

A Matter of Time

by M.D. Bloemker

(Shadow Chasers/Sapphire & Steel)

His fingers flew, swift and sure, effortlessly transforming the thoughts in his head into white characters on a glowing blue background. Words became sentences, sentences flowed into paragraphs, until, with a sense of satisfaction, he tapped the period key. Pausing a moment, he squinted at the last sentence, considered, then backspaced, replacing the last character with an exclamation point.

One final flick of his fingers saved the file to his hard disk as his other hand snagged the cordless telephone and punched a well-worn key to dial a stored number. A blast of sound interrupted the third ring. "National Register," a harried voice spoke above the background din.

"Alicia, *mi amore!*" Edgar Benedek crooned, juggling the receiver to his other ear. "Tell the big banana that his favorite reporter's on the phone. I'm about to fax through my latest peace offering."

There was silence on the other end of the phone, followed by a completely unexpected question. "Who's calling?"

"Who's calling?" Benny snorted. "I missed your birthday, is that it? I'll make it up to you, what kinda flowers do you like?"

"Who is this?" the voice demanded, exasperated.

The grin faded from his face. "Alicia, come on. It's me, Benny."

"Benny who?"

He pulled the receiver from his ear, staring at it as though it could give him a clue as to what was wrong. And, to his utter astonishment, it did.

"I don't own a blue phone," he muttered, turning the piece of aqua-colored plastic over in his hand, then following the cord—"Cord?"—to the base unit. He touched it gingerly, his fingers passing over the telephone number printed below the keypad. "This isn't my phone number."

A querulous voice issued from the receiver, ignored as Benny turned back to the screen and scanned the words glowing green on a black background. "This isn't my color scheme. This isn't my story," he breathed, going cold. "Princess Di? I don't do Princess Di. Where's my story? Where's...."

He swung around in his chair, and stared open-mouthed at an apartment that wasn't his. In fact, it didn't seem to be an apartment at all. The drapes of a large bay window where there should have been two tiny casement windows were parted just enough for him to see a sedate ranch-style house a short distance away. The color scheme of the room, twice as large as his entire apartment, was tastefully coordinated, all muted blues and browns contrasted with the bright rose pattern of the drapes and sofa upholstery, and there wasn't a stick of furniture that he recognized.

He swallowed hard, muttering under his breath, "Oh, no. Not again."

The air changed around him, an abrupt cooling that sliced through him, much like the sharp, cold edge of a blade of...

He launched of the chair in a leap that catapulted him nearly halfway across the room before he spun to face the owner of the hand he'd barely dodged from claspings his shoulder. For a moment, he could only stare, speechless, at the last person he'd ever expected to see, but should have expected all along.

His breath came back in a short bark. "You again. Don't you ever knock?"

The newcomer took a step forward. Benny responded with two steps back. "What is it this time?" he demanded. "You've come to fix this, right?"

"Yes," the man replied stiffly, his clear gray eyes burning in a mask-like face. "I've come to fix this. And I shall start by killing you."

Benny dove to the side as the man lunged, leaping over the sofa to put it between him and his professed murderer. "Wait, wait, let's talk about this, okay? What the hell's going on around here? Why do you want to—yeow!"

The man reached down and, taking the sofa arm with one hand, tossed the piece of furniture out of his way. Benny barely escaped by ducking under the man's rigid arm, nearly somersaulting in his desperate attempt to put the length of the room—and more—between them. In desperation, he looked for the woman who should have been there, who'd always been never less than a few yards from the side of her berserker partner.

"Where is she?" he demanded, less from curiosity than from a very real—not to mention immediate—need to appeal to a more sympathetic ear. "Where's Sapphire?"

Steel halted his advance abruptly, his head coming up to reveal gray eyes glittering with surprise and rage. It seemed to take him a moment before he could speak. "Sapphire is dead." His expression tightened dangerously. "You killed her."

"She...I...what?" Stunned, Benny barely managed to react in time; he sidestepped inches from Steel's outstretched hand and, with his pursuer shadowing his every move, began a defensive circuit of the room.

"I didn't kill anyone," Benny insisted, skirting the upended sofa. "I swear, I didn't kill anyone!"

"I heard her scream," Steel said, his soft voice belying the fury that suffused his face. "I felt... "

His jaw stiffened, almost as though he'd suddenly become aware that he'd been on the verge of voicing a thought that he couldn't complete.

"I didn't kill her! I didn't kill anyone!" repeated Benny urgently.

"You went through the gate with her," his attacker accused with deadly finality.

A long-ago memory overwhelmed Benedek suddenly, jolting him with its clarity and its residual emotional impact. The gate. His hand in hers, she'd led him to the gate. Her eyes glowed, brilliant blue, and the door had opened. One last protest, easily soothed, and then....

"Yes," Benny said weakly.

"She never came out."

"No! She did, we both did. You remember....

"I do not."

His pace slowed as Benny sensed, with relief, that the flicker in the intruder's eyes reflected growing uncertainty. "What happened in there?" Steel demanded.

"I...don't remember. No, I'm telling you the truth, I...I've never been able to remember. She said it was better that way. Come on, you were there when she said it."

"She never came out," Steel hissed.

"Look, look," he croaked desperately. "Isn't it obvious? We're remembering two different things! Killing me isn't going to solve anything."

"Perhaps not," Steel replied. A small smile touched his lips, chilling in its promise. "But it will give me great pleasure."

"Mr. Benedek?"

Benny's eyes widened as, over Steel's shoulder, he saw a very welcome sight. "Sapphire!" he breathed, weak with relief. "Oh, man, am I ever glad to see you."

"Indeed," the woman replied with a smile as Steel, frowning, turned toward where Sapphire was standing at the far end of the room.

"You think me a fool?" he growled angrily.

"Could you tell him to back off?" he pleaded with her.

"Him?" she queried, glancing around in genuine confusion.

"Enough," Steel grunted, fury sparking in his eyes.

"Oh, boy," Benny squeaked, heart sinking as Steel advanced on him again.

"Mr. Benedek, are you all right?"

Her question ended in a surprised cry as Benny, feinting left, ducked under Steel's swinging arm. He grabbed the edge of the desk to deflect his trajectory and landed, hands and knees, at Sapphire's feet.

He looked up to see Steel advancing on him, with no time to regain his balance and therefore no escape. Instinctively, he raised a hand, mutely asking the woman to shield him from her implacable companion, or at least help him to his feet.

Her hand closed on his, and as he wondered at the incredible warmth of her skin, the room around him changed again, becoming his familiar New York apartment. But more importantly, the terrible rage abruptly vanished from Steel's face.

One hand frozen in the act of reaching for Benedek's throat, Steel stood immobile, staring at the woman standing behind his erstwhile victim. When he spoke after a long moment of silence, his voice had lost all of its former belligerence, filling instead with a poignant longing. "Sapphire?"

And when she spoke, another long moment later, it was with her usual aplomb and subtle irony. "I do believe we have a problem."

"Disaster."

Steel paced angrily, ignoring Benny's wince every time his body seemed to pass through the furniture that existed only in the New York apartment. Neither did it seem to disturb the man that, according to the single remark he'd made on the subject, Benny and Sapphire appeared to be seated on a non-existent futon.

Benny clung tightly to Sapphire's hand, as he had since a few moments of tentative experimentation had proved that this contact kept everyone visible and audible to everyone else. For a while, his surroundings remained stable as well, but increasingly, ghosts and shadows of that suburban living room in which Steel stalked impinged on his awareness. Sapphire frowned but said nothing when he, rubbing his aching forehead, mentioned it to her; Steel ignored him, continuing to pace and mutter.

"Utter disaster."

"I'm not sure I agree," Sapphire replied calmly. "However, I do agree that the situation is...difficult."

"How did we become separated? Where—?" He stopped, struck by a thought. "What happened after you went through the gate?"

"Something separated us in the passage," she said, turning to Benny. "Do you remember?"

He shook his head, too confused to speak.

"Something," Steel repeated urgently. "What?"

"I don't remember, not clearly," she faltered. "I was pushed aside. There was something...someone. Someone with us in the passage. It wasn't concerned with me, it merely wanted me out of the way. When I turned back, Mr. Benedek was gone. I searched for him, and found...." Her face changed as she looked up at him. "Where are you?"

Steel drew a breath, and for a moment looked away. She gasped. "No. You didn't."

"What was I supposed to do?" he shot back defensively.

"You were supposed to guard the entrance."

"You didn't answer me." He glowered, becoming agitated. "I heard...I heard you...You didn't answer me."

"I didn't hear you," she admitted, her voice faint with the confusion reflected in her eyes. After a moment, she focused on Steel again. "What did you find?"

"Another portal, leading to this place. And him."

Eyes distant, she shook her head. "You chose the wrong path."

"But...."

"There were two portals. Two choices. They were deliberately set in place."

"By whom? Or what?" Steel growled.

"You know, I really hate it when you look at me like that," Benedek muttered darkly. "Look, once and for all, I'm not the one responsible for this mess."

"What caused you to break contact with Sapphire?"

"I didn't break contact with her," he insisted, exasperated.

"But you claim you remember nothing."

"Look, I remember enough, okay? I went in with her and I came out with her...."

"No, Mr. Benedek," Sapphire interrupted him gently. "We went in together, yes. But we never left."

"We did," he said, but shock left him with no voice as he stared at Sapphire, who slowly shook her head as she continued, "We never left, Mr. Benedek. We're still there."

He tried to back away from her, but she held on tightly. "That happened nearly ten years ago," he said hoarsely, one hand pressed to his pounding head. "Ten years. Are you trying to tell me that everything that's happened...?"

He struggled for composure. "Look, you say that we never came back through the gate. But we did, I remember that much. I...don't remember what happened in there, though. All I know is that things were one way before we went in and...different...when we came back. So if we never came back, that means that...."

He focused on Steel suddenly, his surprise at finding the man intent on his every word muted by a startling thought. "A house. A Cape Cod on Long Island," he said, voice nearly gone. He squinted, picking out the rose patterns in the living room's decor through the annoying haze of his New York perception. "She loved flowers. She...." He started to rise, but Sapphire's firm grip kept him next to her. "She's here, isn't she?" he demanded of them in a voice that hardly dared hope.

"I wouldn't know," Steel replied, turning away.

Sapphire resisted Benny's attempt to release her hand, forcing him to face her. "This is not wise," she cautioned.

"She's here, isn't she?" he repeated slowly, leaving no doubt that he would not be dissuaded from the answer.

"Not...here," Sapphire admitted reluctantly. "But near."

"My God." Benny swallowed in a dry throat. "My God. That's what's happening, isn't it? She didn't...she never...."

"Mr. Benedek...."

He yanked free and was off the futon before Sapphire could stop him. Steel eyed him warily as Sapphire disappeared from view and Benedek discovered and approached the elaborately framed photo collage above the entertainment center.

Reaching up, he touched the glass, fingers lightly tracing details that brought to him, one by one, stunning revelations. A couple in formal wedding pose; the same woman, reclining in bed, looking tired but happy as she cradled two infants. The same babies yawning sleepily in a stroller, opening presents under a decorated tree under the beaming smiles of the erstwhile bride and groom. The same toddlers riding a merry-go-round, the same youngsters posing self-consciously in matching suits and ties for grammar school photographs.

His fingers lingered on the luminescent face of the happy bride. "Denise," he breathed.

"Mr. Benedek."

The photos wavered before his eyes. "No!" he cried, pulling away from Sapphire's touch. "No, let me...I want to see this. Please."

"This is not wise," she repeated softly, firmly.

"I have a wife," he said, his breath coming in strained gasps. "I have children, I have a house on Long Island, I have...."

"Benny."

"Denise." He shook his head wonderingly as he stared at the photos. "I have...everything I wanted."

"Do you?" Sapphire asked softly.

He turned to her, gray-faced. "This is real, isn't it?"

She reacted to the plaintive note in his voice, lowering her eyes. "Yes. This is real. But it's not right."

"No," he murmured, an instinctive protest from his heart. It had to be right. He stared up at the photos again. Everything he'd ever wanted was depicted there, and in more than half the photos, it was his beaming face next to Denise's. The way it should have been all along. The way it would have been if....

"Why can't it be right? Who would it hurt?" He looked at her pleadingly. "Who would it hurt?"

She didn't have to reply; he saw the answer in her eyes.

"Oh, God," he groaned, turning away.

