jonathan a surprised look for the unexpected statement. "Why do you say that?"

"They need you," MacKensie said, a simple, quiet statement of fact. "And more than any of them—Dr. Reid needs you."

Cawston began a protest but confusion held him silent. "I—I don't understand."

"I think you do," Jonathan assured him. "I have no idea what traumas he's suffered in his life other than what I've heard here today. I suspect that you do know, however. He needs someone to help him face down the demons of the past. He needs someone who understands what he's been through. He needs you."

"He's right, Professor."

All heads came up at the sound of John's weary voice. Annalise stood at his side, clutching his arm supportively and watching him intently as he continued, "He's right. I do need you, if for nothing more than to deliver a well-deserved kick in the pants on a regular basis."

Cawston pretended undue interest in the pattern on the side of his tea cup. "I believe TIM is better qualified for that particular task than I."

"Well, yes, but ... you can't be rebooted."

Andrew and Luwanna snickered openly, catching the badly suppressed smile that Cawston did his best to hide.

John moved to the table, taking the empty chair next to Cawston. "I've come to realize something—with a little help," he smiled warmly at Annalise at his side. "Something I should have realized a long time ago, I'm afraid. I was so wrapped up in my own anger and self-pity that I never truly recognized how much your friendship means to all of us. And especially to me."

"After everything that's happened?" Cawston said uncertainly. "After everything that's been said?"

"Words are irrelevant, Professor. You were one of the first Saps who treated us kindly and fairly. You risked your own life to protect us, even when you were offered a chance to walk away unharmed. You've given up your career to keep us safe. All of these things—we couldn't have possibly asked you to do. Yet you did all of these things, Professor. You did them for us."

Cawston, unable to speak, only nodded slightly to reluctantly acknowledge John's words.

"And you did them because you cared about us," John continued. "I can't believe I was so blind as to not see it. You cared about what happened to us even though I never really made you feel that your concern mattered to us. Can you forgive me for that much at least, Professor?"

"There's nothing to forgive," Cawston said, voice heavy with emotion. "There never has been."

"I wish that were true," John sighed.

Cawston lifted his head, regarding John's bowed head for a long moment in silence. "You could have subjected me to a memory wipe," the professor said finally, his slow and thoughtful. "You didn't hesitate to do the same to everyone in the government and military who knew of your existence. But you didn't do that to me. Not even after—" He paused to regain his composure, then finished softly, "There's nothing to forgive."

"I don't know what we'd do without you, Professor," John told him sincerely.

"And I don't want to find out," Luwanna piped up. "Besides, when I go to university next year, how am I going to get a passing mark in calculus if he doesn't remember me?"

"You could try studying," Cawston said, leaning over to whisper near her ear, provoking a delighted giggle from the girl.

"I am pleased to announce that the procedure is finished, and was a complete success," TIM interjected, his voice undeniably smug. "The patient is now resting comfortably."

"Thank God," Jonathan murmured under his breath, noting the same relief he felt wash visibly over Cawston. John's facial muscles tightened, but only until Annalise squeezed his hand. He thanked her wordlessly with a wan smile.

"Mr. Benedek is sleeping soundly at the moment. I will notify you when he awakes."

"Wait a minute," Jonathan said suddenly, brow furrowed. "Wait. Can this memory wipe thing be done on someone while they sleep?"

"Yes, easily," Andrew answered. "TIM?"

"I see no reason why the procedure I've just performed would interfere with a standard memory wipe, since markedly separate regions of the brain are involved. Are you certain, Dr. MacKensie?"

"Oh, yes," Jonathan winced, envisioning Benedek's reaction upon discovering that his promised super powers had vanished. "Quite certain."

"And as for yourself?"

All eyes went to Jonathan at TIM's carefully phrased question. "Myself?" he repeated faintly. A moment later, his uncertain expression eased. "I'd like to think that I would never succumb to the temptation of using the knowledge that people like yourselves even exist for my own gain, but ... I can't be sure. I became an anthropologist because of my need to know where mankind has come from and where it's going. I don't believe I could easily ignore the answers that the *novae* represent. So ... I think it might be best."

"I appreciate your honesty, Dr. MacKensie," John said in reply. "TIM, ask Siri and Lu Xiang to attend to Mr. Benedek's memory wipe procedure."

