

# After All

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Liz rapped on the door, leaning close to listen for noises from within. "Jonathan? Mail call." A moment's silence convinced her that the office beyond was empty. Flipping through the pile of envelopes in her hand, she captured a few to slide in the wall pocket next to his door, then turned down the hallway on the last leg of her afternoon rounds.

Seconds after her footsteps had faded around a corner, the door of a utility closet cracked open. An eye peered out, then two; then a dark-haired head cautiously eased through the opening. "All clear!" the woman whispered. "Come on."

She held the door open for her companion, who emerged wincing and stretching. "Gee-za, that was a close call," he grumbled. "I'm getting too old for this stuff."

"Well, you shouldn't have come," she scolded, glancing up and down the hallway nervously. "I told you, I could handle this myself."

"Oh, yeah, and you'd have never found the maintenance room on your own, would you?" he snorted, plucking at her sleeve meaningfully. She pulled at the uncomfortable neckline of the uniform coverall, the twin of the one worn by her companion, and grimaced as he continued, "And you were the one who thought his office was clear across campus. Face it, sister, I'm saving you a lot of time and trouble."

"Which I appreciate, as long as you don't end up causing me even more trouble. The last thing we need is for her to get a good look at you, you know."

"Didn't anybody ever tell you to respect your elders, young lady?" he grouched good-naturedly, chuckling when she slapped away the hand he placed on her hip.

"Oh, I hope this works," she muttered with an exasperated groan. "I'm really looking forward to liking you again."

"Hey, what's not to like?" he protested with an expansive grin.

"Don't get me started," she warned between gritted teeth. "And keep your hands to yourself or I swear, I'll cut them off at the shoulder. Now, come on. Help me figure this out, okay?"

He shrugged, suddenly cool. "Since you're the one who can handle this yourself, you can figure it out yourself, right?"

"Don't go zero on me now," she moaned. "This is important, remember?"

His expression sobered abruptly as he drew his fingers through steel-gray hair. "Yeah. Yeah, I remember."

"It didn't look like he was in his office. Where do you think he might be?"

He looked around, finding the hall clock. "Okay, it's almost three-thirty, on a Wednesday...he'd be between classes. He should be here."

"Well, he's not. Think, okay?"

"I'm telling you, he should be here, getting ready for the four o'clock class."

She sighed, stepping hard on her rising agitation. "We've got to find him."

"Yeah, I know, I know. Look, you stay here and keep an eye on things, and I'll scout around a little, just do a quick tour of this floor. Maybe he went visiting, you know?"

She nodded reluctant agreement. "Don't go too far and keep your head down, okay?"

"Got it," he winked. As he turned, he hunched his shoulders slightly, to become an elderly, weary maintenance worker trudging the last few miles toward retirement.

After watching him shuffle down the corridor, she faded back into a recess formed by two facing doors. This gave her the perfect vantage point if Jonathan MacKensie approached his office from either end of the corridor. She had a dead-on view of his door, but by the time he reached it, his back would be turned to her and so her presence would remain undetected. And that would give her the time she needed to figure out what their next step would be.

Tense minutes passed without a sign of either Jonathan MacKensie or her companion. She fidgeted, growing more nervous with each minute that passed, another minute in which they risked discovery, casting frequent worried looks down the corridor. "Come on, come on," she urged under her breath.

Shuffling footsteps drawing near her hiding place sent a wave of relief through her. "It's about time...."

She stepped forward to angrily confront her cohort as she spoke, and, at the same moment, the office door in front of her opened. With a sharp gasp, she stared, wide-eyed, at a startled Jonathan MacKensie as he reached over to remove his mail from the wall slot.

From the top of the hallway came a disgruntled voice saying, "I looked all over, I couldn't...."

Panic shattered her shock-induced paralysis. Exploding with a loud hiss, she gestured wildly, and her companion responded instantly, darting back up the hallway and around the corner. The sudden exertion sent her reeling against the wall and she clung there as she looked up to see Jonathan MacKensie still reaching for his mail, still frozen in an attitude of utter, complete shock.

She swallowed, mustering a weak smile. "Uh...hi."

His arm lowered slowly as he continued to stare. When he spoke after a long moment of silence, it was without breath or inflection. "Laurie."

Her heart broke to see the impassive expression on his face, giving her no clue whether she should approach him slowly, collapse at his feet babbling a litany of explanations and apologies, or give in to a wild, overwhelming impulse to fall upon him, wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him until they both turned blue. As she vacillated, she heard the unmistakable sound of someone whose curiosity was far stronger than his common sense trying to get her attention in sharp, beckoning hisses.

She sprang forward as Jonathan turned toward the odd noises, grabbing him by the shoulder and pushing him into his office. He stumbled when she released him long enough to slam the door behind them, and recoiled when she reached out to steady him. The look of shock and incredulity on his face stung her. She stepped back quickly, hands raised in truce. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean...I didn't want...I was trying to...oh, gee-za." With a growl of raw impatience, she shook her head. "This never gets any easier, does it?"

He eased sideways, putting the desk between them as he continued to stare at her. "You, ah...you're back," he stammered. "You said...he said you...."

"Benny explained everything to you, yes, I know," she said, keeping her voice calm and reasonable. "He also said he didn't think you believed a word of it. Is that true?"

"You've talked to him, then?"

The hurt, accusatory tone was slight, but enough to make her wince. "No, I haven't...I mean, yes, I have, but not here. Not in this time."

She stopped herself from saying more when he closed his eyes briefly, as though her words had hit the limit of his credulity. "He was right," she murmured unhappily. "You didn't believe him, did you?"

"Believe?" He uttered a short laugh that held no amusement. "You mean that story about how you came here from the future to avert global catastrophe in the year twenty...twenty...."

"Twenty-sixteen."

"Whatever. Oh, he did a marvelous job, he really did. Very sincere, very convincing. But really, my dear...." His hard-edged sarcasm dropped away into quiet anger. "What kind of fool do you think I am?"

She opened her mouth, but words refused to emerge, locked in mortal conflict between the Laurie who wanted to fall to his feet and beg abject forgiveness, and the Laurie who wanted to land a punch where it would hurt the most. "Look, we don't have a whole lot of time here, so I'm not going to argue this with you," she said, seizing the middle ground. "We cut things real close before because I spent most of my time trying to convince you that I was telling the truth." She faltered slightly, remembering too late what she had really spent most of her time doing, but steamed on, "And that's because you don't believe anything or anyone without proof, do you? Well, Dr. Jonathan MacKensie, PhD--I've *got* proof this time."

She turned on her heel and, striding to the door, opened it, managing to catch her companion as he tumbled into the room.

Dragging him forward by the arm, she presented him with a terse flourish. Aware that he had just become the abrupt center of attention, the old man pulled on a bright smile. "Long time no see, Jon-boy," he crowed.

Jonathan's tense expression melted into open-mouthed disbelief as he stared at the gray-haired, bearded man. "You have *got* to be related to Benedek," he breathed.

"Closer than brothers," he nodded, earning a sharp nudge in the ribs from Laurie's elbow and a hissed, "You are *not* helping."

Jonathan sank into his chair, shoulders sagging. "What is this all about?" he pleaded, hopelessly confused.

She moved carefully, approaching as close as she dared while saying, "You have to believe me, Jonathan. Benny was telling you the truth. I told you the truth."

"The truth?" he quavered, pressing a hand to his forehead. "You came from the future to save one troubled student, to save the entire world from destruction. That's what you want me to believe? And what about now? What do you want me to believe now? Who did you come back to save this time?"

She crouched by his side and reached for his hand, smiling in relief when he didn't draw away from her. "You," she said quietly, willing him to see the truth in her eyes to replace the confusion in his own. "We came back to save you."

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"I knew something was wrong when I couldn't find my friend Gary--he's the one who got me into the lab. He said he'd wait around for me--and I didn't recognize the two people who were there and they'd never heard of Gary and they definitely didn't know who I was anymore than I knew who they were. These are great, what are they?" Laurie reached over to scoop up another handful from the bowl on the coffee table.

"Cheeseballs," Jonathan said, his voice as flat and vaguely grumpy as it had since they persuaded him to ask Liz to find an emergency substitute for his four o'clock class and return to his apartment with them for an explanation that promised to be long and, from the expression on the professor's face, torturous. His eyes went from Laurie, who was enthusiastically licking her salty, orange fingers, to her companion, sprawled in the easy chair next to the sofa, engrossed in a battered Rubik's cube; his face never changing expression from its faintly bemused grimace.

"Anyway," Laurie said, swallowing. "They called the campus police on me, and said I was in a lot of trouble because I didn't have the security clearance to be there. Not only that, I wasn't even registered as a student at G.I. and that's when I really knew that things were really hyper-ki, because I took my undergraduate degree at

G.I.. I should have been in their records for at least six years. So I told them that if they talked to you or Doct-- Benny, either one of you could vouch for me."

"And could we?"

She ignored the subtle sarcasm, popping another few cheeseballs into her mouth. "Maybe you could have, if anyone had ever heard of you."

His head inclined, straining forward slightly as though really trying to understand something that might have been better off left beyond his ken. "So what you're trying to tell me is that, because you changed the past, no one at Georgetown Institute knew who I was?"

"Oh, they knew. Once they looked it up in the records, that is." She swallowed with a wince, as though the cheeseballs had suddenly lost their taste. "You, um...you disappeared, Jonathan. Twenty-nine years ag--before."

"Disappeared?" he echoed faintly.

"Biggest 'bloid story of 1987, Jocko," the old man crooned, twisting the Rubik's cube with an exaggerated flourish. "I got headlines out of you for months. Why, you were featured on *Unsolved Mysteries* for five years running, with yours truly providing color commentary. Me and Robert Stack..." he lifted his hand with fingers crossed. "...closer than that."

Jonathan rose from the sofa so suddenly that Laurie, seated on the opposite end, squeaked in surprise. Two quick strides brought him in front of the recliner; he stared, narrow-eyed, at the grinning man seated there.

"Here." The elderly man leaned forward, flicking his fingers at his neat, salt-and-pepper goatee. "Codge this, eh? You can pull on it if you want, it ain't glued on. No stage makeup here. I earned every crow's foot, the hard way. Every wrinkle you see represents an ex-wife; every gray hair an alimony payment."

Open-mouthed, he shook his head as he emitted a breathy sound of incredulity. "It's...it's not possible, it can't be, but...it *is* you."

"After twenty-nine years, pal, I think that's my line," Benny said, leaning back in the chair to return his attention to the cube.

"Jonathan." Laurie rose to take his hand when she sensed that he was on the verge of losing his balance to confusion. She guided him back to the sofa, sitting down close to him and keeping his hand in hers as she watched his pale face carefully. "Is this really so difficult for you to believe?" she asked quietly, with a touch of regret for the turmoil they were obviously causing him.

"I'm not sure what to believe," he murmured, looking ill. "But...but even if I were to believe that everything you're telling me is true, then why didn't you tell me about this the first time you were here?"

"Because it wasn't true the first time. I mean, it wasn't...." She closed her eyes briefly, gathering composure. "The world I left behind when I came here was on the brink of destruction, but you were there. Dr. Jonathan MacKensie, chairman of the G.I. Anthropology Department for eleven years, was facing the same crisis as we all were in 2016. Not to mention Dr. Edgar Benedek, director of Paranormal Studies...." She spared a dark glare in the direction of a derisive hoot from the recliner, then cold-shouldered Benny, leaning closer to Jonathan to continue, "The world I came back to no longer faced that threat. But you weren't there. And Benny...well, I found him in a motel room in upper state New York, drinking his sixth marriage off his mind."

"Seventh, but who's counting?" Benny interjected cheerfully. "The minute she walked into the room, I was wide-awake and ready for eight, but she's only got eyes for you, Jonny."

She shushed him sharply, but not before Benny winked and Jonathan gave her a strange look. "He told me everything he knew--how you'd disappeared sometime between the evening of April 7, 1987 and the next morning...."

"That's today," Jonathan realized.

"...and that you left absolutely no clue as to what might have happened. Your bed hadn't been slept in, there was nothing disturbed here in the apartment, you didn't make any phone calls, you left no note...."

"I'm supposed to disappear tonight?"

She paused, sensing the touch of fear that tinged the ostensibly calm words. "Jonathan...."

"And when you say disappear, you mean...I was never heard from again? Ever?"

"Depends on who you talk to, pal." Benny dropped the Rubik's cube back onto the end table, then planted his interlaced fingers behind his head. "I found dozens of reliable witnesses who swear they spotted you and Elvis doing the cross-country thing in a Winnebago. A few people said that the Justice Department plopped you into their witness relocation program, but I got hold of those records in 1998 and you weren't even a blip on their scope. Then there were the Mafia connection rumors, the 'runaway from the rat-race to a Polynesian paradise' theory, the amnesia hypothesis, even the criminal-on-the-run speculation, although they never did figure out what crime you were supposed to have committed. And then there was...." He paused, then directed a mirthless smile at the ceiling. "Then there was the most popular theory."

"Which was?" Jonathan prompted when Benny made no effort to continue.

Laurie squeezed his hand gently to get his attention. "Benny didn't have much of an alibi for the night you disappeared...."

"I had a great alibi," he retorted. "I was at a party in Greenwich Village. Can I help it if all the witnesses were too blasted to recognize their own noses? Hey, that party's probably starting right now, isn't it?"

Jonathan gaped. "They thought...he..."

"He was their prime suspect right up until the day they dropped the case for lack of evidence."

"They only dropped it because they couldn't prove there was a crime committed in the first place," Benny corrected, jaw set in a hard line. "But everybody just kept on believing what they wanted to believe. Hey, don't look at me like that. I told you, I was--hell, I *am* in Greenwich Village, right now. If you don't believe me, we can get Hercule's number from directory assistance and you can talk to me. Do it quick, though, because once Herc drags out the tequila, you'll get more a intelligent conversation by calling the Great Ape exhibit at the Bronx Zoo."

Jonathan closed his eyes, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, I...I just can't believe any of this. It's ridiculous, it's...it's absurd, it's just not...possible."

His words ended in a faint plea as Laurie forced him to meet her steady gaze. "Then you have absolutely no idea what circumstances might have caused your disappearance?" she asked carefully.

"I think that much is pretty obvious," Benny offered. "Too bad. My pet theory was that you took off to Tahiti on your own just to watch me squirm for thirty years."

"Benny," she snapped, eyes blazing. He looked at her, then glanced away, tight-lipped. "Jonathan, I'm sorry, he didn't mean that...."

"Are you sure about that?" Jonathan asked quietly, watching Benny trying to pretend he was unaware of the scrutiny.

"Jonathan, please. Can you think of anything at all that might have caused your disappearance?"

"No," he said with a distracted, irritated sigh. "I have classes tomorrow, a weekend seminar in Baltimore, and next week Dr. Moorhouse expects me to investigate phantom lights in British Columbia."

"I was looking forward to that trip," Benny murmured, engrossed in a study of his fingertips.

"Do you, well...do you have any enemies?"

He blinked, startled. "Sure you don't believe...."

"I told you, I don't know what to believe. Benny says he spent years investigating everyone who knew you, even people who hadn't seen you in years."

"I don't have any enemies," he stammered. "Do I?"

"What about Michael Tipton?"

"What about him?" he returned warily.

"Drop kick that idea," Benny interjected. "Tipton was the first guy I drew a bead on. His alibi was so airtight that NASA could have launched it as a space station. He's still under court-ordered psychiatric care for that little contretemps from, uh...what, six months ago now? Between that and his legal problems, he's gonna be under a microscope for at least ten years, after which he becomes a college professor at UCSF and a noted peace activist. Strictly pacifist, by the way."

Laurie snapped her fingers. "Then how about the people who tricked him into doing their dirty work for them?"