Steel stood silent nearby, hearing only Benny's side of the conversation and growing increasingly impatient. "I must speak with Sapphire," he said as Benny collapsed onto the futon, aching head held in his shaking hands.

"Go to hell," Benny muttered wearily.

He didn't look up as Steel approached him, belatedly realizing that given the man's stated intention for coming here in the first place, ignoring him wasn't necessarily a wise thing to do. "I will speak with Sapphire now," the man said in a low, controlled voice. "Her way—or my way."

Benny scowled up at him, flinching away when Steel raised his hand. "Okay, okay, back off." His gaze shifted to the woman who had taken a step closer to him in concern. "He wants to talk to you," he sighed, holding out his hand to her.

Any other time Benny might have been intrigued by the subtle change that came over Steel's face when Sapphire appeared before him again. A softening, as though a raw edge had been tempered, smoothed over. He wondered vaguely, and not for the first time, if their peculiar relationship was born not of practicality but of mutual need.

"Why?" Steel demanded. "Why is this happening?"

"I don't know," she admitted with a sigh. "I can't even guess."

"These choices must be the key to understanding this riddle."

"I agree." She tugged gently on Benny's hand to request his attention. "I know this will be difficult for you to believe and understand. All I ask is that you trust me. Please."

He nodded mutely, bringing a warm smile to her face. "We are still in the passage, beyond the gate," she told him. "Someone has shown you two paths, two directions that your life could take. I exist in one, Steel exists in the other. Both are real, but neither belong to you. Not yet, anyway."

"Not yet?" he echoed weakly.

"We went beyond the gate to find the cause of the breach. And we did that because you told us that you knew the plane would never arrive. But it did arrive. I saw it. Steel saw it. You did not."

She tightened her grip on his hand when he stiffened. "The gate didn't open for you, it opened for me. The breach couldn't have been affecting you at that point. How did you know?"

"I—I just knew," he faltered.

"No," she said firmly. "Someone told you."

He shook his head, causing her to repeat more firmly, "Someone told you, Mr. Benedek. Who? Who told you the plane would never arrive?"

"No one," he gasped. "I swear, I...I don't remember...I just knew...."

Her fingers brushed the side of Benny's face as she spoke. He watched, open-mouthed, as her eyes filled with a soft, pulsing blue light. Dimly, he heard Steel speak his partner's name in a tone of warning tinged with deep concern, but the blue light grew stronger and swept the man from Benny's awareness as it carried him to another place within his own mind.

Mr. Benedek.

He turned around, nearly colliding with an elderly woman struggling with a suitcase. Setting her on her way with a quick, graciously accepted apology, he glanced around again, decided that he'd mis-heard the page and returned his attention to the array of monitors on the wall above him. Departures and arrivals glowed steadily on the screens as he scanned quickly for the specific flight.

And as he stared, the notation next to that flight flickered noticeably. ON TIME became DELAYED. Then oddly, switched back to ON TIME.

Mr. Benedek?

His head came up as he frowned in confusion. That wasn't a public-address system page. That was a voice inside his own head.

Show me the beginning.

"Here," he said, not knowing to whom he spoke but knowing, somehow, that this was the answer the voice requested. "It began here. The arrival information kept changing."

Show me more.

He didn't move, but suddenly he was no longer on the concourse. He stood near the closed gate, hovering near the flight desk at the fringe of a tense, frightened crowd.

He knew. The others only suspected, but he knew. Their long wait was ultimately to be in vain. The gate before them would never open.

How did you know?

"I just...knew," he whispered.

Who told you?

"No one. No one. I... ."

The voice grew stern and insistent. *Who told you?*

"No one...." He trailed off as he opened his eyes. The gate was open. Weary-looking people emerged from the boarding tube, some gliding into welcoming arms, other trudging on past him.

He stared in disbelief. "This...isn't...."

How did you know? The voice spoke urgently. *Who told you?*

The gate was closed. Someone in the quiet crowd around him began to weep.

"No one!" he insisted. "No one told me! I just knew. I knew because...."

His breath caught as the memory returned with the force of a sledgehammer. He knew even before he spun around that it would be there.

A shadow. Just a shadow, like a badly remembered dream. Vaguely man-shaped, its core was utter darkness, radiating undulating prismatic waves of such brilliance that he recoiled with one arm shielding his eyes.

"No!" he shrieked, scrambling backward to cower against a support beam. "Get away from me!"

What is it? Why do you fear it?

"Get it away!" He cringed as the darkness spread, swallowing all light in its path. With a shrill cry, he tried to scramble to his feet, but the concrete beam beneath his shoulder dissolved as the shadow reached out to envelope him, sending him sprawling.

"It's all right," a voice soothed as gentle hands pried his fingers from his face. "You're safe. You're safe."

He opened his eyes to...nothing. But something held him securely by the shoulders and when he turned his head, it was to see Sapphire's welcoming smile.

"What—?" He swallowed hard, looking around frantically. Then he remembered. The passage. He was in the passage, surrounded once more by its surreal nothingness.

His heart seemed to lodge itself in his throat as he accepted the hand Sapphire offered him to help him to his feet. "You were right, weren't you? I never left here. It was all...."

"A choice," she finished, steadying him on his feet.

"Why?" he managed after a moment.

"A very good question, indeed." Steel entered his field of vision, his expression inscrutable. He gestured briefly with his hand. "The portals vanished as soon as we returned here. I suspect their purpose has been fulfilled."

"Ten years," Benny said numbly, unable to release the grip he kept on Sapphire's hand. "All those books I wrote. The kids' birthday parties...." He squeezed his eyes shut as the disparate memories assailed him, vying for prominence. "None of it was real?"

"On the contrary," Sapphire told him. "In a way that I cannot hope to explain to you, you did indeed live both lives. When you stepped through the portal, you entered your own future. The person you are now joined with the person you will be in that time and place, so it was as if you had lived that life. Both were very real, Mr. Benedek. But you can choose only one. And the choice must be made here."

"Why?" he pleaded. "Why is this happening? Why do I have to make a choice? Why can't my life just happen the way it's supposed to?"

"A question I would very much like answered," Steel said quietly.

"Someone does know the answer," Sapphire commented after a moment spent silently helping Benny to calm down. "The someone who told you that the plane would never arrive."

"Why do you keep saying that?" Benny asked wearily, rubbing his eyes. "I keep telling you, I just knew. That's all. I just...."

"There was a shadow," she reminded. "It frightened you."

The memory caused his breath to catch in his throat. "No...."

"Why did it frighten you?"

"It...." Unable to speak, he shook his head violently.

"Why did it frighten you?"

"It wasn't a shadow!" he blurted.

"What, then?"

"I...don't know." Her words seemed to pull at him, tugging insistently at something he didn't want to see, didn't want to set free and he clenched his teeth with the effort it took him to resist. "I don't know...."

"Why did it frighten you? Did it threaten you?"

"No. Yes!"

"Does it want to cause you harm?"

"Yes," he choked, but then shook his head. "No."

"Did it hurt you?"

"Yes." Head drooping, he clung to her hand with both of his, utterly drained. "Yes."

She placed the fingers of her free hand under his chin, gently forcing him to meet her soft, blue eyes. "The memory is nearly gone. Only the shadow remains," she whispered, understanding. "And the pain."

"Sapphire."

Steel's voice, sharp with warning, drew her attention away. Sick and disoriented, it took a moment for Benny to realize what they were reacting to.

Sapphire grabbed his arm as he recoiled with a ragged gasp, pulling him into a fierce, protective embrace. "No," she whispered urgently near his ear. "It won't harm you. Please."

He strained to break free, but she held fast until his panic subsided and his head dropped to rest against her shoulder. "Look past the pain," she urged him softly. "You already know that it hurt you. Now you must discover why. You must," she cajoled when a shudder marked his protest.

He straightened with an effort, but when she silently prodded him to turn around, his courage failed. She waited until his eyes opened again, then placed her hands on either side of his face. "Do you know why it seeks you?"

"No," he managed hoarsely.

"Do you know how it caused you pain?"

"I...I'm not sure."

"Do you know how it caused you pain?" she pressed.

"I...I'm...yes." He gasped for air. "Yes."

"Benny." She forced him once again to meet her eyes. "Listen to me. This is very important. You must find out. You must discover why it did this to you."

He shook his head helplessly. "How?"

"Ask."

She anticipated his violent response, holding him still until he stopped shaking. "Ask," she repeated, more urgently. "Don't you understand? Everything that's happened to you here depends on the answer. You must know if your pain was caused by the truth...or a lie."

He stopped breathing for a moment. It hadn't occurred to him until that moment that a choice might be involved. The realization washed all fear from him like a cold flood of water, giving him the courage to turn around and face the pulsing shadow that waited patiently for him.

"What are you?" he demanded, voice nearly gone.

He flinched as the apparition answered him, but Sapphire's grip on his arm kept him still. There was no voice, not even recognizable sound. A cacophony of eerie tones assailed his ears, meaningless.

But unthreatening. He forced his squeezed-shut eyes open, reluctantly staring once more into the vague shadow, a dark amorphous shape in the gray nothingness. And listened.

"It needs help," he realized in growing wonder.

Steel looked at him sharply, narrow-eyed. "How so?"

"I—I'm not sure. You can hear it, can't you?" he begged Sapphire.

She shook her head apologetically.

"Are you quite certain?" Steel demanded.

"I...I don't...."

The eerie wail rose plaintively and the shadow's extremities rippled, very much like someone reaching out in supplication.

"Yes," Benny said faintly, unable to take his eyes from the apparition. "I'm sure."

"Then will you?" Sapphire asked quietly, without inflection. "Will you offer it the help you believe it needs?"

Benny stared at the specter, overwhelmed by a sudden surge of fear. "What if I'm wrong? What if it doesn't need help, what if this is only a trick?"

"You must choose according to your own conscience," Sapphire told him.

He drew air into aching lungs, and shook his head helplessly. "I don't know," he groaned. "I don't know what the right choice is."

"I believe you do," she replied confidently.

He stopped short of reflexively disagreeing with her. She was right, after all. He did know. There was something about this place, this situation, that wouldn't allow him to turn his back on someone...something...in need as he might have done in the real world. If it were indeed a trick, even if he died some horrible death as a result, at least his conscience would be clear.

He lunged forward before resurgent fear had a chance to kick the decision aside. The apparition before him raised its arms; in defense or joy, Benny couldn't tell and didn't much care. He grabbed and connected with something warm, rough-textured and very solid. A shrill sound, like the protest of a thousand taut wires struck at once, pounded in his ears as he pulled against a great weight. Something grabbed his arm as Benny strained, somehow knowing that the thing he was attempting to drag forward wanted very much to help, but was being restrained by an almost equal force pulling in the opposite direction.

The cacophony seemed to resolve slightly, or perhaps it was only the ringing in his ears. In strident, sweeping multi-tones he thought he heard the words "...help...me...."

"I'm trying!" he gasped, gritting his teeth and pulling harder. At last he felt some give, abrupt as though his opposite number's grip had suddenly slipped.

Benny stumbled back, and the burden to which he clung came with him. His backward motion was checked by contact with something solid—Steel, who kept Benny on his feet by grabbing his arms and holding on until his legs steadied beneath him.

"Thanks," Benny said breathlessly, less bewildered by the exertion than he was by the rescue.

Sapphire came forward, going to her knees at the side of the thing...the man...that Benny had pulled from the depths of the shadow. He lay still where he had fallen, sprawled face down. Clad in a charcoal gray suit badly marred by dark stains and tears, the man's shoes were missing and his bare feet bore the scars of wounds both old and recent.

Without fear, Sapphire reached over to brush long, tangled hair from the man's face. Her eyes widened as a soft gasp escaped her lips.

"Silver."

Steel released Benny, coming forward to stare down at the man as Sapphire gently cradled his head in her hands. "Silver?" he repeated with soft incredulity. "What's he doing here?"

Sapphire's anguished expression deepened as she carefully pressed her fingers to the injured man's forehead, then traced a slow, gentle path to his temple. "He's not supposed to be here," she whispered.

"That's part of the question, not the answer," Steel growled.

"No," she said sharply. "I mean, he's not supposed to be here, not at all. Not with us, not now."

Steel frowned, troubled. "Are you saying...?"

"Yes."

"But that's impossible."

"You know it's not."

"It's impossible for him," Steel snapped impatiently. "He doesn't know how. He doesn't have the training."

