

Maelstrom

Part I: Too Long at the Fair

by M.D. Bloemker

The diner was deserted save for the waitress who had, for some reason even she was beginning to question, volunteered to stay on until closing. Her two co-workers had long since departed into the rain that had been sheeting down from a roiling black sky since early afternoon. Stifling a yawn, Betty checked her watch. No customers had been through the door since the storm had first broken. And the rain showed no sign of relenting, which she'd secretly hoped would happen in time to keep her walk home uncomplicated. With less than an hour until closing, she decided with a sigh that there was no sense staying a fool about it.

She rose, tossing her magazine under the counter. Crossing to the door, she paused to loosen her apron before reaching up to turn over the sign, then stopped, blinking in surprise. Someone emerged from the driving rain, heading for the door of the diner.

She hurried to pull the man inside. "Oh, honey," she clucked, shouldering the door shut against a relentless gust of wind. "You're either real desperate or a damned fool."

Shaking himself out like a wet dog, the man looked up at her, a bright smile beaming through sodden strands of hair streaking his face. "A little of both, I'm told," he assured her cheerily.

She returned his smile, amazed to see the stranger in such good spirits considering his condition and circumstances of his arrival. There was something about him that she liked instantly, and her maternal instincts surfaced. "Oh, here...." She tugged the wet sports coat from his shoulders. "Honey, you look a right fright. Let me get you some towels."

He followed her to the counter, chuckling self-deprecatingly. "That'll be great," he told her warmly. "A cup of java would be even better, as hot and as black as you can make it, heavy on the caffeine."

She produced a roll of paper towels from beneath the counter, spread his sports coat across a stool in front of the ovens and snared the half-full pot of coffee from the burner with fluid, practiced movements that the man watched in delighted fascination. He slid onto a stool at the counter, and the coffee cup was in his hand less than a moment later. He sighed his thanks, taking a long, grateful gulp.

"Caught you driving?" she said, nodding out toward the storm lashing at the windows. "Something else I can get you?"

He waved that the coffee was enough for now, taking another sip before answering her first question. "Hit like hell's own fury back on 113. But I wanted to make Lannerton by nightfall. How close did I get?"

She smiled, amused. "Congrats, honey. This *is* Lannerton."

His smile was brief, but oddly relieved as he tore off sheets of toweling to rub away the rainwater still streaming down his face and neck. She fussed a little over him, giving herself a moment to appreciate the rather good-looking boyish features revealed by their joint efforts. "You need to use the phone or anything?" she asked as she disposed of a mass of damp toweling.

"Naw." He produced a comb, tidying his disarray of hair. "The name of a good motel would be nice, though."

She shook her head, still marveling at the cheery note in the man's voice. "You're in a pretty good mood for someone who must have been driving in that mess for the better part of two hours." Her voice trailed off as she squinted at the first unobstructed view she'd had of the man's face since his arrival. Recognition widened her eyes. "Hey. I know you. Yeah! I've seen you on Donahue—and Merv! I've got all your books!"

He straightened, his smile brightening as she continued burbling, "Can you beat that? Wait until Gary and Cathy hear that Edgar Benedek was in our diner! Oh, gosh. Oh, gosh." She stared at him, mouth agape for a long moment before common sense finally snapped her out of it. "What in the world brings you to a wide spot in the road like Lannerton? The only haunted house we ever had here burned down twenty years ago!"

He gestured nonchalantly. "I'm doing one of those Travel in America things, you know—the highways and byways, pulse of the heartland stuff."

"Yeah," she nodded, thinking hard now. "Yeah, come to think of it, I haven't seen you on any of the shows for a while. Matter of fact, I've been missing your stuff in the Register, too. I really liked that last series of yours, what was it? 'Famous Monsters I Have Known'. That one was great, really great." Her smile faded slightly as she caught the subtle change that came over the man's face as she spoke. "I guess this new project's been keeping you busy."

"Yeah," he agreed readily, but the smile that had once been genuine now looked wan and forced. "Yeah, I've been ...busy."

"Hey," she said thoughtfully, a memory pushing itself forward. "I remember, you were working with a partner for a while." She squinted up at the ceiling, missing the furtive tension that crossed Benedek's face. "Yeah—some university professor from back East? You guys were doing some great stuff. Is he still around?"

The light in the man's eyes died as she spoke, giving her a bad moment to suspect she might have said something wrong. But he mustered up another smile, assuring her, "Oh, yeah. Yeah, he's still around. Matter of fact, he's working this gig with me, but we, ah...we sorta got our wires crossed. He was supposed to take a connecting flight from Dallas to Paris, Illinois. Ended up in France instead." He gave her a sly wink. "I'm still not convinced it was an honest mistake."

His chuckle was infectious, and she joined in, but not without the nagging feeling that she had touched on something that would have been better off left alone.

A change of subject seemed politic. "Oh, hey, listen, are you going to be in Lannerton for a time? I'd be ever so tickled if you'd autograph a few of your books for me. I could bring them in tomorrow, and lunch'll be on me?"

"Sure." Some life returned to his manner; his smile became jaunty again. "Anything for a loyal fan."

"Are you sure there isn't anything more I can get you?" she fluttered, unsure whether her nervousness was because of her excitement over meeting a real celebrity or residual concern that she'd somehow managed to genuinely upset the man.

"Maybe you can tell me if you've heard anything about a carnival coming to town."

She blinked, confused by the conversation's sharp turn as well as the strange intensity with which he regarded her. "Oh—yeah, as a matter of fact..." Reaching under the cash register, she pulled out a sheet of paper to hand over to him. "Somebody came by yesterday with these."

As far as Betty was concerned, this guy was full of surprises—his expression as he studied the flyer reminded her of a child granted his fondest wish. Mentally she shrugged it off; she'd met a few carnival enthusiasts in her time, and anyone who could write the kind of books that Edgar Benedek wrote undoubtedly felt obsessions more keenly than most. "You can keep that if you want, they left a pile," she told him.

The smile he gave her had genuine gratitude in it. "Thanks. You don't know how long I—" He broke off, shaking his head as he read down the flyer. To himself, he repeated softly, "You don't know."

"Well, I wouldn't really get my hopes up just yet," she told him kindly. "They were supposed to pull in today, but I expect this weather's going to change their minds about that. And the ground's gonna take at least a week to dry out, so I wouldn't be surprised if they have to end up cancelling the whole thing."

He folded the paper carefully, tucking it away into his shirt pocket. "I suppose they might," he agreed mildly, draining the last of his coffee. "But I don't think they will. How much do I owe you?"

She waved him off. "On the house. It's not everyday I get to shoot the breeze with a real live celebrity. Don't forget about tomorrow."

"Forget a free lunch served to me by Bo Derek's twin sister?" Grabbing up her hand, he planted a gallant kiss on her knuckles while taking a quick glance at her nameplate. "Til the morrow, Betty. Now—which way to the nearest hot shower, lumpy bed, and cable TV?"

Harmon's Midway Carnival and Circus Side Show.

There was barely enough light to make out the printing on the crumpled sheet of paper, but he'd already memorized it, every single word and exclamation point. He knew what it said. What he still didn't know was what it meant.

The rain was gone, leaving only the chill wind that ripped at his clothes, sinking its icy claws into the depths of his bones. A jumble of inky clouds boiled overhead, lanced by brilliant flashes of pale moonlight glinting gold off wet leaves and scattered still pools of rainwater.

He'd found a hill overlooking the pasture where the motel manager told him the carnival would establish itself upon arrival. Standing on the crest afford him an unobstructed view down onto the eerily silent tableau. Tents, vans, trailers and trucks huddled haphazardly, all unlighted, all still. In the gloom, he could make out figures diminished by distance moving among the litter, but no sound reached his ears save the sigh of the relentless wind.

Spread out before him was the end of his search, the culmination of three months of anger and frustration and, at times he preferred not to think about, overwhelming despair. The arduous quest was over. Now came the real test.

It would be madness to make his move now. Darkness was their time. He didn't know enough about what he was facing to risk giving them any kind of advantage. Morning would have to be soon enough. His patience had held fast over the long weeks and would have to carry him through the next few hours.

But it took every ounce of willpower he could muster just to turn away. Pausing, he looked back over his shoulder, then down at the paper in his hand. After a moment, he let it slip from his fingers. The wind whipped it into a brief, manic dance before sweeping it toward the black objects below. He felt a curious release as he watched it disappear from sight. Morning. Morning would be soon enough. The phrase carried him down the road, back toward Lannerton and his dreary motel room.

Harmon's Midway Carnival and Circus Side Show.

He squinted against the morning sun to peer up at the garishly painted archway. Shouts and sounds of spirited construction surrounded him. The men assembling the ticket booth glanced disinterestedly at him as he strolled past onto the grounds itself.

He wandered for a time unaccosted, none of the people hurrying back and forth between trailers and tents giving him more than a passing look. Turning a corner, he found himself staring at a large, worn painted canvas advertising the gypsy fortune-teller. His throat tightened as he moved to inspect it more closely. Amateurish brush strokes defaced the original work; black paint covered hair he knew was once the color of fire, black paint dotted eyes he knew had been clear blue. Even the chin and cheekbone structure had suffered under the awkward alteration.

Anger flooded him, and he fought it down as fiercely as he'd done all other strong emotions of late. After a moment to collect himself, he looked up at the canvas again, and a sad smile crept onto his face. "Sorry, Lady Carmen," he spoke softly, almost a sigh. "I tried. I really did try."

He stopped himself, shaking his head. There was no time for self-recrimination, not when there was so much to do, and so little time to figure out how he was going to do it.

Making his way deeper into the maze, he worked back through the trailers and vans until he found himself among the animal cages. So far he'd seen no sign of the red tent. While he could stay calm by reassuring himself that it hadn't yet been erected, a suspicion that he was being taunted persisted. Somehow they knew he was here, and were toying with him, keeping just out of sight and just out of reach.

Then he spotted someone over by the empty animal cages. With a thrill of triumph, he recognized the man: a carnival roustabout, one of Harmon's most trusted workers. He paused, considering a risky course of action. Coming here as he had, with no real plan, no real idea of what he was going to do, this suddenly seemed to be the perfect time to take a risk.

Bent under a cage, the roustabout didn't hear Benedek's stealthy approach. With a feral growl, Benedek pounced, snagging the man by the back of the collar and slamming him hard against the side of the van.

Collapsing with a howl of pain and surprise, the man cradled his head as he sprawled in the dust. In a flash, Benedek planted a knee in the man's chest, pinning him to the ground. "Hi there, Billy," he snarled. "Remember me?"

Billy blinked up at him in confusion. Then, suddenly, he erupted in a mocking laugh. "You again!"

Twisting his fingers into the fabric of Billy's worn shirt, he yanked hard, cutting off the man's laugh and his breath with it. "Yeah—me again. Lucky you."

"Hey, c'mon, get off," Billy suggested, unperturbed by either Benedek's assault or the blind fury in his attacker's face.

"After you tell me, once and for all—where is he?"

"Once and for all—I don't know," he mocked, grimacing comically. "C'mon, get off."

Benedek leaned all his weight on his knee until he forced a strangled cry out of the man. "Let's be reasonable about this, okay? I'm going to ask you just once more, and I want an answer this time. If he's alive, I want to know where he is. If he's dead, I want to know where he's buried. That's not too complicated for you, is it?"

"Okay, okay," Billy said, looking more peeved than alarmed despite the manic intensity suffusing Benedek's face. "Go talk to Harmon."

"I'm talking to you."

"And I'm telling you, you gotta talk to Harmon. I'm only the hired help around here, okay? You want to know something—talk to Harmon."

Benedek released him roughly, getting to his feet while suppressing a wild urge to kick the grinning man's teeth in. It didn't help his mood to realize that he'd just gotten the answer he knew he'd get. Billy gave him an affronted look, dusting himself off as he rose to his feet. "Do you mind?" he said in mild irritation. "I've got work to do here."

"Where's Harmon's office?" Benedek demanded shortly.

"Keep going." Billy bent down to resume his task, pausing only long enough to give the man a long, knowing look. "Don't worry. You'll find it."

Billy's mocking laughter rang in his ears as he spun on his heel and stalked off, deeper into the dark passageways formed by deserted trailers.

He hadn't gone far before he spotted another roustabout mucking out a horse pen. Jumping behind a van for cover, he peered out to study the man carefully. He'd caught only a glimpse of the worker's face, enough to set off a flash of recognition. All he could see was the top of the man's dark head and his back as he bent to his task, and he opted to wait until the man straightened or turned around so that he could get a better look.

The roustabout swung his shovel at a horse whose tail flicked near his face, punctuating the jab with a coarse oath. Two shovelfuls later, he straightened, wiping his grimy face against the sleeve of a work shirt that had seen better years. Delivering another cheerful curse at the unperturbed horse, he climbed out of the enclosure, and grabbed up a brown bottle from a nearby bench. As he swallowed the contents in one long gulp, Benedek got his first clear look at the man's face.

It felt as though someone drove a blade of ice into his gut, twisting with each wrenching stab. He couldn't breathe; couldn't move. He could only watch, paralyzed, as the roustabout tossed the empty bottle over his shoulder and picked up his shovel. Pausing to rub his unshaven chin against his sleeve once more, he addressed another amiable obscenity at the animal as he moved off.

The roustabout pulled up short when Benedek suddenly blocked his way. Irritation flashed across the worker's face as he retreated a step, eyeing Benedek narrowly. "Something I can do for you, pal?" he asked, his voice a coarsened growl.

He couldn't speak yet, still held fast in the icy grip of cold horror. All he could do was stare. There was no question left in his mind, which still violently rebelled at the truth before him. He knew that face too well. The hard and bitter hazel eyes, cruelly sneering mouth; harsh voice, unkempt hair, grime-smearred face with a week's growth of beard stubble, all were features of some grotesque mask overlaying the face of a man he'd spent over three months trying to find.

It took everything he had left in him, everything that hadn't been lost in the first moments of overwhelming horror, to force himself to speak. "Jonathan?"