"They took off for East Germany the day after we foiled their little scheme. The Polish government nailed them a couple of months after the Berlin Wall came down."

"The Berlin Wall came down?" Jonathan echoed, eyes widening.

"I also checked into the possibility that someone involved with them would have taken it upon themselves to exact retribution. I must've gone through every document in the KGB archives. They weren't involved with our incendiary pals, by the way, but they sure knew how to keep tabs on troublemakers."

Jonathan gaped. "You gained access to KGB files?"

"Not one of them was in the country at the ti--tonight, that is. And the ones I did get to talk to had no kind words for the suggestion that they'd waste their time and energy on petty revenge."

"So that leaves us back where we started," Laurie sighed.

"This is all...a bit much for me," Jonathan murmured, weakly.

Concerned by the pallor of his skin and the dazed look in his eyes, Laurie leaned in closer, searching his face. "Jonathan, you do believe us, don't you?"

"Believe you?" He swallowed with difficulty. "What should I believe? That for some unfathomable reason, you persist in prolonging this cruel and pathetic practical joke at my expense? Am I supposed to marvel at how adroitly you've manipulated my reactions, my...my emotions, do I applaud the incredible effort that you must have expended searching out a dead ringer for an elderly Edgar Benedek and, my god--if you taught him everything he knows about Benedek, you must know him better than he knows himself."

Pain speared through her, sharpened by his words, thrust deep by his anguished expression. "No," she pleaded.

"Is that what I believe? I don't know. I just don't know. Because if I do believe that, then I need to know one thing. Just one thing. Tell me why. Tell me what it is that you want from me."

"I don't want anything from you," she insisted, eyes brimming. "I just want you to be safe."

He stared at her intently, uncertainly still flickering in mad dashes across his taut face. "Tell me again."

Her mouth opened, but emotion stole the words. With a single cry, almost a sob, she placed her hand on his shoulder, drawing close to place a soft kiss on his cheek. His fingers lifted to test the stain of tears she'd left

behind. Then he reached out to cup his hand to the side of her face as he gazed into her eyes, one last search for the truth. "Then I suppose...I do believe you," he murmured.

She gripped his hand, as much in excitement as to prolong the delicious warmth of the contact. "Do you, honestly? Do you really believe me?"

"I...have to, I think. I have to believe that only the truth could have compelled you to these lengths. Because I can't believe anything less of you. Not you."

"Gee-za, do you think we can punch up an old western on another channel?" Benny drawled, bored.

Laurie muttered an imprecation under her breath as MacKensie pulled away self-consciously. "Jonathan, listen to me. Listen." She gathered up both of his hands, holding them tightly. "Since none of us has any idea what is going to happen tonight, we're going to stay here with you."

He drew a breath, collecting himself. "That's not a good idea," he told her as he rose from the sofa, breaking free from her without apology.

"That wasn't a suggestion," she protested, jumping to her feet to follow him and pulling up short when he stopped pacing after three steps. "Don't you understand? What happened here tonight isn't supposed to happen, and I've got to make sure that it doesn't."

"Why?" he challenged, keeping the hand she tried to recapture out of her reach. "Because you genuinely care about what happens to me, or because you think that it's your fault?"

She stared, in shock. "I do care," she managed in a faint voice. "How could you possibly think I didn't?"

"Listen to her, Jonno," Benny piped up in a voice of droll unconcern. "She went ballistic when I broke the news about you to her. Those weren't guilt feelings I was trying to sedate before the motel manager called the cops on us."

"And what happens tomorrow?" Jonathan asked after a moment spent watching Laurie's embarrassed expression as she rubbed the bridge of her nose tiredly. "Tomorrow morning, when I'm still here and you feel your job is done. What happens then?"

It took a great deal of effort for her to lift her eyes and meet his expectant gaze. "Then everything will be all right," she said, forcing a smile. "Everything will be...."

She gave up with a pained sigh when he looked away. "I can't stay," she whispered, begging him to understand. "I can't. I want to, oh...you don't know how much I want to. But I can't."

"Then perhaps my disappearance isn't so much of a mystery after all," he told her quietly.

Her confusion melted into wonder as he took her hand, squeezing it gently. She searched his eyes, not daring to believe what she found there. "You mean...."

"Perhaps everything is happening the way it's suppose to happen. Perhaps you came here to take me back with you."

He leaned close as he spoke, and Laurie, mesmerized, tilted her face up. Her half-closed eyes snapped open when a sudden noise nearby distracted her. Both she and Jonathan turned to see that Benny had come out of the recliner in a leap and was staring at them, fists clenched at his side.

"Can I use your phone?" he said, the cold light in his eyes belying the casual tone. "I need to call Greenwich Village and tell myself to sober up an alibi or two."

Laurie broke away from Jonathan, brushing the hair from her face to cover the nervous tremor in her hand. "Um...Benny, look, why don't you go into the kitchen and see if Jonathan's got any beer in the refrigerator?"

"You made me take a Dri-Up, remember?" he returned with exaggerated patience.

"Oh, right. Orange juice, then, or maybe some mineral water...."

"I have some soft drinks on the top shelf," Jonathan offered, without enthusiasm. "Help yourself."

"Thanks. I will." With that, he turned and with only a moment's hesitation to dredge up a thirty-year-old memory, headed off in the direction of the kitchen.

"What did you make him take?" Jonathan wanted to know, genuinely curious.

"It's a drug, non-prescription. It affects the taste sensors in the mouth, so that alcohol ends up tasting like sulfur. He was pretty bad off when I found him, and since he insisted on coming back here with me and the last thing I needed was more problems, I decided to take a few precautions. Jonathan, you weren't serious, were you?"

"I think I was," he assured her solemnly.

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" Her voice shook with incredulity. "Jonathan, you'd be throwing away thirty years of your life!"

"I'd be sharing those thirty years with you."

She shook her head helplessly, unable to take her eyes off him. Every silly daydream she'd ever had, every fantasy she'd woven around the neatly trimmed gray head of an oblivious Jonathan MacKensie whirled in a mad spin behind her eyes, a tantalizing, teasing kaleidoscope. "Oh, don't do this to me," she moaned.

He spoke each word carefully, a challenge. "Why not?"

"You have to live your life as it was meant to be lived. Those thirty years were filled with incredible accomplishments, Jonathan. You can't forsake that. I won't let you do that to yourself." She touched his arm, leveling a determined look at him. "And I won't let you do it to Benny, either."

Jonathan spared a look in the direction of the kitchen. "He's fine," he said, but conviction drained from his words even as he spoke them.

"Not compared to the Edgar Benedek I know. I'm not sure how, and I'm not sure why, but he needs you, Jonathan. He needs you to become the person he's supposed to be--a respected educator and world-renowned paranormal researcher and theorist, not a retired writer." She snorted. "Retired. You know what that really means? It means that he's spent so much time in the bottle and prowling for a new wife before the ink's even dried on his last marriage license that he's forgotten *how* to write."

"You can't expect me to believe that I could have had that much of an effect on his life."

She gave him a narrow-eyed look, smug. "Why not?"

When he looked away, she placed a hand on the side of his face, gently drawing him back. "I appreciate the offer, more than you'll ever know," she told him lowly. "But some things that are worth having just aren't worth the price that we'd have to pay."

He carefully placed his hand over hers, moving it to clasp between both of his. For a long moment, he stood silent, head bowed. Then, with a deep breath, he raised his eyes to meet her apprehensive gaze. "You're right. You're right. I'm not even sure why I said it."

"I'd like to think I know why," she said, eyes filling over her tremulous smile.

"It's just that...you're here. You came back, the way I hoped you would despite everything Benny did to convince me otherwise. And now...now you're telling me that tomorrow we have to say goodbye again."

"Oh, Jonathan," she murmured, stung by the pain he could no longer manage to suppress. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I would have given anything to have things turn out differently. I tried so hard not to give in to my feelings. I tried, but...."

"But I pushed you too hard," he murmured, abashed.

"No," she protested firmly but gently. "No, you didn't, not at all. You were just too easy to fall in love with."

He finally smiled when she freed her hand to poke lightly at his chin. "How do you feel about older men, then?"

Her lips pursed thoughtfully as she assessed the glint in his eye. "The same way I feel about younger ones. Why?"

"How do you feel about long engagements?"

She stared at him, searching his face until she finally dared to realize that he was serious. But her hesitation caused him to frown. "I'm already married?" he guessed, dismayed.

"That, um, would be telling, wouldn't it?" she stammered, clearing her throat and covering her mouth with one hand in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to suppress a joy-filled laugh. Giving in, she threw her hands around his neck, hugging him fiercely.

He returned her embrace, then pulled her away from him just far enough to seek her mouth for a fervent kiss. When they parted, long moments later, he traced the lines of her face with his fingers until her eyes opened dreamily. "I'll wait for you," he promised in a low whisper.

It took all her strength to do it, but she shook her head. "No. That's one promise I don't want you to keep. No, I mean it. There will be...someone. Someone who'll make you very happy, Jonathan. I have no intention of being the one who stands in the way of you finding her. Please, promise me. Don't live your life for something that won't happen for thirty years. Just remember--you don't have to wait for me. I'll be waiting for you."

A loud commotion from the kitchen startled them out of their kiss. "Benny?" Laurie called warily.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," the distant voice floated back. "Gee-za, whoever heard of stacking the canned peas on top of the spaghetti?"

"He's remembered where I hide the chocolate-chip cookies," Jonathan realized with a sudden laugh.

"I think a raging chocolate craving is a side effect of that medication," Laurie chuckled, easing back into Jonathan's warm embrace.

"Dr. Benedek," he mused with another laugh. "The concept defies imagination."

"Defied his, too. Oh, he remembered what I'd told him when I first came here. But when you disappeared, he wrote the whole thing off as a con job on my part. I really had my hands full when I finally tracked him down to that motel. He didn't recognize me at first--he thought he'd forgotten an appointment he'd made with the local escort service. Seeing him like that broke my heart, and not just because he's nothing like the Edgar Benedek I know. It took me a while to get him calmed down enough to tell me the whole story. And then he had to calm me down," she added ruefully.

"He must blame me for the mess he's made of his life," Jonathan said, without rancor.

"He doesn't blame you. He doesn't blame anyone, except himself." She leaned her head against his shoulder, reveling in his close warmth. "He's supposed to do such wonderful things. Both of you are. And I'm going to make damned sure that you do."

"You said that you were a graduate student at G.I.," Jonathan spoke after a long, comfortable silence.

"Mm-hmm."

"But they had no records for you in the, uh...in the changed future?"

She pulled away from him far enough to look at him quizzically. "What are you getting at?"

"Why would my disappearance affect your decision to attend the Institute?"

Her mouth fell open as she considered the question. "It shouldn't have. I applied there because I could get the best scholarships. My decision had nothing to do with you or Benny. I didn't even know who either of you were until freshman orientation."

"The scholarships, then?"

"Were established fifty years or more before, and neither of you would have had any influence over their administration." Her eyes widened as she shivered. "Jonathan, I don't like this. There's something really, really wrong here."

He gathered her close again, his hands gently massaging the tension in her shoulders as she continued fretfully, "I just wish we knew more. I have no idea what we're up against, I don't know if whatever we can do here will be enough."

A gentle squeeze was his tacit assurance that he had faith. With a uncertain sigh, she forced herself to relax into his embrace, determined to savor what she could for as long as she could.

Another loud noise, almost like an abrupt thunderclap, erupted from the kitchen, this time accompanied by Benny's startled yelp.

"Oh, now what?" Jonathan sighed.

Laurie reluctantly lifted her head from Jonathan's shoulder. "Benny?" Her barely patient expression changed to one of alarm when she was answered by another yell, this one sharper and filled with unmistakable fear.

Jonathan gripped her arm, dragging her with him as he sprinted toward the kitchen door. "Benedek? Benedek, are you--"

He sprang back with a cry, herding Laurie behind him as the door burst open just as he reached it. Benny emerged, white-faced, shaking--and not under his own power. His shirt collar was tight in the grip of an oddly dressed stranger, whose long, thin face reflected a flash of surprise that was quickly replaced by grim determination as he lifted his free hand.

"Who the devil are you?" Jonathan demanded, voice two octaves higher than normal. His belligerent step forward was thwarted by Laurie, who yanked him back as she, with a fearful nod of her head, indicated the stranger's raised hand.

"That's a gun he's holding, Jocko, not his wallet," Benny quickly explained to the confused look in MacKensie's eyes.

His captor released him abruptly, sending him tumbling forward into MacKensie's arms. Leveling the squarish device in his hand at Jonathan, the stranger scrutinized him carefully. "MacKensie. Good." His attention and aim then glided to Benny, who glared at him in return. With a strange, crooked smile, the intruder nodded. His gaze swiveled to Laurie, darkening. "I don't know you."

She squinted at him, breath catching in her throat. "Dr. Richter," she gasped.

"Richter?" Benny blinked twice, then leaned forward for a closer look. "Richter! Yeah! I remember you now. You...." He stopped short, eyes wide. "What the hell are you doing here?" he said warily.

Laurie's gaze went between Richter and Benny, confused and alarmed. "Benny, of course you remember him. You and Jonathan...." Her hand froze mid-gesture, mouth falling open. "Oh, no."

Richter's thin mouth tightened in undisguised fury. His hand flashed out, grabbing her arm. Pulling her to him, he jammed the odd weapon against the side of her head. Both Jonathan and Benny managed to abort their instinctive attempts to rescue her as soon as Richter's warning glare swept them. "Easy, easy, just take it easy," Benny soothed, hands patting the air.

"Who are you?" Richter growled threateningly near her ear. "What do you know about me? Tell me." He shook her when she could only manage a frightened stammer. "Tell me!"

"Her name is Wilson, Laurie Wilson, and she just knows you by reputation," Benny interjected desperately. "She's a big fan of yours, come on, she's no threat to you. Let her go, okay?"

"What do you know about me?" Richter's initial agitation faded into a cold, steady anger as he ignored Benny, giving the gun a hard push against Laurie's head until she winced and uttered a faint exclamation of discomfort. Jonathan hovered, anguished, held back as much by the immediate threat to Laurie's life as by the death-grip that Benny kept on his arm.

"Nothing!" she squeaked. "I don't know anything about you, I swear, I...ow!"

"One more chance," Richter hissed. "Tell me the truth this time."

Jonathan spoke her name, without breath, pleading with an outstretched hand.

"Okay," she gave in with a frustrated sigh. "Okay. Benny's right, I just know you by, um...reputation. That's all."

"What year did you come from?"

She considered prevaricating, but realized that it was useless to try. "2016."

"Why are you here?"

She stared at his hard, angry face, suddenly and inexplicably certain. "To stop you," she said quietly.

With a irritated snarl, Richter suddenly shoved her at Jonathan, who immediately enveloped her in a fierce embrace, angling her away from Richter's immediately line of fire. Benny stepped forward, subtly placing himself between Richter and the other two as he lifted his chin belligerently. "What's the scoop here, doc?" he said with exaggerated nonchalance. "Don't tell me, let me guess. You found out that we'd taken a joyride in your precious matter/anti-matter accelerator and you've come to personally slap our wrists?"

"His accelerator?" Laurie gasped.

"Yeah," Benny faltered, thrown by the odd reaction Richter had to Laurie's words. "His accelerator. Dr. Alvin Richter, father of matter/anti-matter particle acceleration theory...."

He trailed off as Richter's reaction intensified, his breath coming in short gasps, his eyes going wide. Warned, Benny jumped back, but not in time to keep Richter from grabbing his shirt at the shoulder, yanking him forward again. "Father of matter/anti-matter particle acceleration theory," he repeated in an incredulous, joy-filled whisper. "That *is* what you said?"

As Benny stared at him, beyond confusion, Laurie spoke, her voice heavy with despair. "No. That's not right. That's not right."