"But that doesn't mean that he can't."

"Why would he?" Steel insisted. "Why would he do something so...so mind-numbingly stupid?"

"Why...indeed?" The question came in a broken whisper from the man whose eyes fluttered open, and blinked hard several times to focus on the face above him. "Hello, my dear. As lovely as ever, I see."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Steel demanded, glowering down at Silver.

"And as obdurate as ever," he sighed, the words catching in his throat. A small coughing fit suddenly became a spasm, and Sapphire held him tightly until it passed.

"Easy," she soothed. "Easy."

Steel dropped to a crouch, waiting until Silver opened his eyes again. "You're a fool."

"It's good to see you, too," the man rasped, mustering a faint smile.

"You shouldn't be here," Steel insisted.

"You're hurt," Sapphire said, catching one of Silver's hands to study, aghast, the rash of scars and unhealed wounds covering his skin. The dark stains covering large areas of his ravaged clothing bore mute testimony to the fact that his injuries were extensive.

"A few scratches," he demurred.

"You're bleeding."

"I suppose I am."

"You're an idiot," Steel snorted.

"If you say so, it must be true," Silver replied, unperturbed.

She gasped softly. It seemed to take her a few moments before she could bring herself to speak and when she did, it was in a barely audible voice. "You're dying."

He closed his eyes with a quiet sigh. "Yes. I know."

"You must go back."

"No. No, I'm afraid that's quite out of the question."

"But if you don't...."

"But," he said sharply, gasping for air at the effort it cost him. When he could speak again, he continued, "But...if I do, I'll die anyway. They're waiting for me, you see."

"Who?" Steel demanded. "Who is waiting for you?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't remember."

"How could you not?"

"Symptomatic, I suppose. I'm doing well to remember who I am, let alone who you are."

"Entropic effects of displacement," Sapphire informed Steel grimly. "Memory is invariably adversely affected."

"Can you help him remember?" Steel asked, displeased.

"I'm not certain," she hesitated.

"I'd prefer you didn't, then," Silver interjected. "Entropy...I don't remember what that means, but it doesn't sound like an experience that should be shared."

"Do you at least remember if those who are waiting for you did this to you?"

"I do remember that much, yes. The answer is no. I may not remember who they are, but I do have a vague recollection that they have no patience for such...subtleties."

"Then how did this happen?"

Silver remained silent, his watery eyes moving to deliver a steady, inscrutable stare to a point above and to his left. "Curiously, that much I do remember."

Sapphire looked up to follow the direction of Silver's gaze and found herself staring at a pale and shaken Edgar Benedek.

"How can this be?" she demanded, voice soft with incredulous horror.

Silver touched her arm. "It wasn't his fault," he assured her. "It was mine, entirely mine. I knew what the risks were. I accepted the consequences."

Steel began to pace silently, hands clasped behind his back. Sapphire's eyes burned angrily as she continued to stare at Benny. "Tell me what happened. Tell me."

"It was him," Benny said in a voice that surprised him with what little strength it held. "He was the one who told me. I remember now. He said that I'd be given a chance to choose. But the choice...he said the choice itself was only a trick. A trick to keep me from making the right choice."

"Why did you hurt him?" she flared.

"He didn't," Silver sighed. "I told you, I knew what the risks were when I attempted to cross a barrier without the proper training."

The returning memory drew deep lines into Benny's ashen face. "I thought he was ill, I tried to get him to a hospital, but he wouldn't let me near him. Every time he tried to say something, it was like...like something was hitting him, or...."

Sapphire's fingers went white where they clutched Silver's torn and bloodied sleeve. "To have suffered this much injury...."

"I was quite persistent," he told her, mustering a wan smile.

"And then he told me what the choices were and...I didn't want to listen anymore."

Steel spoke in the silence. "Someone has gone to a great deal of effort to effect a choice at this particular point in time. Why?" He focused his attention on Benny. "What is so important about your life, here? Now? What is it about you that has caused some of the most destructive forces of the universe to come against you?"

"Not against him," Silver interjected, as gently as he would correct a child. "Against you."

Steel turned, demanding sharply, "What else do you remember, then?"

"Gently," Sapphire said, a command to her partner.

"He knows more than he's telling."

"He's telling all that he knows." Sapphire held his gaze until he turned away with an impatient sigh.

Silver lifted his hand to give the one she held against his face a grateful pat. "Thank you, my dear. Your faith, as ever, sustains me."

"If we are the target, why has this man been drawn into this?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. But he is important. To you."

"How?" Steel demanded, at patience's end.

"I don't remember," he insisted wearily.

"But you expect us to trust what you say."

"He's risked his life to come here," Sapphire pointed out, her voice holding a hard edge.

"He says."

"The injuries are real."

"The explanation is suspect."

"I believe him."

"Believe what you will." Steel turned his back, effectively ending the argument.

Silver convulsed with a dry, hacking cough. Benny watched Sapphire's face as she held the man's shoulders until the spasm subsided and his head dropped weakly back into her lap. The surprising emotion he'd heard in her voice flickered like a fire in her eyes as, with her fingers, she traced the half-healed wounds marking his face.

"Why have you done this?" she asked softly.

He stirred, opening bloodshot eyes that seemed unable to focus, and somehow managed a smile. "For you," he rasped in a voice meant to tell her that the answer should have been obvious.

"Why?" she insisted.

"The choice, you see. He wouldn't have known there was a choice at all. I had to tell him."

"We were assigned."

"Because of me," he said, pronouncing each word with extra care, as though to assure her that there was no reason for the distress that quavered faintly in her voice. "Their plan...oh, my dear, I tell you—it was brilliant. You would have never known, never even suspected. I had to do it, if just to draw your attention. Don't you see?"

She shook her head and he reacted with an exasperated sound. "They had no intention of actually giving him a choice. They opened the gate. A small breach, open for such a short time. He would have never known; you would have never known until it was much too late. That's why I had to tell him. And that's what drew you here—my interference, not the breach itself."

"He saw the gate as closed," Sapphire said, confused.

"Yes. After I told him that was what he must see."

"He's right." Benny spoke faintly, lost in the sudden rush of conflicting memories. "They'd already made the announcement. People were crying. I...didn't...I had no idea...." He swallowed hard, his eyes widening in sudden horror. "I didn't know. I didn't know it was going to happen."

"Go on," Sapphire urged as Steel ended his measured pacing to listen intently.

"I remember standing there, thinking that it just couldn't be true. Couldn't be. Someone was wrong, it was all some horrible mistake, or...or someone was playing some kind of sick joke. I'd spent all that time waiting for the door to open, and now they were saying it never would. But they had to be wrong. If they'd just go over there and open the door, they'd have to see that they were wrong. Just open it, and then everything will be all right and we can all go home and have a good laugh...."

He trailed off, lowering his head for the moment it took him to regain his composure and put some distance between himself and the memory threatening to overwhelm him. "I thought I heard someone call my name," he said in a lower, calmer voice. "I turned and...there was someone standing by the gate. He was smiling at me. Smiling. Kinda like he knew that I hadn't fallen for the joke."

The insight drained strength from his voice for a moment, and a quick exchange of glances with Sapphire told him that she hadn't missed it, either. "What then?" she prodded gently.

"He opened the door."

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" Steel demanded coldly in the heavy silence that followed Benny's whispered words.

"I expect he didn't remember it until just now," Silver offered. "My fault, I fear. There was no time for subtlety."

"You took back time?"

"Just a few seconds," he demurred to Sapphire's sharp accusation. "Less effort than you might think, since I merely took advantage of the distortion effect caused by their manipulations. As you can see, I caused no permanent reversal, but it did keep him from accepting their invitation, as it were. Long enough for me to assure him that it was a trick, that the gate had to stay closed. Long enough to get your attention."

"When we arrived, the gate was open," Steel pointed out.

"Clever of them, don't you think? Persuade you to believe that the lie was the reality and his perception the falsehood, and you'd deliver him exactly where they wanted him. Such delicious irony."

"Clever," Steel echoed, unconvinced. "But you insist that we are the target, not him. If you would have us believe that you speak the truth, then your clever explanation fails the most critical test. It does not explain why."

Silver drew a deep breath, his eyes closing briefly. "I've already told you, I don't remember why," he sighed, defeated. "I'm sorry."

"Clever," Steel sniffed.

"How can you be so obtuse?" Silver flared, body and voice trembling with passion. "Think, man. Think. Your paths have crossed before. You know what the correct choice must be. I'm not lying to you. I'm trying to help you, you stubborn idiot."

Sapphire soothed him back when his voice shattered into a moan of pain. Shaken, Steel turned his back on them once more, remaining silent.

"That's not all I remember," Benny said suddenly, raising his head to reveal his gray, haggard face. "I remember why you thought Sapphire was dead."

Silver made a sharp noise, followed by an unconvincing coughing fit, successfully distracting Sapphire. But Steel's attention remained intent on Benny as the muscles of his face tightened. "Why?"

"You know, it's really not wise to...." Silver rasped.

"Because she was."

Sapphire and Steel exchanged alarmed glances as Silver deflated with a groan. Steel took a step forward, lifting one hand. "Tell me."

"Don't do it," Silver said quickly.

Benny rocked slightly, straining to resolve the fractured memory. "She took me to the wrong portal. Not the one they wanted me to choose. She stood in their way." His voice dropped to an anguished whisper. "And...that's why they killed her."

"Who?" Steel demanded. "Who did this?"

Benny folded his arms tightly across his chest. "I don't remember faces. Just...shadows. They pulled me away. I saw...." His breathing stopped as widened eyes stared at nothing. "They...I saw them...."

"Tell me."

"Don't!" Silver interjected forcefully as Benny physically recoiled from the memory. "Steel, please. Don't. It's not that important. Please."

"What happened after that?" Steel continued after a moment in which his gaze went from Silver to the top of Sapphire's bowed head.

"I'm...I'm not sure. I'd been...I dunno. Living is the word, I guess. I'd been living that other life and then they came for me and then they...she...." He gasped in a breath, swallowing hard. "Then I was in the other life, but still remembering the other one and...that's when you found me. That's all I know. I swear."

"Someone pushed me," Sapphire said softly, without inflection. "That's all. Someone pushed me."

Silver tightened his grip on her hand. "My apologies," he whispered. "Unconscionably rude, I know, but I assure you it was quite necessary."

When Sapphire spoke again, it was in a quiet voice filled with the same wonder that shone in her eyes. "You took back time...twice."

"And gained considerable respect for your matchless abilities in the bargain, I might add," he smiled.

"And why have they not tried again?" Steel wanted to know.

"The same reason you've both remained unharmed despite the fact that they would like nothing more than to see you dead. Me. I'm the cork in the bottle, as it were. And they are not pleased about the situation at all."

"What are you saying?" Steel demanded tensely.

"I'm saying that you're running out of time." Silver paused, eyes closing tightly. When he opened them again, slowly, the light in them had dimmed and his hoarsened voice reflected his weakened condition. "This place is safe for you only as long as I'm here. You must leave now, quickly. Take him with you. Stay with him. Make certain he doesn't remember what happened here. Tell him...tell him anything that you think will make sense. And make very, very sure that no one attempts to open the gate for him. Not that I think they'll be foolish enough to try again...."

"I can't leave you like this," Sapphire protested.

"You can't stay and I can't go with you," he insisted firmly. "Please, don't try to argue with me. I know what I'm doing. This way, we all have a chance."

"You said there was none for you."

"There could be," he said, unable to suppress an uncertain stammer. "There could be. They're bound to be distracted by this failure, so if I'm quick enough...."

"No."

"You must."

"No."

"You must," he whispered. "Steel, please. Take them from here. Take them, now."

"No."

"For pity's sake, don't let me have done this for nothing!" he exploded.

There was silence broken only by three of Silver's labored breaths; then:

"Sapphire."

Steel stood ramrod straight and still, but his tone of voice was as eloquent and commanding as any physical gesture. Sapphire remained motionless, her head bowed, eyes closed, her face averted as though recoiling from the steady gaze Silver kept fixed on her. Then, reluctantly, she gently shifted Silver's head and shoulders from her lap, and rose to join her companion.

Silver reached over with some effort and yanked on Benny's sleeve, distracting him from his interested study of the pair who stood close, but not touching; face to face but looking past each other; utterly silent yet still appearing to be in earnest conversation. "Listen to me," he begged in a whisper. "Remember this if you can. I regret that your life has been so ruthlessly and maliciously violated and if there had been anything I could have done to prevent it, I would have. Please, believe that."