The man laughed shortly. "Nah. Got the wrong guy, buddy." He started to move past, but Benedek's hand shot out, gripping the man's arm like a vise. The roustabout tensed, on guard. "Hands off, pal," he rasped ominously. "I told you, you got the wrong guy. My name's Lon. Got that?"

He shook his arm free, giving Benedek a strange mocking sneer strikingly similar to the one Billy gave him only moments before. His sharp laughter echoed as he pushed past Benedek, disappearing around a corner without another look back.

Benedek watched him go, unable to move or react. For the first time, the full realization of what he didn't know crashed down, pressing against his chest until he had to force himself to breathe. He'd been operating on vague clues, which had in turn only hinted at a greater blackness lurking beyond; while he thought he was prepared for anything, nothing had prepared him for this.

Something scabbled for a foothold in the midst of his turmoil. How could it be possible for that rough, crude roustabout to be the sophisticated, erudite professor of anthropology for whom Benny had searched for more than three months? For that matter, how could that same professor, who suffered from severe allergic reactions to all types of animals, be the same roustabout who'd been cheerfully mucking out a horse corral?

And, for that matter, if they were indeed the same person—why hadn't Jonathan recognized him?

A crumpled piece of paper, tossed by the wind, skittered across the ground and slapped to an abrupt halt against his leg. He retrieved it, going still. Despite its tattered condition, he recognized the precise creases he'd made only yesterday. This was the same flyer Betty had given him; the same one he'd discarded to the wind last night.

The flash of insight turned him ice cold. Harmon already knew he was here.

Hints—he'd only had hints, just enough to keep him wary and forewarned. But here he stood, at the door, on the threshold, and he'd just been given his first glimpse into the fathomless abyss beyond. It was also a gentle warning, yet another hint of the thing that still lay maddeningly beyond his ken. He could still turn away and he'd never have to find out what was waiting for him; he'd never have to confront Harmon; he'd never know the truth. And he'd be able to live out a full, safe, comfortable life....

...haunted by the demons of his own cowardice to the end of his days.

He straightened his shoulders, shaking off the grayness hanging over him like a heavy cloud. Harmon was expecting him, and it wouldn't do to keep a busy man like that waiting.

Harmon's Midway Carnival and Circus Side Show.

The open door cut a black hole through the middle of the legend painted in bold colors on the trailer serving as the owner/manager's office. Turning a corner put Benedek within twenty paces of the van, and he paused, nodding with grim satisfaction to find his suspicions proved correct. Harmon stood at the top of the ramp, just outside the door. A few yards away, Billy lounged against the side of the trailer, looking up in studied disinterest at Benedek's arrival.

He spared only a glance for Billy, turning his attention to the man standing on the ramp. He'd met Harmon just once, and then only for a few minutes, but the details of that refined figure were burned in his memory. As he'd been three months ago, the carnival owner was nattily dressed in a pin-striped three piece suit of stylish cut and soft gray colors that flattered and concealed his powerful frame. A florid face, features soft and bulbous, was framed by a halo of white hair extending down the side of his face into old-fashioned sideburns. Unusually bright eyes glinted hard as he looked down on Benedek with a thin smile.

Someone emerged from the darkness of the van to take his place behind and to the side of the carnival owner. Harmon glanced back, and the unctuous smile widened by the time it again fixed on Benedek.

"I'll be damned." Lon laughed in genuine surprise, crossing his arms. "You were right. He came."

Harmon joined him with a softer chuckle. Then, with a sweeping gesture, he started down the ramp. "Mr. Benedek. What a pleasant surprise."

Benedek held his ground as Harmon approached with hand held out in greeting. "I must say, you're a long way from home, sir. What can I do for you?"

Deliberately letting the silence stretch, he stared first at the man's offered hand and then at Harmon's artless expression. Taking the point without visible offense, Harmon dropped his hand with a sigh. "Oh, dear," he murmured, shaking his head in distress. "I see not much has changed since last we met."

Benedek's eyes flicked up as Lon approached to take up a nonchalant stance only paces behind Harmon. "Oh, I wouldn't say that," he said, fighting back the ache stabbing through him to again glimpse his friend under the grotesque facade. "I think a few things have changed since then."

"Really?" He laughed with tolerant amusement. "Well, then, we must discuss this further. However—" Removing a watch from his pocket, he consulted it with a frown. "I'm rather busy at the moment. If you'd care to return tonight around, say—dusk? We'll have our discussion then."

"We'll talk now," Benedek informed him tersely.

"Impossible," Harmon said with a dismissive wave. "You'll return at dusk. Good day, Mr. Benedek."

Benedek started to block Harmon as the man turned away, but Lon anticipated the move. Harmon moved off unmolested as Lon grabbed Benedek's collar, hurling him to the ground. "We'll see you tonight, Mr. Benedek," Lon jeered, ending with a pealing guffaw.

Anger flushing his face, Benedek jumped to his feet, but Billy moved up, making it obvious that both he and Lon were waiting for the man to give them any excuse. Slowly, he backed off a few steps as he dusted off his clothes, giving them a short nod before turning away.

He left with the all-too-familiar sound of mocking laughter in his ears.

Benedek kept his appointment with Betty, signing more copies of his books than even he would've thought existed in the entire state, let alone a burg like Lannerton. From the number of people crowded into the tiny diner, he surmised that Betty had called friends and acquaintances from at least three counties around.

For two hours, he lost himself in an old, comfortable routine. After a time, something long-frozen inside him began to thaw. The familiar glow returned with the realization he could still hold an audience in thrall with raucous stories told with his old verve and style. But, abruptly and without warning, the glow vanished. It was as if something passed over his vision, changing light and substance from warm and welcome to cold and threatening. From that point on, he had to fight to keep his bright smile and snappy patter going at even a shadow of his usual pace. It became a vain struggle, threatening to completely enervate him. Pleading another engagement, he finally extricated himself from the gaggle of admirers and escaped back to his drab but quiet motel room.

Giving in to common sense, which told him to take advantage of this time to get as much rest as possible, he stretched out on the bed. It wasn't long before he realized that he'd made a drastic mistake. The two hours at the diner sapped his physical strength to the point

where he couldn't get up again; unsurprisingly, true sleep wouldn't come. He was left, awake and immobile, to stare at the ceiling, trying to ignore the knots twisting inside him.

The memories came, feeding and growing fat on the oppressive silence. He tried to force them back, but they were stronger than he was, and in short order overwhelmed him. With a sigh, he drifted into a light doze, giving himself up to the inevitable.

One vivid image floated up, superimposing its garish colors upon all the rest, taunting him with its clarity. Bold sweeping letters painted on the side of a carnival booth: Harmon's Midway Carnival and Circus Side Show. Jonathan MacKensie paused to lean his heavy canvas bag against an elaborate 'S', poking into the depths as he continued the argument. "You're doing it again, Benedek."

The voice, even muffled by virtue of being directed at a canvas bag, was sharp and irritated, as Jonathan had been for the better part of the day. It was an attitude that Benedek had suffered with wearing patience for all of that time. His glance heavenward went unnoticed by MacKensie as the man continued to rant. "You promised. You promised we'd do things my way this time."

"Look—" Benedek dodged the charge of two children playing tag through the milling crowd. "Look, we've already talked to the owner and the only five workers around here who speak understandable English. We did it your way and we got zip. And—wait a minute, are you trying to strangle yourself, what is this?"

Turning to confront Benedek, the strap of Jonathan's canvas bag had slipped hard against the side of his neck. Benedek pulled up on the handle long enough for MacKensie to regain his balance and his breath. "Look at this," he grumbled, slapping the bulky case with the back of his hand. "You call this scientific research? I call this masochistic. You are a man with a problem, Jonny, and you're gonna need a chiropractor to sort it out."

"Benedek, the only one around here with a problem is you, because there is no way you're going to convince me that we can get to the bottom of this thing by having our palms read. Now—if you want to indulge, fine. Run along like a good little boy and have fun. I've got more samples to take. George only agreed to keep the chem lab open until seven tonight."

Benedek gave him an leering smile. "Now if it was Georgina, I'll bet you would've gotten the lab kept open on twenty-four hour call."

Jonathan spared him a disgusted look in turn. "Be back at the front entrance in half an hour," he snarled, stalking off into the crowd.

Watching him go, Benedek shook his head in open amusement. Even after so many successful investigations together, their respective operating techniques were still light years apart. One of these days he was going to have to figure out how they ever managed to stop arguing long enough to get anything accomplished. In fact, it might make an interesting theme for a future book. *Worth considering*, he mused, sauntering off toward the midway.

He found the fortune-teller's tent with ease, and paused to admire the painted canvas hanging near the entrance. The artwork showed more talent than was usual for a carnival banner. The image of a colorfully-garbed gypsy woman stared intently out at him, one graceful hand poised over a glowing crystal ball. Against type, her hair was a wild cloud of flaming red, while her eyes glowed a clear, sapphire blue.

Something tugged at his memory, a brief flash of another woman, a psychic of his acquaintance who also possessed those same remarkable features. He had to laugh, dismissing the resemblance as an absurd coincidence.

The interior was damp and strangely cold, sharp with the musty odor of rotting canvas. Even the gentle fragrance wafting out of a nearby incense burner couldn't keep him from wincing at the acrid assault on his sinuses.

The fortune teller was seated in the middle of the small space, her face shadowed in the half light. She made a slow motion with her hand. "Please. Be seated."

He settled on the stool, facing her across the small table. At a slight gesture from her fingers, he gave her his hand, letting her cup it and turn his open palm to the light.

He waited, wondering idly what he would be told this time. It was a constant source of amusement to him how so many side-show performers could tell him so many wildly divergent things by looking into the same hand. There was one thing he hadn't bothered to set Jonathan straight on, and that was that he hadn't come here to find out what the future held for him. He'd already had his lines examined by several of the top palmists in the field, had even received rudimentary instruction in the science from them. This was professional interest; he was curious to see how well this particular performer knew her stuff. Once he'd satisfied himself on that

point, he could get down to the real purpose of his visit, which was to sound her out on what she knew of the strange rumors surrounding Harmon's Midway Carnival.

Silently she traced the lines of his hand with her finger. The edge of her nail touched the junction of his life and heart lines and paused.

As he looked on in growing interest, her finger withdrew slightly, as though the contact had suddenly burned her. Then, she gently but firmly turned his hand over, pressing it against the table as though to conceal whatever she had seen there.

"Leave here, Benny," she whispered, fear cracking her thin voice. "Leave here now."

Mystified, he leaned forward, squinting to make out her face in the gloom. It couldn't be. But the voice...and the red hair that had twinged his memory outside the tent, the crystal blue eyes....

His head moved back and forth, involuntarily denying what his eyes were insisting was the truth. "It can't be," he said, incredulously. "Lady Carmen? You're Lady Carmen!"

She nodded furtively and with a rude start he saw her deeply lined face for the first time.

This was a ghost, only a pale shade of the woman he'd met at the governor's ball just one year ago. Lady Carmen, the queen of Chicago society, a highly respected psychic of undisputed powers who employed two secretaries to manage her work and social schedules. She and Benedek had hit it off from their first introduction, and for once he'd been the one in complete thrall, fascinated by her charm, her classic beauty, and the way she could toss off ribald stories as someone else would pluck petals from a daisy. A year ago, Lady Carmen glittered at the apex of her chosen profession. Now he stared across a broken table into the shallow depths of her ruined beauty, feeling as though everything in this world he knew and trusted had just slapped him hard in the face.

Her low voice shook with agitation. "Please. Leave now. There is danger here."

Her terror reached out to touch him like a real thing, snapping him out of his shocked daze. *Danger, she said.* This was his first real hint that what he and Jonathan sought actually existed.

She withdrew her hand, but he snatched it back, imprisoning it in a gentle but unbreakable grip. "No, wait," he said when she resisted. "Talk to me. Tell me about the danger here."

Haunted eyes met his for a long moment. For just a second he thought he glimpsed something, a flash of light too quickly swallowed up by the deep grayness of her face.

"I can't talk to you here," she whispered. "Come to my trailer in five minutes."

He hesitated. The woman was terrified, that much was obvious; he thought it entirely likely that she was only trying to escape him. As though sensing his doubts, she leaned in toward him. "I will tell you what you want to know. And may God have mercy on my soul."

Ripping her hand from his grasp, she disappeared out the back of the tent before he could stop her, leaving him in silence to ponder the genuine anguish that had racked her last, half-sobbed words.

Five minutes later found him at Lady Carmen's trailer; the door opened as he raised his hand to knock. She ushered him inside with a quick motion, peering out furtively before shutting the door.

The interior of the trailer was, if possible, even more depressing than the tent. There was only enough here to cover the most basic human needs; this was the dwelling of a broken spirit, devoid of all light, color and sound.

Seating himself on a shabby, broken couch, he faced her as she perched on the edge of an overturned crate. She stared down with vacant eyes at her thin, veined hands twisting the fabric of her skirt.

He almost made the mistake of starting with banal small talk, catching himself just in time. With as much real concern as he could muster behind his voice, he began, "Lady Carmen—what happened?"

"Don't ask me that." Her voice and her gaze were sharp, haunted. "I can't tell you. Don't ask me that."

"Okay," he agreed with a calming gesture. "Why don't we just...talk? We can talk about why I'm here, and maybe then you could answer a couple of questions I have. Just a few questions, about the carnival," he hastened to assure her when she tensed again.

She didn't reply, but neither did she protest, so he began his story.

Harmon's Midway Carnival and Circus Side Show arrived in town nearly two weeks ago. Since then, there'd been reports of domestic violence, random vandalism and a frightening rash of suicides in the surrounding communities. Otherwise normal, respected citizens were being arrested for unprovoked assaults on loved ones as well as strangers; jailed for incidents of malicious mischief; brought up on charges for deliberate damage to property. It was the kind of aberrant behavior modern sociologists had long tried to pin on the excessive violence prevalent in popular entertainment as well as the current fad rash of vigilantism. But there was no such common denominator here. The police investigated a few of the cases and promptly discarded the notion that the incidents were connected.