Richter's cold smile grew as his fingers whitened where they held Benny captive. "Tell me more."

"What's to tell?" Benny stammered when his voice was freed by the sight of Richter's gun hand lifting to aim at his head. "You're the Director of Experimental Research at Georgetown Institute...aren't you?"

"No," he heard Laurie's soft wail, muffled against Jonathan's shoulder.

"No?" Benny echoed weakly.

Richter smiled, an unholy grimace. "Yes."

Benny swallowed hard. "Oh, no."

Eyes narrowing, Richter scrutinized him carefully. "And you're not Director of Paranormal Studies at G.I., are you? No." His delight grew. "No, you're not. And is that the telltale aroma of sulfur I detect? An unfortunate side-effect of a certain popular medication, I believe. The good Dr. Benedek, an unrepentant souse?" His mouth opened in unfeigned surprise when Benny reacted uncomfortably. "The honorific isn't yours, either? Not even a Master's degree, I'll warrant." His voice dropped to an awed whisper. "Then it *will* work."

"No," Laurie cried, anger blazing in her eyes. Jonathan held her arm, preventing her from stalking forward to confront the startled intruder. "I'll make sure it doesn't. I make sure everyone knows what a cowardly fraud you really are....!"

"No!" Benny sprang to block Richter's line of fire. "Laurie, will you get on-line, please? This guy's got a gun and an attitude, so it might be a really good idea to just agree with everything he says, don't you think?"

"Very sensible," Richter growled. "Move."

When Benny hesitated, Richter gestured sharply. "You, take her and sit over there."

Jonathan and Laurie parted reluctantly when Richter motioned MacKensie to the easy chair, while Benny guided her to the sofa as instructed. "I'm finding this situation rather fascinating," Richter said as they uneasily settled. "You, Miss...Wilson, was it? You appeared as surprised to see me as I was to find you here. And since I myself had no idea of my plans until a very short time ago--how on earth did you know?"

Benny prodded her when her frightened silence caused Richter to level the weapon, not at her, but at Jonathan's head. "I didn't," she stammered. "I didn't know, I..."

"Tell him," Benny urged when her voice and courage failed again.

"I used the Institute's matter/anti-matter accelerator...." She hesitated, anger flaming briefly in her eyes as she continued, "Dr. Ghaemi's accelerator and Dr. Benedek's time travel theoretical application to travel back to 1986, hoping to prevent an imminent global war."

Richter's head inclined, a brief frown making it obvious that an imminent global war was not a part of his memory. "You apparently succeeded."

"Yes. I succeeded, all right. But when I returned to 2016, everything was wrong."

"Dr. Ghaemi?" Benny murmured under his breath, a strange look in his eyes. "Then those rumors were true, weren't they? I interviewed Ghaemi just before he died, and he claimed you tried to steal his work and take all the credit for yourself. I never could get anyone else to talk to me."

"No one?" Richter smiled in delight.

"You killed Dr. Ghaemi?" Laurie said, aghast.

"It was a heart attack," Benny interjected hastily when Richter's smile faded into an ominous glare. "Stress-related, strictly natural causes."

He felt her shake with fury under the arm he kept braced across her back. "No. He killed him," she asserted flatly.

"So. Ghaemi dies of a broken heart. The rumors remain unproven. And my genius is given the full recognition it's due." Richter laughed, a clear, joyful sound. "Ah, it's too good to be true, too good."

"What's he going on about?" Benny demanded of Laurie, at patience's end.

"Tell him," Richter said with an amiability born of his sudden good spirits. "Tell him the story of the rise and fall of Dr. Alvin Richter."

"The rumors were true," she sighed, her resolve to remain silent destroyed by Richter's move to aim the gun at a tense, ashen Jonathan MacKensie's head. "The rumors were all true. You and Jonathan exposed him."

"Gave evidence against me," Richter enjoined with a grim smile. "Smearred my name across the entire scientific community. Humiliated me. Petitioned for my forced resignation from the faculty of M.I.T. Destroyed my livelihood and my life."

"But I tried to do all those things and got nowhere," Benny shot back.

"You weren't doing it as Doctor Benedek," Laurie told him tiredly. "The people you tried to talk to as an investigative reporter would have only opened up to a fellow professional. And since you and Jonathan were working together, the two of you had the considerable weight of Georgetown Institute behind you as well."

Richter leaned over, propping his weight against the easy chair arm in a move so abrupt that it startled Jonathan into losing his breath to a moment of panic. "I always considered you the real enemy, you know," he said, voice low and menacing. "You wouldn't let it go, even when the Ethics Commission suspended the initial investigation. You and your self-righteous, moralistic, grand-standing...."

"I don't know you," Jonathan said, voice crackling with barely suppressed fear. "And I don't know what you want or what you're trying to prove...."

He broke off with a ragged gasp when Richter brought the odd gun up to within inches of his face. "That's all right," the man said, mocking benign patience. "Miss Wilson here knows what I want and Doctor...excuse me, *Mr.*, Benedek has already told you what I'm trying to prove. As for knowing me, well...that's why I'm here, isn't it? I'm going to take care of that minor detail right now."

"No!" Laurie shrieked. Richter spun, leveling the gun at her as she sprang from the sofa, but it was Benny's quick reflexes, not the threat, that held her back. Seizing the moment, Jonathan leapt from the chair, but missed Richter's arm by a hair's breadth. The man stumbled back as Jonathan tried to regain his balance enough to swing around, but before he could, Richter brought his fist down, hard, against the side of MacKensie's head. With a sound half of surprise and half of pain, Jonathan collapsed to the floor on his hands and knees.

"Jonathan!" Laurie cried, struggling against the arms Benny had locked around her waist. "You bastard! You can't do this!"

Satisfied that Benny, though obviously straining, could succeed in holding her back, and that Jonathan was too dazed to offer much of a threat, Richter relaxed enough for a thin smile. "After Mr. Benedek has so kindly told me what the fruits of this endeavor will be? I think I'd be a fool not to try, don't you?"

"No!" Her fury dissolved into desperation as Richter reached down, yanking Jonathan to his feet. "You-- you can't, you...please.. Oh, god. Oh, god, you can't...."

Richter eyed her strangely, then studied the man who swayed groggily in his grip. "Can't? Can't what? Kill him? Is that what you're going on about?" He tossed off a nonchalant shrug. "You're right, of course. I can't do that. That's not nearly enough to mitigate the years of humiliation to which he's subjected me. Not nearly enough." Eyes glittering, he tightened his grip on his captive's arm until Jonathan winced. "No, I want you to suffer the way you forced me to suffer. I want you to watch helplessly as your life disintegrates around you. I want you to experience firsthand what it's like to be powerless, utterly dependent on the mercy of others for your very life."

"Look, this is nuts," Benedek enjoined hastily. His arms were still tight around Laurie, although she had stopped struggling to break free. Hands pressed to her face, she stood rigid, trembling, unable to move or breath as she stared at Jonathan. "I'm the one who tried to nail you in this life as well as the other one, that makes me double your trouble, right? As least take it out on someone who knows why you're pissed at him, okay?"

Richter favored him with a sneering smile. "I think, Mr. Benedek, that in your particular instance, I'm well satisfied with the results of my decision."

"Please." Laurie's voice was thin and tearful, the pleading of a desperate child. "I'm begging you. Please. We'll give you anything you want. Please, don't do this."

"I'm afraid that there is nothing you can give me that I would want more than this," Richter smiled, mocking regret. "But I do thank you for the generous offer. And may I return the favor by asking you to keep one thing in mind after you return to your own time? I know you now." His eyes glittered coldly. "Don't cross my path. If you do, I assure you, you will suffer and I will make certain Dr. MacKensie here suffers as well."

"No," she cried, a faint, plaintive wail muffled by her trembling hands.

"Ah." Richter glanced at his wrist, then favored them with a stiff smile. "It's been charming, but we must be going now. Farewell."

"Laurie!" Jonathan gasped as Richter dragged him toward the kitchen door.

"No!" she shrieked, lunging forward before Benny could stop her. With a shout, Jonathan shifted in Richter's grip just as the man twisted around, raised his weapon and fired. Laurie screamed, cringing back as the table lamp near her exploded in a shower of sparks. Benny grabbed her and yanked her back into his arms, shielding her from seeing Richter reward Jonathan's heroics with a vicious twist of his arm as he shoved MacKensie into the kitchen.

"No," she sobbed, over and over again, as she huddled miserably in Benny's embrace. She stiffened with a cry when a sudden thunderclap shook the room, and slumped heavily in his arms with its fading echoes. Benny went to his knees with her, doggedly holding on as she clung to him, her breathing growing ragged and labored. He felt her muscles tense, and quickly braced his body against hers just in time to absorb her agonized, anguished scream. And kept holding on, long after she had cried herself into an exhausted sleep on his shoulder, wet with her tears mingled with the ones that had silently fallen from his own eyes.

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Gentle words, spoken repeatedly, made themselves heard over the mad roar in her ears, pulling together all the shattered pieces of her senses and patiently knitting them together into some semblance of a coherent whole. She forced herself to listen, dimly aware that all she needed to do was listen, just...listen. Her body was braced by something strong, held tightly against something warm; a soothing touch wiped away tears, drained the heat from her flushed and swollen face. And the voice continued its litany as its strength gently guided her from the murky depths.

"Benny?" she said groggily. She tried to lift her head from his shoulder, and failed, uttering a low, pain-filled moan.

"Easy, easy," he urged. He leaned back, then returned with a steaming cup in his hand. "Here. Just a little. That's it. A little more...."

"Capacin apple cinnamon," she murmured approvingly after she'd managed a few sips of the steaming liquid. She shuddered as the herbal drug's stimulant effects sped through her system. "How did you know?"

"How do you think I always managed to sober up in time for a deadline? Or a wedding? Come on, a little more."

"I meant, how did you know that apple cinnamon was my favorite?"

"I read minds. Good, you're looking a lot better already."

She moaned, pressing the palm of her hand against her throbbing forehead. "Where are we?"

"A little no-name motel just outside of D.C. I've got a standing reservation, and the owner asks no questions."

"How did we get here?" she asked, thoroughly confused.

"You didn't make it easy," he sighed, taking the cup from her hand.

"I was really out of it," she guessed quietly, chagrined.

"Couldn't even get you to understand why you needed to get into the clothes we'd stashed in the outer lab. Fortunately, I found a dust sheet in the storeroom and one of the few cab drivers in town who owed me a favor. And you cooperated just fine as long as I kept to simple directions like walk, sit, stop and stay."

"Benny, I'm sorry, I...."

He shushed her quickly. "Come on. I was there, remember? This works better if you hold still, you know."

She relaxed back against his bracing arm, allowing him to pass a vibrating blu-pak across her forehead and temples. Past lowered eyelids, she finally noticed that he was dressed in an old cloth robe, marked with the faded embroidered trademark of a famous luxury hotel. His gray hair was wringing wet, and she realized with chagrin that he must have interrupted his shower. "How long...how long have we been here?"

"It's about seven in the morning right now."

"Six hours?" she grimaced.

The blu-pak slid a soothing course down and across her forehead several times before Benny spoke again. "It's Wednesday."

"Thirty hours?" She fell back against the pillows with a moan, only then realizing that she was covered with a sheet and nothing else. Tucking the sheet more securely around her, she waved off further attempts at ministrations. "Thirty hours. Benny, I'm so sorry...."

He shushed her again with exaggerated fierceness. "You needed the rest. When's the last time you had any sleep, anyway?"

The memory tightened her throat. Except for a catnap on the way back from the motel in which she'd found Benny, the last time she'd had any real sleep had been in Jonathan's MacKensie's bed, wrapped securely in his arms. Benny reacted to the shadow that crossed her face with a quick change of subject. "Hungry? I picked up some fruit, and there's that vegetable paste stuff you like, or...."

"No, I'm fine, really," she assured him. "I think what I'd like right now is to get cleaned up. Did you leave any hot water?"

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When she emerged from the bathroom, tying the belt on another old robe that she'd found waiting for her, she paused to see that Benny had dozed off in the chair near the bed. Moving carefully so as not to disturb him, she located her clothes, folded neatly, in a drawer. The delivery tag from the quick cleaners was still attached. She fingered it thoughtfully, then took a long look around the room. Two bags of groceries, the blu-pak, the self-heating thermo cup he'd used for the tea, several crumpled wrappers bearing the name of a fast-food delivery service and the pale color in his lined face--all evidence of a long, patient vigil.

She placed the bundle back into the drawer, then padded over to sit on the edge of the bed. When Benny stirred some time later, he opened his eyes to find her quietly watching him.

"What?" He warily considered the strange look on Laurie's face. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

She smiled, embarrassed. "I was just thinking how wrong I've been about you. I made the mistake of thinking that you were a completely different person from the one I knew. I was so wrong. I just had to dig a little deeper through the debris," she added with a melancholy sigh.

"It wasn't such a bad life," he scolded gently.

"I was also thinking how lucky Jonathan was to have a friend like you." Her voice caught; she recovered quickly, but by that time Benny had responded by leaning forward and taking her hand between both of his. "I used to wonder how, with all the arguing and bickering that went on between you, you two could even stand to look at each other, let alone claim to be friends. Now I wonder how I could have not known."

Benny's smile faltered wistfully. "You make me wish I had your memories. There've been enough times in my life when I could've used a friend."

On impulse, she leaned over to kiss him, but what she'd intended as a gentle peck on the cheek instead lingered on his lips. A pleasant shock went through her as he pressed closer. When she didn't resist or break away, his tongue began to softly explore her mouth. She made a sound, almost a guilty protest, but it faded away into a soft moan.

Long moments later, Benny broke free, then stopped breathing altogether as he stared at her, searching her face with confused eyes. She saw the battle in his own eyes, the overwhelming urge to seize the moment and offer her a distraction in exchange for a chance to exploit her emotional vulnerability. No, no; that wasn't something she could believe anymore. What she saw in his eyes was desire beyond a simple wish to give her comfort the one way he best knew how.

Part of her yearned to beg him to take her right then, to overwhelm her with his body and physically drive the ache from her heart. The other part protested the traitorous thought. It wouldn't be fair to him, it wouldn't be what she truly wanted....

But what did she want? The only person she wanted no longer existed. Here, silently offering himself to her, was someone who should never have existed at all, someone who would have never been if what she truly wanted had been allowed her. Now she was lost in a future that she was not a part of, and a little piece of this unreality was offering her his complete and total acceptance. Her eyes filled as she touched the lines of his face with gentle fingers. He remained still, patiently and perhaps fearfully waiting for her answer.

She allowed a faint smile to flicker across her face, and he responded by moving his hands to her shoulders. Her eyes never left his face as he slipped his fingers around the edges of her robe, gently drawing it open. Rising slowly from the chair, he cupped her face in his hands, staring at her for a long moment before leaning forward, seeking her lips as he pressed her down onto the bed.

Her arms went around him, drawing him close as he slid his body down next to hers. A moment later, he hesitated, reluctantly breaking the deep, hungry kiss. "Are you sure?" he asked huskily, a whisper in her ear.

She answered him with a soft moan and an insistent tug on the belt of his robe. He covered her face, neck and shoulders with his mouth as she slid the robe off his body. Her hands communicated urgency and he reacted, slowly drawing his hands down her sides, across her breasts, down her stomach. She moaned sharply at his touch, back arching in uncontrolled pleasure. "Don't stop," she begged, voice thick with passion, interspersed by tiny, sharp gasps as he gently parted her thighs. "Oh, god, please, don't stop, don't stop...."

He drew her shuddering body tightly against his. His mouth sought hers again, and with another passionate moan deep in her throat, she proceeded to show him just how sure she really was.

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"I can't believe you're a day over eighteen," she murmured, snuggling deeper into his embrace.