Benny's throat constricted as he remembered what waited for him, what he would be forced to face without the confusion of portals or timeslips or breaches. What this stranger, appearing so abruptly at his side as he'd stared at the open gate, had told him had to happen. He'd forced Benny to see the truth behind the compelling lie, and had insisted he believe the truth despite the tricks his senses—and his heart—kept playing on him.

"I just want to know one thing," Benny said, voice tight with anger and grief. "Why. Tell me why. You owe me that much. Just tell me why."

Silver drew in a deep breath, then held it, his resolute expression faltering under the full impact of the raw emotion in Benny's eyes. Releasing his breath in a sigh, he closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"There's a reason they've chosen you as their pawn," Silver continued in the same soft, sympathetic voice when Benny, thin-lipped, looked away. "I can't tell you what that reason is, only that in time, you'll come to know for yourself. I pray that you will find the reason as compelling as I did." He paused, eyes shining, before continuing in a fainter voice, "And I also hope that, when that time comes...you'll find it in your heart to forgive me."

"Come." Sapphire's hands were warm on Benny's shoulders, startling Benny out of his intention to demand Silver explain his strange words. "We're leaving."

"Go," Silver said when Benny looked back at him, about to protest. "Right now they can only find me. When you pulled me through into this place, I effectively blocked their way to you. If you wait much longer, you'll only give them the time they need to remove the obstacle."

Benny's eyes narrowed as he resisted Sapphire's attempt to lead him away. "That's why...You didn't need help, did you?" he realized.

A spark briefly lit Silver's dull eyes. "Get him out of here," he told Sapphire with a tired, dismissive gesture.

Steel reached over to take Benny's other arm when he again balked. He glanced between them, assessed their impassive expressions. Then, too exhausted to fight and unable to think of a single reason he would want to, he acquiesced with a nod, and let them lead him away.

Before them, a rectangle took shape, diffused white light through which indistinct shapes moved. As they drew nearer, the images resolved, revealing the airport waiting area and concourse he had left...how long ago? Minutes? Hours? A lifetime?

A shadow suddenly angled across the opening, then partially retreated. Steel tightened his grip on Benny's arm. "Quickly!" he ordered, pushing him toward Sapphire as he spun around.

Without question or hesitation, she urged Benny toward the opening, where the pulsing shadow strained to eclipse the light. Someone was trying to shut the door, he realized.

"Steel!" Sapphire called sharply as they reached the threshold.

Her companion, still glaring back into the grayness, shook his head, muttered darkly under his breath, then strode quickly to join them. Just as Sapphire reached out to draw him with her through the gate, a shadow fell across Benny's free hand.

He stared down in growing horror as the darkness crept up his arm, tried to flex fingers that he suddenly knew weren't there. Steel stood before him in a movement that took less than a heartbeat, holding Sapphire at bay with an extended arm. "Don't touch him!" he warned between clenched teeth.

The shadow slid upward, a slow, inexorable climb; his entire forearm was gone. Shaking with terror, Benny forced his eyes up to meet Steel's implacable glare and Sapphire's startled expression. "Help me," he begged. "Please."

Steel didn't move, even as Benny reacted with a shrill cry as the darkness moved up to his shoulder. Sapphire attempted to move past her companion, but he held her back, his jaw tightening with determination.

"Steel," she said, her voice low and husky. "I must."

"No," he grated.

"I must try."

She tried once more to move past him when Benny screamed again, but this time slipped her hand around the one that restrained her and gripped tightly. "I must," she repeated in a whisper.

His arm came away slowly, enough for her to slip past him and come forward to place her hand on Benny's shoulder.

His eyes flew open with a gasp, but there was only panic in them, no recognition. She ignored his feeble attempt to push her away with his other hand, concentrating on the darkness that had halted its advance at her touch.

His senses returned slowly as she held on to him, her eyes glowing like twin blue suns. She murmured something he couldn't hear past the pounding in his ears. Then, as he watched in fearful fascination, the shadow reluctantly retreated, and her hand followed it, down his arm, past his elbow....

He broke out in nervous, relieved laughter as her hand passed over his, and the last touch of darkness swirled off the tips of his fingers. Trying to choke out an expression of gratitude, his breath stopped in his throat as the shadow suddenly returned, wrapping itself like a whip around Sapphire's hand and arm.

"No!" Steel cried, leaping forward to grab...nothing.

Sapphire made a sound, more of surprise than fear as the shadow slithered up her shoulder. Responding more to the sudden horror on Steel's face, Benny clutched her other arm more tightly in a desperate, although he knew ultimately vain, attempt to save her.

"Can't you help her?" Benny pleaded.

Steel shook his head numbly. "I don't know how," he said, an anguished, angry whisper.

She uttered another sound, flinching as the shadow coiled toward her face. "Take him," she gasped. "Steel, take him back. Quickly. Quickly!"

Benny resisted the hand Steel laid on his arm, despite knowing that the man could wrench the limb from its socket without breaking a sweat. At that moment, a sound unlike any other he'd ever heard split the air around them. A cry formed in a human throat, yet utterly inhuman; a single, wrenching sound, a scream of pure anger and defiance.

"No!"

The shadow snapped away. Abruptly released, Sapphire fell heavily against Benny, gasping for breath. Momentarily stunned, Steel touched her shoulder as though to reassure himself it was whole again, then unexpectedly met Benny's gaze. It was clear, without discussion, that both of them knew who had used what was quite probably his last ounce of strength to drive off Sapphire's attacker.

"Are you all right?"

Benny's head snapped up, his eyes wide with astonishment. Sapphire, regaining her balance, regarded him with concern, as if nothing at all had happened to her. But that wasn't quite true. There was something new in her eyes, a slight shimmer that he suddenly didn't have the strength to interpret. A wave of nausea knocked his knees out from under him; only Sapphire's support kept him from collapsing.

Steel, with uncommon gentleness, urged them through the unobstructed door. Benny clung tightly to Sapphire, eyes closed against the violent muscle spasms that began to rip through his body.

Something warm contacted his fingers, pressing gently until he opened his hand. He stared down at where he knew his hand must be until his vision cleared and he found himself looking into the steaming depths of a cup of coffee.

And someone else's slim, graceful fingers still resting against his. He lifted his head to meet her concerned eyes.

"Welcome back," Sapphire said softly.

Discomfited, he glanced around quickly. Lounge. They were in the lounge. They'd been herded here by pale-faced airline representatives so that the resulting hysterics wouldn't upset innocent bystanders. He sat in a secluded corner of the room, Sapphire seated next to him. Nearby, the man who had only a short time ago perfunctorily introduced himself as Steel stood, silent, staring straight ahead as though only waiting for his companion to finish. Other people were clumped in scattered groups throughout the lounge, some huddled together in grief, others joining hands in silent, fervent prayer. A priest moved among them slowly, offering quiet words and gestures to those who could rouse themselves enough to accept them.

Everything was exactly as it was only a moment ago. Except this was not where he was a moment ago.

Benny tried to speak, but the words broke apart in his dry throat. Sapphire responded by guiding the cup to his mouth, holding it steady until he'd managed a few gulps. He thanked her with a nod, then waited behind closed eyes until his courage returned.

"What happened?" he rasped.

"What do you remember?"

He shook his head after a moment's thought resulted in a hopeless jumble of fragmented images evoking unpleasant feelings. "The last thing I remember is...going through the gate with you."

Tension drained from her shoulders as she managed a wan smile. As he considered it, he frowned. There was something else, something in her face that he couldn't recall seeing in his last clear memory of her: a deep, unutterable sadness that he felt, oddly, to be a strange mirror of the anguish that had every nerve ending in his body twisted into a knot.

"Well?" He drained the coffee cup. "Did you fix it?"

Her smile faded, reacting to the bitterness in his voice. "We were successful," she said quietly.

"Good. Good." He looked around again, nodding grimly. "Look, um...I don't know who the hell you people are. And right now, I don't think I particularly care. This is all just some sort of job for you, isn't it? Just another day at the office. A time breach. A time breach." His incredulous snort ended in a strangled sound as he pressed his hand to his forehead. "You just waltz in here, size it up like a contracting job, whip off an estimate for completed repairs, and then patch it all up. But you really couldn't care less whether we think the bill is too high, do you?"

"Please," Sapphire said gently, one hand soft on his arm. "What was done was necessary. You must believe that."

"Because you say so?" He yanked his arm away. "What do you care what I believe?"

"I do. I do care."

"You don't know me, lady. And you sure as hell don't know what you just cost me."

Behind them, out of Sapphire's line of vision, Steel turned his head, eyes blazing. Without looking back, Sapphire merely held out a hand. Seething, Steel drew in a deep breath, then turned away again.

"That's it, then," Benny sighed, rubbing his burning eyes with both hands. "I just walk away from here and...what? Go on with my life? Well, funny thing, that. I don't have a life anymore. It's gone." His voice shimmered and broke. "She's gone."

She touched his arm, waiting until he willingly gave her his hand to entwine her fingers with his. He stared down at their clasped hands, desperately fighting to keep his anger and despair from draining away. Those were his, his to keep if he wanted them, she had no right to take them away. No right. No...right....

He sagged in defeat, eyes stinging. "Why can't I remember what happened in there?" he whispered haggardly.

"It's better that way," Sapphire assured him.

"Why? Why did this have to happen?"

"I don't know. I'm telling you the truth," she said to his sharp glance. "You must believe that. I don't know why this has happened at all, or why it has happened to you. I know only that...you are important to someone. No, I don't know who. Someone. I don't know why. That's all I know. That's all I can tell you."

"Is that why you said you were here to help me?" he said, almost wishing that his memory of his first meeting with them wasn't quite so clear. They'd appeared as though out of thin air, one on either side of him as he'd stared at the gate that seemed to be open but that he somehow knew should be shut. They'd called him by name, had given their names perfunctorily when he, in a confused daze, demanded to know who they were, and then they'd ignored every other question he asked them. Steel had explained the breach as calmly as someone else would discuss a pothole in the road; Sapphire had patiently shown him how, by shifting position and angle, one could see the layers within layers of displaced time that the breach exposed. He'd been too bewildered to question it then, but was beginning to realize that there'd been a studied purpose to their actions. They didn't have to explain anything to anyone, least of all him. But they had.

"When you first showed up, you knew who I was. You knew me."

"We have met before."

"I don't...."

"Not in your lifetime to this point. Not yet."

He shook his head, hopelessly confused. "I heard you two talking before we...I heard you tell him that my destiny had something to do with yours, that...that our paths were converging." He spared a sharp glance at a seemingly heedless Steel. "And he didn't sound too happy about agreeing with you, either. This doesn't have anything to do with that bull you gave me about something worse having to happen just to fill the void. You know more about this than you're telling me, don't you?"

"We only know what is happening," she assured him. "But even we do not know why."

He took a deep breath, released it shakily, then drew another, holding it for a long moment with his eyes tightly closed. "Then what is the point?" he begged in a strained voice, the last word ending in an explosion of air from his lungs.

Her hand remained on his trembling shoulders for a long time, until the tears he kept hidden behind the hands clasped tightly over his face had dried and his breathing had eased. "We must leave now," he heard her say with a touch of regret. "Our work here is done. But you must promise me, please. Please. When you leave this place, do not take the anger with you. Find someone to help you leave the anger behind. Promise me."

He forced his stiffened hands away from his face, taking a final swipe at his eyes as he turned his head toward her. But she wasn't there. Steel wasn't there. He found himself alone in the far corner of the airport lounge, now nearly deserted.

Except for the man who approached him with a kind smile and words that his jumbled mind couldn't quite make sense out of. He stared dumbly at the newcomer, finally sorting out enough details to recognize the clerical collar and crucifix and make a connection. His first instinct was to send the priest away with a brusque gesture and the all-too-true explanation that what the man represented didn't exactly fit into his own set of personal beliefs. But something held his muscles still and his mouth shut. Something like a gentle voice urging him to leave the anger behind, and to do it, use someone else's strength in place of the strength he no longer possessed.

"Sure, Father," he heard his own voice, remarkably calm if still heavy and slow. "Sure. I guess I could use someone to talk to right now. Thanks."