But the newspaper accounts caught the attention of Dr. Juliana Moorhouse at the Georgetown Institute, shortly after two students, in unrelated incidents, attempted suicide off the Administration Building roof. Several hours of intense research revealed to her what she took to be the common denominator even the police had missed. All those affected by bouts of temporary (and in several cases permanent and/or fatal) insanity, including the two suicidal G.I. students, had recently attended Harmon's Carnival.

On that thread alone, she assigned the carnival to Jonathan MacKensie as the next subject of investigation for the Paranormal Research Unit. He'd protested, of course, insisting he found nothing paranormal about people temporarily losing their senses after ingesting carloads of cotton candy and spending three straight hours riding the Ferris wheel. Dr. Moorhouse had, of course, eventually prevailed.

Benedek's help had been enlisted in very short order; he allowed Jonathan to talk him into accompanying him on this jaunt, not bothering to reveal the fact that he'd already been alerted to the story via his own sources. From the start, however, they found themselves at loggerheads. Each had independently formed their own theory about what might be causing behavioral problems at Harmon's Carnival, and stuck to their beliefs with the tenacity for which they were each, in their own ways, becoming famous.

Jonathan had convinced himself that toxic substances were somehow involved. Either the carnival had been erected over the site of a hitherto unsuspected chemical waste dump, or someone connected with the traveling show was experimenting with dangerous chemical combinations.

Benny, whose entire approach to this type of investigation could only kindly be called intuitive, decided that some form of mind control was at work. His announcement to that effect sparked the argument that had continued unabated for most of the day.

Their interrogations of supervisory personnel had all dead-ended, leaving Jonathan to concentrate on gathering the soil and air samples he hoped would support his own theory. Benny's personal preference was to continue down the ranks, into the lower echelons, talking to any worker who would talk to him.

An odd, twisted smile appeared on Lady Carmen's face as he finished his story, telling him his instincts were right. She harbored the secret that had so far escaped their search, and with a strange sinking feeling, he saw also that both he and Jonathan must have guessed far off the mark.

"There is a connection—isn't there?" he asked softly when she did not speak.

The darting look she gave him was the affirmative answer he hoped for, but fear still held her silent. Overwhelming pity filled him for the broken woman whom he had known at the peak of her powers and beauty. He couldn't begin to guess what circumstances had brought her to this grim pass, but he felt compelled to give her some indication of the depth of his rage at the evil that had stolen her spirit.

He slipped off the couch, going into a crouch at her side. Gently, he took her twisted hand, soothing it between his. She resisted at first, as though the contact caused her discomfort. After a moment, however, she seemed to relax, allowing him to unfold her tightly clenched fingers. The stiffness eased from her shoulders a little, some of the harshness melted from her lined face. She stared down at the hand covering hers, quiet and grateful. He sensed that his touch had given her back some of the peace that had somehow been too long denied her.

"Lady Carmen," he asked, a quiet plea. "What's happening here?"

She drew a ragged breath, clasping her free hand tightly against the base of her neck. "Harmon," she said, a broken sigh. "Harmon...knows. Darkness." Her eyes focused on something only she could see, something that brought pain again. "He is the darkness."

"Harmon?" he prodded.

"I made a mistake." Her voice was that of a child crying in the night. "I trusted him. He came to me, all light and bright smiles, promising that all the joys of the world could be found inside one red tent. I...." Emotion convulsed her face and the hand to which he still clung. "I trusted him."

"Let me help you," he urged. "Tell me how and I will."

She shook her head, recovering with a gasp. "No. No, it's too late. Help yourself. Leave. Leave while there's still time."

"Tell me what the danger is," he insisted.

About to refuse, she stopped, that odd light again flashing in her eyes. "Harmon," she managed with no voice. "Hunger waits in the red darkness, giving fear, reaping its harvest, feeding until there is nothing left but the fear—and the madness. The red tent...Harmon. Harmon is the danger. Harmon...is the darkness."

Stiffening, her eyes widened with sudden terror. "No!" she wailed, tears spilling freely down her worn face. "He knows. He knows."

He caught her as she collapsed into soul-wrenching sobs. For a moment, grief stole her strength, leaving her helpless in his arms, and he held her tightly, speechless with pain and rage. Then abruptly she pushed him away, fighting off his attempts to calm and soothe. "Run," she gasped, backing away from him with clawed hands held up warningly. "Please. Oh, god—please, run."

"I'm not leaving you like this," he protested desperately. "Let me help you. Please."

"Help me?" She froze, red-rimmed eyes shining as she stared bleakly at him. "Save yourself. Please, he's coming, he...he'll find you. Don't you understand? Run as far away as you can, away from here, away from him, away from the red tent—promise me, please, you must. You must, please!"

Incoherent, hysterical sounds ending in a wail of frustration met his attempts to question her about the significance of a red tent. Before he could stop her, she hurtled out of the trailer, running as if the hounds of hell were snapping at her heels.

By the time he made the doorway, she'd already vanished. A glance at his watch told him the bad news—he was ten minutes late for his rendezvous with Jonathan. Torn, he took a moment to make his choice. First things first—pacify MacKensie, and then get the man to help him search for Lady Carmen.

Jonathan was fuming, as expected. He'd already dumped the canvas bag into the trunk of their rental car and was impatient to return to Georgetown and the chem lab. He calmed only when Benedek told him he had tracked down a lead, but it was short-lived calm, lasting only as long as it took Benedek to admit he had nothing but cryptic clues gleaned from an hysterical fortune-teller. One of those clues, however, caught Jonathan's interest.

"Red tent? I noticed one over by the main pavilion."

"Good for you. Now look, this lady is not a nut case, okay? She has some real problems right now, but—"

"Come to think of it, I don't remember taking any samples from that area."

"—I still think we should try to find her and talk to her some more. She's got a line on what's going down here, and get this: she says that—"

"I've got one or two empty sample bottles—"

"—Harmon knows what's happening, too. We gotta find her, we gotta talk to her some more."

"Fine." Jonathan gave him the smile of a man who had not heard a single word. He fished car keys out of his pocket. "You go find her while I do a few more samples. I'll meet you back here in fifteen minutes."

Benedek gave up, throwing his hands into the air with a long sigh of exasperation. "Great. Fifteen minutes. Gotcha." He turned back mid-stride. "Hey—listen. Just to be on the safe side—stay away from that red tent for now. Okay?"

Jonathan looked up blankly. "What?"

"The red tent," Benedek repeated patiently. "Stay clear. At least until we can talk to Lady Carmen and get the big picture."

Jonathan nodded agreeably, turning away to head for the parking lot.

Benedek watched him go, nagged by the suspicion that he should have pressed the point. The need to find Lady Carmen distracted him from the thought, and it was that moment, that decision which continued to haunt him every minute of every day that had passed since.

He finally found Lady Carmen in the fortune-teller's tent, sprawled on the ground by the overturned table. With a sense of horrible foreboding, he reached down to turn her over, revealing the twisted, staring face of a life that had ended in searing agony.

Through the haze of sick horror, he became aware that she clutched something in her hand. With silent apology, he untangled the thin chain from her cold, stiff fingers, prying loose the tiny crystal object from inside her clenched fist. He had to strain in the dim light to make out the sharply incised lines forming a stylized phoenix, a mythical bird rising from the ashes of its own fiery self-immolation.

His eyes blurred; he rubbed them clear again. This must have been her leitmotif, the embodiment of her desperate hope for her own salvation; a hope cruelly dashed in an instant that had only allowed her enough time to tear the delicate chain from her own throat.

Hastily summoned paramedics made a tentative diagnosis of massive heart failure; the autopsy report later detailed with stark, clinical detachment how her heart had exploded in her chest.

But Benedek knew intuitively the true cause of death. Lady Carmen died for warning him about Harmon's Midway Carnival and Circus Side Show.

Finally shoved out by the emergency crew, Benedek began his search for Jonathan. He didn't get concerned until he'd checked the car park twice and the front entrance and main pavilion three times. He didn't panic until he realized nearly an hour had passed without a sign of the man.

He searched until he'd exhausted every other possibility at least twice. And then he headed for the red tent.

Tucked into a shadow of the main pavilion, there was nothing to indicate its use; no sign, no banner, no placard. Hand out to draw back the flap, he hesitated. Lady Carmen's life had been forfeit for warning him about this place. Under any other circumstances he would have obeyed her warning without question. But this was his last resort. With a shiver of growing disquiet, he stepped inside.

The tent was empty. Sunlight filtered through the thin cloth, suffusing the air with an eerie red glow. While light entered with ease, sound did not; the closing of the flap immersed him in sudden, complete silence.

He moved toward the center, scanning the small area. Jonathan wasn't here. For the first time he felt the full force of confusion and anger pressing down on his chest. There was nothing here that overtly threatened, nothing that would warrant the vehemence of Lady Carmen's hysterical warning. There was nothing here at all.

Something caught his eye, a glint of red light off metal. There was something here, lying near the main tent support. Tracking the flash of light down, he found three objects half-buried in the thin layer of sawdust. A sample bottle, half-full of dirt; a set of car keys; and a man's wallet.

He opened the wallet, already knowing what he would find. The contents, including cash and credit cards, were untouched. The driver's license bore the name of Dr. Jonathan MacKensie.

The police proved to be singularly uncooperative, politely informing him that they did not want to hear his story for at least another twenty-two hours, at which point they'd be more than happy to add Jonathan MacKensie's name to the bottom of an already daunting Missing Persons list. He'd barely finished slamming the receiver back into its cradle when he realized his mistake in thinking the police could help him at all. There was only one direction left to turn, only one way to get to whatever lay at the root of this mystery. Lady Carmen had given him part of the answer along with her warning. He had to confront Mr. Harmon, owner and operator of this carnival that had cost Lady Carmen first her sanity and then her life; the carnival he was beginning to suspect had just cost him another friend.

Harmon received him in his office, the decor of which reflected some very sophisticated and bizarre tastes. With Billy listening silently in the background, Benedek decided to tread a chary course, informing the carnival owner that he'd come on behalf of his colleague.

"Professor MacKensie?" Harmon inquired mildly. "Oh, yes. I believe he was engaged in some kind of, ah...research, was it? Billy?" He shot a questioning look at the dour roustabout, who nodded shortly. "He had some idea that there might be poisonous substances contaminating the soil or air—yes, I remember now. Has he reached a conclusion so soon? Is there a problem?"

Harmon's unctuous manner put Benny instantly on guard. He closely watched every nuance of manner, carefully listened to each polished inflection, trying to fathom what lay behind Lady Carmen's desperate warning. "Dr. MacKensie seems to have turned up missing," he replied warily.

"Missing?" Harmon regarded him blankly. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"He's gone. Vanished. Disappeared. I found these—" he paused to produce the objects he'd discovered before finishing pointedly, "—in the red tent over by the main pavilion."

If Benedek expected surprise from the man, he got that and more. There was an unmistakable hint of satisfaction in the slight smile that appeared on the carnival owner's face.

"In the red tent, you say?" he murmured, nodding once. The smile trembled, as though he were suppressing its growth. Harmon and Billy exchanged a brief, veiled glance; then the moment of silent communication was gone, and Harmon fixed a look of open sincerity on Benedek. "Indeed. Do you suspect foul play? Perhaps the police should be summoned."

Benedek hesitated, looking down at the wallet in his hand. There was no way he could convince anyone that something sinister was involved in MacKensie's disappearance, not with an intact wallet and keys to a Mercedes found openly discarded. Harmon knew that. Harmon was declaring an open challenge, leaving Benedek with the dawning realization that he didn't have the vaguest notion of what he was fighting for—or against.

He shook his head, deciding to parry with a bluff. "I don't think that's really necessary—do you?"

Harmon blinked, unperturbed. "Again, I'm afraid I don't know quite what you mean."

"What happened to Lady Carmen?" he demanded tautly.

"Oh..." His expression slid easily into a sympathetic mask. "Yes, that was very sad, wasn't it? A woman so cruelly struck down in the prime of her life...."

"I've seen few things sadder," he said, his voice dangerously still. "And I'm not talking about the way she died, either."

Harmon gave him a quiet smile. "Neither am I."

There it was—the first hint of the darkness he'd sensed lurking behind the man's bright eyes. Now there was no turning back. With that simple comment, Harmon finally acknowledged Benedek as an adversary.

With a sharp motion, Harmon continued, "But let's not get into an unproductive conversation about the life and times of the late, lamented Lady Carmen. She is unimportant. Indeed—insignificant."

"She was a good friend."

"Indeed." Something cold grew in the man's steady gaze. "My sympathies. However—as to your friend, Dr. MacKensie. May I respectfully suggest, Mr. Benedek, that you have done everything you could be expected to do under the circumstances? Go home. Get some sleep. Perhaps your friend is even now trying to reach you there with a perfectly reasonable explanation for his disappearance."

Hope flared for only the moment it took Benedek to perceive the mocking light in Harmon's eyes. Already the carnival owner called for his surrender, before battle had even been joined. Even though he realized he had virtually nothing with which to fight, he couldn't retreat. He had to find out what had happened to Jonathan, and Harmon knew. There had to be a way to force the truth. He owed at least that much to Jonathan—and to Lady Carmen.

Harmon called the game by returning to his work, a silent, imperative dismissal. Billy moved to his side with a quiet command. "This way, Mr. Benedek."

He shook off the hand Billy put on his arm. "Where is he?" he hissed fiercely, glaring up at the stocky roustabout. "Tell me where he is, dammit!"

"Relax, okay?" Billy laughed cajolingly. "A lot of nice lookers like to hang around carnivals, y'know. Maybe he got himself a date."

Benedek flipped the wallet in Billy's face. "What's he going to pay her with? His winning smile?"

Billy snagged his arm, slamming him against the trailer wall. A powerful hand closed on Benedek's throat, cutting off his breath.

"Mr. Harmon's a busy man," Billy said amicably. "Let me show you the door."

And with that, he grabbed Benedek by the shirtfront, tossing him out onto the ramp. The door shut with a resounding slam.