"Ah, there you have it," he smiled, brushing her shoulder with his fingers. "My worst-kept secret. I'd still be married to my first wife if I could have persuaded her to stay in bed with me the rest of our lives."

"That sounds like a fair offer to me," she sighed contentedly.

He pressed his fingers beneath her chin, placing a soft kiss on her lips. Apprehension gripped her when his smile suddenly flickered and dimmed. "What are you thinking? Tell me. Please."

Torn between the truth and a gentle lie, he hesitated. "I'm thinking that I'd really like to believe that you...." Wincing, he shook his head, wishing he'd gone with the lie instead.

Her hand gripped his shoulder, keeping him from pulling away from her. "Benny, listen to me," she urged. "I...I knew you for six years, as my teacher, my academic advisor, my mentor. I always had the utmost respect for you. What I didn't have was the luxury to allow it to become anything more."

"Because of...."

"No." She pressed her fingers against his mouth. "No, not because of Jonathan or how I may have felt about him, even though he barely knew I existed," she added ruefully. "It was because of...someone else. Someone who loved you just as much as you loved her."

"Her?" Benny echoed wonderingly.

"I first met you at a reception for Dr. Ghaemi. You introduced me to your wife. Someone else told me that you'd just celebrated your twenty-second anniversary."

"Twenty-two years?" His mouth fell open as he struggled to comprehend. "With the same wife?"

"Every time I saw the two of you together, it took my breath away. No selfish fantasy of mine could have compared to what I saw every time you looked at each other, and there was no conceivable way I'd ever allow it to." She paused, her eyes softening as she lifted her hand to his face. "I envied her, though. I often wondered what mysterious thing she was forever looking for in your eyes. Whatever it was, she always found it. And when she did...." She emitted a tiny sound of envy and wonder. "I wanted to know what that kind of special joy felt like, but I could have never taken it from her. And you would have never let me."

She caught her breath to see the pain in his eyes, realizing too late that what she had described was something he'd been searching for, in vain, all of his life. "Look at me," she urged, pressing her hand gently to his chin until he obeyed. "It can't be too hard to find, it never took her very long to....ah." Her smile blossomed as her eyes filled with tears. "So this is what she saw every day for twenty-two years? Now I'm really jealous."

"Well," he murmured with a soft smile. "We can't have that."

Her eager agreement become a deep moan as he kissed her passionately. Long moments later, she broke free with a startled gasp. "Again? I can't believe this! Again? You aren't human, are you? I can not *believe* you...you...oh...oh, yes...."

He drove away all her doubts and a few more thoughts besides. Afterwards, he held her close, listening to her labored breathing ease into the deep, regular rhythm of sleep. Placing a kiss on her forehead, he rose from the bed, careful not to disturb her.

From a satchel he'd stowed beneath the desk, he removed his notebook, sliding back its cover to expose the gold-plated connections, then slotting it into the information center console. Using the console's larger input controls and monitor, he stepped through the motel's liability disclaimer and warnings about inflated prime time access rates until the main menu flashed on the screen. A few key presses transmitted his account information and request parameters. "Okay," he murmured under his breath as he began composing the first query. "Here's hoping I'm not throwing away the best damned thing that's ever happened to me." He stared at the message informing him that the requested search was successful before tapping the key that would download the information into his notebook. "Well, why buck a trend?" he sighed.

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"Benny?" Laurie wiped her eyes groggily, sitting up when a sleepy probe of the bed beside her proved empty. She found him seated in the armchair, his feet propped up on the edge of the bed. "What are you doing?"

"Research." He kept his eyes on the notebook's tiny display screen as he spoke. "A couple of things were bothering me. For one thing, why did we get such easy access to the accelerator?"

"It wasn't that easy," she reminded him.

"It should have been impossible. It's Richter's baby, not Ghaemi's, remember?"

"Richter." Her voice turned cold, but held steady.

"I'm not sure how--maybe he took one more trip back to visit himself with a list of things to do, I don't know--but he's the one who scotched your G.I. entrance application."

She eyed him suspiciously. "You were listening at the kitchen door, weren't you?"

"I may be a retired writer, but my instincts aren't dead," he grinned. "So if he went to all that trouble, why didn't he take the really simple precaution of beefing up security around the accelerator?"

"Maybe he thought keeping me out of Georgetown was enough?"

"Maybe, but..." He grimaced, shaking his head. "Dangerous assumption, especially when he's got so much to lose. Besides, I turned up something interesting. Seems Richter's on sabbatical from G.I. Looked like a real sudden departure, if you ask me."

"How in the world did you get access to confidential college records?"

He smiled without looking up. "Same way I got those grad students in the lab to look the other way so that we could sneak into the accelerator. Not everybody at G.I. thinks that Richter walks on water. Some of them remember Dr. Ghaemi very fondly."

"Benny, he'll find out you've been asking questions," she realized, alarmed.

"I don't think that's going to be much of a problem."

Reacting to the ominous note in his voice, Laurie rose, wrapping the sheet around her as she swung her legs over the side of the bed to face him. "I've been reading over some of Richter's published papers on the theoretical applications for that accelerator he claims he developed," he told her when she silently urged him to explain. "Pretty heavy stuff. The most recent paper was about his time travel experiments. I think I understand enough to figure out how he managed to keep his clothes and bring a gun with him. But there's something else he says that..." He hesitated, becoming distraught. "I don't know if it's true, he doesn't even know if it's true, but in theory...in theory, it's true, and the few experiments that he was able to carry out seem to confirm it."

"Benny, what is it?" she asked quietly when he seemed loathe to continue. "Tell me."

"If someone were to travel back into the past and change things so drastically that it affected the course of their own lives, then..." He drew a deep breath. "They would return as a separate person, but occupying the same body. Two sets of memories and life experiences, each one just as real as the other. The crux of the theory is that the result is a complete breakdown of coherent mental processes. Insanity is inevitable. The only variable is how long the disintegration will take, which depends on the initial psychological stability of the subject. Gives whole new meaning to the concept of split personality, doesn't it?"

"Benny?" she quavered, watching him rub wearily at his eyes.

"Where did you do your graduate work in metaphysics?"

Her lips formed the beginning of a word starting with "G", but the word that emerged, to her dawning horror, was, "CalTech."

"Didn't take me long to track you down from the info on your G.I. application. Your mother's frantic. You disappeared from your apartment two days ago and no one's seen or heard from you since."

She drew a shivering breath, wrapping her arms tightly across her chest. "Oh, my god."

Setting the notebook aside, he rose to sit next to her on the edge of the bed. She huddled against him, eyes squeezed shut as she fought off a wave of panic. "Is he sure about that? Inevitable? Maybe...maybe he's wrong, maybe...."

"It's not public knowledge, but I did find out why Richter went on sabbatical and where he's spending his vacation," he said lowly, soothing her head onto his shoulder. "An exclusive little resort in Virginia, where all the rooms are decorated in designer white and Early American foam padding."

"Oh, my god," she sighed, in despair. "Then it's just a matter of time, isn't it?"

He pulled away from her to take her face between his hands, tilting it up so that he could look at her. Tears spilled down her cheeks and he wiped the wetness away with the fervent wish that he could take the fear away as easily. "All you wanted to do was save the world," he said with a laugh that might have been amused had grief not shattered it mid-note. "This isn't fair. It's not fair, it shouldn't be happening...."

"We tried to stop it." She sniffed, closing her eyes a brief moment to regain her threatened composure. "We did our best. That's all that matters, really."

There was no conviction in her voice, and he couldn't bring himself to agree. He embraced her again and for a time she lay quiet in his arms, face pressed tightly against his shoulder. At length she uttered a sigh. "I, um...I suppose I should call my mother, shouldn't I?"

He nodded reluctantly. "Might be a good idea. I think she had the call traced. And the last thing you need right now is to have to explain to the police what you're doing holed up in a motel with me, 3000 miles from home."

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She stirred as he slid into the bed next to her, and lifted her head to allow him to slip his arm around her. "How are you feeling?" he asked, brushing her forehead with his lips.

"Talking to my mother wears me out at the best of times, but...." She made a small sound expressing her dismay. "I'm sorry about the names she called you."

He shrugged his unconcern, adding with a smile, "Although I *was* a little worried about the ones that could have held up in a court of law...."

"How long have I been asleep this time?" she asked.

"Only about an hour. But you still look pretty tired, maybe I'd better let you get some more rest...."

"No, no. I feel like that's all I've been doing since we got back. Well...mostly all, anyway," she amended with a tiny smile. "Are you still working through that download?"

"That and a couple more accesses. I, um...we have to talk."

Reacting to the somber note in his voice, she lifted herself up on her elbow to regard him with concern. "What?" she demanded, half-afraid to ask, more afraid to know.

"I think I know where Richter took Jonathan."

He caught her when the surge of excitement drained the strength from her supporting arm, and pulled her up with him to a sitting position in the bed. "I'm not completely sure," he added hastily. "I put a call in to a friend in New York, and he's going to check something out for me, providing he can get past my ex-wife to do it."

"Check what out?"

"There's something...." He paused long enough to retrieve his notebook, manipulating the controls as he continued, "There's something that was scratching at the back of my mind, some kind of vague memory of something I'd seen or read. So I started going back over my notes." Pausing again, he shook his head wonderingly.

"Thirty years of my life are in here, can you believe that? I put everything in here, no matter how far-fetched or bizarre."

"What did you find?"

"Well, people were always sending me things; blurry photographs, faked letters, credit card receipts, anything they could think of to convince me that I should hand them a check for the reward I was offering for solid information. I threw everything into a drawer, then into boxes, then into more boxes, and finally into storage when my third...or was it fourth? wife threatened to burn the lot. But I kept notes on everything, even the really obvious fakes. Here--this is what I found."

She squinted at the tiny screen. "That's gibberish."

"Oh, sorry. My personal shorthand. It's a copper plate sent to me in, ah...1992, from some big excavation project in England. They said they found it while digging up an eleventh century tomb."

"Why did they send it to you?"

"Because they were convinced I'd had a confederate plant it there as some sort of hare-brained publicity stunt, although they were perfectly happy to settle for the only explanation I could come up with, which was this was either someone's idea of a sick joke, or a really bizarre attempt to claim the reward money. At any rate, they had no use for it, so I just threw it into the pile with the rest of the junk. I didn't even bother to scan the image in when I inventoried back in 2002. My friend is going to see if he can't find the plate and fax a vid to me so I can double-check the inscription."

Her fingers tightened around his wrist with the excitement that was building inside her. "What did the inscription say?"

"If my notes here are right, and I won't be sure until I can check the vid--it had my name on it, and Jonathan's along with what looked like a date." He paused, giving her a long, unreadable look. "August 4, 1069."

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Two lines intersected on the map displayed on the monitor. A fast query brought up a scrolling list of details. "The excavation site was in a place called Sudbury Dell. Hmph. Looks like Richter dumped our boy in England. Must have thought that was some kind of weird poetic justice, I suppose. Sudbury Dell. Never heard of it."

Laurie leaned over his shoulder. "Cross-reference with the date?"

"That'll take some time. I don't have an account set up in the historical database."

"I do," she said, with a frown. "At least...the me that belongs in this time does."

He gave her an odd look, but obligingly rose to give her the seat in front of the console. Her fingers moved tentatively over the access keyboard, growing more confident when her efforts met with success. As the final query spewed results and she redirected the information to a notebook download, she suddenly withdrew her hands from the keys, clasping them tightly together.

"I minored in physics," she said in a strained voice. "Not history. I don't have an account in the historical database, I'm registered with physical sciences. I took my undergraduate degree at Georgetown, not...." Her breath came in short gasps as her shoulders began to shake. Benny crouched by her side, gathering her into his arms. "It's all mixed up," she cried softly. "All confused. The more I try to sort it out, the worse it gets."

"Then don't try," he soothed her. "Don't try."

"I'm trying to remember me," she protested. "I can't remember me."

"Then trust me to remember for you," he urged. "Please. Trust me."

She remained still in his arms a moment, then nodded acceptance.

"Good. The first thing we're going to do is let you get some more rest."

"No, we have to...."

"I said, trust me." He prevented every attempt she made to protest until she gave up with a tired sigh, letting him lead her back to the bed. "I'll wake you up in time for dinner and we'll go over everything I've found in the download then. With any luck, we'll find out enough so that we can sneak back into the lab tonight."

She caught his hand as he covered her with the blankets. "We'll find him," she whispered.

He heard the faint question that marred her attempt to make it a firm, declarative statement and managed a smile. "We'll find him," he assured her, giving her hand a squeeze before releasing it, then turning away before his heart could force him to speak the rest of the sentence *even if it means losing you*.

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"This is madness."

He turned to face the woman who had spoken the emphatic words, in time to see her shut off the trill of fear he'd sensed disturbing her voice. With a sigh, he realized that, although he'd persuaded her to come this far with him, there was no longer any point in arguing with her; her fears and superstitions were too deep-rooted for him to expect to overcome them with mere words and assurances. "Wait here for me," he said, turning away.

He'd moved only a step before she hurried forward, placing her hand on his shoulder to stop him. "If you are discovered here...."

"I know," he assured her quietly, without turning.

"Why must you do this?" The fear returned and this time she made no attempt to disguise it. "Why must you pay strange tribute to the spirits of the dead?"

He closed his eyes with a weary sigh. "No. No, I explained this to you. I thought you understood."

"I...want to," she admitted reluctantly. "It is difficult."

Turning to her, he waited until she raised her eyes to his. "I'm sorry, I know it's difficult. And I appreciate your concern, but you must believe me, there's nothing to fear. Not from the spirits of the dead, anyway. Your brother, well...that's another story entirely."

"He will be angry when he discovers we have gone without his permission."

He nodded his understanding of the new fear shimmering in her eyes. "Yes, I suppose he will."

"And if he comes upon us here...."

"Then I'd better hurry." As he removed her hand from his arm, he gave it a gentle squeeze. "Stay here. I won't be long."

She drew back, hands clasped tightly before her. Giving her one last smile of reassurance that he didn't completely feel, he looked down at the object in his hands. A copper plate, fashioned by an artisan whose initial reluctance to take on the odd task had been mitigated by a handsome bribe provided by the woman who, despite her severe misgivings now and indeed from the moment he'd first begged the favor from her, had always given him her full, unswerving support. When the finished product had passed from the craftsman's hands to hers and from there to his, he'd borrowed an engraving tool and awkwardly inscribed the crude message. He touched the plate, feeling the inscription's rough edges. Had he made the cuts deep enough to survive one thousand years and still carry its message intact? And if it were found, still legible....

Jonathan MacKensie shook his head, refusing to succumb to doubts. If he did, he would have to admit that he actually harbored hope that this might work beyond the simple expectation that someone might someday in-

terpret the message and realize what had happened to him. That's all he could possibly hope for, just a resolution to his fate. *That's all.*

Leaving her standing at the edge of the clearing, Jonathan approached the barrow, three years overgrown with new grass and summer weeds. A simple tomb for a noble and his two sons, fallen on the field of battle. Hastings. They'd fallen at Hastings at the side of the doomed Harold, leaving behind a daughter and a younger son to bury them here in this glade and begin the dread wait for the day that the new king would come to seize their lands.

William's soldiers were coming, there could be no doubt about that. It was a matter of weeks, perhaps days, or even hours. The new lord had made it known that he intended to die before he would allow his lands to be seized and handed over to a supporter of the hated new king. And, as Jonathan knew full well, die he would, and by the very fact of his defiance condemn everyone he held under his firm control to the same fate. Including his own sister.

Including Jonathan MacKensie.

Mindful of the woman's anxious eyes on him, he circled the mound, debating the best way to bury the plate so that it would remain undisturbed and yet be easily uncovered by the excavation crew he hoped would be working this site sometime in the late 1980's, according to what he remembered of the ambitious plan a seven member university consortium had drawn up for this part of England back in 1984. If they didn't skip this area, if they didn't run out of funding, if they didn't find the plate at all....