He leaned back in his chair, rubbing at his burning eyes. For once he was grateful for the solitude of the lab, so that no one would see that the indefatigable Dr. Edgar Benedek could indeed be brought to the point of exhaustion by a full day of press conferences and interviews.

The last reporter had been ushered out by his loyal research assistants less than an hour ago. They'd also insisted on taking him home for some much needed rest, but failed to take the precaution of ensuring that he'd stay there.

Rest. His body screamed for it, but his mind was still racing as fast as his heart. Tomorrow would see his place secured in the history books. His name would be spoken in the same breath as the great pioneers of science and technology: Einstein, Edison, Hawking. At least that's what the reporters kept burbling. All they needed to see, with their own eyes, was the first public trial scheduled for ten the next morning, and they would hand him his fame and fortune on bended knee.

The key lock on the main lab door disengaged with a quiet click. Benny noted it with only mild interest. Only a few dozen people could have gotten past the outer security, fewer still had access to this floor of the building, and only five possessed key cards for the lab. He could easily handle the displeasure that any of the five would display upon finding him hard at work in the lab instead of safely at home, asleep.

The door opened and closed with its usual soft hiss. No familiar voice greeted him. No other sound followed.

Benny raised his head, but didn't turn around. He pressed his hand to his mouth reflectively, considering the implications of the feeling that had just come over him. The feeling that the door had never really opened. The sounds were just a polite way of getting his attention.

"Took your time getting here, didn't you?" he said finally.

A rustling sound told him that the intruder stood only a few feet away, behind him and to one side, and had taken a step toward him. "By my reckoning, I'm right on schedule," a quiet, amused voice assured him.

Benny turned just as the stranger entered the dim light spilled by his desk lamp. "I expect I look a bit different cleaned up," Silver smiled as Benny frowned and squinted at him.

"What you look like is someone who hasn't aged a day in forty years."

"Clean living." With another smile, Silver sauntered over to a workbench, leaning casually against it. "I wasn't sure you'd remember me."

"Remember you?" Benny snorted softly. "Funny thing about that. Didn't remember a thing about you two seconds after we left that...that place. Didn't remember much of anything, really. Then it all started coming back. Little bits first, a few here and there, then more, and then even more until they started forming bigger bits. Not all at once, no...took years to happen. Almost like..." He paused, lifting a finger. "Almost like I'm remembering in reverse. Get my meaning? Almost like right after it happened I was remembering it like it'd happened forty years ago, and right now, it's as clear as if it had just happened yesterday."

"I think it was yesterday, actually," Silver said quietly.

Benny nodded, deep in thought. "It started here, then, didn't it? You weren't back in the past with us—we were here, with you."

It was a question to which Benny obviously already knew the answer, so Silver merely answered with a slight smile.

"I guess this means I made the right choice after all," Benny said after a long silence.

"You tell me."

"Didn't think so. Not for a long time." He reached over, picking up a framed photo and staring at it for a few moments before turning it toward Silver to reveal the smiling faces of a handsome woman and two teenaged girls. "The boy's camera-shy. Managed to weasel his way out of the shoot. Can't imagine where he gets it from."

"A beautiful wife and three lovely children," Silver said with a congratulatory nod.

"Best things that ever happened to me. Who'd have thought? Not me. Not then."

Silver made a point of seeking out the vast array of framed diplomas and awards crowding the walls. "Fame and fortune?"

"More than any man has a right to expect," Benny admitted.

"Well, then. You tell me."

"You're here. I guess that means it was the right choice all the way around."

Silver's smile grew, genuinely relieved. "I'm glad you think so."

Benny studied him for a long moment, then reached over to turn the desk lamp around, directing the beam full on Silver. Livid scars gleamed on the man's face and hands. His smile fading, Silver accepted the scrutiny in silence.

"You got away okay," he said finally, returning the lamp to its original position.

"Thanks to you, really. They were so infuriated that you'd escaped their last attempt to stop you that they forgot about me. Long enough for me to slip past them, anyway."

Benny pondered the studied insouciance in the man's tone and decided against pointing out that he knew full well that the pattern of scarring was more extensive than he remembered and therefore considerably more recent than Silver wanted him to believe.

"What happened to them?" Benny asked, keeping his tone level.

"Who?"

"Sapphire." He fixed Silver with a calm stare. "Steel."

"Why do you ask?"

"They're why you're here, aren't they?"

Silver tilted his head, his expression both amused and suspicious. "You can't know that," he said, but Benny sensed it was actually a question and that his voice held more than a hint of fear.

"Call it an inspired guess," he replied, detecting genuine relief as the cause of the badly suppressed sigh that Silver expelled. "You were the one who insisted that they were the target, not me."

"Do you think of them kindly?" Silver asked suddenly, his expression neutral.

Benny eyed him as he considered. "Try another adverb."

"Any suggestions?"

He shook his head after a moment, gaze straying to the framed portrait in front of him. "Kindly will do, I suppose," he decided finally.

"You would have no reason to wish them harm, then. To satisfy a certain sense of personal justice, as it were?"

"No," he answered before he'd really thought about the answer. "No, of course not."

"Would you then feel inclined to perhaps...help them?"

He looked up, realizing that the man was no longer leaning against the workbench; was, in fact, no longer pretending casual indifference. Silver stood only a few feet away from him now, leaning toward him with his hands held together in an almost...suppliant pose.

"Help them?" Benny echoed, confused. "Why would they need my help?"

"Suffice to say only that they do," Silver explained, his voice low and intense. "Desperately so."

"What's happened to them?"

Encouraged by the genuine concern he heard in Benny's voice, Silver ventured another step closer. "You know we have enemies. Implacable enemies, Mr. Benedek. And ruthless. Some time ago, they set a cunning trap and we—the three of us together—fell into it. I escaped. They did not."

Benny leaned back in his chair. "You knew about this when you came back to warn me."

"Oh, no, no. But my memory was fully restored once I...."

"Don't kid a kidder, pal," Benny's voice rose sharply. "You knew all along. You lied to me. You lied to them. You knew."

Silver remained silent as Benny continued, angrily. "'I don't remember,' you kept saying. 'I don't remember.' I begged you to tell me why, and you lied to me."

"It was necessary," Silver offered in a curiously distant voice after Benny's angry shout had faded into the silence. "I'm sorry."

"Is that the truth now?" Benny asked with exaggerated suspicion, steepling his fingers and staring at Silver over them. "Or another necessary lie?"

"I assure you, it was necessary. They couldn't know. Don't you see? They couldn't know." Silver's voice shook with intensity. "If I'd given them even the barest hint, it might have affected their actions."

"You could have kept them from falling into the trap at all," Benny pointed out.

"Or the knowledge could have led them to even greater harm. I couldn't take that risk. Not when I already knew of a way to free them from this trap."

Benny stared at his steepled fingertips as he gently tapped them together. "That's where I come in, I take it."

"Yes."

"Why?" He spoke carefully, recognizing that he was finally phrasing the one question that had haunted him for the past four decades. "What's so important about me?"

"Do I take your interest to mean that you are indeed willing to help?"

Benny gave him a sharp look. "Pal, after forty years of recurring nightmares, do you really think I'm operating on a level of practical interest here?"

"I must warn you that this should not be a casual decision."

"I assume that means we're talking risk?"

"Very much so. It's entirely possible that, should we succeed, our enemies would become yours as well."

Benny considered. "Can I handle that?"

Silver didn't insult him with a quick, glib answer. Nodding solemnly, he answered seriously, "With my guidance, yes. I believe so."

"You believe so?" Benny snorted, glancing pointedly at the latticework of scars on Silver's hands and face. "Looks to me like you haven't done such a hot job of handling them yourself."

Silver followed that glance down to look at his scarred hands before folding them, too casually, behind his back. "I can only tell you that the situation was one in which you would...could...never find yourself placed. You are, for the most part, protected from them by the mere fact of your humanity. They can't harm you through direct action. And I can tell you how to protect yourself from the ways in which they could cause you harm."

Benny grimaced, shaking his head. "You know, it seems to me that Steel had a hard time trusting you, too. I got the feeling that he thought you'd say just about anything to get something you wanted." He eyed Silver thoughtfully. "And he knows you a lot better than I do, doesn't he?"

"It's in his nature to be cautious," Silver observed quietly.

Benny snorted again. "That's kind."

"I have no reason to lie to you. Not now."

"Maybe," Benny conceded after a reflective moment. "Maybe I believe that." Another long silence passed, ending with an explosive exhale as he slapped his hand against the top of the desk. "Maybe I don't have a choice. Okay...where do we start?"

Silver blinked, nonplussed, prompting Benny's irritable, "Well, come on. I'm an old man, and I'm getting older by the minute with you standing there gawking at me. You came here for a reason, so spit it out—where do we start?"

"Right here," Silver recovered with a broad smile, turning to gesture toward the access door at the far side of the lab. "Everything we need is right here."

Benny pursed his lips. "My time machine."

"Your matter/anti-matter temporal control interface," Silver corrected, amused. "Yes—your time machine."

"Somehow, it figured," Benny sighed.

"I'll be forced to make some modifications that will, I fear, render your equipment, well...quite useless."

"For how long?"

It took Silver a long time to form the reply. "Permanently."

Benny stared at him, expressionless. Unable to detect emotion on the man's face, Silver inclined his head, brow furrowing in deepening apprehension as the silence grew. "Mr. Benedek?" he ventured after a full minute had passed without sound or movement from the elderly man seated at the desk.

Rapid eye blinks preceded a sudden intake of air, as though Benny had, until now, forgotten how to breathe. "A gun would have been quicker, you know," he muttered.

"If there were any other way...."

"You're not talking about taking out the Institute's matter/anti-matter accelerator, are you? That's not my call to make, that's someone else's baby, you'd be destroying the life work of dozens of other people...."

"No, no, the accelerator itself will remain undamaged. You only tap into it for the initial reaction process, after all. My modifications will only affect that which transpires strictly within the confines of your interface mechanism."

His panic subsided a little at that, but not enough to ease his rapid breathing. "You're still talking about wiping out two years of my life," he moaned. "Two years."

"From initial theory to final implementation, yes." Benny's eyes flew open, startled, to find that Silver had, somehow, ended up crouched by his side. "But it's just the machinery that will be destroyed, not your entire body of work. You can rebuild in a matter of weeks, and with my help, you'll...."

"Your help?" Benny barked.

"You can't imagine I'd not offer recompense for the loss I'm asking you to incur," he said with a mock grieved air.

Benny's eyes narrowed. "What kind of recompense?"

"Professional advice," he whispered, eyes dancing as he watched the old man react to his words. "You haven't solved the problem of stability in the higher temporal frequencies, have you?"

"It's solvable?" Benny demanded warily.

"Eminently. A minor correction in the calculations for the primary induction process, and a small adjustment to the flow ratio will completely eliminate the forced duration expiration." He leaned closer, adding conspiratorially, "And you'll eliminate your research budget's wardrobe replacement line item expense."

Benny opened his mouth, then closed it again, determined not to let out a sound until his head stopped spinning.

"Is it enough?" Is what I'm offering payment enough for what I'm asking you to sacrifice?"

Slowly, the dazed look left Benny's eyes as he focused on Silver's anxious face. "Is my machine the only hope they have?"

"Yes," Silver replied quietly.

It took a moment for Silver to realize that Benny was staring down at his scarred hand where it rested against the side of the desk.

"That's all you really had to tell me, you know," Benny said finally.

Silver's flash of wild relief segued immediately into a cautious look. "Are you quite certain?"

"Don't push your luck, pal," he growled. "Take what you can get while I'm in a mood to give it, and get this over with."

Silver smiled, grateful and relieved. "Come," he urged, rising.

Benny blinked up at him. "What do you need me for?"

"Your security access?"

"You got in here without it," he pointed out testily.

"Your expertise."

"You're the one who knows what he's doing."

A pause. "Your pleasant company."

Benny grudgingly met the man's smiling eyes. "I think I've finally figured out why I can't seem to hate your guts."

"And why is that?"

"Because we're a lot alike, you and me. More than I'm really thrilled about, but...yeah. A lot alike."

"Do you really think so?" Silver asked in a flattered tone of voice.

Benny gave him a disparaging look in payment for that tone of voice. "You tell me. What would you have done if I'd said no?"

Silver cast his eyes down as he pursed his lips. "I hadn't given that possibility much thought."

"Why?" he shot back.

"Truthfully...it never occurred to me that you would say no."