Benedek jumped to his feet, fighting back a crazed impulse to smash down the door and continue the assault on Harmon's smarmy face. But if he gave into anger, he'd be admitting that he'd lost this round to Harmon. He refused to give the carnival owner the satisfaction.

He took a moment to collect his wits and consider his options. Low-key observation appealed to him; he'd wander the grounds with a sharp eye, talk to the carnies and the performers, gather hints or clues in the hopes that he could piece together a scenario and from there choose a plan of action. But as quickly as the scheme formed satisfactorily in his mind, his hopes for implementing it were dashed by the stealthy approach of several roustabouts. One glance convinced him that they'd been summoned to escort him off the grounds. He nodded his acknowledgment of their presence, shoved his hands deep into his jacket pockets and strolled nonchalantly out the front entrance, with only one sneaking look backward at five stony faces watching him go.

For one insane moment, he'd considered smashing at those granite faces, but common sense held him fast. He'd be little use to Jonathan nursing broken bones in the hospital. This was no time for ill-considered actions. He had to fall back; watch; plan; wait.

He paced the carnival's perimeters for a time; the makeshift fencing was a barrier, but only a minor obstacle if he chose to go that route. Any ideas in that direction were quashed when he noted the strategic placement of hulking roustabouts and uniformed security guards. He was left to sort out a tangle of anger and frustration, feeling that Harmon somehow knew his every thought, every move and with infinite patience cheerfully blocked him at every turn.

Because there was nothing else he could do, he left. And, despite the fact that there was nothing else he could have done, he would later consider that single action to have been his biggest mistake of all.

A sleepless night formed new resolve. He would return to the carnival at first light, and this time, somehow, he would get answers. Somehow.

But morning's light dealt him a devastating blow. Harmon's Carnival was gone. Dismantled, uprooted, it had vanished sometime during the night, leaving behind only the littered wreckage of a summer pasture, leaving him with only empty silence, and feeling a strange kinship with the dancing ghosts of cloth and paper tossed by a merciless summer breeze.

Two days passed in a gray, strangling haze of unproductive phone calls, shrugs and negative answers. Harmon's Carnival was a gypsy show, unregistered, unlicensed. It came and it went, leaving only muted memories of lights and colors and sounds. The only tangible

proof of its passing were the ruined lives left in its wake. Those who had trod unaffected through the gates and down the midway remembered nothing of consequence. Those who had descended into madness for only a brief time were equally vague, as though the memory deliberately eluded them—or they themselves were unwilling to touch the memory despite Benedek's searching questions. And those who had not recovered at all were far beyond his reach, as they were far beyond anyone's reach—or help.

He searched, he prodded, he probed; and the answers, like so many fine grains of sand, slipped through his grasp. No one knew where the carnival came from. No one knew where it went.

In the cold darkness of his hotel room, he'd held his head in his hands over a telephone he's used without result for nearly twelve continuous hours. The hollow of his stomach burned, demanding something more than the dry BLT he'd forced down hours ago, but the ache in his head and his heart overruled.

No one could help him. No one knew anything. No one knew.

And then the phone rang. His brief flare of hope turned to ice to hear the voice of Dr. Moorhouse's secretary, demanding to know why Dr. MacKensie had failed to appear for his graduate seminar. Summoning what little composure shock had left him, he managed a weak excuse, and in the same breath asked for an appointment with Jonathan's department head.

In his desperate quest for information, he'd successfully avoided telling anyone that Jonathan MacKensie had, for all intents and purposes, vanished off the face of the earth, perhaps in the hope that the man would turn up unscathed in his own good time. But he couldn't hide from the truth or from himself anymore. Jonathan wasn't coming back. And Benedek didn't have a clue where to find him.

Lack of sleep worked to his benefit for once; in a dull haze, he actually made it to the doorway of Dr. Moorhouse's office before his nerve completely deserted him. What kind of story did he have to tell? What was to stop her from deciding that he was prevaricating to cover a darker deed? If she didn't believe him, she could easily make a complaint to the police. And he knew from long experience that life sentences had been handed out on less evidence.

He backed off from the door three steps before he managed to force panic back to reasonable proportions. This was something that had to be done. He had to face her, he had to tell her the truth. He had to make her believe because he needed, more than he wanted to admit, an ally—and a friend.

She listened, without apparent interest nor change in expression as he related the incidents of the past three days, remaining silent even as he waited for her to react at the finish of his story. Staring reflectively at the pencil she tapped lightly against the edge of her desk, she finally looked up, regarding him stonily.

"Have you told this story to anyone else?"

"No," he managed, but his voice had no strength in it, and he shook his head tersely, unable to meet her searching gaze.

"And why have you come to me?"

"Because...." Again, his voice and words failed him. He rubbed wearily at his forehead. "Because I thought...I'd hoped you would...."

"Fall for it?" She tossed the pencil down in mild disgust. "Have I somehow become the sounding board for your more preposterous fabrications? Has your association with Georgetown engendered some barely restrained streak of perversity? Or is it merely a matter of your believing that if you get me to believe something, anyone will swallow it?"

Stung, he shot to his feet, swallowing back the surge threatening to burst forth as invective or tears of frustration—or both. "Excuse me, Dr. Moorhouse," he rasped. "I made a mistake coming here."

"Benedek."

Her sharp command stopped him at the doorway. She could destroy him, here and now, just by picking up the telephone and calling security, and that thought alone nearly set him running. But the silence behind him remained taut and after a moment, he relaxed his grip on the doorknob, turning back to face her.

She studied him through narrowed eyes, without the irritation or suspicion of only moments ago. "You really believe that this story you've told me is the truth—don't you?" she said quietly.

He nodded without hesitation. "As much of it as I know, anyway."

"And you intend to pursue this bizarre theory of yours?"

A statement and a question both; he heard the mute plea in her voice and nodded again. "I do."

"I see." Her eyes lowered for a moment, coming up with a different, softened expression in them. "Please. Come back and sit down."

He left her office three hours later with a precious piece of paper in his hand—authorization for the G.I. accounting office to establish an open-ended expense account in the name of Edgar Benedek. The money was secondary as far as he was concerned. What lifted his heart was the mute support the simple act of signing her name to the voucher gave him.

A crashing assault of sound splintered his senses. Heart pounding in his ears, he stared up at the cracked ceiling of his motel room, unable for a blind moment to remember where he was or how he'd come to be there.

Reaching out to the bedside table, he fumbled the switch on his travel alarm, and the incessant ringing stopped. Blinking his blurred vision clear, he noted the time. Late afternoon, just a little more than an hour to sunset. One hour to his appointment with Harmon.

He rose, splashed ice cold water on his face to relieve his burning eyes. Then, retrieving several worn notebooks from his knapsack, he settled at the table near the window.

Close notes covered most of the pages, a stream of consciousness jotted at odd intervals over the months of his journey. He lingered on the first notebook, slowly flipping the dog-eared pages. Soon after leaving Dr. Moorhouse's office, he'd boarded a plane to Chicago, intent on discovering why Lady Carmen had died an ignominious and sinister death in the midst of a squalid gypsy show. The answers he received were intriguing, but damnably vague. Fragments of information eventually made up an incomplete picture. Lady Carmen had visited a local carnival with friends. While there, she'd been approached and befriended by a distinguished gentleman; none of the people who'd accompanied her that fateful day could remember his name. But the description they gave was more than familiar, so that was the one answer he didn't need. Her friends also could not remember anything untoward having happened, save that Lady Carmen seemed to have become restless and uneasy for no reason she or they could name. After a few hours, they'd dispersed at the parking lot to return to their respective homes.

No one could tell him whether she'd actually returned home that night. Her secretaries reported to work the next morning, to find the door unlocked and most of her clothing and two suitcases gone. No note was ever found; no one received an explanatory phone call, not even her business manager. Her bank accounts remained untouched. The police conducted a desultory investigation, dropped after a few weeks with no conclusion.

Everyone he questioned evinced genuine shock and astonishment to learn that she'd spent her last days as a performer in a gypsy carnival. But no one could explain why it happened.

After leaving Chicago, he'd tracked Harmon's Midway Carnival and Circus Side Show all over the country. For three months, it had been like trying to capture a shadow; no matter how quickly he followed up on a new lead, he always arrived too late. Sometimes days; a few times scant hours; but always too late. There would be nothing left but an empty field and strange stories of common ordinary folk descending into madness or destroying their own lives with no apparent cause, rhyme, or reason. He turned to every expert on the occult, the supernatural and the paranormal he could find, following up even the slimmest of leads. He heard countless theories and half-hearted attempts at explanations for what could possibly have been behind Lady Carmen's cryptic warning, but the story was the same there as everywhere else. No one really knew. No one could help.

On these pages he'd written every note, hint, name, place and thing picked up over the weeks and months of his search, an attempt on his part to capture anything that could help him unravel the mystery. So far nothing had gelled; the words stared back at him like straws scattered in the wind.

Grabbing the newest notebook, he dated a blank page and began a short, unvarnished statement declaring his impending visit to Harmon's Midway Carnival and Circus Side Show. If the worst happened, if he was destined to vanish off the face of the earth this night, he was determined that it would not be without a trace.

He ripped out another page, addressing a short note to Dr. Moorhouse. This one he'd leave with Betty, with explicit instructions that if he failed to claim it within two days, she was to drop it into the nearest mailbox. It was the best he could do for Dr. Moorhouse at this point, since it would serve no purpose to contact her, not with so much left unresolved. When next she heard from him, it would be his own voice flushed with triumph at the end of a long-distance call, or this four-line note that was a combination admission of failure, apology—and goodbye.

By the time he finished, the light in the room had deepened into a warm golden-orange. With a brief stop at the diner, he'd be arriving at Harmon's Carnival with the last rays of the dying sun.

A few local people gathered around the empty front ticket booth, reading a sign announcing the carnival's opening the next afternoon. He felt their curious stares follow him as he passed through the front gate, opened for him without question by a security guard.

He kept walking, trying to ignore the sound of the gate being barred again behind him. It didn't really matter—there was only one way out for him, and it had nothing to do with whether the front gate was open or locked.

Harmon's office was a reversed image of that morning; the trailer formed the dark bulk, and the open door glowed with light. Pausing at the bottom of the ramp, Benedek willed himself to calm, ruthlessly killing even the barest hint of emotion. Only then did he allow himself to move forward again.

The office was unchanged from the last time Benedek saw it, months ago. Harmon was seated behind the desk; he'd obviously anticipated Benedek's approach, for his quiet gaze was steady on him from the moment he appeared in the doorway.

"You see for yourself the sheer tenacity of which the human spirit is sometimes capable."

He looked at Benedek as he spoke, but the comment had been directed to the person whose presence Benedek had failed to notice.

Lon chuckled, shaking his head as he swung his feet off the corner of Harmon's desk. "Is that what you call it?" he said with a mocking sneer. "Myself, I'd've called it stupidity."

"Oh, Mr. Benedek is not stupid," Harmon assured him. "Far from it. Indeed, he possesses several unique qualities which intrigue me."

Lon snorted rudely. "Don't expect me to be impressed, okay?"

Harmon swiveled his gaze back to Benedek. "You'll have to forgive Lon," he said with a thin smile. "He isn't much on the social niceties. But then—he doesn't have to be."

"Who is he?" Benedek demanded, his voice still and dangerous. "What is he?"

Harmon leaned back in his chair, considering the question. "What is he?" he repeated musingly. "A tenant. No—no, that's not entirely accurate. More of a...custodian, if you will. We have a mutually satisfactory arrangement in that regard. In exchange for certain services, I allow Lon the temporary residence of his choice."

Benedek's breath froze in his chest, threatening to choke him. So this was what had happened to Jonathan. His body had been usurped by this...this thing calling itself Lon. This had been his existence for the past three months—his spirit imprisoned by some sadistic hell-spawned creature that had cruelly used and abused him.

Or was that guess wrong? Was there indeed anything left of Jonathan MacKensie, or had Lon's forcible possession evicted the man's soul completely?

Harmon seemed to sense Benedek's unspoken question. "Lon—if you'll excuse us, I'd like to allow Mr. Benedek a visit with his friend for just a few moments. To reassure him, you understand."

Lon grimaced, obviously loathe to abdicate even for the few moments Harmon carefully emphasized. Snarling at Benedek, he acquiesced with a glowering nod, flopping back down into his chair.

Benedek hesitated, unsure what Harmon proposed to do. He was staring hard at the man, trying to pick up even the barest clue from the carnival owner's bland expression, when a quiet voice startled him.

"Benedek?"

His head snapped around to stare into a face from which all the hard bitter lines had faded. Lon had disappeared somehow, leaving behind Jonathan MacKensie, looking worn and exhausted. Harmon forgotten, Benedek jumped into a crouch by the chair. "Jonathan?" he said softly.

The man blinked rapidly, trying to clear eyes holding a lost, haunted look. Benedek was painfully reminded of someone stepping out into the light of day after prolonged imprisonment in the depths of darkness. "Long time, no see, buds," he said warmly, forcing a smile. He put a hand on Jonathan's shoulder, ostensibly a casual gesture, but more so to quell the shudder convulsing his friend's body. "You're a hard man to find, did you know that?"

MacKensie shook his head numbly. "You don't know," he said, his hoarsened voice cracking with agitation. "You don't know...."

"I know more than you think," Benedek assured him quietly. "That's why I'm here."

"No," Jonathan insisted. "If you knew, you wouldn't be here. There's still time...still time to...."

"Leave?" He shook his head, giving the man a piercing look of reproach. "Not a chance, pal. It took me too long to get here. When I leave, you go with me."

Jonathan flinched as though Benedek's words stabbed him. "You don't understand," he groaned. His fingers clutched at Benedek's sleeve, twisting into the material. "Don't do this. You don't understand what's happening...."

"No, you don't understand," Benedek overrode him firmly. "This is my fault and I've got to fix it. I should've warned you."

"You did warn me," Jonathan reminded him tiredly. "I didn't listen."

"Then I should have made you listen." Benedek's voice turned harsh. "I was the one Lady Carmen warned, that makes me responsible."