He dropped to a crouch, digging at the damp earth with his fingers. The sod came away easily. Encouraged, he used the edge of the plate as a crude shovel.

"No, not there. The deer will dig it up, you idiot."

Jonathan jumped to his feet, dropping the plate as he spun around. He stared at the man emerging from the shelter of a nearby copse of trees. "It goes over there," the newcomer grinned, pointing to the other end of the barrow. "Trust me. I know."

"Benedek," he breathed.

Benny stopped, holding his hand back in a beckoning gesture. Struggling with her heavy gown and cloak, Laurie appeared from behind the trees. With her hand reaching for the one Benny proffered her, Laurie froze with a gasp, staring at Jonathan. For a moment, a startled look flickered on her face, and a glance down reminded him of the reason why. His linen tunic, simple woolen tabard and light cloak, and especially his shoulder length, severely styled hair were a radical transformation from her last memory of him, but he realized her bewilderment stemmed more from the extent of his altered appearance rather than the change itself.

But her confusion passed, completely absorbed by the light of pure joy that took possession of her face.

"Don't let this be a dream," Jonathan said under his breath as he forced himself to take a step toward them. "Please, don't let this be another dream, please...."

His words ended in a surprised yelp as Laurie broke into a run and literally fell into his arms, tripped up by her cumbersome cloak. She'd no sooner gained her footing than, with a cry, she flung her arms tightly around his neck, laughing and weeping.

Jonathan, still in shock, drew his arms around her slowly, carefully, half-expecting her to dissolve into a puff of dream-smoke. But her trembling body remained solid under his hands. "This isn't a dream," he whispered, not daring to believe. "You're real. You're...."

"We found you, I can't believe we found you, I...I'm sorry," she sobbed, her voice muffled in his cloak. "I'm so sorry, I wanted to stop him, I tried to stop him...."

He shushed her, lifting her chin so that her eyes met his. "You're here," he whispered, eyes shining. "That's all that matters."

She stared up at him, closing her eyes as he lowered his head to kiss her, gently at first, and then with mounting passion.

Long moments passed before she broke away, happily gasping for breath. Beaming up at him, she wiped her face self-consciously, sniffing. "Benny, he, um...he figured everything out. The archeologists found the plate and sent it to him...."

"The plate," Jonathan exclaimed. "I dropped it...."

Benny appeared at his side, stopping him half-turn by presenting the plate with a grin and a flourish. "Nice pattern. Funny thing, you know? I've got one at home just like it."

Jonathan stared at him, then Laurie, overcome by emotion. The words stuck in his throat despite every effort he made to free them. Then, with a deep sigh signaling surrender, he threw his arms around Benny in a fierce, massive bearhug.

Benny laughed, clapping Jonathan soundly on the back. "Hey, hey, easy. Somebody might get the idea you're actually glad to see me," he chortled. "Or that you didn't think we'd get the mes--" He squinted at Jonathan's face as the man, chagrined, hastily wiped his eyes. "Hey, that's it, isn't it? You really didn't think it would work, did you?"

"I...wasn't very sure, no," he admitted reluctantly.

"Whoa. You and me, we gotta have ourselves a little talk, don't we?" Benny told him, mocking an ominous, chiding tone. "But before we get into that, would you mind answering just one question for me?"

"What's that?"

"Who's your friend?"

"Johanna," he gasped, spinning around to see that the woman was still where he had left her at the edge of the glade. But she now knelt on the ground, her arms crossed tightly against her chest and her head bowed in an attitude of intense prayer. He started toward her, pausing long enough to urge Benny and Laurie to go with him. "Do either of you know Latin?"

Laurie shook her head. "Ah, let's see," Benny mused. "Cogito, ergo sum. Veni, vidi, vici. Carpe diem. That's about it. Why?"

"It's the only language she and I had in common." He reached her side, carefully dropping to a crouch to touch her shoulder. With a frightened cry, she cringed but made no other effort to dislodge his hand, keeping her eyes fixed to the ground. "And neither of us possessed a very large vocabulary."

"We are nothing if not prepared," Benny intoned solemnly. He angled his body to keep his actions hidden from the woman, who didn't seem inclined to look up at him anyway. Tapping his ear, he reached under his cloak to produce a small, rectangular device. "We swiped them from the linguistics lab on our way back to the accelerator. Programmed to translate over 500 different languages, including ancient, modern, Indo-European, Asian, Romance, Gaelic and at least fifty different dialects of Mandarin Chinese. Laurie's got both units set to eleventh-century Saxon. Close?"

Jonathan stared at him for a moment, then spoke a few words in an unfamiliar, guttural tongue. Benny inclined his head, listening. "Yeah, it is pretty amazing, isn't it?" he grinned, answering the question. He held up his hand, listening again, then repeated his reply in the same language Jonathan had used. "Nifty, eh? Ow." He grimaced. "It's got a bad habit of squawking when I give it a word it can't translate."

Johanna lifted her head, eyeing them warily for the few words among the many they'd exchanged that she could actually understand. She swallowed nervously, stammering something that sounded, to the computer translator voice in his ear, like, "My lord and my lady, my most humble greetings."

Benny whistled. "Welcome to the eleventh century."

Jonathan urged her to her feet, taking her shoulders firmly in his hands to force her to face Benny and Laurie. "They won't harm you," he told her in her own language. "And there's no reason to be afraid of them. They're my friends. They've come to help me."

It was obvious from the way she could barely bring herself to look at them that her fear stemmed directly from her knowledge that they were Jonathan's friends. "They have come to take you back with them, to...to return you to the place whence you came."

"Is it just my imagination, or is she seeing horns on my forehead?" Benny said.

Jonathan sighed heavily. "It's not your imagination."

"Then what does she think about you?" Benny murmured, incredulous.

The look Jonathan gave him was filled with unexpected pain, causing Benny to flinch back in surprise. Before he could demand an explanation, Johanna collapsed to her knees, hands clasped tightly before her in an attitude of abject penitence. "Spare me, please, I beg you to spare me," she sobbed.

"Oh, boy," Benny sighed. "I don't need the translator for this one."

Jonathan crouched down beside the weeping woman, doing his best to comfort her as she cringed from his touch. Laurie hovered, but finally withdrew to Benny's side, realizing that anything she tried to do to help might go badly.

"How much time do we have?" she whispered aside to Benny.

He surreptitiously consulted his watch, pinned to the inside of his cloak. "We just missed the first window. I set the second window for noon. Two hours."

"We have to figure out how to get her away from here by then. If she's not taking this well, I can just imagine how she'd react to us all vanishing in front of her eyes."

Pulling his cloak closed, Benny glanced at her with a strange, thin smile. "Let's see what we can do about making friends."

MacKensie gave him a stern look at his approach, which caused Johanna to bury her face into her hands. "Would it help at all if she were to lend me that for a moment?" Benny asked, pointing. He paused, then awkwardly repeated the request by mimicking the translation in his ear.

Johanna looked up, then down at the object Benny referred to--a large wooden cross worn on a cord around her neck. She then turned fearful eyes to Jonathan, who nodded and spoke to her in a voice too low for the translator to pick up. With trembling hands, she drew the cord over her head, but hesitated when Benny reached for it. Allowing her to retain possession of the cord, Jonathan took the cross and laid it carefully in the palm of Benny's outstretched hand.

The paralyzing fear visibly drained from the woman's pale face as she finally forced her eyes up to meet Benny's smiling ones. He glanced quickly to one side, enough to see Jonathan make a motion just beyond the edges of Johanna's peripheral vision. He repeated the gesture slowly: the Sign of the Cross.

The woman smiled, gasping in violent relief. Responding to Jonathan's silent urging, Laurie took the cross from Benny's hand and solemnly executed the gesture as well. Johanna, still shaking, but no longer terrified, replaced the cross around her neck, holding it against her breast for a moment of intense, silent prayer. Only then did she allow Jonathan to draw her to her feet.

Jonathan formally introduced her to them, subtly discouraging her from bowing low to them as he did. He carefully referred to Benny by his proper first name, Edgar, earning himself a grimace for the effort. Johanna repeated Laurie's name, hesitating over the foreign sound. "He has spoken of you, many times," she said shyly.

Laurie stared at Jonathan, all of her growing suspicions suddenly coalescing into a dread realization. His appearance, his familiarity with the Anglo-Saxon language, the ease with which he dealt with Johanna, even when she was deep in the grip of terror....

"Jonathan?" Her voice was an incredulous whisper. "Just how long have you been here?"

"Wait." Benny held up his hand. "Before we get into anything complicated, there's one thing we have to do, and we have to do it right now so that we can get it over with and I can just stop worrying about it."

"What's that?" Jonathan wanted to know.

He stooped down, scooping up the plate where Jonathan had let it fall in his haste to reach Johanna's side. "Bury this. Come on." Clapping a hand to Jonathan's shoulder, he turned him in the direction of the barrow and grinned. "Let me show you where it goes."

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"Survival training," Laurie said smugly, carefully adding kindling to the fire she'd coaxed from the sparks of two flint rocks. "Like riding a bicycle."

"Where'd you pick up survival training?" Benny stared at her with new respect as she settled back against the same tree trunk he was using for support. Jonathan and Johanna sat across from them, his cloak spread beneath them as protection from the damp earth, her hand held tightly in his.

"ROTC. Those scholarships didn't pay for everything, you know."

"Gee-za, she's trained in hand-to-hand combat, too," he chortled in mock dismay, sobering up immediately when she rapped his arm and inclined her head meaningfully. Johanna had tensed again, as she did every time they resorted to speaking in the language she didn't understand, and especially when one or all of them laughed in response.

"Jonathan, please," Laurie said, leaning forward. "Tell us what happened."

MacKensie drew a deep breath, his grip tightening on Johanna's hand. "He wanted to send me back to the Stone Age," he began in a quiet, tired voice. "But he discovered that the calibrations were set for a maximum span of only a thousand years. So he settled for the Battle of Hastings. Something went wrong, though. I discovered later that he'd brought us back several months late and a hundred miles too far."

"Us?" Laurie echoed uneasily.

"Oh, yes, he came back with me. He wanted to experience the sheer pleasure of gloating over me, then watching my face as he stepped back into the, what did he call it? The window?. Only...." A hard smile crept across his face. "It didn't work out quite the way he'd hoped. That wasn't a smile on his face when he left. It was more like a black eye, broken nose and smashed teeth."

Benny applauded, hooting his approval. "Atta boy, Jonbo!"

"So you've been here for over two years?" Laurie gasped.

"Nearly three," Jonathan nodded with a sigh.

"It took you that long to think up this message plan of yours?" Benny demanded, incredulous.

"It took me that long to get here," Jonathan said, growing agitated. "I, uh...it's been a difficult...it's been difficult." He drew a deep, uncertain breath, then expelled it sharply. "He just left me here. I was dressed strangely, I didn't know the language or the customs or even where I was, I had no idea how to fend for myself. I was...I was...."

"Utterly dependent on the mercy of others for your very life," Benny quoted, closing his eyes briefly as he emitted a soft snort of disgust. "Damn the man."

Jonathan remained silent until he had composed himself once more. "I owe Johanna my life, probably a dozen times over. She's the only one who bothered to try to communicate with me. I'm not sure how, but she's also manages to keep her brother from handing me over to a very persistent local clergy."

Benny arched an eyebrow. "Let me guess. They want to save your immortal soul by toasting your mortal body to a crispy crunch?"

"That's the last item on their long list, yes," Jonathan nodded. "Fortunately, they've been too preoccupied with the transition to give us much grief lately."

"Transition?" Laurie queried, puzzled.

"This entire area is owned by supporters of Harold, including the lands belonging to Johanna's brother."

"Of course," Laurie realized. "William is claiming the lands for his supporters by driving out those who fought for Harold." She winced suddenly and Benny reacted by grabbing her hand and gripping tightly until her brow cleared. "Nothing, it's nothing," she said to MacKensie's concerned question. "Jonathan, if you're saying that you're living under the protection of a Harold supporter...."

"Yes," he assured her quietly. "Yes, I know. Although I'm not certain that the word 'protection' is particularly apt."

Laurie reacted to the bitterness in his voice, tensing. When he remained silent, she rose to her feet, stepping around the small fire to kneel by his side. His bowed head moved slightly, then went still as she took his hand and gently pushed back the rough cotton sleeve. She made a sharp sound, not quite a gasp or a sob, to see the vicious scars marking his wrists.

He closed his hand over hers, still refusing to look up at her. Tears spilled down her face as she covered her mouth with one hand, unable to speak and not knowing what she would say even if she could.

Benny murmured something behind her, then awkwardly spoke the translated words, gaining Johanna's attention. "Perhaps the lady would care to walk with me while I gather more wood for the fire."

Jonathan lifted his head with some difficulty, managing a wan, grateful smile. He spoke to Johanna softly, succeeding in melting the apprehensive look from her face. She accepted Benny's hand and his help to gain her feet. With a last look back at Jonathan, who offered her a reassuring smile, she took Benny's arm and allowed him to lead her away.

Laurie touched Jonathan's shoulder, tugging at the edge of his tunic. His hand clamped down on her wrist, but she persisted silently until he released her with a deep, resigned sigh. She pulled back enough of his garment to expose the livid scars scoring his shoulder.

"Oh, my god," she gasped, squeezing her eyes shut. "Why would someone do this to you? Why?"

He took her into his arms and her head onto his shoulder, daubing gently at the tears streaming down her face. "It's the only form of behavior modification Geoffrey--or anyone else in this backward place--considers effective."

"Behavior modification?" she echoed, confused.

He held her tightly, his face pressed against the top of her head. "Geoffrey's soldiers found me, nearly dead from exposure. They might have killed me on the spot, but no one wanted to take that responsibility, so they brought me to him instead. He apparently decided that I was some sort of supernatural being--angel or demon, he didn't much care--sent to consolidate his power and protect him from William. At least, I think that's the only reason he allowed his sister to nurse me back to health. His grasp of Latin was virtually non-existent and he became impatient with my inability to understand him. And infuriated when Johanna and I found a common language, forcing him to go through her in order to communicate with me. Even when I finally learned enough of his language to make myself understood, he became convinced that I was lying when I insisted that I had no special powers to put at his disposal. He believes that all he has to do is force me to change my mind. And for that, he resorts to demanding my respect the only way he really knows how."

"Three years?" she whispered tremulously. "You've endured this for three years?"

He was silent for a moment; then, unexpectedly, he chuckled. "Actually, that's rather bearable compared to the real tortures of this benighted place. Do you have any idea how quickly I would sell my soul for a really decent cup of coffee and a long, hot shower?"

She burst out laughing despite her tears, slapping his shoulder in mock irritation. "You could use a shower, too, you...."

Her words faded as Jonathan touched her face. She met his gaze, gasping softly to see the depth of the pain in his eyes, burned deep by three years of privation and despair. "But that wasn't even the worst of it," he said, tracing the lines of her face gently with his fingers. "The worst was knowing that I'd never see you again. That I'd never be able to keep my promise to you. I had only those few moments with you, and then...."

His words ended sharply. Swallowing with difficulty, he averted his face as though to keep her from seeing the effort he expended to retain control. "I actually wondered why, if Richter hated me as much as he said he did, he didn't simply kill me on the spot. I thought it meant that there had to be a spark of compassion in him somewhere, that he was moved somehow to be merciful. It didn't take me long to realize how wrong I was."

"But you beat him at his own game," she told him, voice low and urgent. "And not just by finding a way to lead us straight to you over a thousand years of time. You did it by surviving while he destroyed himself."

He looked at her sharply, eyes wide. "When he changed the course of history, he changed himself as well," she explained quietly. "He got everything he wanted, but at the cost of his sanity. Benny can explain it better than I can. Even without the PhD, he seems to have a real grasp of the theoretical implications."