"Of course not." Benny tapped the air with his finger. "If it had, you wouldn't have even bothered to ask. You'd have just done it, and my feelings be damned, eh? This is all just a formality, a...a...."

"Consideration. A courtesy," Silver supplied with a resigned sigh. "I owe you that much."

"Yeah," Benny murmured, nodding thoughtfully. "A lot alike."

A movement in the silence drew his attention. Silver extended a hand toward him in a beckoning gesture. "I owe you that much," he echoed meaningfully. "And more. Come."

"Yeah, you knew I wouldn't miss this for the world," Benny grumbled good-naturedly as he lumbered to his feet.

At the access door, Silver paused, turning to Benny expectantly. He reached for the retinal scan activator then stopped, eyeing Silver speculatively. Then, with a mischievous half-smile, he folded his arms and inclined his head.

With a show of mock exasperation, Silver pressed his hand against the activation plate. White light washed his thin face, focusing on his eyes. For a moment, the warning light glowed a bright, steady red. But as Benny watched, the red light flickered and faded as the green light winked on and the access door lock clicked open.

"Nice," Benny nodded, genuinely impressed.

Silver gestured gracefully. "After you."

The outer room contained the monitoring station, an equipment-laden workbench with two chairs normally occupied by research assistants. Next to another door that led to the focusing chamber itself was the observation window, only used before and after an experiment to visually assess the condition of the experimental subject; a lead shield snapped into place during the course of a reaction cycle as a safety precaution. Silver approached the workbench to switch on the main power grid. His slender fingers unerringly found the proper switch to retract the observation window's shielding.

Benny joined him at the window as Silver carefully scrutinized the tiny room beyond. "The tricky part will be getting this door to open while the reaction is in process," Silver remarked, more to himself than to the man standing at his side.

"You're talking about overriding one of the primary failsafes," Benny objected, unnerved.

"I'm talking about pushing the cycle past all the failsafes," Silver informed him grimly. "The reaction will have to be stabilized...."

"Stabilized?" Benny stared at him, aghast.

"...and sustained at a constant level for a minimum of five minutes."

"Five...." He choked on his own gasp. "That's not possible."

Silver strode back to the workbench, flicking on every switch he could find. "It is possible," he announced as he studied the information flickering on the monitors. "But it's not what this equipment was designed to do, and it's certainly not what it was designed to bear."

"But why do you have to sustain the reaction?" Benny demanded. "All our research shows all that's needed is the impetus...."

"To send something or someone backward or forward through time, yes," Silver agreed impatiently as he frowned at a power level measurement. "But I propose to do neither, since they do not exist in normal time. That's the trap they fell into, you see. They're imprisoned in a place beyond time."

"What exists beyond time?" Benny asked, genuinely baffled.

Silver paused. "Nothing," he said softly. "Absolutely nothing."

Benny opened his mouth, then shut it again, unsure whether he feared he wouldn't understand the answer if he did demand a clarification, or whether he really didn't want to know in the first place.

"The sustained reaction will open a window between time and beyond time. My calculations must be precise. Too short a cycle, and I'll miss them. Too long..." He hesitated, debating whether to finish the statement. "Too long, and the opening I create will spread unchecked, destroying anything it touches. Normal time possesses adequate defense mechanisms, so the damage there would be minimal, but beyond time—it would be like striking a spark in a gas-filled room."

"Are you sure that's a risk you're prepared to take?"

Benny turned, startled as much by the intrusion of a familiar voice as he was by the fact that it had asked a question he'd just convinced himself to leave unspoken. "Jonathan?" he blurted, staring at the man who stood in the doorway leading out to the lab. "What the hell are you doing—"

He trailed off in confusion when he realized that Jonathan MacKensie was paying no attention to him. He was staring impassively at Silver who, to Benny's growing bewilderment and unease, had gone still, his eyes fixed on the hand he held, motionless, an inch above the control panel. As Benny watched, Silver straightened slowly, seeming to force himself to turn toward Jonathan and meet the man's steady gaze.

Jonathan smiled unexpectedly. He crooked a finger, beckoning Silver.

Benny took a step forward, but Silver snagged his arm, pulling him back roughly. "Don't interfere," the man said in a low, emphatic voice.

"What are you talking about? Interfere with what? What's going on here?"

Less patiently and without the smile, Jonathan gestured again. Benny's heart gave a violent lurch as he realized that the expression on Silver's suddenly drawn and ashen face was that of utter defeat.

"How long have you known him?" Silver asked, his voice pitched for Benny's ear alone.

"Over thirty years," Benny stammered.

"When did they take him?"

"When...? They? Who...?"

He shook Benny's arm impatiently. "When?" he hissed. "When did they take him out of time?"

The resurgent memory punched the breath from his lungs. "March," he managed after a moment. "1987. Sapphire, Steel, they...they came, they...oh, my God."

No patience left, Jonathan took a step toward them. Silver reacted instantly, using his grip on Benny's arm as leverage to push himself forward, effectively interposing himself between the two men. "Stay here," he told Benny calmly. "Lock this door after we leave."

"He's got complete access to everything, including this room," Benny pointed out.

Silver's noisy exhale was a tacit comment on the fact that the request hadn't been made to keep Benny safe; but, rather, to keep him unaware of what would happen once Silver and Jonathan left the room together.

Jonathan closed the distance between them with another step and lifted his hand. For the moment that Silver's grip lingered on Benny's arm, he could feel Silver's muscles contract in dread anticipation.

"Wait a minute, wait," Benny said, abruptly grabbing Silver's shoulder and shoving him aside. "Just let me get this straight, okay? Who are you, what have you done with the real Jonathan MacKensie, and what do you want with this guy, anyway?"

"No, no, Benedek—you don't understand," Jonathan protested, aghast. "My God, they were right. He's completely misled you, hasn't he? I swore to them that you were far too intelligent to fall for such obvious lies, but... ." He shook his head in heartfelt dismay. "Thank God, I'm not too late."

Benny squinted at him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"They tried to warn you, but his clever tricks kept you out of their reach. So they came to me...."

"They took you," Benny reminded him tartly.

"It doesn't matter how, it only matters that they were desperate to prevent this man from carrying out his nefarious plan...."

"And what nefarious plan might that be?"

"He's lying to you, Benedek. He's been lying to you all along. He isn't trying to save anyone. He's only trying to keep everyone from learning how he himself betrayed his friends to save his own skin."

Benny heard Silver's sharp intake of breath, but didn't turn to assess what telling facial expression might have accompanied it. "Is that so?" he said neutrally, successfully hiding the fact that he was badly shaken; he could detect absolutely nothing insincere about Jonathan's words or manner.

"This nonsense he's filled your head with, about vengeful enemies and horrific traps, it's all a lie. Even his own people know better than to trust him. Don't you see? He's manipulating you into throwing away years of work. He doesn't need your machine to rescue anyone. He needs it to bury the last evidence of his own dastardly cowardice."

Benny inclined his head, nothing more; encouraged, Jonathan smiled in tentative relief. "They knew it would come to this," he continued. "That's why they went to such lengths to find me, the one person they knew would act in your best interests, who wouldn't allow you to throw away your life's work on the word of a craven fraud."

"You never believed in my work," Benny said quietly.

"No, you're wrong," Jonathan protested fervently.

"You're the one who volunteered to become the institute watchdog for this project so that you could officially nag me about how I and my little pipe-dream were going to single-handedly land GI in bankruptcy court."

"You're wrong," he insisted. "My God, man, why don't you believe me? We've known each other for over thirty years, Benedek. Why do you persist in allowing this man to manipulate your life in this...this obscene fashion? Don't you understand? He's proposing to destroy two years of your life for his own selfish purposes. You've been nothing but his pawn for forty years. Forty years. I want to put an end to it. Help me. For pity's sake, Benedek, help me put an end to it."

Benny stared at him, expression unreadable, but a slight tremor in the hand that held back Silver betrayed his vacillation. Just as Jonathan seemed sure enough of the success of his impassioned plea to allow a smile to edge back on his face, Benny spoke, his voice low and steady.

"Nice try."

He smirked at the startled look in Jonathan's eye. "Guess you counted on me being too confused to think, eh? Seems you forgot something, too. My motto? Come on, you must remember that. No matter how much they know, no matter how much they've got on you—always, always trust your own instincts first."

"You're making a terrible mistake," Jonathan said evenly after a long moment.

"Oh, yeah? Terrible for whom, exactly?"

The last syllable ended in a squawk as Jonathan's hand flashed out, grabbing Benny's shirt collar and twisting the fabric, hard, into his throat. "I'll give you one last chance," he grated. "Help me put an end to this now...or I will put an end to you."

"Let him go," Silver demanded angrily. "Let him go. He's nothing to you."

Jonathan smirked as Benny struggled to breathe. "Nothing," he echoed derisively. "So. This little man presumes to master time itself, eh? Ignorant, pathetic...."

"Let him go," Silver begged.

"And if I told you I'd let you walk out of here after I broke this nothing's neck and destroyed his toys?" Jonathan fixed a fiery glare on Silver without loosening his grip on Benny's collar. "If I offered you your life in exchange for his, what would you say then?"

Silver hesitated, glancing at Benny's reddened face as the man tried, in vain, to pry Jonathan's fingers away. He made a sound, the start of a word, then looked at Benny again. His expression changed, losing some fear, gaining some confidence.

"Would I have your word on that?" he asked suddenly.

Jonathan burst out laughing. "If I say yes, you'd gladly kill him for me, wouldn't you?" he sneered. "You see, little man? This is what you put your trust in."

"There would be no reason to kill him if you merely destroyed his creation...." Silver suggested meekly.

"I'm not a fool," he spat. "He'd simply rebuild and you'd slither back here to try again. No, no, the answer's quite simple. Either you or him. Or both, if you continue to irritate me."

Shoulders hunched protectively, Silver retreated a step. "As you wish," he murmured with a submissive nod.

Jonathan's dark, triumphant smile faded as he turned his attention back to Benny and found the man staring calmly at him. As MacKensie looked on in growing astonishment, Benny wrapped his fingers around the wrist of the hand that Jonathan held at his throat and easily pulled it away.

With a strangled cry of protest, Jonathan tried to wrest free, but Benny held on to his wrist with no seeming effort, and caught the other hand as it went for the throat again. Eyes wide with utter disbelief, MacKensie looked down at his trembling, imprisoned hands. "What...?" he gasped.

Silver was at Benny's side in a flash, all traces of his obsequious manner gone. "He is fighting it."

"You'd better not be half as surprised as you sound," Benny growled. "What kind of hold do they have on him? Can he win?"

Silver moved past him, out of his line of vision. Benny could only guess from the sounds behind him that he was busy at the control console again. "I'm surprised he's able to fight them at all. I'm not entirely sure he can win. Or that they'd let him."

Jonathan emitted a grating sound as his entire body convulsed. He strained once more to free himself, growling with frustration when Benny's grip held firm. Then, abruptly, he went still, his eyes blinking once, twice before settling with some difficulty on Benny. For a moment, pure hatred darkened his face, followed by a strange smile that Benny suddenly realized was silent, fervent promise to make him pay dearly for his interference.

"No," Benny said under his breath as Jonathan bent double, sinking to his knees. He tightened his grip on his friend's wrists, trying to keep him upright and failing. "No, don't...no...come on, Jonny, don't...."

He lost his breath with his nerve when Jonathan went rigid and still, not moving even when Benny released him to frantically check a pulse point. "He's not breathing!" he cried, panicking. "My God, he's...."

"Fine," Silver interjected cheerfully. His hand on Benny's shoulder, he crouched by the shaken man's side. "He's fine. I've suspended time for him. Well, for everyone in a 500 meter radius, excluding us, of course."

"You...." Benny blinked at him, shaking his head weakly. "You did that, with my interface?"

"With the help of your interface," he amended. "But I'm afraid that, in doing so, I've had to divert critical resources, the loss of which might seriously affect the outcome of my plan."

"How badly?"

"Impossible to tell. But it does mean that we'll have to work quickly. Come, I'll need your help."

Benny hesitated, looking back at Jonathan MacKensie and the look of pure anguish frozen on his friend's features. "He's fine," Silver assured him gently, taking Benny by the arm to urge him to his feet. "And when we succeed in rescuing Sapphire and Steel, they'll have no more hold over him."