"You don't understand," he insisted, a desperate protest. "You've got to leave now. If you don't, he'll—"

"Kill me?" Benedek shook his head. "Not likely. Not yet, anyway."

Jonathan's head sank to his chest as his efforts drained his strength. The hand clinging to Benedek's arm twisted suddenly, taking his wrist with it.

His cry of protest choked off to see hatred burning out of Jonathan's eyes, hatred he realized belonged to Lon. "You don't understand," he snarled, a grotesque parody of MacKensie's impassioned plea. "Harmon won't kill you. I will. And I'll make your precious friend feel every bone snap beneath his hands."

"Lon." Harmon's sharp voice stopped the man from closing his grip on Benedek's throat. With another snarl, Lon pushed Benedek to the floor. "Such pretty concern," he jeered. "He's a damned fraud."

"Which is part of what makes him so very dangerous to us." Harmon rose, stepping around his desk to stand over Benedek. The close proximity of both men made it impossible for him to get to his feet, so he stayed where he was, glaring up at the faces staring impassively down at him in turn. "Mr. Benedek recognizes deceit in all its guises," Harmon continued coldly. "He knows the names of lies. He sees the taint of corruption that touches everyone and everything."

"Very nice," Lon snorted. "A very pretty epitaph. So if he's so damned smart, why ain't he in the next county pulling the hole in after him? You did everything except write it out for him in block letters, and you're telling me this guy's supposed to have brains?"

Harmon gave him a patient look. "You still don't understand, do you?"

"Maybe I don't," Lon retorted sullenly, reacting to the mild chide in Harmon's voice. "And maybe I don't care."

Glaring up at Lon, Benedek addressed Harmon. "Not very deep, is he?"

The carnival owner chuckled, clapping Lon on the shoulder affectionately. "He is true to his nature, and I could ask nothing more. He is, after all, one of my best...workers."

Benedek didn't miss the sly emphasis. Harmon was blithely throwing tidbits his way; perhaps he was fishing, perhaps waiting for Benedek to rise to the bait. But it was far more likely that Harmon already had him on the line, playing him, waiting to strike and crush at his leisure.

He hadn't gotten lucky finding the carnival this time. Harmon had merely tired of toying with him, and let him catch up, laughing as his prey flailed in the sprung trap.

What surprised him most was that he actually felt calm. He fully accepted that he stared failure, defeat, and yes, even his own death in the face. It was a face he recognized, the one Lady Carmen warned him about. Harmon's face—the face of darkness.

Now he could see the full futility of the last three months of his life. All those weeks he'd spent fighting a sometimes overwhelming battle with guilt, when he could see, with startling clarity, that there was nothing to feel guilty about. The power at work here was beyond his comprehension. It took his breath away just to glimpse the barest hint of its true scope. There was no way he could have prevented what happened and there was no course he could have charted that would have kept him alive any longer than Harmon wanted him to remain that way. He'd tried, had indeed gone beyond his own limits, and he'd met what he knew now was inevitable defeat.

His calm sprang from the realization that this was only defeat—not failure. He hadn't failed Jonathan or Lady Carmen, because the whole thing had been out of his hands from the start. And, by the same token, he hadn't failed himself because he'd tried. However futilely, he had tried.

And before he died, the only thing he wanted was to get the answers for which he'd searched so long.

"Just what kind of work does Lon do for you?" Benedek asked with the detachment that marked his new resolve.

"Maintenance." The answer was casual and immediate. "He and others like him in my employ are vital to the operation of this traveling show. You might say that they are the backbone, the...spirit...of my carnival."

"Come on, Harmon," Benedek snapped. "Quit dancing, okay? I think I deserve that much, don't you?"

"Oh, indeed." Harmon laughed. "You do. You deserve at least that and ever so much more. Lon—would you care to give Mr. Benedek a small demonstration of the kind of work you do for me?"

Lon gave him an expectant look, dimming into brief disappointment when Harmon held up a small space between his thumb and forefinger. With a shrug of determination to make the best of the situation despite Harmon's unspoken limitation, he dropped into a crouch by Benedek's side, fixing him with a look of bright malignance. Benedek had to stop breathing to quell his involuntary wince, barely able to look on the baleful presence staring at him out of Jonathan MacKensie's eyes.

"Your friend went into the red tent," Lon said, his voice a sibilant whisper. "But you know that already, don't you? Yeah, he went in. He looked around. And he started thinking about how curious it was for an empty tent to be sitting in the middle of a busy carnival. They all do, you know." Lon leaned in closer, his hazel eyes aflame. "That's all I need. That's all any of us need. We circle and we watch and we wait, and when their backs are turned to us all unawares, that's when we strike." He held up clawed hands as a low laugh starting deep in his throat. "We cling, we rend, we tear—and we feed."

The laugh burst forth, mocking Benedek's white-faced horror. "Sometimes," Lon chortled, recovering. "Sometimes we leave nothing. Most times we leave just enough. But sometimes...." He made a brushing motion against his own shoulder. "Sometimes we take a shine to what's left."

The air trapped like a jagged piece of ice in his lungs choked him; he forced himself to exhale, and the small sound he made caused an evil grin to split wide across Lon's face.

"Mr. Harmon let me keep this one when I used up the old one a little too fast." His eyes lit up in salacious delight. "Hey, guess what? That means that I ended up saving your little friend's life. They got a word for that, don't they? Ironic. That's it, ironic." His head went back in a pealing laugh. "Funny, huh? Don't really matter none to him, though. Won't matter none to you in a bit. And I expect I'll use this one up soon enough, and then I'll just get me another. Maybe even you."

Benedek could feel his body betraying him, his heaving stomach shooting bile into a constricted throat. All he could do was shut his eyes, lean his head against the wall, try to close out the malevolent assault.

"Your buddy knows the things I do." Lon's voice continued, soft and persistent. "I let him watch. Well, actually—I make him watch. But that ain't as much fun as it used to be, so I send him nightmares, too. Here—let me give you an sample."

His eyes snapped open to see Lon's hand, fingers splayed, reaching for his face. With a small sound of protest, Benedek tried to raise his own hand to fend Lon off, but it fell like a dead weight to the floor, useless. His entire body was paralyzed. He could do no more than try to twist his head away as Lon touched two fingers to either of Benedek's eyelids, pulling them shut.

Though the pressure of Lon's fingers held his eyes closed, he could see, with heart-stopping clarity, into the depths of madness.

The images were abstract, colors blending and melding to form objects that suddenly loomed and then faded, twisted, swirled and danced. Of themselves, it would have been nothing more than a bright kaleidoscope, a chaotic jumble of light and color.

But Lon offered him more than a light show. He was giving him a taste of living death.

This was a hurtling descent through the shattered remnants of his own mind. This was the reflection of his own skewed reality. This was his life, flaunted in his face like a slaughtered thing, slashed and bloodied and dead.

Everything he'd ever loved and cherished, everything he'd ever taken to his heart; all were being shown to him, savaged and mutilated with reckless glee.

A sound, like a rush of great wings, cut through the storm, pounded his senses, sent the madness skittering away before its blast, hurled aside the things feeding hungrily on the shards of his sanity. And reverberated like the blast of a thousand cannon, reaching down with its thunder to shake his very soul.

The pressure against his eyelids was gone. The maelstrom receded abruptly to lick faintly at the edges of his battered senses. He summoned the only flicker of strength he had left to crack open his eyes, staring through filmed vision at Lon's smug leer above him.

His body trembled violently; he fought to the awareness that although the air around him was ice cold, perspiration drenched him. A searing pain in the depths of his throat and chest told him the rest—the sound that had shaken him from the depths of his nightmare had been a scream torn from his own throat.

Harmon appeared behind Lon, beaming down with satisfaction. "As you see, Mr. Benedek. Lon is one of my best workers."

He swallowed around the rawness in his throat, scrambling for enough breath to form words. "I take it that wasn't his best shot," he gasped.

"Oh, far from it," Harmon assured him confidently. "Far from it."

Benedek stared at the evil, malevolent thing distorting the face that had once belonged to a friend. He finally understood the frantic, almost hysterical warning Jonathan gave him. With his brief touch, Lon had given him only a taste of the horror that he in turn must have been inflicting on Jonathan's imprisoned soul all this time. Jonathan was right—he really hadn't understood, not completely. And now it was much too late.

"Now," Harmon said, rubbing his hands together. "I think our discussion can best be furthered by repairing to more suitable surroundings."

Benedek closed his eyes, losing his battle against exhaustion. "The red tent," he murmured.

"Catches on quick, don't he?" Lon chortled.

"I did tell you, several times as a matter of fact, that he is not to be underestimated," Harmon rebuked Lon mildly. "Why don't you summon Billy for us? Mr. Benedek will need some help, I think."

Benedek didn't bother to object. His last conscious thought was that he didn't have enough breath to waste on futile protests.

He came awake in the midst of a red fog. The brilliant intensity of the carmine glow brought stinging tears to his eyes. Two dark forms loomed over his supine body, and he blinked rapidly, seeking to bring them into focus.

"Mr. Benedek." Harmon's voice, filled with gentle amusement. "Welcome back. I trust you feel rested."

What he felt was ill, violently so. His body and his soul ached, both battered and bruised. He blinked away the mist filming his eyes, swallowing in a dry throat. From what little he could see, this was the interior of the red tent, lit against the night by some unseen light source; he lay near the center on the sawdust floor. "What the hell is this place, anyway?" he demanded, putting as much defiance as he could into his weakened voice. "Why did you kill Lady Carmen for warning me about it?"

Harmon, with a flash of surprise at the still unbroken spirit at his feet, appeared to consider the question. "You give yourself too much credit, Mr. Benedek. Lady Carmen was her own problem. Of course, she was a difficult case from the start. She possessed true gifts, you know. Oh, yes—of course you know. A pity for her she did not number precognition among her many talents."

"Somehow you lured her in here." He stared pointedly at Lon. "But your trained mongrel here screwed it up, didn't he?"

Lon reacted with a snarl, lifting his foot for a kick aimed at Benedek's rib cage. A sharp look from Harmon stilled him. "Lon did his usual excellent job," Harmon said, staring down the roustabout until Lon looked away with a grimace. "He eventually prevailed, after what proved to be a difficult struggle. As I have already pointed out, she possessed true gifts."

"You broke her, but you couldn't own her," Benedek realized. "It's reassuring to know that even you have your limits."

"Limits? A curious thing to say, Mr. Benedek." Harmon's voice stayed even, but a subtle shadow crossed the man's red-hued face.

"Don't stop me if you've heard this one, okay? The way I see it, people shuffle into this tent and Lon here and his buddies glom onto them to gobble up their souls." He painfully pushed himself up into a seated position in the sawdust, glaring up at Harmon and Lon in turn as he continued. "But that didn't happen to me. And you botched Lady Carmen pretty good, didn't you? Oh, she was a mess, all right, I'll give you that much. But she managed to warn me. That's why I'm still breathing, isn't it? Because she warned me. You guys can only slide in when there's no barrier to keep you out. And I'll bet Lady Carmen ended up leaving a bad taste in your mouth, didn't she?"

"Shut up," Lon snarled darkly.

Benedek ignored him, fixing his steady gaze on Harmon. "She told me something real interesting. She said she'd trusted you. So how did you do it? Did you take her arm like a gentleman and escort her in here yourself? Did you see how her psychic powers made her a juicy morsel for your panting horde? Was she just some little reward you threw them for a job well done?" He paused, assessing Harmon's closed expression as well as the darting glance Lon gave his boss. "That's it, isn't it? Let me clue you in on what else I figured out. Lady Carmen was a mistake, a big one. She fought you off. You couldn't suck her dry, and for some reason you couldn't kill her, so you settled for controlling her. Only that didn't work either, did it?"

"You are mistaken on one point, Mr. Benedek," Harmon informed him easily. "Lon may not have been able to, as you so crudely put it, gobble her soul. But to kill her outright would have been such a waste. By sustaining her life energies, she provided us with—how shall I put it? An occasional tasty nibble. Did I upset you, Mr. Benedek? My apologies."

"Us," Benedek echoed hollowly, his mind working. "There's a point. Just where do you fit in, Harmon? Where does this red tent fit in? You never answered my question, you know. What the hell is this place?"

"You might call it a great machine, in the classical sense of the word." Harmon paused for a dramatic gesture. "It attracts, redirects and enhances the already formidable efforts of Lon and his compatriots. And it serves as a repository of sorts, a way station for the fruits of their endeavors."

Blood froze in his veins. Frantically he sifted through his memories, and nausea seized him as he realized the one thing missing from Harmon's Midway Carnival and Circus Side Show, now as well as three months ago. "This is where the power comes from," he said, his voice threatening to flee before this newest horror. "That's why there are no generators, no power lines for the amusement rides or the booths. It all comes from here. This is the focus."

"Not precisely." Harmon preened. "Merely a routing station. I am the focus."

Benedek could only stare at him in silence; there were no more words left in the wake of that devastating truth.

Lon shifted uncomfortably. "Why are you telling him this?"

"Because he deserves to know." For the first time, Harmon's voice held an edge. "Mr. Benedek has given us good sport. I feel the truth is the least I can do for him under the circumstances."

"Circumstances?" Benedek laughed shortly, without mirth. "Before you off me, you mean."

Harmon smiled quietly.

"Okay. Fine." He exaggerated a resigned shrug. "As long as you think you owe me some truth, let's get down to the real stuff. Why did you kill Lady Carmen? Because she warned me? Because, by warning me, you realized you couldn't control her anymore?"

"She was unreliable." A furtive tenseness flashed across Harmon's face. "She became an irritant."

"Right. She slipped her leash once too often, trying to find ways to destroy you," he guessed.

"What did she tell you of that?"

Benedek paused, nonplussed. Harmon's voice, for the first time he could remember, was sharp. "She didn't," he replied carefully, watching Harmon closely. "It's called a good guess. It's exactly what I would have done if I'd been in her shoes."

Harmon lifted his head, staring down at Benedek with veiled eyes. "Perhaps it is then fortunate for us both that you will not be given that chance."