"Implications?" he echoed, eyes narrowing as he searched her face for the reason behind her sudden, intense distress. "Laurie, what is it? What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing." She forced a smile, pressing her hand against the one he touched to her face in concern. "Everything's fine now. And you're going to keep that promise to me, Jonathan MacKensie."

He uttered a small, amused laugh. "Ah, I see. You came all this way just to make sure I didn't break our engagement?"

Her attempt to reply in the same spirit failed as she stared into his eyes, and realized that no words could possibly explain to him exactly why she had come all this way; not half as well as she could show him, anyway.

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Laurie roused from her half-doze against Jonathan's shoulder to the teasing voice of Edgar Benedek as he leaned over them. "Wakey, wakey, kids." His expression sobered as he held Laurie's eyes and meaningfully tapped his cloak at the place where he'd pinned his watch beneath. "Come on, naptime's over. It's time for you to go home."

"Home," Jonathan echoed groggily, accepting Laurie's help to gain his feet. As he focused on Laurie's upturned face, he seemed to stop breathing, his eyes widening as though a long-buried dream had just appeared before him, overwhelming him with its promise and beauty. "Home," he repeated in a thin, quavering voice, his smile growing as Laurie, laughing, embraced him.

"I will miss you, Jonathan."

He spun with a startled gasp at the sound of Johanna's quiet voice; or rather, at the sound of her words, spoken in halting but perfectly understandable English. With one hand pressed to her ear, she spoke again, eyes dancing mischievously. "I shall think of you often, and fondly."

Jonathan's open-mouthed stare went to Benedek, who was finally forced to give up stifling his amusement. "I'm sorry, she insisted," he chortled, holding out his hand for Johanna, with a reluctant pout, to give him the translator. "She's got the soul of a first-class practical joker, I'll bet you didn't know that."

"You...she...you...I can't believe you!" Jonathan blurted. "How could you possibly--?"

"Take it easy, take it easy," Benny soothed, mindful of the way Johanna's smile faded into sudden, deep apprehension. "We weren't having much luck with a civilized conversation when I had to repeat everything twice, so I figured, you know, to make things easier on both of us...."

"Of all the...." He stopped himself with an effort when Johanna shrank back against Benedek in growing fear. Fear, he realized with chagrin, of him.

"How did you do it?" he asked suddenly, with a grimace of utter disbelief.

"How?" Benny blinked. "What how? I just showed her how it worked and....oh, right. I gotcha. Well, yeah, she did get a little freaked about demons talking in her ear, but we got past that okay." He paused long enough to allow Johanna to lean into the tiny receiver he held steady for her, coaxing a tentative smile back onto her face with a grin of his own. "Guess you've been more of an influence on her than you give yourself credit for. You know, she told me all about those science lessons you've been giving her on the sly. If she can handle the really heretical concepts like planetary orbits and the true nature of stars, what's a little thing like this, eh?"

Jonathan kept staring, confused. "How do you do it?" he said finally, a smile of grudging admiration tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"It's a knack," Benny grinned, reaching under his cloak to remove his watch. "Ten minutes until launch, just enough time for a few soggy goodbyes. Here."

Laurie blinked, startled, as Benny handed her the watch along with both translator devices. "Make sure those get back to the linguistics lab and you can keep the watch. Strictly a memento, though. You sure won't get much for it at the pawn shop."

"What?" She stared at him, mouth agape. "Benny, what are you doing?"

He stepped back, holding out his hand, which Johanna, with a shy smile, took in a tight grasp. "Staying," he said simply. "I'm staying."

"No," Laurie breathed, in shock. "No, you can't. You can't...."

"I can't go back with you." His studied nonchalance faded as he realized for the first time that she really didn't know what he'd known all along. "Aw, Laurie...come on. Think about it. *Think*. I'd be writing myself a one-way ticket to the nut factory if I went back with you, you know that."

A chill went through her, draining the strength from her limbs. She might have collapsed if Jonathan hadn't caught and supported her. "No," she said numbly. "You...you can't. You can't."

Jonathan regarded him with a strange, intent expression. "You knew," he said lowly. "Didn't you?"

He held Jonathan's gaze for as long as he could before looking away with a deep sigh. "Yeah," he admitted with forced nonchalance. "Yeah, I knew."

"Then...why?"

Their eyes met again as Benny searched for and found the real question Jonathan was asking him. "Because I want what she told me I could have...if I didn't have to waste half my life looking for you Damn it. I want that life. I want to be that person, I want to have what he has. And I want it a helluva lot more than--"

He betrayed himself with a glance at Laurie, unable to deflect it with an exasperated growl.

Laurie felt Jonathan's arms loosen their grip on her while his hands gently urged her forward. She gave him a smile of gratitude, then moved forward, reaching for Benny.

He took her hands, pulling her close and tsking in her ear for the snuffle heralding the fast approach of a more emotional display. "What if...what if it turns out that you can't stay?" she murmured, anguished. "What if you just disappear?"

Smiling, he tweaked her chin playfully with his fingers. "I won't let that happen."

Her mouth opened to protest the irrationality of his assertion, but something in his eyes stopped her. Something that told her, without question, that if anyone could stop the inevitable through sheer force of will, Edgar Benedek could. "I don't know what I would have done without you," she told him sincerely, voice breaking. "Thank you. Thank you."

He kissed her forehead, his lips lingering a moment before he turned her around and sent her back to Jonathan's arms.

"Have you really thought about this carefully?" Jonathan asked, frowning. "This place, the people here...it's a very rough life. And dangerous. You have no idea how it can be, how it...could be."

"When you consider the alternative, there's not much thinking to do about it, is there?" He'd recaptured Johanna's hand, drawing her attention to him by giving it a warm squeeze. "Besides, it's the least I can do for her after spoiling her surprise."

"What surprise?" Jonathan blinked.

"Oh, she had no intention of letting you go back," Benny told him matter-of-factly. "Not just because she was afraid of what...what's his name again? Geoffrey? would do if he found you'd been messing with daddy's grave. What she's really afraid of is that you won't survive his next temper tantrum, and she had no intention of finding out the hard way." He gave the woman a smile full of admiration. "She's got a servant waiting just a little ways from here, holding on to two horses and five days worth of provisions. Enough to get two people well south of here. I guess one of them will be me now."

In amazement, Jonathan stared at Johanna, who returned his smile shyly. "She's going back. She's finally going back."

"And trust me, you get all the credit for talking her into rethinking her priorities," Benny assured him solemnly.

To Laurie's questioning look, Jonathan explained, "Her father, the old lord, married her off to a noble whose family supported William's claim to the throne, hoping, I presume, to play both ends against the middle. Her husband fell at Hastings, too. But when she heard about the death of her father and two brothers, she left her baby with her husband's family and came home. She's the eldest child, you know. And she's always felt the inequity that, if circumstances had been different, these lands would have been hers by right. In a way, she holds that they are--in her heart, at least--even though her youngest brother inherited by law after their father's death. I tried for so long to convince her that her only loyalties belonged to her child, not to land that was about to be taken away from her anyway, or to the memories of a family who thought nothing of using her to play pathetic political games."

Laurie squeezed his hand and spoke directly to the bitterness that colored his low voice. "But you convinced her. Even if it did take a direct threat to your life, you convinced her. And because of that, she won't die fighting a hopeless cause at the side of her brother."

He gave her a wan smile of gratitude, then shifted his gaze to Benedek. "She's a very special woman," he told his friend, eyebrow arched meaningfully.

"Don't worry," Benny assured him. "I'll take care of her."

"I was going to tell you to let her take care of you," Jonathan amended with a smile. "It'll work much better that way, trust me."

Laurie glanced at Benny's watch in her hand. "Six minutes."

"Hope you don't mind if we don't throw streamers as you pull away from the dock, but we'd better get moving if we want to get to the in-laws before sundown," Benny grinned.

Jonathan nodded his appreciation of the real reason that Benedek left unspoken--his reluctance to allow Johanna to witness the exact circumstances of their departure. He extended his hand to Benny. "Thank you," he said, voice holding more emotion he could successfully mask behind two simple words.

"Wish I could have gotten to know you better," Benny told him, grasping his hand warmly. "Glad to know that I will. And you...." He leaned over to give Laurie a quick kiss, then chucked a thumb over his shoulder at Jonathan. "Take care of him."

She laughed, then glanced sideways to see Jonathan move to Johanna, taking her hands and leaning close to speak to her in a low voice. "Benny...I...."

"Sh." He made a tiny erasing motion with his hand. "You really didn't know. I realize that now. I'm sorry, I thought you...I mean, I should have known that you had other things on your mind, I didn't mean to throw you like that."

"I should have realized," she said bleakly. "I should have."

"Would it really have made a difference?"

She looked up at him, her eyes misting to see the uncertainty playing across his face. "I think it might have," she admitted with difficulty.

He gave her a smile that thanked her for the thought. "Then it's just as well."

Raised voices drew their attention. Johanna had removed the cross from around her neck and was holding up the cord as Jonathan demurred with raised hands. A sharp chide and a stern look from her was all it took for his arms to lower in defeat and his head to bow low enough for her to place the cord carefully around his neck. Her fingers lingered on his chest as she looked up at him with sad eyes, whispering something that ended in a flickering smile. In response, he leaned closer to her, a silent question that she answered by closing the distance between them for a soft kiss.

Johanna gasped suddenly, jumping back at the sound of a distant voice shouting. At the far end of the glade, a middle-aged, rough-clad man trotted toward them, waving frantically.

"Olfric," Jonathan exclaimed, reacting only a moment slower than Johanna, who was already hurrying across the distance to reach the distressed newcomer.

"Is that the guy's name or an Anglo-Saxon curse?" Benny wondered aloud as he grabbed Laurie's arm. They caught up with Jonathan and Johanna as the man, speaking quickly and in obvious distress, tugged at MacKensie's sleeve between gasps.

"Who needs modern technology to understand this?" Benny said tensely after assessing the looks that Jonathan and Johanna exchanged. "Big bad bro's headed this way, right?"

"Take her away from here," Jonathan urged, his grip tight on Benny's shoulder. "Quickly. Please."

He resisted the pressure MacKensie exerted on his arm, assessing the anxious look on Olfric's sweating face as he again yanked at Jonathan's sleeve. "I'm sorry, did I miss something here? Aren't you the one who's supposed to be running?"

"Don't argue with me. We'll be gone in three minutes, and if he finds you here...please. Go."

Jonathan pushed him into Johanna's waiting hands. He stared at her, then at Jonathan again, torn by indecision. But an insistent pull on his arm drew his attention back to Johanna's anguished face as she said something to him in an urgent, pleading voice. Unlike Olfric, she wasn't directing her immediate concern at Jonathan. She was looking at him, only him, and the words she spoke, though foreign to his ears, carried their message straight to his heart.

With one last look over his shoulder at Jonathan and Laurie, he quirked a quick grin. "See you in the history books."

And with that, he allowed Johanna to drag him off by the hand. Olfric blinked at Jonathan in confusion that only deepened when MacKensie, with a terse command, gestured at him to go with them. Benny double-backed long enough to snag the baffled servant by the sleeve, yanking him forward for Johanna to grab his arm. Raising her voice sternly over his startled complaints, she propelled both of them along with her, hurrying back toward the heavily wooded area in the direction Olfric had come.

"Come on," Laurie urged, gathering her gown and cloak in one hand and Jonathan's arm in her other. "Behind the trees, over there where you first saw us. That's where the window will open."

They scrambled down into a shallow depression, huddling close to the ground. The tree cover was sparse here; enough to shield them from a casual eye but not from a concentrated search. She pulled the watch from the pouch at her waist long enough to glance at it. "Two minutes," she quavered, equal parts fear and incredulity. "Two minutes? This guy's got incredible timing, you know?"

Jonathan placed his cloak across her shoulders, working the neckline over her head. She resisted, confused only for the moment it took her to realize that he was anticipating having to draw his pursuers away from her while she cowered in shadows under the shroud of dark clothing.

Grabbing his hand, she shook her head firmly. His face tightened, first in irritation and then in silent plea, but she kept staring at him until he finally sighed in defeat and drew her into a close embrace instead.

Her arms tightened around him as the sound of raised, angry voices came to their ears. Jonathan's breathing stopped suddenly, resuming with a heartfelt sigh of relief only when he determined that the shouting came from the opposite direction in which the others had fled.

She pressed closer to him, feeling him begin to tremble as the voices drew nearer. "I'm not letting you go this time," she said, a desperate reassurance as much to herself as to him. "Not this time. Not this time."

Closing her eyes, she repeated the words in a breathless litany, trying to shut out the voices and then the thudding of agitated horse's hooves that grew closer and louder with every second that, too slowly, passed.

Jonathan stiffened with a ragged gasp just as a strange voice bellowed in triumph. His arm wrapped around her head as he fell against her, taking her to the ground with his body covering hers. Past his shoulder, she caught a fleeting glimpse of an angry face above them, and sunlight flashing against polished metal as a sword was raised. Just as her mouth opened for the scream of pure despair that welled up inside her, the shouting stopped in mid-cry.

Her eyes flew up to stare, not at a sky filled with sun-gilded clouds, but a grey, featureless ceiling. Instead of distant birdsong, she heard only a dying mechanical whine and the soft clicks of power measurements returning to their null states.

Jonathan lay still against her, his uneven breathing muffled against her shoulder. As gently as she could, fighting against the panic building in chest, she pushed him onto his side, then scrambled to her knees to lean over him.

"Jonathan?" She cupped his face in her hands, smiling in relief as he edged his eyes open and his brow creased only in confusion, not pain. Dazed, he glanced around at the strange room, which completely empty except for them and a strange opalescent panel on a far wall. "Where are we?" he managed, acceding with a sigh when Laurie prevented him from trying to get to his feet.

"Almost home," she whispered with a smile. "You're almost home."

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She sat on the edge of the bed, clutching a towel tightly in her hands, but making no effort to use it despite the water dripping steadily from her hair. Jonathan lay curled up on his side, face buried in a pile of pillows, his own hair still damp from the shower. A wave of regret swept her as she watched him sleep, a contented smile fixed on his lips. She'd done the right thing by turning down his offer to share his shower with her. After all, his disappointed pout was nothing compared to the look of pure joy on his face when she'd presented him with a steaming cup of coffee when he emerged from the bathroom.

But even the healthy dose of caffeine combined with the surge of adrenaline that had overcome him after he'd realized, once and for all, that he was finally home, failed to keep him awake. Laurie daubed at her face with the towel, hating herself and congratulating herself. His intense reaction to her first hesitant attempt to remind him that she couldn't stay very much longer had convinced her that what she had to do was necessary. Even if it did tear at her heart to do it.

She reached over to gently pull the sheet over his raised shoulder. What would he do when he woke up to find that she'd gone? Would he realize that the massage she'd insisted on giving him before taking her own shower was not a kindness or even gentle foreplay, but simply an effective technique for easing him to sleep so that she could slip away without tears or recriminations...or goodbyes?

And would he really ever forgive her for that?

"It has to be this way," she whispered as much for herself as for the sleeping man next to her. "It has to. I'm sorry."

A distant knocking sound drew her from her reverie. She rose quickly, wrapping the towel around her head as she left the bedroom and headed for the front door.

"It *is* you!" was the exclamation that greeted her when she opened the door to Edgar Benedek's astonished face. "It really is you!"

Her breath caught as she stared at him, thirty years younger and clean-shaven, but no less vibrant and alive. And, she realized with a pang, no less dear, either. His name escaped her in a sigh as she extended her hands to him. He took them, but hesitated on the verge of saying something and squinted at her instead. Without a word, he threw his arms around her, squeezing tight. "What is it, what's wrong? What's going on here? Where's Jonathan? You said Jonathan was here, he's okay, isn't he? Are you okay?"