"I would like to consult with them about the false memory they'll implant," Cawston offered. "I'd advise that Mr. Benedek and Dr. MacKensie's altered memories be coordinated, starting with their initial visit to my office."

"Excellent idea, Professor," TIM said, a sentiment echoed on John's face.

"So, when can Mr. Benedek be moved?" Andrew wanted to know.

"Anytime. He is suffering no ill effects as the result of the procedure," TIM answered.

Andrew nodded, rising to his feet and exaggeratedly bracing himself like a warrior before the battle. "Then I guess you're first, Dr. MacKensie. We'll let Siri and Lu Xiang know what to do once the professor tells us what he wants you to remember."

He swallowed nervously, but clung to his resolve. Andrew started forward, but was stopped by a gesture from Cawston, which he apparently understood with a nod and a step backward. Cawston leaned forward to speak lowly to Jonathan. "Are you very sure?" he said, voice filled with concern.

"If we left Benedek's memories intact, you'd be borrowing more trouble than Attila the Hun could handle. Yes. I'm very sure."

Cawston shook his head. "I meant you. I can hardly credit your claim that retaining your memory of the *novae* would inevitably corrupt your soul."

"You don't know me well enough to say that," Jonathan reminded him ruefully.

"I do know how highly Julianna Moorhouse thinks of you, how much she respects you," he chided gently. "In my book, that's a ringing character endorsement not easily ignored."

"And if Professor Cawston stands up for you, that's good enough for us," John added, with an apologetic shrug for having eavesdropped.

Jonathan hesitated, torn. "No," he decided finally, letting out his breath slowly and carefully. "No, the time just isn't right, not for me. Perhaps someday, but ... not now."

Cawston appeared disappointed, but agreed with a nod. Sensing that the low-voiced conversation had come to an end, Andrew moved to stand by Jonathan's side. Luwana caught on late, bounding up from her chair to round the table at a run and breathlessly take her place on the other side. As the youths placed their hands in position, Anilise, her hand still clutched tightly in John's, spoke up. "Goodbye, Dr. MacKensie. And thank you. Thank you so much."

As he puzzled over what she have possibly been thanking him for with such heartfelt emotion, John said reluctantly, "Yes. Yes, thank you."

A humming sound, gentle and insistent filled his ears, and soft gray clouds began to obscure his vision. The last thing he saw was the reassuring nod and the smile of open gratitude Cawston gave him as he slid into oblivion.

The first thing he saw when he opened his sleep-fogged eyes was the face of Professor Cawston, leaning over the chair he found himself sprawled in. He started, looking around him frantically until he'd picked out enough detail to realize that he was back in his hotel room.

"Easy, easy," Cawston soothed, an amused smile lurking behind his concerned expression. "You didn't tell me you'd just arrived from the States this morning. I would have never suggested dinner at the corner pub if you had. These local brews don't quite mix well with jet lag."

Jonathan rubbed his burning face, trying to remember. He normally didn't indulge in alcohol of any kind, but ... there was no denying that the memory was there. Cawston had invited them to dinner. Benny had been determined to try every type of ale the landlord could supply as long as it was on someone else's nickel, and had persuaded Jonathan to sample a few that MacKensie had unwisely admitted he recalled from his youth.

"Where's—" He sat up, spotting Benedek snoring peacefully on a sofa across the room, placed carefully on his side with his arm propping up his head.

"He's fine," Cawston assured him. "But I couldn't get him to his own room without help, and you'd already fallen asleep. I hope you don't mind."

"No, no. That's fine. Let him sleep." His brow furrowed. "I've never known him to drink himself under the table before."

"As I said, no doubt the jet lag."

Jonathan accepted the verdict with a nod. "Yes, no doubt. I'm truly sorry we caused so much trouble for you, Professor Cawston."

"Oh, no, no," the professor waved the apology away. "It was no trouble at all, I assure you. And I promise not to breathe a word of this to Julianna."

To his credit, in spite of his fogged condition, MacKensie caught the slight emphasis Cawston gave to Dr. Moorhouse's name. He grinned suddenly, extending his hand to the professor, who shook it warmly. "She would love to hear from you," Jonathan assured him fervently.

"It *has* been too long," Cawston admitted ruefully. "Just recently, I've come to realize that perhaps there are many things that I need to rethink."

Uncertain how to respond, Jonathan waited for Cawston to explain. The professor seemed inclined to continue, but suddenly stopped and smiled quietly instead. "I should be getting back to my office."