Benedek barely heard him, his entire focus on examining his newest flash of insight. For the man to exhibit such a reaction, there had to be something that he feared. But of what could someone who wielded such incomprehensible power possibly be afraid? Something that Lady Carmen discovered despite his cruel hold on her?

Was that what she'd tried to tell Benedek before Harmon finally snuffed out her life?

His hand reached up, closing on his sweat-dampened shirtfront. The pendant he'd untwisted from Lady Carmen's dead fingers was still there. Either they hadn't bothered to search him or they hadn't considered the ornament a threat. He felt its outline through the fabric of his shirt. All these months, he'd worn it as a kind of tribute to her, considering it little more than a token, a symbol of his obsession with the truth behind her death. But perhaps it was more.

At a quiet nod from Harmon, Lon snagged Benedek by the collar, dragging him up. "On your feet, pal. You and me got some business to conduct."

Benedek shook him off, backing away to put at least two arm lengths between him and the sneering roustabout. He watched Harmon, wondering what kind of game the man intended to orchestrate this time. If there was one thing of which he was sure, his death would not be as quick as had Lady Carmen's. He could see the hungry look on Lon's face, the predatory gleam in his eyes. His death would be slow, and Lon would preside over it; perhaps not as fully satisfying as gorging on an unsuspecting soul, but obviously enough to animate Lon with greedy anticipation.

From an inside jacket pocket, Harmon withdrew a thin, gleaming object. "From my personal collection," he said, allowing light to glint redly off the polished blade. "I believe it is very like the one used to surprise Marat in his bath." He considered it for a moment. "Or perhaps this is the one. Quite possible."

"I'm flattered," Benedek muttered. "Do I get my choice of chest or neck?"

Harmon tsked patiently. "You misjudge me, Mr. Benedek. I fully intend to give you a sporting chance."

Benedek's eyes narrowed, confused. "You're telling me this is some kind of contest? Get real, Harmon. There's nothing in it for me, and you know it."

"Oh, quite the contrary. If you emerge triumphant, I am willing to spare your life."

"Yeah, right," he said derisively. "And I spend the rest of my days getting yanked around on the end of your chain. No dice, pal."

"Mr. Benedek." Harmon's voice was that of a parent patiently dealing with a recalcitrant child. "As much as you may protest, you do not want your life to end." He approached, careful step by careful step, holding the dagger out with its tip resting against the middle finger of his other hand. "You make very noble noises, but you are not a martyr. Your survival instinct is too finely honed, too hard-won for it to allow you to make a sacrifice of your life. I am right; you know that I am right."

He started to deny it, but something about the way the red light danced off the metal transfixed him, strangling his protest until it died unvoiced. Harmon was right. Although resigned to his fate, he was still incapable of going meekly, like some placid animal, to his slaughter. For all the horror he had glimpsed and been forced to witness, he was still unbroken, and that resolute spirit would not allow him to contemplate its own self-destruction.

Harmon saw the internal struggle reflected on Benedek's face and smiled his satisfaction. "I knew you would not disappoint me." Turning on his heel, he crossed back to the far side of the tent, continuing to speak. "In the event you should survive this contest, you will not find me a demanding taskmaster. As a matter of fact, a man of your sensibilities would be quite useful to me. Perhaps a supervisory position. Or—dare I even suggest it? A partnership. Yes, a partnership. I believe you would be well-suited to the task, Mr. Benedek. Well-suited indeed." He paused, once more considering the knife in his hand. "Well, then, gentlemen. Shall we begin?"

And with that, he let the weapon fall from his fingers to land at his feet in the sawdust. He glanced up at Lon and Benedek in turn, nodded, and then paced away, his hands clasped behind his back.

"There you go." Lon turned a sly grin on Benedek. "Just to prove I'm a sport, I'll let you take the first shot."

"And just what kind of shot am I supposed to be taking?" he demanded warily.

Lon rolled his eyes with an exaggerated groan. "You're pretty dim when you don't need to be, aren't you? There's the knife, right over there. You try to get it before I do. Is that clear enough, or do you want me carve it into your thick skull for you?"

Something in his chest constricted, choking him as his panicked glance went from Lon's smirk to the blade lying a few yards distant. This was their game? He was supposed to grab that knife and....

His throat filled with the vile taste of revulsion. "Wait a minute," he said, his voice cracking. "Wait a minute. You call this fair? I can't fight him!"

Lon shrugged indifferently. "Then I guess you die. Suits me just fine. Only...." His face twisted in exaggerated indecision. "It's too easy that way. Maybe what you need is a little incentive. How about a cheering section?"

With a bright smile, he waved his hand across his face, a wildly dramatic flourish. Benedek flinched away, knowing instinctively what Lon was doing, and unable to watch it happen.

"Benedek...."

His resolve betrayed him; the quietly desperate plea jolted him like a physical blow. "No!" he snapped irritably. "No, this isn't...." A sickness grew in his throat; he tried to keep his eyes averted, but they betrayed him too, seeking out the place where Lon had stood only a moment ago.

"Jonathan," he breathed. "Jonathan, stay out of this, okay? He's just using you. Do us both a favor and just...stay out of this."

Jonathan's head moved slightly, the reflexive flinch of someone held fast in an iron grip. "He...he won't let me. He's going to kill you. He's going to make me kill you. Benedek...Benny. Please. I...can't."

He was hearing Jonathan MacKensie's inexorable descent into the depths of madness, and could only stand by helplessly, could only wonder that the man had hung on even this long. Despite his frantic efforts to deny it, he also heard and understood the man's desperate plea. Jonathan was asking him to put an end to it.

His lungs ached; he hadn't taken a breath in longer than he could remember, and he gulped in air until his breathing became an intolerable roar in his own ears. He became gradually aware that he stared with blind eyes at the knife on the ground.

The boiling, churning thing in his stomach pounded at the edges of his reason. He knew it for what it was: all the anger and frustration he'd ruthlessly held back all these weeks and months. Every hour, every minute he'd denied himself release was another brick in the carefully constructed defenses threatening to crumble before a tumultuous assault.

"Benedek...." A last, dying sigh.

The first wall fell, releasing a tidal wave of blind fury. He sprang for the knife.

His only conscious intent was to force Lon to surface again. If Lon meant to provoke him, he'd won this round hand down, and Benedek couldn't afford to lose any more ground. He meant only to gain possession of the knife, gain time to pull back, rethink, regain control, compose his scattered wits once more.

Lon snatched for the weapon, his hand coming up a split second empty. Benedek rolled to one knee, the knife already poised defensively. Falling back a step, Lon nodded. Feigning awe, he drawled, "Very good, Mr. Benedek."

He spun, aiming a sweeping kick at Benedek's face. His flinch cost him his balance; only one hand kept him from tumbling to the ground. But he had no time to recover as Lon continued the turn, bringing the side of his other foot crashing against Benedek's head.

He sprawled, the knife jarring out of his hand. This time Lon reached it at the same moment Benedek found it again.

Closing his grip, he crushed Benedek's fingers against the handle. For a moment, Benedek met his eyes, and glimpsed the dark, malignant thing greedily sucking at the fringes of his soul.

Lon twisted, sending splinters of agony up his arm and shoulder. He clapped his free hand over barely in time to keep the knife slipping from pain-numbed fingers.

Countering, Lon locked Benedek's wrist in his other hand. Yanking up, he brought the blade point to tremble between them. "There," he rasped, eyes glowing. "It can go either way now, can't it? You...." Increasing his powerful grip, he bent back until the sharp point was inches from Benedek's flushed face; then he relaxed slightly until it nearly touched his own throat. "Or me."

Benedek stared at the blade, suddenly and inexplicably calm. Lon's grip was impossible to break, but the man deliberately left him just enough flexibility to allow Benedek a chance to strike with deadly effect. All he had to do was pick his moment.

There was almost enough anger left in him to consider doing it, but it was a brief, absurd thought. No amount of anger, blind rage or towering fury could force him to drive a knife into Jonathan MacKensie's throat.

"He wants you to kill him," Lon said, chilling Benedek to suspect that Lon knew his secret thoughts. "He begged you to do it. Go on. Here, right in the neck. Quick, easy—he won't suffer." He laughed, an evil rumble. "You'll be doing him a favor."

The last wall crumbled; his pent-up rage exploded out, drowning all conscious thought in the crashing wave. With strength he'd thought long-exhausted, he broke Lon's hold, shoving the man away. Lon sprawled in the dust with a cry of astonishment while Benedek scrambled to his knees, recovering the knife in his uninjured hand.

Still blinking surprise, Lon stared at him agape. Then his face twisted as he lunged, hands clawed for Benedek's throat.

His spring would have impaled him if Benedek hadn't jerked back his hand in time. The conscious decision cost him. Lon was on him, slamming his head into the ground, crushing his throat.

Calling on his new-found reservoir of manic strength, he broke the strangling grip. Lon's grasping fingers snagged his shirt, ripping it open as Benedek rolled away.

He made it to his feet this time, keeping to a low crouch, ready for any move Lon decided to make. But his opponent remained on the ground, glaring irritably at his unexpected challenge.

Harmon, who'd paced the perimeter of the tent as the battle progressed, appeared behind Lon. "Very impressive, Mr. Benedek," he said with a nod. "I am gratified to have my faith in you justified."

"Doesn't that just make my day?" Benedek growled between gasps to restore his lost breath. "So—you going to ring the bell for the next round or what?"

But Harmon was no longer smiling. A shadow darkened his face as his eyes narrowed, fixing on a point just below Benedek's chin.

His shirt was ripped open from shoulder to side seam. He realized what drew Harmon's attention even before his hand closed over the exposed pendant.

A crystal phoenix, rising with a sweep of great wings from stylized flames. Life renewed through fiery destruction. Heat dispersing the cold, light annihilating the darkness.

It was as though his sudden awareness served as a some kind of trigger. The hard object began to pulse. Warmth suffused his hand, the tiny crystal its focal point.

With the strange sensations fluttering in the palm of his hand came renewed hope. Somehow this was a chance. Somehow Lady Carmen found the answer—this crystal pendant—yet had lacked either opportunity or enough free will to put it to final use. All she'd been able to do, in her final moments of life, was to tear the chain from her own neck, perhaps in the faint and desperate hope someone would understand.

He hadn't, at least not consciously. But he'd taken the pendant into his charge anyway, without really knowing why. Given any other set of circumstances, prying things from the fingers of a corpse was not exactly something he would give himself credit for doing. Perhaps he'd understood what she'd tried to tell him after all.

But did it matter? He lacked the essential ingredient: knowledge. If this tiny carving was indeed a weapon, the fact remained that he didn't have the vaguest notion how to use it.

The warmth grew, spreading up his arm and shoulder, sending heat deep into his chest where he had the crystal pressed. He concentrated, trying to fathom how he could turn this to his advantage. Harmon spoke, distracting him. "Lon. Mr. Benedek has something in his hand, something he's trying to hide from us. Get it."

Lon hesitated, giving his boss a puzzled look. "Lon," Harmon snapped, his voice lowering to a furious hiss. "Get that pendant away from him. Kill him now if you must, but do it. Now!"

Benedek backed away, clutching the ornament possessively. Lon frowned his confusion, first at Benedek then at Harmon.

Harmon changed before Benedek's startled eyes. Gone were the genteel features, the soft smirk, the languid, easy manner. The bright eyes sparked with hate, his face a grotesque mask of towering fury. For the first time Benedek saw what lay behind Harmon's deceptively placid facade.

Lon's indecision passed with a diffident shrug; while Harmon's urgency still unnerved him, he appeared to be more than happy to oblige by delivering the death blow without further delay.

Benedek flinched at the first feint, scuttling away again. His mind was a battlefield of its own, split between two imperatives. The first was to sort out how to use a tiny crystal as a weapon; the second was that he had very little time left to sort anything out. All he could do was defend himself. Lon was maneuvering for a kill. In the end, because he could not even consider the only other possibility, Lon would win.

There was at least time for a calculated stab in the dark. "You want this thing so much, Harmon? Why don't you come get it yourself?"

Harmon flinched. Benedek seized on it, trying to make sense of the violent reaction. The thought of actually touching Benedek or the pendant itself was so repulsive that Harmon's own reflexes betrayed him.

Harmon himself seemed instantly aware of his mistake. Voice rising in panic, he shrieked, "Lon! Quickly!"

Lon gathered himself like a cat preparing to spring. Benedek read death in the man's dancing eyes, saw that he had only a few seconds left to find an answer.

The heat within his clenched fist grew intolerable. At any moment he felt that his hand would burst into flames. The pulsing intensified, now like the heartbeat of a trapped and frightened bird—as though the crystal was taking on life of its own.

Trapped. Life of its own. A clear and startling insight coalesced his emotion-shattered thoughts. The pendant itself was trying to tell him what to do.

The nerves of his hand, his arm and shoulder were aflame with searing pain. To reach Harmon, he would have to get past Lon, and there was no hope of that. So he did the one, last desperate thing left to him.

He fixed blazing eyes on Harmon, a final defiant challenge. "You want this so badly? Here—take it!"

He hurled the pendant straight into Harmon's face.

An unearthly shriek of agony startled Lon out of his attack crouch. Harmon doubled over, clawing frantically at his head. For a moment Benedek couldn't make out what caused Harmon agony—and then a tongue of bluish flame sprang out from beneath the man's hands.

Lon backed away, stunned. Sinking to his knees, Harmon emitted a shrill, ululating cry that couldn't have been formed by a human throat. Fire spurted, consuming the hands clutched over his face, wrapped in a sheet of burbling flame.

Lon's shriek escalated into a wail of denial and grief. Blazing eyes turned on Benedek, and the cry deepened into a primal growl of blind fury. He leaped, a fluid, powerful motion covering the few feet between them before Benedek could react fast enough to defend himself.

Benedek slammed to the ground under the man's weight, his head cracking against the sawdust floor. In vain he tried to escape the clawing fingers seeking his throat.