Disoriented, feeling sick to his stomach, Benny gave up trying to follow what Silver was doing at the control console. Somehow, it just didn't matter anymore. His gaze kept being drawn back to Jonathan, and the memory of that last, vitriolic look before his collapse.

"Why are they doing this?" he blurted when he could no longer stand not knowing. "Why do they hate you so much?"

Silver didn't look up, but his hands hesitated a moment in their graceful dance over the control board. "It might surprise you to know that we're actually very much alike. We share the same purpose, the same goals. What we do not share, sadly, is philosophy and methodology. You see, we represent a kind of freedom they'll never know. That they can, in fact, not allow to exist, not within the strict framework they've built for themselves. To them, freedom is anarchy; chaos. And in a way, they're right. Freedom would destroy them, utterly. So they feel they must, in turn, obliterate that which could potentially destroy them."

"You're saying that they came after you because they don't like your attitude?" Benny said incredulously.

Silver chuckled unexpectedly. "Yes, I suppose you could put it that way. But it's rather more personal than that, I fear. You see, we were once given a choice, and we didn't choose them. So, as long as we exist, we remind them that we rejected their ways. And since they view their way as perfection and perfection cannot be rejected, well...we then become perversions that must be eliminated."

"Our way or no way," Benny murmured bleakly.

Silver cast a quick, surprised look at him. "It is a rather human concept, isn't it?" he lamented. "Here, I'll need your help with this. Stand by the window and tell me if you detect any change inside the focusing chamber."

"What am I looking for?" he asked after a minute spent staring into the barren room with an occasional glance at the minute, almost fussy adjustments Silver made at the control console.

"If I understand the nature of the problem correctly, I'm searching for a minor anomaly that is, unfortunately, essentially free-floating—for lack of a more accurate term, of course. Difficult to track, just about impossible to stabilize in its native environment. The best I can hope for is to set up a kind of attractor, like a magnet. Draw the anomaly to us, stabilize it here within the focusing chamber, then...." He paused, drawing air deeply into his lungs. "And then, with luck, extract the contents of the anomaly before sending it back to where it came from. As for what you're looking for...."

"Never mind, I think I just found out."

"Describe it," Silver barked, redoubling his attention to the controls and monitors.

"One hell of a light show," Benny murmured, watching in awe as slow-moving arcs of light spread throughout the enclosed room.

"Could you possibly offer a description that's a bit more specific?" Silver snapped.

"Sorry. You've got horizontal waves of visible light in the blue- green range on the periphery, and the middle looks like the whole spectrum twice over. A lot of sparking, a lot of...." He blinked and squinted. "It looks like random electromagnetic activity," he realized.

"It's working," Silver murmured with a broad smile. "It's actually working."

Benny shot him a look for the first hint of uncertainty he'd ever heard the man express, but was distracted by a burst of light from inside the room. "What's happening now?" Silver demanded, alerted to the change by a frantically beeping monitor.

"There's something...." He strained to see past the glare of the single arc of light that had suddenly filled the entire room. "There's something in there. It's...hard to see, but...."

He paused as the flare subsided, then stared in confusion until Silver impatiently prodded, "Well?"

"I'm not sure I believe this, but...I could swear that looks like a diner in there."

Silver sprang from his chair. "Wait!" Benny cried as the man tried, in vain, to open the door leading to the chamber. "It's mag-locked, it can't be opened when the reaction is in progr—"

He jumped back with a gasp as Silver, with a sudden, feral snarl, smashed the door's access panel with his fist. Circuitry sparked wildly, completely ignored as he plunged his hand into the recess and yanked out the control module. Then, with another inhuman sound from deep within his throat, he strained against the door. It slid aside slowly, grinding to a halt after six inches.

Silver collapsed against the door suddenly, completely drained. "Help me," he begged between violent gasps.

The sparks of exploding light in the room beyond distracted Benny for only a moment; he slid his shoulder into the opening Silver had created and pushed with all his might. Just as he was sure that every bone on that side of his body was about to shatter from the strain, the door suddenly gave away and he tumbled into the room.

Dazed, he managed to regain his senses only after Silver had him halfway back onto his feet. "Thanks," he murmured, looking around in confusion and amazement. "My God, I was right. It is a diner."

Silver's grip tightened on his arm, silently directing his attention to a far corner of the strange room.

They stood, face-to-face, arms extended, hands joined. Benny let Silver lead the way to them, and held back as Silver cautiously approached and leaned in between them, searching each of their faces in turn. With a glance back at Benny, Silver passed his hand between the two at eye-level. Neither moved or reacted, not so much as an eye-blink.

"What's wrong with them?" Benny asked, unable to get his voice much above a whisper. He followed Silver's movement as the man paced a slow circle around the immobile pair. "Are they—"

"No," Silver said quickly, a strange, awe-filled light growing in his eyes. "No, they're not. This is amazing." His voice dropped suddenly, as though he spoke only for his own benefit as he continued to stare in wonder. "I can't believe they did this. I can't believe...." He broke off with a sudden, short laugh colored by genuine surprise.

"What? Can't believe what?" Benny prodded. "What's going on here?"

"If I could only do the explanation justice," he marveled, voice quavering with suppressed excitement. "You see, it wouldn't have taken them long to realize the true insidious purpose of this trap. It was constructed not only to imprison them, but to destroy them, one little piece at a time. Think of it. An eternity imprisoned in this nothingness...."

"They'd go mad," Benny guessed grimly.

"Yes, quite," Silver agreed in a hushed voice, still gazing between the impassive faces of his friends. "So they chose this alternative. A kind of self-imposed stasis, removing the fragile consciousness from the destructive effects of eternity. The only problem is that it takes a minimum of two to affect such a state, and once entered, it can only be terminated by an outside influence. And only if that outside influence is in time."

"What do you mean, in time?"

"I mean, this state can't be maintained indefinitely. Bereft of consciousness, the corporeal entity begins a slow, steady disintegration. Left long enough, it becomes impossible to re-integrate."

Benny had to remind himself to breathe. "So what you're saying is, they either decided to commit slow suicide, or...." He focused abruptly on Silver's drawn face, "...or they knew someone would come for them."

Silver looked away, but not before Benny caught the telling glint of reflected light in his eyes.

"Can you do it?" Benny urged quietly.

He nodded to cover the moment he needed to regain his composure. "If I'm not too late."

Benny edged closer as Silver lifted his hands, placing one on Steel's shoulder, the other on Sapphire's. His fingers gripped gently as he drew a deep breath to summon concentration and closed his eyes.

A full minute passed in silence, without movement. It was a sensation tingling along the back of Benny's neck that finally drew his rapt attention away from the eerie tableau. The diner's lunch counter seemed to buckle slightly. A trill of sparking light ran along the edges of the Formica table tops. The vinyl-covered booth benches rippled, like light dancing across the fur of a stretching animal.

"Hurry up," Benny urged under his breath. "Come on."

Part of the ceiling seemed to flex, as though struck by a tremendous, soundless blow; behind him, something behind the counter clattered metallicly to the floor. With increasing trepidation, Benny forced his attention back to Silver and gaped.

In the space of a few seconds, a drastic change had overcome Silver. His face was gray, marred by deep lines of strain. Healthy scar tissue disintegrated; blood oozed from a dozen re-opened wounds. As Benny watched, open-mouthed, even the man's clothing seemed to deteriorate, covered by stains and rips whose placement Benny found not-so-strangely familiar. Silver's entire body trembled violently, as though he fought unbearable pain to finish what he'd started. And to no seeming avail; there was not a flicker of movement from either Sapphire or Steel in response to his desperate efforts.

Benny sidled up behind Silver as close as he dared, fists clenched in an agony of helplessness. Suddenly, Silver wrenched back with a gasp, as though his last reserve of strength had snapped like a thin rope. Benny caught him, keeping him upright when it became obvious that the man's only options were to accept the support or slide to the floor in a nerveless heap.

"Thank you," Silver said when his scraping gasps eased enough to allow him to speak.

"It's not working."

"No." Silver waved a hand weakly. "No, I just need to catch my breath and...."

"Stop lying to me, damn you!" he growled between clenched teeth. "You tried to make me think you were fine, that you were all healed up and healthy as a horse, but that was a lie too, wasn't it?"

"I saw no reason to cloud the issue with such an insignificant detail," he protested weakly.

"This is killing you," Benny hissed.

"Ah." He steadied himself against Benny's arm, regaining his own balance. "Well, appearances can be deceiving, can't they?"

"You can't...."

"I must."

The sharply spoken words carried unexpected heat that retracted Benny's hands when Silver tugged his arm free. But the motion cost him. With a soft sound of surprise, he collapsed again, and this time all Benny could do was ease him to his knees.

"You can't," Benny said, an emphatic whisper next to his ear, gripping his shoulders tightly as much to support him as to make sure he didn't try to get up again.

But Silver made no effort to move, his head bowed heavily as he struggled for breath and composure. At length, he spoke, voice dulled by despair so deep that it shook Benny to his soul to hear it. "Then I've lost."

"Come on," Benny sighed, bracing himself to drag Silver to his feet and away from the room that appeared to be self-destructing around them. "We've got to—"

Silver tried to lift his head when Benny neither finished his words nor moved another muscle, but just as it seemed that the strength he needed to do so would fail him, fingers gently brushed his face, tipping up his chin. His eyes widened, despair slipping into wonder as he stared up into Sapphire's soft smile.

Her other hand feathered the side of his ravaged face as light glimmered in her blue eyes. "I knew you would come for us," she said, a heartfelt whisper. "I knew."

Silver grasped her hand where it rested against his face, and held it there like a treasured warmth as he released a shuddering sigh.

Nearby, Steel lifted a hand to his forehead, his eyes still filmed by confusion. His disorientation snapped away as a nearby wall seemed to fold in on itself. He grabbed Benny's shoulder urgently. "Lead us."

Benny instantly saw the reason for Steel's terse command; the chamber door was no longer visible in the growing chaos around them. Without discussion, Steel usurped his attempt to help Silver to his feet, easily lifting and supporting the stricken man. "Lead!" he barked.

Shielding his eyes with an upraised arm, Benny skittered through the arcing lights that seemed to be consuming the solid objects around them in a white-hot blaze. "Here!" he called as a swipe of his hand contacted the half-open access door. "Go, go!"

Sapphire stood aside to allow Steel to ease his burden through the narrow space, then reached for Benny's arm. Anticipating the move, he side-stepped, and caught her wrist to push her forward. "Uh-uh. Ladies first."

She hesitated, but an explosion of crackling sparks called the question. Ducking through the opening, she turned back, reaching for Benny.

Just as his fingers locked with hers, the boundaries of the room seemed to implode. White light blinded him, then darkness wrapped tightly around him, choking him, screaming in his ears. He fell back with a cry. And fell. And kept falling....

Someone shouted something, angry and defiant and suddenly he hit the ground with such force that his breath was knocked out of his lungs. He lay dazed, nose pressed against cold vinyl tile until his scattered senses reassembled enough for him to recognize the pattern, one that he himself had picked out of a decorator's catalog by flipping a page and stabbing a finger at the first sample he'd come upon.

A rush of adrenalin gave him the strength he needed to flip himself onto his back and stare up at Sapphire, who hovered over him in concern. Steel stood by the chair into which he'd eased Silver, but was staring, puzzled, at Jonathan MacKensie, still frozen in place on his knees.

He allowed Sapphire to help him to a sitting position, not minding at all when she took most of his weight against her bracing arm as the room tilted and swirled around him; finding it, in fact, rather pleasant to use her face to focus his fractured vision. "Welcome back," he whispered, unable to suppress a giddy smile as he spoke.

"The sensation will pass shortly," she assured him with a smile of her own.

"Oh. That's too bad," he murmured, letting his reeling head come to a comfortable rest against her shoulder.

"Sapphire."

Steel's voice was low, terse; imperative. Both she and Benny looked up to see the reason for the man's concern. Silver, huddled in the chair by the control console, had pitched forward in a near faint.

Benny released her from his side with a silent tightening of his grip on her upper arm. With a quick, grateful smile, she rose and hurried to Silver's side as Steel carefully lifted him back into the chair. He kept his hand on the stricken man's shoulder although it was no longer necessary to steady him, gazing down at Silver's bowed head as Sapphire went to her knees before him. She cupped Silver's ashen, bloodied face in her hands, her trembling fingers soothing away red-tinged wetness. He roused at her touch, looked up at her through slitted, exhausted eyes and managed a pale smile. "As lovely as ever, my dear," he rasped, losing his voice and his strength on the last word.