He kept up a stream of concerned questions as Laurie disentangled herself from him long enough to close the door, then take his arm to lead him in the living room. His face suddenly brightened as he studied the bulky sweatshirt--and nothing else--that she was wearing. "I got it! You spirited Jonathan off into the future with you for a little slap and tickle and you lost track of time!" Miming a quick rimshot, he waited for her confirmation and deflated when she looked away.

"Where is he?" he demanded dully when it became obvious that she couldn't speak or look him in the eye. "Let me see him."

"He's asleep." Laurie recovered with an effort, swiping hastily at her eyes. "Benny, we...we need to talk first. I, um... there's some things you need to know, things...."

He touched her arm when she lost her voice again, urging her to the sofa and sitting down next to her. "What's wrong?" he asked quietly when she lifted her head to look at his hand as it covered hers, squeezing gently. "Tell me. Is it Jonathan, is he...?"

"He's...he'll be fine," she assured him hesitantly. "With your help. He needs your help, and I...I need to ask for him because I'm not sure he will."

His grip tightened on her hand. "Tell me."

"Benny, first I need to know how long Jonathan's been missing."

"Six days," he told her, confused. "You don't know that?"

"I-I did, I just wanted to make sure. I didn't want it to be too soon and risk coming back to an apartment filled with police, but I didn't want to bring him back only to find that everyone had given up on him and...and...."

"Bring him back from where?" he prodded patiently when she paused to compose herself again. "Laurie, all the police found here was a broken lamp and some really weird bullet fragments. The only thing they could figure was that someone persuaded him to go somewhere with them...."

"They didn't suspect you, did they?" she asked, the sudden urgency in her voice causing him to blink in surprise.

"They tried, but they gave it up when even Dr. Moorhouse had to agree that I wouldn't have needed a gun." He frowned in confusion at the flash of relief that crossed her face. "Come on, Laurie, what's going on here? Was he with you?" When she shook her head, he pressed, "Then where?"

"All I can tell you," she began slowly, fighting for every word, "All I can tell you is that, although he's only been missing for six days, three years of his life are gone."

Benny stared at her intently, straining to comprehend. "Time travel," he decided. "Okay, that part makes sense, that's why you're here, right? So what you're telling me is that Jonathan's spent three years somewhere...somewhen else, but you're also saying that he didn't spend them with you. Then...then what else are you saying?" He spread his hands helplessly. "That it took you three whole years to find him?"

His eyes widened when she nodded. "Listen," he said, swallowing hard. "Before we get any farther than this, don't make the mistake of thinking that I understood anything I just said, okay?"

"I can't tell you why," she said, taking both of his hands in hers as she addressed the stunned look in his eyes. "I can't tell you how it happened or who was responsible because...because that's Jonathan's decision to make. It's up to him to decide when and how much he wants to tell you. What I can tell you is that the past three years of his life have been...an ordeal. He's going to need help adjusting and I need for you to give him that help."

"Ordeal," he repeated, eyes narrowing. "Define ordeal."

"I-I can't...."

"Come on, if you're gonna sit there and tell me you can't explain anything to me and then throw the word 'ordeal' at me, you've got to at least give me a hint. If you want me to help, then tell me what I'm up against."

She hesitated, quavered under the fierce light in his eyes, then acceded with a sigh. "All right. All right."

Rising, she led Benny by the hand to the bedroom door, gesturing him to silence as they entered. "Whoa," Benny breathed as he approached the bed and angled for a look at Jonathan's face, partially hidden in the pillows. "The prodigal prof! Well, he certainly doesn't look any the worse for wear, does--?"

A gasp splintered his voice as Laurie reached over and lifted the sheet from MacKensie's shoulder.

She replaced the sheet, lifting her head to meet Benny's eyes after a long moment of silence. In shock, he looked back at Jonathan, then at her again. When he spoke, his voice was as dull and colorless as his face. "Who did that to him?"

"He'll tell you, when he's ready," Laurie replied, returning her gaze to Jonathan's peaceful face. "But please, Benny...only when he's ready. I'm only showing you this because I know he can't hide this for long and I want...I need for you to know. To know that he's suffered; to have some small idea how he's suffered." She looked up, blinking hard as she drew a deep breath. "To get past the first shock, anyway," she said with a small, bitter laugh.

"First?" he echoed hollowly.

Jonathan stirred, startling her. Gesturing, she guided a reluctant Benedek out of the room, closing the door carefully behind them.

Still gray-faced and numb, Benny allowed her to guide him back to the sofa. "This is crazy," he managed between efforts to keep from hyperventilating. "Six days, he's been gone six days. We all thought he'd taken off for Tahiti or...or...."

She waited until he successfully forced himself to calm down before asking, "Did you tell anyone else you were coming here?"

"Dr. Moorhouse. But you know that, you called me at her place, didn't you?"

"What did you tell her?"

He grimaced, struggling to capture the memory in a mind that was roiling like a storm at sea. "That...that it was a mutual friend on the line, calling to tell me that Jonathan was back at his apartment. I told her not to call the police until I checked it out, though. She might call them anyway if I don't get in touch with her soon. She's probably climbing the walls right now."

"You have to talk with Jonathan first before you tell anyone else," Laurie said quietly. "You have to help him come up with some kind of explanation for his disappearance. Something that might also explain why his memory seems to have a three-year gap instead of a mere week. Benny, he needs your help."

"You keep saying that." He ran his fingers through his hair distractedly. "You keep saying that I have to help him, and...and, I'm sorry, I just don't think I can do that."

"Benny?" she whispered, aghast.

"Come on, what kind of help can I give him? What makes you think he'd even let me? Why do you think I can even--" He broke off suddenly, staring down fixedly at his tightly clasped hands. "Look, you don't understand. I just don't do 'help' all that well."

"Perhaps that's because no one has ever asked you," she told him gently.

"Yeah, well, maybe they know something you don't, did you ever think of that?"

She touched his face, smiling reassurance into his anxious, uncertain eyes. "But I do know something they don't. I realize I'm asking a lot of you, but it's nothing you're not capable of giving. I know, Benny. I *know*."

Fear faded from his eyes slowly as she held his gaze. "Am I really such a wonderful guy in your time?" he asked, half-chidingly.

The other half was an almost child-like plea for encouragement, and she had to pause a moment to keep her heart from saying something she might not be able to explain to him. "You *are* a wonderful guy," she said softly. "And if I hear one more negative word on the subject, I'm going to make you repeat it until you believe it."

"I like it better when you say it," he admitted grudgingly, relief banishing his dark expression.

She forced her hand away from his face and her emotions back under firm control. "I-I have to go soon. I can't be here when he wakes up."

"Oh, swell," he groaned, his forehead landing in one hand. "Deja vu. Did you at least say goodbye this time?"

He reached for her hand and missed as she rose abruptly from the sofa. "I'm sorry, that was a lousy thing to say...."

"There's a bundle of clothing near the bathroom door," she said briskly as she removed the towel from her head. "Burn them. Don't throw them away or give them to a charity, just burn them. I'll reimburse the costume shop for them, if they even remember renting them to us...me."

"Laurie...."

"Watch what he eats over the next few days, his system will need to readjust slowly. If you can get him to a doctor...."

"Laurie...."

"...he might fight you on that, but it's important that...that he...."

"Laurie."

He blocked her last attempt to dodge him, his voice low near her ear. For a moment, she stood rigid, towel twisted tightly between her hands. His arms were open and ready for her when she turned to him, dissolving into tears against his shoulder.

"I'll do my best," he assured her solemnly.

She sniffled in mild chagrin, lifting her head to smile at him. "I know you will."

A rueful look crept over his face. "Ah, I wish I had your faith," he sighed.

"It's not faith," she told him, tapping his nose with her finger. "I told you. I *know*."

His expression changed, becoming thoughtful. "I'm glad you were there for him. He's lucky to have someone like you."

She thanked him with a quick hug, averting her face in case her expression revealed more than simple gratitude for his sincerity. "Are you going to be okay?" she asked softly, in concern for the faint traces of distress still lingering behind his eyes.

"Me?" He snorted softly. "I'm fine. Always have been, always will be. It'll take more than this to knock the wind out of my sails. Come on, I should be the least of your worries."

Unable to find the words to assure him otherwise, she took his hand and gave it a warm squeeze. "It's almost time for me to leave."

"You, ah...planning to go back dressed like that?"

She glanced down, her face coloring. "Maybe he won't mind if I, um, borrowed a pair of pants, too."

"I think he'd insist on it," Benny grinned.

"Is...is there anything I can do for you before I go?"

He squinted up at the ceiling a moment, thinking. "Can you swing me by the guy who played tic-tac-toe on his back?"

Accepting her lopsided smile as his inevitable answer, he shook his head. Sighing, he leaned over to kiss her softly on the forehead. "Then...I guess I'll see you in thirty years."

She smiled at him, eyes shining with unshed tears. "I'll be waiting," she whispered.

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The strident whine faded into silence, taking her energy along with it. Sinking to her knees in the suddenly silent, empty room, she held her head between her hands until the mad whirl of lights and images behind her eyes eased.

Slowly, she forced herself to her feet and to the access door, stopping to look back one last time. *One last time*. That's what she'd thought when she'd arrived back here after helping Jonathan and Benny save a student from taking the first step on an ultimately destructive path. But she'd opened this door to a future altered beyond that which she'd anticipated. What would she find now? What if Jonathan had told Benny that it was his time travel theory Richter usurped in order to wreak his bizarre revenge? What if that knowledge affected Benny's decision to write his treasured proposal, let alone have it published? What if their knowledge of the lengths to which Richter would go to pursue his vengeance affected how they dealt with the man's misdeeds? What if....?

She shut off the whispering doubts in her head with a brisk shake of her head, opening the door leading to the main control room. All she needed to think about right now was getting out of here without being spotted by

anyone except Gary, the grad student who'd allowed her access to the accelerator in the first place, and then figuring out whether she had an apartment to go home to.

Someone shorter and slighter than Gary stood at the primary power station, back turned to her. She jumped back with a gasp, scrambling desperately for some kind of acceptable explanation for what she was doing in the focusing chamber. The stranger turned just as she spotted Gary, lying in a crumpled heap near the far door.

"You!" she breathed, in horror as Richter blinked at her in surprise. "You...you...."

Fear snapped away as she focused on Richter's hands poised on the main control panel. "You get away from there, right now," she growled in mounting fury. "Get away from there, or I swear, I'll kill you."

"You'll kill me?" He laughed suddenly, a high-pitched, unnatural sound. "You'll do that, will you? Yes, you will. Of course you will. I would if I were you. I wouldn't even have to be you. I'd kill me if I were me, too."

Her eyes narrowed as Richter leaned against the console and lowered his head, chuckling uncontrollably. "But I am me, aren't I? At least I used to be, before I became someone else. Someone...someone else...."

He lifted his head to stare blankly at the control panel, not moving or speaking. Laurie sidled carefully around the perimeter of the room to reach her fallen friend's side. Just as she crouched down to touch Gary's shoulder, Richter turned suddenly, causing her to flinch back with a cry.

"Is he all right?" Genuine concern filtered through the confusion in Richter's face and voice. "Oh, I hit him, didn't I? Was that me? It must have been me. Which me, I wonder? He's all right, isn't he? One of me really must apologize."

Out of the corner of her eye, Laurie spotted what Gary must have been going for when Richter struck him: the security alarm. She reached for it, waiting to see how the man would react. He focused on her motion, and her hand froze, hovering above the touch-switch. "I came here for a reason," he murmured, one hand lifted as though to capture an elusive memory. "I did, I came here for a reason. What was it? Don't--" His voice rose sharply, stopping her hand's slow movement toward the switch. "Don't do that, not until I figure this out."

She stared at him, anger boiling into sudden white-hot rage. "Stop me," she snarled, slamming her hand down.

His hands dropped to his sides with a resigned shrug. "Ah, well," he sighed, easing down into an operator station chair. "It probably wasn't that important."

Gary groaned, lifting his hand to his forehead. By the time she'd determined that his only injury was a large lump on the back of his head and had eased him to a sitting position, campus security came crashing through the door.

"Where've you been?" Gary said, one eye on the commotion raised by Richter's insistence that he had to find his other self before he could leave, and the security officers' firm assertions that the man they were carefully but firmly hauling out of the room was the only him they were interested in. "I've been here all night waiting for you, I was really starting to get worried. Who is that guy? Why'd he hit me? What's going on around here?"

His last question was echoed almost immediately by a familiar, accented voice, belonging to the tiny, vastly confused man who stalked indignantly into the control room, railing at the departing security officers who ignored his repeated demands for an explanation. Laurie looked up, breaking out in a smile of relief. "Dr. Ghaemi," she breathed.

The scientist adjusted his bifocals to peer down at them. "Miss Wilson? Mr. Kasner? Would you care to explain this unseemly disturbance?"

"I would, professor, but I've got to get Gary here to the infirmary," she improvised, helping the still-dazed young man to his feet. "And I'm sure security will want to talk to him...."

"I want to talk to him! I want to talk to both of you! I want both of you to talk to me! I want to know what is going on here! I want...why do you look at me that way, Miss Wilson?"

She stifled a laugh for the comical look of suspicion on his face. "I'm sorry, it's just...oh, you just don't know how good it is to see you, professor."

Gary swayed, distracting Ghaemi from demanding clarification for her odd remark. "I take him, I take him," he said, gesturing peremptorily. Laurie eased her friend over to Ghaemi's support, and, as the older man carefully guided Gary's stumbling steps out of the room, she heard him complain, "Security, I tell them, I need more security, this is top priority project, very dangerous stuff, I need more security, but do they listen? Who let that madman Richter in here? What did he think he was doing? Will someone tell me that? Miss Wilson!"

She sprinted to the door, looking down the hallway. "Yes, sir?"

Gary leaned heavily against the small man as Ghaemi half-turned toward her. "This unfortunate business has interrupted my meeting. I will request for you to make the proper apologies for my absence. Room 204, please. Thank you."

"But...I...Professor, wait, I can't...." She gave up with a dispirited sigh when Ghaemi ignored her protest, hauling Gary with him around the corner.

All her legs wanted to do was tread a straight path to her apartment and a long-overdue appointment with her bed, but she forced them in the direction of the stairway and Room 204 instead. With luck, she'd be able to get away with poking her head in the room and escape without too many awkward questions.

Drawing a deep breath, she tapped lightly on the partially open door and reached for the knob. It jumped away from her hand, sending her back with a startled gasp. She stared up at the man who was regarding her with an equally surprised look. "Laurie! What are you doing here so early in the morning?"

She kept staring, aware of the inane smile growing on her face despite her best effort to stifle it. "Benny," she whispered.

But the look in his eye was only mild confusion, nothing more. She suddenly realized that he only knew her as one of his graduate research students, and the realization made her heart twist with an intensity that caused her to wince visibly. Recovering with a firm shake of her head, she stammered, "I mean, uh...Dr. Benedek. Hi. Uh...Dr. Ghaemi asked me to...."

"Are you all right?" he interrupted, squinting at her. "You look pale."

"I-I'm fine, I...."

"Well, you don't look fine," he decided firmly. "You look like you're going to fall over on your nose." Taking her by the arm, he drew her into the room despite her weak protests. "It's all this excitement and carrying on, that's what it is. Come in, sit down and tell us all about what's happening downstairs."

"No, really, Be--Dr. Benedek, I have to...."

She lost her voice with her breath when the other occupant of the room, seated near the head of the conference table, looked up from his notebook and smiled. "Good morning, Miss Wilson," Jonathan MacKensie greeted her politely.

Her legs gave out, sending her heavily into the chair Benedek provided for her at the head of the table, next to Jonathan. She tried not to stare at him as his expression turned quizzical. "Are you all right?" he asked, concerned.