Harmon was destroyed, he knew that; yet somehow he'd still failed. His thoughts were strangely calm as an iron grip choked off his breath. His guess had been right, but not right enough, and there were no more chances anymore.

He focussed on the splintering, red-hazed vision above him, realizing his mistake too late. His last image was going to be Jonathan MacKensie's face savaged by malefic insanity, burning eyes reflecting back the last moments of his life.

Something exploded with an evil hiss; a golden-green shower of sparks rained down on them. In that moment, the killing pressure left his throat. Lon stiffened with a gasp, blank eyes staring at the man-shaped core of the growing inferno. A cry grew in his throat, faintly at first, then with increasing vehemence as he pressed hands tightly against either temple, squeezing his eyes shut. Then, unexpectedly and without warning, the agonized shout died; Lon collapsed backward, falling in a senseless heap to the ground.

Clutching his bruised neck, Benedek scrambled to his knees to hover over the motionless body, swiftly checking pulse points. With relief he found a faint, thready heartbeat.

Covering his head, he used his own body to shield the other man from a sudden rain of sparks. A quick glance up told him the worst. The fire caught on the dry canvas; one side was already consumed, threatening to collapse in on them.

Benedek pushed on the man's shoulder, turning up his face to rap sharply with the flat of his hand. "Jonathan?" he gasped, praying for a sign of consciousness. "Hey, Jon-boy, anybody home? Come on, you've got to be there. We've got to make tracks, Jack. Jonathan!"

His last sharp cry triggered a response; the man's head jerked, his eyelids fluttering weakly. Encouraged, Benedek let a smile of relief spread. "Jonathan, I hope that's you in there," he breathed.

The man's hand came up, seeking a grip on Benedek's arm. His mouth worked as rapidly blinking eyes seemed to focus. A hoarse, barely audible word: "Benedek?"

Relief disintegrated under the gun of a new threat—the red tent was dissolving around them in a boiling sheet of hungry flame.

"Jonathan, you gotta help me out here," he said as he levered the man's arm around his neck. "I can't carry you, you gotta help. I swear, I'll never ask you for another favor for the rest of my natural life if you come through for me now." Urgency became desperation; Jonathan was still little more than an unresponsive dead weight. Calling on every shred of strength he had left, Benedek got his feet under him, straining to bring Jonathan up with him. "Come on, Jack," he said between strain-gritted teeth. "I know you're in there. Help me, dammit! For once in your life, please—cooperate!"

One unburned section of the tent remained, providing hope of escape, but it was only a matter of seconds before the flames would claim it—and them.

He hadn't come this far to give up on Jonathan now, but even obsession had to take a back seat to common sense and his own self-preservation. He'd had that brief moment of cognizance as a hint that Lon's destruction had left something behind, but he had no way of knowing whether that brief moment had been a greeting or a goodbye.

The escape route narrowed; there was no more time left.

A fresh wave of desperation poured through him, backlashing into his voice. "Jonathan!" he cried, a full-throated shout. "Now! Please!"

It was the last clear, unfragmented memory he had. He was never sure whether some hitherto unsuspected well of manic strength suddenly opened up to him, or whether his almost palpable terror finally got through to Jonathan. Somehow he moved, and somehow he supported Jonathan enough to move with him, and somehow they both moved fast enough to keep ahead of the voracious tongues of fire shooting out in every direction, consuming canvas and old rotting wood and everything else trapped in its relentless grip.

His memories were of the triumphant roar of flames; of panicked, running people, ghosts silhouetted by the brilliant glow; of pounding pain in his head and lungs as they ran; of light and heat reaching out to lure them back into its bosom....

And then, peace. Whatever had imbued him with inhuman strength just as suddenly deserted him. Jonathan slipped from his numbed grasp. Forcing air into his strained lungs, he was rewarded by agony that beat him to his knees in the grass. A wave of dizzying nausea threatened to send him spinning into unconsciousness, but he fought it back willfully. And when awareness returned with painful gradualness, he found himself bent forward at the waist, face buried in the cool, sweet grass.

He rolled over on his back to stare at the black night sky above. They were on a grassy incline, with the carnival far below them, its destruction setting the horizon aglow with a warm, golden light. The spiraling flames reached high into the night, with a curious sinuous beauty that held him fascinated for a time. Near him, Jonathan lay on the ground, his gasps muffled in the grass. Benedek forced himself to wait until he'd recovered enough wind before saying, "Hey. We did it, Jocko. You and me, we did it."

Jonathan struggled to raise himself up, chest heaving with exertion. He failed, falling back as Benedek moved to him on his hands and knees. "Take it easy, easy," he insisted, putting his hand on Jonathan's shoulder. "There's no rush now. The wind's not blowing this way. Just take it easy for a while."

He let his hand remain until he was sure Jonathan wouldn't move again. But the moment the pressure was gone, Jonathan reacted; his hand reached out, blindly seeking and finding Benedek's arm. With surprising strength, his fingers twisted into the material of Benedek's jacket and clung.

Benedek hesitated, gazing down at the whitened knuckles of the man's clenched hand. Carefully settling himself on the ground, he rested the hand of his captive arm on Jonathan's. At the tentative contact, Jonathan's muscles relaxed, and Benedek was sure that he heard a quiet sigh muffled in the grass.

He lowered his feverish forehead onto the free arm crossed against his knees. Over; it was over. Now he could give himself up to the first real sleep he had had in ages. The sleep of healing; the sleep of peace; and the sleep of security, knowing that for the first time in what seemed an eternity, there were no more nightmares waiting for him.

His tranquility was marred only briefly as he surrendered himself to exhaustion; disturbed by the stray but stinging thought that perhaps the real nightmare was only just beginning.

"No change."

Benedek huddled in the armchair, his forehead cradled in one hand while the other hand held the telephone receiver to his ear. Silence greeted his quiet words, the same silence that had greeted the same words for over a week and a half. In his mind's eye he could see Dr. Moorhouse, on the other end of the line, rubbing tiredly at her temples just as he was doing now.

She spoke at length, her voice emotionless. "I see." Another pause, longer this time. "Mr. Benedek, I don't know if I've had an opportunity to mention this to you before, but—I *do* appreciate the efforts you are making on behalf of—"

He winced, cutting her off gruffly. "Just tell me one thing, okay? Is there really a point to all this effort?"

"Pardon me?" Astonishment shot her voice up half an octave.

"Okay." He paused to control the flash of anger suffusing his voice. "Okay, tell me this, now—does he really have anything to go back to? Dr. M, he's been missing for over three months. He's not exactly going to have the welcome-home banner waving for him, is he?"

"Now you listen to me, young man," she snapped angrily. "I assure you, no one will have the least bit of difficulty accepting Dr. MacKensie's return from the remote dig in Kenya for which I personally recommended him."

He blinked, nonplussed. "Could you really get them to swallow that?"

"Young man, I could get them to swallow the Pacific Ocean if I put my mind to it. Just let me worry about putting affairs in order on this end."

"Sure," he agreed faintly, still rattled by her sudden and dazzling resolution of something that had been nagging him for some time. Since his overwhelming urge to fall down on his knees and kiss her feet couldn't be indulged, he opted for the next best thing. "Dr. Moorhouse?"

"Yes?"

"Marry me."

Exasperation layered her heavy sigh, but he knew somehow that it masked a tolerant smile. "I'll expect to hear from you tomorrow," was her only comment.

"Just one more thing," he said hastily.

"Yes?"

"That time limit. I know we discussed this, and I know I agreed...." He broke off with a sigh, coherent speech dissolving. "I think I could really use some more time."

"Mr. Benedek." The patient voice was back. "I admire your persistence. I do understand, you must believe me. But there comes a time when we must force ourselves to face the facts as they exist. I do not believe the time limit, as you call it, is unrealistic. You have a life of your own to consider, after all. Unless you are able to report some real progress in the next two days, then I really do not see where we will have any choice in the matter."

Two days. His heart sank. As much as he wanted to rant and rave and argue, he knew she was right. If nothing had happened by then, then nothing *would* happen. He would be left to face the fact that it was, and always had been, too much for him to handle in the first place.

"I'll expect to hear from you tomorrow," she said again, and he mustered a smile, recognizing the hint of real sympathy in her voice. As precise as her speech had been, he hadn't been fooled; the words had been just as painful for her to speak as they had been for him to hear. With a quiet assent, he replaced the receiver and settled back to stare at the telephone in pensive silence.

He'd had his first hint of trouble in the hospital. An emergency rescue team had found them on the hill; he'd been too out of it to protest being separated from Jonathan into another ambulance. Treated and released almost immediately, he'd then spent the better part of an hour trying to coax news of Jonathan's condition out of close-mouthed nurses and doctors. An almost incoherent phone call to Dr. Moorhouse finally produced results. With only the assurance that he'd found Jonathan alive and reasonably well, she'd put her own curiosity on hold long enough to bulldoze the hospital staff into considering Benedek next of kin.

The efforts paid off just in time. A young doctor, making no effort to hide his confusion, went through the prognosis with him. Jonathan appeared to have suffered no serious physical injuries; what caused concern was the patient's lack of reflexive response to external stimuli. Although conscious, he was uncommunicative; although aware, he would not respond.

Benedek heard the underlying note in the doctor's voice, and despite the fact that it was five in the morning at G.I., hit the phone once more.

Despite misgivings and remonstrations from all concerned, she wangled Jonathan's release from the hospital into Benedek's care. A brief, carefully phrased phone call to Betty gained Benedek the useful information that the local motel also rented individual two-room bungalows set off from the main lodge. After another quick call to the motel manager to make hurried arrangements, he brought MacKensie back to one of those cabins, and it was there that he began a vigil that was well into its second week.

Vigil was a kind euphemism for what became and continued to be an ongoing ordeal. He'd once spent an entire summer between college semesters working as a nursing home attendant, and ever since considered it to be the single worst experience of his life. Now he found himself calling upon that 'useless' experience to get him through, realizing, with stinging irony, that without it he wouldn't have even known where to begin, let alone been able to cope at all.

The first three days and nights were the worst. Jonathan hadn't had one lucid moment in all that time. He either huddled in a painfully tight ball on the bed, or tossed feverishly, rending the sheets in a white-knuckled grip. Benedek assuaged the manager, telling him that MacKensie was merely recovering from a mild case of career burn-out; he cheerfully assured the puzzled domestic staff that his friend was nothing more than an overly energetic sleeper.

His happy-go-lucky facade, one he had carefully constructed over the years as just another tool in a vast repertoire of coercive tricks, served a grimmer purpose. It kept him going when the dark clouds of doubt and apprehension started gathering.

What unsettled him most was the total lack of sound. Even in the grip of his worst tortured convulsion, Jonathan made not a single sound save that of a heaving gasp when his exertions finally sent him into exhausted sleep. No cries, no shouts, not even the tiniest whimper.

On the fourth day, Jonathan spent the entire afternoon in a deep, still sleep. Benedek checked him occasionally, frowning to see each time that the man hadn't moved a muscle. But respiration was strong, his pulse steady, so Benedek decided to let it ride for a time. If there was no change by nightfall, he would then give serious thought to calling for medical help.

Within half an hour of Benedek's self-imposed time limit, Jonathan stirred. The slight movement in the stillness of the dimly lit room startled Benedek out of a light doze. Rubbing at his stiffened neck, he rose from his chair, crossing to turn on a small bedside lamp.

Jonathan lay on his back; sweat-dampened hair clung to his forehead in dark strands, trailing into pale, watery eyes staring, unfocused, at the ceiling. Benedek, about to speak, paused and swallowed in a throat gone inexplicably dry. There was no sign of life in that still face, or in the fixed gaze; no reaction to Benedek's hurried check to reassure himself that at least the physical body harbored a spark of life.

He clapped sharply before Jonathan's eyes and his heart sank to detect no response. Several more times he tried, until finally Jonathan's eyelids twitched. Encouraged, he repeated his efforts several more times to be certain that it hadn't merely been an uncoordinated reflex; again he got the same reaction.

But that was all: a small muscular spasm, nothing more. He straightened with a deepening frown. The doctors had warned him about this. They'd suspected major emotional trauma, which Benedek had been unable to confirm without providing specifics. Those specifics would have landed him in the local loony bin, and that certainly wouldn't have done anyone, including himself, any good.

The next day saw a dramatic improvement, and for the first time Benedek allowed himself to hope. Jonathan could be urged from the bed to take a few wobbly steps, could even be urged to eat as long as Benedek stayed available to remind him to take another bite. But as quickly as hope flared, it died again. Jonathan reached a plateau and stayed there. He performed with robot-like detachment, functioning without true awareness. And still he uttered not a sound.

Benedek tried everything he could think of to provide encouragement by way of external stimuli. He told every anecdote in his repertoire and made up a few more stories on the spot. He established a routine for rousing Jonathan out of bed for some carefully guided exercise. He went out of his way to provide as exotic a menu as a little town like Lannerton could offer him. And, when his efforts exhausted him, he left the bedroom TV on, as a kind of poor substitute for his own presence, so that he could catch up on his sleep on the couch in the other room.

Betty became his lifeline to the real world and sanity. She ran errands for him, answered all his questions without bombarding him with her own, made sure the small refrigerator was stocked, and always seemed to call just when he needed a friendly voice and a concerned ear. She seemed to accept his half-hearted explanations that his friend in the other room was napping or reading or writing and otherwise shouldn't be disturbed. In the first days, when he was heavily dependent on her for her local expertise and time-honed relationships with the motel manager as well as the pharmacist and the grocery store owner, he felt massive guilt pangs at taking advantage of her eagerness to help him without ever once being able to be completely honest with her—or to repay her in any way. But she made it clear in very short order that her concern was for him, and not merely because of an advanced case of hero worship. More than once, when he was sure he teetered at the breaking point, she'd arrive with groceries and just the right smile, just the right words, just the right tone of voice to soothe his frayed nerves. Just enough for him to get through another day.

Occasionally he thought he saw Jonathan fixating on something flashing by on the television screen. Once in a while he thought he might have seen a spark in the man's dead eyes, as though he had just thought of something he wanted to say. But each time Benedek looked closer, the imagined flash was gone, and only the darkness was left behind.