Something about the drawn look in Steel's face and the fact that Sapphire said nothing in reply sent Benny's heart into his throat with a resounding thud. "You can help him, can't you?" he demanded, dreading the answer he was sure he was going to get.

"He has severely overtaxed his resources," Sapphire said, every word spoken too carefully. What was supposed to sound like a rebuke directed at Silver failed its intent when her voice caught, threatening to break.

"I shouldn't have let him do this," Benny whispered, mortified.

Silver made a sharp, cautionary sound, lifting his hand with great effort to lay it briefly against Benny's arm. "You never really had a choice, did you?" he said with what was meant to be a taunting smile but which dissolved, too quickly, into an agonized grimace as his arm dropped back to his side. He swallowed deeply, drawing a shaky breath. "So sorry about the mess."

Benny pressed his lips together tightly. "Don't worry about it. You've already paid for the damages."

A faint smile flickered on Silver's pallid face as his eyes closed in peaceful relief.

Sapphire met Steel's gaze and for a moment they remained locked in urgent, silent communication. Then Steel reached down and gently lifted Silver from the chair, taking the man's full weight against his shoulder.

Sapphire turned to face Benny, pressing his hand between both of hers. "If we had known...."

Benny shook his head. "No. No, we, ah...we had a talk about that already. It's okay." When her wary expression didn't change, he added, firmly and quietly, "I'm okay."

Her smile banished any lingering doubts he might have harbored that he'd indeed spoken the fervent truth. "You are, indeed, truly a special man."

He accepted with a subdued nod. "Just, um...just do what you can for him. All right?"

"Nothing less," she assured him with a smile that warmed him through. Unexpectedly, she leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on his cheek. "Goodbye," she whispered, her breath warm against his ear.

Behind closed eyes, he felt the comforting pressure of her hands against his vanish. Where she had once stood before him was now, he knew even before he reluctantly edged his eyes open, empty space. No trace of Steel or Silver remained where they had been only a second ago. All that was left was the forlorn beeping of damaged controls and monitors, and Jonathan MacKensie kneeling on the floor nearby, holding his hands to his head as he emitted a low moan.

"Hey." Benny reached down, tapping Jonathan's upper arm until the disoriented man allowed Benny to grasp it and help him to his feet. "Believe me when I tell you, pal, it's not worth having a stroke over. Come on, easy now, that's it. Sit down here. Close your eyes, deep breaths. Relax. Good, that's good."

Jonathan blinked rapidly, unable or unwilling to release the death grip he had on Benny's arm even as he leaned heavily back in the chair. "What...what happened, what did I...." He grimaced abruptly in utter confusion. "What the devil am I doing here?"

"You came by to wish me luck tomorrow, remember?" Benny said, watching him carefully. "You walked in here and, uh...well, you took one look at this and you kinda went a little funny on me. There's this charming social ritual, you know, maybe you've heard of it—it's called knocking first?"

"I don't remember...." His voice disappeared as his vision finally cleared and he got his first good look at the burned and blasted control console. "My God," he breathed. "What happened here?"

Benny made an expansive gesture. "Well, you know me. I never could leave well enough alone, could I? I got this idea, see, about how we could improve the...well, it doesn't matter anymore, does it? At least I proved that the idea wouldn't work, eh?"

Jonathan stared aghast at the thin wisps of smoke curling around the edges of the damaged access door. "Was anyone hurt?" he asked in a faint voice.

"Naw, I was alone here when it happened and I didn't get a scratch," he assured his friend blithely, briefly hoping that his throbbing elbow wasn't about to turn spectacular colors and make a liar out of him.

Jonathan shook his head numbly. "This is disastrous."

"Yeah," Benny agreed, making his best attempt to look distressed. "Well...it was a good try. Got nobody but myself to blame that it didn't work out."

Frowning, Jonathan squinted up at him. "You're not planning to give up, surely?"

It was Benny's turn to stare. "That's not a serious question, is it?" he demanded warily.

"It's very serious," he retorted, affronted. "This project is the achievement of a lifetime, Benedek. You can't give up on it now."

Benny opened his mouth, raised his hand, lowered his hand, closed his mouth, and stared at Jonathan some more. "Achievement of a lifetime," he echoed as though the words were foreign terms that refused to translate. "I could have sworn I just heard those words coming out of your mouth. Is one of my grad students practicing ventriloquism or am I at home asleep having a very strange dream?"

"Benedek," he sighed, an abashed look coming over his face. "Benny. I...I admit, I've been less than, well...supportive of your work ever since you first came to me with your proposal. But that doesn't mean I didn't believe in the importance of what you were attempting to prove. It may have taken me a while to come around, but...I do. I do believe."

An incredulous smile spread wide over Benny's face. "Great. Just great. I've got to reduce millions of dollars worth of machinery and equipment to smoldering slag before I can get you to admit that I'm right?"

Jonathan winced. "The Board," he groaned. "Oh, my God, how are we going to explain this to them?"

"We?" Benny said, eyebrow arched. "Did you just say 'we'? As in, you aren't planning to stand back with an 'I told you so' smirk and leave me hanging out to dry?"

He regretted the words as soon as he spoke them. Jonathan seemed to deflate as he rubbed his forehead tiredly. "No," he said at length. "I would not do that. And...I apologize if my behavior and my attitude toward you over the past several years has convinced you that I could possibly consider doing something so...petty, so...."

"Take it easy, take it easy," he said with a laugh to cover the thrill of genuine amazement. "I was just having you on, come on. I'm not sure why it's so important to you all of a sudden, but I don't think you're a terrible person, honest. Never have. No, really."

Jonathan spared him a disparaging look for the exaggerated tone of voice of a parent soothing a distraught child, but didn't look away fast enough for Benny to miss the amused look that flitted briefly across his face.

"After all, it's not like you tried to kill me or anything like that, right?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Jonathan react to the remark, delivered with a casual chuckle worthy of an Academy Award. Mackenzie frowned as though the words had more meaning for him than they should have held. The moment passed with a disgusted shake of his head and eyes rolled heavenward in a silent plea for patience, and only then did Benny dare to take his next breath.

"You're taking this awfully well," Jonathan realized with some confusion, squinting at Benny suspiciously.

Benny shrugged, regretting that he couldn't possibly explain or make Jonathan understand the truth behind his philosophical acceptance of seeming disaster. The mystery that had haunted his life for forty years had culminated tonight in a memory that would banish the nightmares forever—the memory of a soft kiss on his cheek, simple words of gratitude spoken in a lilting voice, and blue eyes shining with unshed tears of joy and grief. To accept the destruction of years of work in order to have saved a life like that...was that really so much of a sacrifice compared to the one that a strange man who called himself Silver made in pursuit of the same goal?

At least Benny knew he had the comfort of knowing he could salvage something out of what was left.

"That's the way it goes, Jonny," he sighed. "You win some...you lose some."

Unconvinced, Jonathan stared a moment longer, then gave up with a dolorous shake of his head. "I'll never understand you," he muttered.

"That makes two of us, pal," he grinned. "Come on, I'm gonna get you home. Gotta get a good night's sleep, you know. Gotta be wide awake when the board members have us for lunch tomorrow."

"Wait, wait." A strange, distracted look came over Jonathan's face as he resisted Benny's attempt to help him to his feet. "There's something...something I came here to tell you."

Benny eyed him. "Tell me what?"

"Odd." He touched his forehead, blinking hard. "I could have sworn...."

Alarmed by the sudden loss of color in his friend's face, Benny crouched by his side to get a closer look at Jonathan's dazed expression. "Take it easy, you're getting upset...."

"No, no, I'm fine, just...confused." He drew in a deep, steadying breath. "I think I came here to tell you to...ask one of the physicists to go over the calculations for the primary induction process. There's a minor error affecting the stability of the higher temporal frequencies...."

His words ended in a frown, telling Benny that the words made no sense to him, and distracting him from noticing the huge grin that broke over Benny's face. "And the flow ratio?" Benny prodded.

"Could use an adjustment," Jonathan breathed, eyes wide with blank amazement. "At onset, a richer mix with travidium, then compensate at peak by throttling back to point oh-oh-three...." He broke off with a startled squeak.

"This is great, Jonny!" Benny exulted, clapping him on the shoulder. "Why, you've just solved a problem we thought we'd never crack in our lifetime. Next year, on the podium in Sweden, you and me and the Nobel Prize!"

"I don't understand." Jonathan swallowed, fighting to keep from hyperventilating. "Why did I just say that? How on earth did I even know?"

"Maybe you just knew." Benny waved his fingers to suggest an unearthly connection.

Jonathan managed a rude snort.

"Okay, then. Maybe someone told you."

"Someone...." Jonathan seemed to be scrutinizing a difficult memory. "Someone said to tell you...."

Some of the confusion seemed to lift from Jonathan's eyes as he continued in a fainter voice, "He said to tell you...thank you."

Tension left him in a rush, threatening his balance. He closed his eyes and released a long, relieved sigh. "Jonathan," he said, clapping his confused friend's shoulder warmly, "You don't know how glad I am to hear you say that. Believe me, you don't know."

Jonathan gave him a strange look that agreed wholeheartedly. "He also said to tell you...sell your antiques."

Benny burst out laughing. "You see? You did read my mind. I was just today thinking that I'd really like to redecorate in Estonian Modern. You'll help me with Rachel on that, won't you, old buddy, old pal?"

This time, Jonathan raised no protest when Benny urged him from the chair, out of the control room and back into the lab. "Benedek, when it comes to dealing with your wife, believe me when I tell you that I will gladly stand back and leave you hanging out to dry."

"Knew I could count on you," he chortled. "No, don't worry about the mess, we'll deal with it tomorrow."

At the door, Jonathan paused, lifting his hand slightly as though trying to focus a stubbornly vague thought. "Whom am I talking about?" he asked suddenly.

"Beats me," Benny lied cheerfully. "It's your hallucination, remember?"

Jonathan regarded him past lowered eyelids. "Curious," he murmured, taking a special interest in a spot on the wall past Benny's head. "I can only remember suffering a blackout like this one other time in my life. Thirty years ago, I believe. One moment I was on the phone to you, the next...you were in my office, I was hyperventilating and the next morning they found my missing artifact in pieces on the walkway beneath my window."

"Whoa, nothing wrong with your long-term memory, eh, Jonny? Come on, let's...."

Ignoring Benny's pull on his arm, Jonathan refocused his eyes on his friend's wary face. "The strange thing is that, for years afterward, I kept remembering something that never happened; someone I never met."

"Yeah?" Benny ventured after a moment.

His eyes took on a faintly wistful cast. "She was quite beautiful," he sighed.

Benny cleared his throat. "Since when am I supposed to think there's something strange about you dreaming about beautiful women?" he challenged, forcing a laugh.

"No reason in particular, except...she was there. With him."

Benny carefully turned his head away from Jonathan's searching look. A moment passed in silence, broken when Jonathan said, quietly, "She said to tell you thank you from her as well."

The best he could manage was a nod and a non-committal sound in his throat. He started slightly when Jonathan's hand touched his shoulder, turning to meet his friend's concerned look. "Who's known me longer than anyone else?" he asked softly.

Benny pretended to think about it. "Well, I guess I've got Dr. Moorhouse beat by about six years now, but that's only because she should have listened to me about cutting down on her caffeine intake."

"And who's known you longer than anyone else?"

His insouciant smile faltered. "That'd be you, I guess."

"I think I would very much like to hear what really happened here tonight," Jonathan told him, low-voiced.

"It's a long story, Jonny," he warned after a moment spent staring at a point past Jonathan's shoulder, helplessly watching all the pieces of a cherished facade shatter to the floor at his feet. For forty years he'd carefully built and maintained that facade to shield the secret only he knew, that he was sure no one else would believe even if he could find that words to tell it. And no one else would believe, except...except perhaps for someone who'd known him longer than anyone else. Someone who had, in fact, never really been fooled by that facade at all.

"Can't be nearly as long as I've waited to hear it," Jonathan replied, brow arched meaningfully.

Benny felt the relieved smile spread across his face as he nodded agreement. "Hungry?"

"Italian?"

"Naw." He quirked a knowing eyebrow. "Chinese. You know I only tell long stories over Szechuan."

"Better than anyone else," Jonathan assured him with a smile.