"I'm fine," she said faintly, lowering her eyes to her hands, tightly folded in her lap. "Just...tired, that's all."

Benedek straightened, lifting his hand to his ear. "Hold on, someone's paging me."

"Are you sure you're all right?" MacKensie queried as Benedek turned away to carry on a terse, one-sided conversation with the voice in his ear. "Benedek's right, you do look pale."

"No, really, I'm fine," she said, making an effort to brighten the smile on her face. "Thank you."

He leaned back in his chair, inclining his head as he studied her. "I haven't seen a fleece sweatshirt like that in nearly twenty years," he realized.

"Oh, this." She cleared her throat, plucking nervously at the mismatched pants that were being held up by a clumsy knot at the waistband and a prayer. "I guess I was in such a rush, I just put on the first things I found in a drawer."

"Indeed." He kept staring, his puzzled expression freezing as though he were trying to recall something. "You know, I once owned a shirt very similar to that one. Very similar."

"Really?" she said, failing miserably at feigning genuine surprise. "That's...that interesting, that's, um...."

He leaned to the left, looking down at her feet. Too late she remembered that she wore no shoes, just the pair of dark socks she'd rummaged from a top drawer. Hoping to distract him, she gave him a bright smile as she tucked her feet under the chair. "I mean, that's interesting that we, uh...have the same taste in clothes," she offered lamely. "Don't you think?"

With a long, wordless exclamation of amazement, Benedek turned back. "You'll never guess, never in a million years, you will *never* guess."

"You're absolutely right, because I have no intention of guessing," MacKensie told him impatiently.

Eyes alight, he leaned over the back of Laurie's chair. "They caught Alvin Richter in the accelerator control room."

"Richter?" Jonathan exclaimed, aghast. "I thought they had that bastard safely tucked away in some high security hospital."

"Looks like he kicked the covers off. And get this--he had a gun with him."

"My god," Jonathan breathed. "Did he hurt anyone?"

"Apparently he gave one of Mehdi's assistants a headache with the side of his hand, but the kid's okay. Oh, the campus police are looking for you." Laurie jumped nervously as he lightly tapped her shoulder. "They want to ask you a few questions. I told them I'd send you down to them soon."

"You were involved in this...this incident?" Horror colored his voice as he extended his hand across the table in open sympathy. "My dear, no wonder you look so distressed. He didn't threaten you, did he?"

"No," she assured him with a strained smile. "No, he, um...he was pretty harmless, actually."

"I'm sure Mehdi's assistant would have something to say about that," Benedek said with a chuckle. "Well. Well, well, well. I guess you know what this means, don't you?"

She lowered her head into her hand, rubbing tiredly at her eyes as MacKensie replied slowly, "Yes. Yes, I believe I do indeed know exactly what this means."

In the silence that followed, she lifted her head, blinking in surprise when Benedek's hands closed gently on her shoulders. Across the table, Jonathan was regarding her with an odd look in his eyes. As she considered it warily, Benedek bent down close to her ear to whisper, "Welcome back."

Jonathan rose, extending his hands to her. She stared at him, unable to move or speak or do anything except look upon the face that no longer held benign paternalistic concern for a weary, strangely dressed student. Then Benny's hands did what she couldn't get her own muscles to do. They lifted her from the chair and pushed

her, firmly but gently, forward. Her hands glided into Jonathan's, her fingers grasping with sudden intensity. And still she stared, utterly lost in the light glowing in his eyes, the light that suffused his face and smoothed away all the years. And when he spoke, his voice was as clear and as steady as if thirty years had been only yesterday. "Welcome back," he smiled warmly.

Laughter bubbled up from deep inside her, breaking her paralysis. He threw his arms around her, lifting her from her feet with the sheer force of his embrace until she gasped for breath. But he'd no sooner set her down than their lips met in a deep, passionate kiss.

"Hey, hey," Benny cajoled when one long moment turned into another, then another. "Equal time, come on here."

Jonathan released her reluctantly, but not without a mock dark glare at a smug Benedek as he gave Laurie a warm welcome of his own, with a fierce hug and a resounding kiss on the cheek. "It's about time you got here. We've been tiptoeing around you for nearly six years now."

She glanced at him, startled, then back at Jonathan, who returned her look with a slightly embarrassed one of her own. "Oh." Her eyes widened. "Oh. So that's...oh. I remember now. All those times you looked at me like...like I'd just done something really stupid, or...or...oh, it all makes sense now."

Benedek placed his hands on her shoulder, leaning close to study her intently. "What else do you remember?"

Confused, she shook her head. "I-I don't...what do you mean?"

"Jonathan said you mentioned something to him, about Richter. About how he destroyed himself by changing his own history?"

Realization made her blood run cold. "The memories," she stammered weakly. "He had both memories, he...he couldn't handle...."

"What else do you remember?" Benedek repeated with soft urgency.

Flustered, she closed her eyes, struggling to regain control. Benedek's grip on her shoulders tightened. "Where did you take your undergraduate degree?"

"Georgetown," she replied, and her eyes came open with the surge of dawning hope. "Bachelor of Science."

"What major?"

"Metaphysics with a quantum physics minor," she breathed.

"Who taught your undergraduate course in Native American Cultures?"

She turned her head, eyes glowing. "Professor Jonathan MacKensie."

"And who's the guy who's still hasn't gotten around to approving your curriculum change request from yesterday?"

"You." Laughing in pure delight, she threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. "You!"

"Congratulations," he said, patting her back. "You're sane for life."

"Are you sure?" she asked, suddenly anxious. "I mean, *can* you be sure?"

"Hey, it's my theory, isn't it?" he said, mocking offense. "Actually, I've been kinda interested in the ramifications ever since Jonathan mentioned it to me. So, I managed to get my hands on Richter's psych profiles a while back. His, ah... 'illness' manifested about eight years ago, just after he lost his last court appeal. Apparently

he claimed that his future self came to visit him with promises of success and fortune, and it was all downhill from there." He paused, arching his eyebrow ruefully. "From what I can figure, that was the mistake you didn't make. You started at one place and came back to the same place, without the backtracking detour. So you're safe. Trust me."

He spoke matter-of-factly, with the air of a scientific professional, but she gave him a grateful smile acknowledging that he'd already betrayed the real reason he'd investigated Richter's illness so carefully. "You're the expert," she demurred. "Thank you, Dr. Be--"

His hand shot up, one finger raised warningly. "Benny," she corrected herself with a laugh. "Thank you-- for everything."

She stole a glance over her shoulder as she spoke and Benny nodded his acknowledgement with a nonchalant shrug. "I'm just a wonderful guy," he assured her airily, giving her arm a comradely jab. "Someone told me that once."

"Only once?" Eyes dancing, she leaned forward to give him a quick kiss on the cheek.

He grinned, mocking wide-eyed surprise. "Well, at least twice, now," he winked. "Listen, the campus stormtroopers are still squawking in my ear here, and...."

His expression sobered abruptly as he lifted his hand to his ear again. "Richter's babbling your name," he told Jonathan. "They're asking you to come down to the office and, uh...."

He left the sentence unfinished as MacKensie glanced away and then back again, with no other movement or reaction. "Right," he sighed. "Look, I think I'll head down there and peel Mehdi off them. That ought to earn me their undying gratitude for life. I'll get you off the hook, I promise," he told Laurie, patting her arm.

She caught his hand, giving it a grateful squeeze as he moved away. At the door, he paused. "Oh, call my admin with the date, okay?"

"Date?" she echoed, puzzled.

"Yeah," he grinned. "I'm giving the bride away, right?"

She hid an embarrassed smile behind her hand. As Benny ducked out the door, Jonathan moved up behind her, placing his hands gently on her upper arms. "Cluck, cluck," he intoned, close to her ear.

The familiar epithet brought a giggle to her lips as she leaned back against him. "Oh, yes, Professor 'Mother Hen'. We used to wonder how he managed his course load and his research-in-progress when he seemed to spend most of his time helping everyone else solve their problems."

Her voice trailed off as a memory tugged at her. In the silence, Jonathan turned her around to face him. "He claims it's an inevitable result of his natural inclination to mind everyone else's business, but I think that you and I know better, don't we?"

"Do we?" she said uncertainly.

"Years ago, Edgar Benedek, the devil-may-care *bon vivant*, discovered, much to everyone's surprise, that he was good at helping people. Although, I must admit that his first attempts leading to this realization weren't greeted very enthusiastically. But that wasn't his fault. The circumstances were...difficult. And I'm entirely to blame for that. It took me a long time to realize that I was acting out resentment because, well...because he wasn't you."

"Jonathan," she quavered, an anguished apology.

"No, I understand," he assured her fervently. "I do understand, now. But it did take time. Quite frankly, I'm not sure I ever would have believed that he had anything to offer or that he was even willing to give it if I hadn't already gotten a glimpse of him that went far and beyond the narrow limits of my prejudices."

He paused to gently brush away a tear that had escaped from her brimming eyes. "I never got the chance to thank either one of you for saving my life. And that's what hurt the most, you know."

She shook her head firmly. "I have all the thanks I need, right here," she insisted. "And from what I can tell--and what I remember--you've been thanking Benny for the past thirty years."

Sniffing in mild chagrin, she lowered her head for a moment. "Did you tell him what happened?"

"Not everything. He knows about Richter, and pretty much everything about the three years of my life I lost because of him. He helped me keep my perspective--and my temper--during the ethics investigation and later during the court trials and appeals process." Smiling suddenly, he pulled up his sleeve to expose his wrist. "He also found me the best plastic surgeon in the business."

In wonder, she touched his hand, lined and covered with a sprinkling of age-spots, his wrist marked only by a few tiny, precise surgical scars. "But I never told him about his, ah...counterpart," Jonathan continued, growing serious again. "It wasn't something I thought was important for him to know. I wasn't sure he could handle it."

"That's probably wise," she agreed, but her voice failed as a memory overwhelmed her.

His hand went to the side of her face as she averted it from him, pressing gently but not forcing her to look at him. A moment passed in silence, then: "He loved you."

Tears slipped from her eyes as she closed them, in pain. A sob escaped her despite the trembling hand she pressed to her mouth, despite knowing that her inability to speak or look at him gave him the answer to the question he left unspoken.

His fingers caressed her face, smoothing away the tears. "I'm glad he was there for you," he whispered earnestly.

She lifted her head to regard him uncertainly. "How could I not be?" he assured her with a warm smile. "He brought you to me, despite knowing what it would cost him in the end. How could I not be?"

Every attempt she made to speak failed until, finally, she accepted his silent offer to allow her to give full vent to her grief safely enfolded in his arms.

After a time, she recovered enough to lift her head and pat his damp shoulder with some embarrassment. "I'd have thought I'd be all cried out by now," she murmured with a thin laugh.

"You've been through a lot in a very short time. It's rather understandable. Especially since you hadn't anticipated his decision to stay behind. I remember how distressed you were. I suspect you haven't had the time to come to terms with that as yet."

She gave him a wan smile, grateful for the genuine warmth in his voice. "I only wish I knew if...." Shaking her head, she finished the thought with a forlorn sigh.

"Ah." With a sudden, odd smile, he moved away from her, tugging her along by the hand. "I have something to show you."

He placed her in a chair at the conference table, then pulled up another chair to seat himself next to her. Activating his notebook, he angled the screen toward her as he requested the retrieval of a stored query result. "I've become known as something of an expert on eleventh century Anglo-Saxon culture and mores," he told her as he flipped rapidly through a dizzying array of text and graphic screens, "although Benedek is the only one, besides you, who knows the real reason why, of course. I'm also on the board of directors and the advisory board of a consortium formed by several universities around the world to finance and implement a rather ambitious archaeological project in the south of England. With those two facts kept well in mind, the G.I. delegation involved with the project were particularly intrigued with the discovery of...this."

She leaned forward as he froze the image, her eyes widening. "Your plate!"

"I first learned that it had been uncovered when one of the G.I. team leaders called me to express his feelings on the matter of elaborate and inappropriate practical jokes. I persuaded him to send it to me before anyone decided to run tests on it and discover that it really was nearly a thousand years old. I, uh...I've never shown it to Benedek. By the time it was mentioned to him in passing by someone involved in the excavations, I was able to convince him that I couldn't remember how I'd disposed of it."

"But...why?"

"Because of this." He tapped a key and the image on the screen rotated to reveal the reverse side of the plate.

When she squinted and leaned closer, he obligingly increased the magnification until she could clearly see that there was another inscription on the plate. The names "Edgar" and "Johanna" were etched deeply into the metal, surrounded by a lopsided heart. Underneath were two stick figures, labeled "John" and "Mark", and a date: July 1075.

She repeated the year in a voice stolen by a surge of excitement. "Jonathan, does this mean what I think it means?"

"It means exactly what you think it means," he assured her.

With a cry of joy, she pressed both hands to her mouth, unmindful of the tears that spilled freely from her eyes. "He did it. I don't know how, but he did it."

"I think I do," Jonathan said, an odd look coming over his face. "Know how he did it, I mean. Well, really, it's no more than a guess, and I can't even begin to explain how it could possibly be true, but...."

"What?" she prodded when he paused and seemed about to dismiss his words as hastily spoken. "Tell me."

"Just a short while ago, a few moments after Mehdi got the call from security, we were sitting here updating our notes. And he asked me how my daughter was doing at Berklee. Perfectly normal small talk, especially when you consider the fact that he's the one who gave her the violin for her eighth birthday, but...." He paused again, reviewing the memory from a new perspective. "But he said it in perfectly understandable Anglo-Saxon. And had no idea that he'd done it. Believe me, I know when he's pulling an elaborate practical joke--and this was no joke."

"What do you think it means?"

"I think it means that he's connected to...to his other self, for lack of a better term. Or that he's the same person and is somehow living both lives at the same time. Or that...I really have no idea," he gave up with a sigh.

"But if he's living both lives, he'll have both sets of memories...." she began, voice filled with dread.

"Can you think of anyone better suited than Edgar Benedek to adapt, unscathed, to the situation?" Jonathan smiled at her reassuringly. "We'll keep a close eye on him, of course, but something tells me that we really have nothing to worry about. He's already convinced he's been reincarnated over a dozen times, this will be just one more past life to him."

She gazed down at his hand, which had reached across the table to take hers in a firm, gentle grip, and gasped softly. "Jonathan--your ring."

Without releasing her hand, he glanced down at his ring finger and its telltale scar betraying the absence of a solid gold wedding band. "It was time," he assured her quietly. "It's been nearly two years now. I wish I could tell you that it was because I knew that you...." He sighed, shaking his head. "It was time."

"No, I'm...I'm glad I wasn't the reason," she said, lifting her head so that he could see the genuine relief in her eyes. "I wouldn't want the implication that I was taking her place. I couldn't. No one could."

Some of the sadness left his face as he smile gratefully at her. "Then perhaps we should think about discussing the new order of things."

She stepped hard on the surge of elation precipitated by his words. "We, um...we really should think about taking things slowly. People aren't exactly going to understand how this--this new order came about so quickly."

"People?" he echoed with an exaggerated shrug of unconcern. "Like whom?"

"My mother, for one. Oh, she'll be furious."

"The age difference?" he sniffed in disdain.

"No, because I didn't give her first crack at you," she laughed. "And what about your children? Jonathan, I'm only a few years older than your eldest daughter."

"They'll be happy for me," he pronounced firmly. "Because I say they will. And they already have their trust funds," he added with a gleam. He reached across the table to take her other hand in a warm clasp. "I have a wonderful idea. Let's just worry about us for a while. We have plenty of time to worry about other people."

She gazed at him, suddenly and inexplicably certain that, given what each of them had survived to reach each other and this moment, all other concerns were insignificant by comparison. "Yeah," she murmured, willingly losing herself in the welcoming light of his eyes. "We have all the time in the world."