Now he had less than two days and not much hope left.

He'd been staring at the phone for nearly half an hour. Something inside him was jumping, urging him to action. Allowing himself to be directed by the vague instinct, he rose, crossing the room to the bedroom door.

The TV was on, as usual; some pre-teen animated superhero danced across the screen. Jonathan, eyes open and blank, lay atop the bed covers, head turned away from the TV.

Benedek entered, grabbing up the remote and a chair. He snapped off the TV at the same moment he swung into the chair, plopping his feet up on the corner of the bed. "You and me gotta talk, Jocko."

Only Jonathan's eyes moved, perhaps only following Benedek's movements with mindless interest. With a long sigh, Benedek chose to stare down at the remote he turned over and over in his hands. "I hope you're in there Jack, and I hope you can hear me because—you and me, we got our backs to the wall here. I just..." He paused, forcing his voice to remain even. "I don't know what to do anymore. For all I know, those doctors were right and you should have—" Now he had to stop in order to regain the breath a sharp twinge of pain had cost him. "This is the way it is. I've only got two more days to figure out if you're in there. After that, there's no more choice. We've got to let the professionals take over. That's the way Dr. Moorhouse sees it, and she makes a pretty persuasive argument. What it boils down to is that if you can't come through on your own, for whatever reason, then it really doesn't matter anymore whether you're here or there or some little padded room someplace else. You and me—we both know that there's no such thing as professional help for this...thing."

He fell into silence again, mustering the courage to speak once more. "What does it matter anyway?" he murmured bleakly. "Maybe I should've let that damned tent fall on our heads. Maybe you're already dead and the rest of you just hasn't caught on to that fact yet."

He willfully shook off the blackness descending on him. "Two days, Jack. That's all we got left. I'll hang on 'til crack of doom if need be, if you'll give me some kind of sign that there's still something in there that wants to get out. Anything. Just give me a sign."

The silence in the room grew until it pressed down on him like a physical weight. He finally looked up to search Jonathan's face for any sign of understanding. But Jonathan's eyes were shut, giving him no clue as to whether the man had been awake, let alone aware, while he'd been speaking.

"Well...I'll come and visit you when I can," he murmured tiredly. "If there's anything left to visit."

He felt completely drained, as though the effort of speaking had sapped his nervous energy. Turning the TV on again, he dropped the remote onto the bed. Rising, he took one rueful last look at Jonathan before turning away. He left, sternly chiding himself for giving into a flash of wishful thinking: for one moment, he could have sworn he had seen a hint of wetness rimming Jonathan's closed eyes.

Unable to summon the strength to pull out the sofa bed, he collapsed on the couch and fell almost immediately into a deep, exhausted sleep.

The late afternoon sun streamed through the front windows when he jolted awake, instantly aware that he'd been asleep for hours.

Something was wrong. He sensed it without knowing precisely what it was that had alerted him. He listened to the silence for a moment before realizing that the silence itself had twinged him awake. The incessant background noise from the TV had stopped.

Jumping to his feet, he crossed to the open door of the bedroom, leaning in. The bed was empty. A quick check of the bathroom, even the closet failed to turn up a trace. Panic building in his stomach, he bolted out of the room to check the front door.

The chain lock, which he'd carefully fastened, dangled free.

Fear stabbed him, stealing his breath; fear that he had somehow, all unknowingly, gotten through to Jonathan, only to push the man into doing something drastic. But he refused to consider that, shoving the thought aside vehemently. Jonathan had survived three months in hell; he wouldn't try to destroy himself over some ill-considered thing Benedek had said.

Or would he? As far as he knew, Jonathan had been fully aware for the past week and a half, still held prisoner in his own body. Perhaps in all that time, Jonathan had looked upon Benedek as his last thread of hope, the only person alive who had even the barest hint of what held him captive, the only one who could possibly help him. If he felt that Benedek was abandoning him, what then was he capable of doing?

The possibility staggered him; he leaned against the door to steady himself. It was then that he spied a scrap of paper lying on the floor.

He recognized it as having been torn from one of his notebooks. There was writing on it, a grotesque parody of Jonathan MacKensie's normally precise handwriting. The note read simply: "Went for a walk. Don't worry. J."

He stared at it in open-mouthed astonishment, even when the paper trembled too violently for him to make out the words anymore. Then an unexpected laugh bubbled up from the depths of his chest, lifting him into euphoria. "I'll be damned—you left me a sign!"

He stifled a chortle, but couldn't completely wipe the smile from his face even as more practical concerns took over. The note told him a thousand different things while at the same time, it told him nothing. He could spend the rest of the evening and all of the next day trying to figure it out, and in the meantime, Jonathan was wandering around unfamiliar territory in god-only-knew-what state of mind. He snagged his jacket, hurtling out the door, muttering as he went, "J.J, we gotta have a long talk about getting lost trying to find yourself...."

Some inner instinct guided him directly to the hill overlooking the burned and blasted landscape, the same hill he'd stood upon that first night in Lannerton. He found Jonathan there, seated on the ground near the crest, chin resting against arms crossed upon raised knees, staring vacantly out over the ruined, sunlit field.

Benedek approached slowly, calculating how best to proceed. He could only hope that whatever drew Jonathan to this spot was a positive thing, a healing force, an attempt to exorcise the internal demons still holding him fast in a grip of silence.

He stopped a few paces away, carefully within range of Jonathan's peripheral vision. He had a few of his own demons to battle now that he was within sight of the charred wreckage of Harmon's Midway Carnival and Circus Side Show. But the glorious summer day helped nudge the darkness away; a lilting fragrance in the warm air swirled into his lungs when he took a deep, grateful breath.

Settling on the ground, he stretched out in the grass with a contented sigh. Tilting his face up to the sun, he closed his eyes, giving himself up to the comforting warmth.

A quiet voice slid into his gently drifting dream. "I wish I could have met her."

Benedek came awake in an instant. It took him a moment to calm his suddenly pounding heart enough to realize that the voice hadn't been from a dream. With those few, softly spoken words, Jonathan broke free of his prison of silence.

Fearing that any unconsidered action at this point might end up doing more harm than good, he held his reaction in check, electing instead to pick up the thread of thought culminating in Jonathan's cryptic comment. The wistful quality of his voice plus the fact that Benedek had spent nearly two hours the night before reminiscing of Lady Carmen's halcyon days gave him the clue. He strained to remember what he'd actually said about her, recalling that he'd consciously stressed her earlier career, extolling her beauty and genuine talents. But he'd segued several times into hints that he felt they owed their lives to her sheer determination to destroy Harmon, even as the man inexorably squeezed her life dry.

If Jonathan's quiet comment indeed referred to Lady Carmen, that meant that he'd not only heard last night, but had also listened and absorbed. Benedek's instincts had been right all along. Jonathan's soul wasn't dead inside a battered shell, as he and Dr. Moorhouse feared, but had merely retreated, like a cruelly beaten animal, to cower in the concealing shadows and lick its wounds. It was even now emerging, tentatively, probingly, waiting only to be coaxed back into the light. Benedek realized, with that new insight, that he had to be especially careful. Any shadow or threat would likely send him scurrying back, this time to be lost forever in the darkness.

He ventured a reply, his voice carefully neutral. "I wish you could've met her, too. She was an incredible lady."

"How did she do it?"

Another cryptic comment to sort out. He'd touched on the business of the pendant last night, admitting that he had no idea where she'd gotten the crystal or how she'd managed to conceal her intent from Harmon for so long. Something told him that Jonathan's thought was not for how she'd managed to find the answer itself, but how she'd found a way to the answer at all.

It was a long shot, but he decided to phrase his answer based on that suspicion. "Don't sell yourself short, Jack," he replied, shifting slightly to turn the other side of his face to the sun. "Lady Carmen was a gifted psychic—I told you that, right? That gave her the edge you didn't have." He cracked open an eye to check Jonathan's reaction, and saw that his friend had buried his face in his crossed arms.

Raising up on his elbows, he fixed Jonathan with a long, piercing look. "Listen," he said quietly. "You did the best you could. Nobody could've done better, including me. You came through. Concentrate on that, okay? You came through. That's the only thing that matters."

There was no reply, no overt reaction for a long time. Benedek waited, trying not to give into a panicked thought that Jonathan retreated again, this time past all hope. But then he stirred, raising his head.

"There's nothing for me to go back to," he said, his voice flat and emotionless. "Not after all this time. I can't expect everything to go on hold while I..." his voice faded slightly, recovering to continue, "...drop off the face of the earth."

"Got you covered, Jack," Benedek replied, serene in the knowledge that he could put at least one ghost to rest right away. "Dr. Moorhouse had got it all fixed for you. Trust me, when she gets through with the Board, they'll meet you at the plane with a brass band and color guard. And after we get you all squared away neat and cozy, she and I are going shopping for a china pattern."

He slipped in the deliberately insouciant comment to provoke a reaction, and Jonathan didn't disappoint him, giving him with a bewildered stare. Benedek changed the subject quickly, feeling better by the moment. "So, whaddya say?" he grinned. "Wanna head back or stick around and catch a few more rays?"

Jonathan made a small motion of his head that Benedek took to mean he wasn't ready to leave. A shadow came over him at that; something still lurked behind the man's pale face, something dangerous and unresolved. Benedek forced himself to settle back again, determined to wait it out.

It came just as the sun dipped below the horizon, shooting a riot of red and orange streaks high into the sky. Jonathan spoke, his voice a husky, broken whisper. "Was it real?"

Behind closed eyes, Benedek held his breath.

"I keep hoping...I'll wake up. I'll be home, or in the hospital, someplace...something I could understand. But it doesn't end. I don't wake up."

He knew what Jonathan was begging him to do. The man wanted something tangible, something explainable to account for his lost life; anything to keep from facing the demons of reality.

A wild thought sparked in Benedek's mind, growing as he propped himself up on one elbow. "J.J., I'm going to do you the biggest favor of this or any other lifetime."

"What's that?" Jonathan said, mildly startled by the earnestness in the man's voice.

"I'm not going to answer your question." He pushed up into a full sitting position, dusting his hands. "In fact, I'm never going to answer it. We're never going to have this discussion again. As of this moment, file the past three months under 'unexplained phenomena', and let it collect dust."

On his knees, he met Jonathan's puzzled gaze with a intense one of his own. "Forget conventional wisdom, Jocko. Forget those undergrad psych courses you took, forget the faddy patois about grabbing your problems by the neck and staring them in their beady little eyes. You're never going to get anywhere trying to face this down, so go the other way altogether. Give it a thirty-yard punt downfield, and then call the game. Walk off the field. Hit the showers." He warmed up to his hard-sell, his eyes dancing with a manic light. "The last three months never happened, Jack. We're talking selective amnesia here, get what I'm saying? Build some delusions. Cling to them, make them *real*."

Jonathan tried to look away, but Benedek wouldn't let him, grabbing his arm to jerk his attention back. "Don't you understand? What happened here was some kind of nightmare, and that's where we have to leave it—with the rest of the bad dreams. Forget reality; reality has nothing to do with this and you know it. Illusions and delusions, that's what you've got to hold onto now. I'm not giving you a bum steer—you are talking to the Grand Master of Self-Deception here. No one know better than me how important a really creative fantasy can be when all you want is to keep your sanity intact."

Going back on his heels, he chewed his bottom lip as he considered Jonathan's bowed, unmoving head. Had it been a mistake to push the point? He was right, though; he knew he was right, and that certainty kept him talking. "Look. Why don't we grab a cup of coffee? I'd like to introduce you to someone; she not only serves up the best java in town, she's also a big fan of mine, two big plusses in anyone's book, you gotta admit. I'll toss in a couple or three cheese danishes, and we'll reminisce about this great time you had, oh—clamming off the coast of Maine. Or how about white-water rafting down the Colorado with a sidebar jaunt to the Grand Canyon? Or, better yet—spin casting for rainbow trout in Lake George?"

Eyebrows arched, he held out an expectant hand toward Jonathan and waited. Whether the man was aware of it or not, this was the now or never scenario Benedek had been anticipating all along. If Jonathan denied Benedek's airy fantasies, then he doomed himself to a half-life, locked in hopeless battle with internal demons he would never defeat. But if he immersed himself in blithe illusion, he would then be free to go forward, unencumbered by torturous memories of an old reality that had no right to exist in the first place.

The waiting stretched past the point where Benedek was forced to breath again, and began to reach the point where he feared his argument was lost. Then Jonathan blinked, turning a quiet look on Benedek. "Spin-casting? Did I at least catch the limit?"

Light-headed with relief, Benedek managed a chiding look. "Even fantasies have their limits, Jocko. American Sportsman you're not."

"Half the limit?"

"Get real."

"At least one?"

He finally allowed himself the release of a heartfelt chuckle. "Okay, sold. One. An eight-incher, and it was pretty tasty, too." Laughter lifted him to his feet with a jaunty spring he hadn't felt in ages. "Come along with us, sports fans, as we go now in search of that most elusive of creatures: the perfect cup of coffee."

The last vestiges of clinging blackness that had covered his soul for far too long finally swept away in a flood of elation when Jonathan cracked a wan smile and said, with nearly his old voice, "Could we make that a perfect cup of tea? And an apple danish. I don't like cheese."

Benny whooped, slapping his hands together. The foundation of a glorious illusion had been laid; life was returning. He made a solemn, silent promise to himself that he wouldn't relent until he'd forced a full-fledged laugh to bring the color back to Jonathan MacKensie's face.

At a cajoling gesture from Benny, Jonathan rose to his feet, allowing his friend to throw a comradely arm around his shoulder as they made their way back to Lannerton and Betty's diner. Benny made yet another promise to himself: somewhere along the line, he would pause long enough to give Dr. Moorhouse a quick call, or perhaps stop by the Western Union cubbyhole to send her a simple, two word message: 'Jack's back'. But for now, he would allow himself to luxuriate in the glow of the only true reality he knew and trusted: the warm security of a bond forged in fire, a friendship risen intact from the ashes of fiery destruction.

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