Jonathan rose, following him to the door. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Professor. And thank you for—" He made an all-encompassing gesture while pointedly looking over at the couch where Edgar Benedek had just loosed a particularly raucous snore.

In the process of opening the door, Cawston paused. "Please, do give my love to Julianna."

"I will. If you'll give my regards to ... your friends."

Startled, Cawston froze, staring hard at Jonathan. "What?" he breathed, losing color.

"It's ... it's a little confused," Jonathan admitted, rubbing at his temple. "Like ... two things happening at once. Dinner I never had at a pub I never entered, watching Benedek get sloshed on ales he never drank." He laughed lowly, rubbing harder. "Andrew and Luwanna must have missed a few synapses."

Cawston closed his eyes, sighing heavily. "I can send for them right away ..."

"No." MacKensie said sharply, his expression changing as he looked down at his free hand, which was resting in his jacket pocket. With an amazed expression, he removed his hand and opened it, palm up, Cawston gasped to see the object he held up; though no larger than a pebble, it was unmistakably the same type of crystal as the ornament in Cawston's office. "No, I don't suppose it was a mistake after all," Jonathan said wonderingly.

The professor continued to stare, beyond confusion. "But ... who?"

"When you find out, let me know," Jonathan smiled, dropping the crystal to his fingers to hold up to the light. "But in the long run, I think ... it doesn't matter who. The real question is what. What does the culprit hope to gain by giving me back a memory I'd been foolishly anxious to lose?"

"And?" Cawston asked, intrigued.

"Consciously or not, I think that they're tired of the isolation. They want change. Acceptance. They need to know that the world outside their cocoon isn't filled with their mortal enemies."

Voice and facial expression carefully neutral, Cawston studied him for a long moment. "You said that you believed you weren't ready," he pointed out quietly.

"And you said that I didn't have enough faith in myself," MacKensie enjoined with a slight smile that faltered slightly as he looked down at the crystal again. "When I made that decision, it was because it didn't matter to anyone but myself if I remembered or not. But this time ... this time, I'm being asked. And ... I think that makes all the difference in the world."

"Yes," Cawston agreed with a meaningful smile. "Yes, it most certainly does." He extended his hand to Jonathan, who shook it warmly. "I'll be seeing you soon, I'm sure."

Jonathan shut the door after he and Cawston had exchanged parting pleasantries, then crossed the room to stand next to the sofa upon which Benny blissfully slept. "Get up," he said loudly, giving the couch a resounding kick.

"What?" Benny sat bolt upright, eyes wide. "What?"

"You're a disgrace. You should be ashamed of yourself," Jonathan grumbled, moving away to take a seat in the armchair by the window.

Benny took a moment to collect his scattered wits. "How come you always say that right after I've had the time of my life? What are you, anyway, the Good Time Assassin? Whoa." He swallowed, tentatively shaking his head. "I take back everything I said about Professor Cawston. The guy sure knows how to party hearty."

"Really?" Jonathan sniffed, covertly watching Benny briskly rub down his flushed face. "So now it's Professor Cawston's fault, is it?"

"Fault? Hey, I say we put him up for knighthood. Do you suppose he'd be up for a serious pub crawl tonight?"

"Oh, promise me that you'll let me listen in when you call him to ask," Jonathan said with sarcastic eagerness.

His mood turned to apprehension when Benny rubbed the back of his neck, his brow furrowing. "I don't remember the last time I got blitzed like that," he murmured to himself. "Kinda strange"

Jonathan held his breath as Benny continued to search his memory, and released it in a quiet exhale when Benedek abruptly shrugged off the question. "Hey, what do you say we check out these haunted pubs? I got a list of 'em from the concierge. Guaranteed manifestations nightly. Rattling chains, moaning and groaning, bumps in the night"

"Are you sure that isn't a list of strip clubs?" Jonathan asked dubiously.

"Here's a great one. The Dead Man's Inn. Says here the landlord's been hanging around for over five hundred years waiting for Will Shakespeare to finish his ale. What d'ya think? Are you game?"

"If you feel up to it," Jonathan said carefully, watching for his reaction.

"If *I* feel up to it?" Benny eyed him incredulously. "Don't you remember who you're talking to?"

"Only too well, Benedek," Jonathan assured him, suppressing a smile of warm relief. "Only too well."