

**THE
TOMORROW
PEOPLE****Rift***by Mary D. Bloemker*

Normally the ceaseless flow of information on the world's communications airwaves would have been enough to keep TIM occupied during those long periods of time in which the Tomorrow People were absent from their secret headquarters, buried deep beneath the streets of London. Lately, however, most of the accumulated data he had rejected as useless or repetitive. Leaving only two of his receivers on automatic, he turned instead to his main programming banks and began sifting through the main index of his memory. With unexpected time available to him, he decided to do a major reprogramming, setting up two new files to store information from the Watchdog satellites, placing, replacing, or deleting information as needed. A task that would have taken months on a conventional computer was the work of a few hours for TIM, who flashed pertinent pieces of hard information on his main viewing screen once in a while for his own amusement.

He was completing minor maintenance on the first file when an inner system alerted him to the fact that one of the Tomorrow People was arriving via the jaunting pad. This he noted only perfunctorily, as the part of his biotronic network that controlled the guidance coordinates of the jaunting belts was on automatic, and needed nothing from his integrated logic and personality circuits to help it along. Several bits of information filtered through, however, much as a stray thought intruded on a human mind. It was too soon for Stephen or Elizabeth to return to the lab; Stephen had at least two more classes at school, and Elizabeth had mentioned something about a staff conference after school hours. Therefore, the person who would be appearing on the jaunting pad in less than half a second would be John, who had earlier succumbed to TIM's urging to get more fresh air and exercise.

TIM's greatest concern, however, had remained unvoiced. He had long noted John's seeming reluctance to relate himself to the world that lay beyond the confines of the underground laboratory. Absorbed as John was in setting the groundwork for the future of the Tomorrow People, he was in turn becoming far too insular. It was inevitable that someday they would replace *homo sapiens* as the dominant life form on the planet Earth, just as Neanderthal had given way to Cro-Magnon. But that was a prediction for the next generation; for now, John had to realize that it was only his special powers that made him different. He still needed to eat, sleep and exercise, just like any "Sap," and it wouldn't hurt him to develop a social life either.

If it had been a human mind originating those thoughts, it would have been called brooding, and there would have been a very human expression to mirror the condition. For TIM, however, the thoughts took less than a fraction of a second to complete, passing through his logic banks without being recorded; the only outward indication he gave, had there been anyone to see it, was a subtle dimming of the multi-colored display on the four main spheres hung from the ceiling of the lab. As a human figure began to form on the jaunting pad, TIM quickly put his reprogramming job on standby and prepared to greet the newcomer.

John materialized onto the teleport platform and barely managed to preserve his balance as the now-familiar residual dizziness flashed through him again. The incident, though brief, did not escape TIM's fully alert notice. "John, are you all right?"

The young man descended into the main room of the underground lab, rubbing his fingers against his temple as he did. "Fine, TIM. I'm fine."

"You are not fine," TIM admonished. "I have noted that you seem to be experiencing

disorientation after jaunting, and that it appears to be getting progressively worse."

John lowered himself into a chair, reluctant to admit that TIM was more right than even the biotronic computer could know. He wasn't sure what to tell TIM, if indeed he could tell him anything at all. The dizzy spells were occurring with increasing frequency and intensity, with the result that he had developed a reluctance to jaunt that bordered on morbid fear. Since the attacks started, nearly two weeks ago, he had been attempting to pinpoint their cause himself, and was now certain that the root of the mystery was the brief span of time he spent in hyperspace in the course of a normal jaunt. For a half a second, his corporeal being existed neither here nor there, but in that vast non-existence they referred to as hyperspace for lack of a more descriptive term. When intuition and circumstantial evidence has first suggested hyperspace as the culprit behind his odd dizzy spells, he had deliberately prolonged his jaunts, extending his brief stay in that non-space. Knowing TIM would disapprove of such a dangerous experiment was why even now John could not bring himself to discuss the situation with the somewhat overly-protective computer. As the result of several harrowing and near-fatal forays into hyperspace a year or so ago, they did not deliberately enter that region for any length of time beyond the normal duration of a jaunt without taking extraordinary precautions.

John looked up at the lockers where they kept the special suits originally designer for extraterrestrial expeditions. He had only dared prolong this last jaunt for seven seconds, long enough for his suspicions to be confirmed. Something had touched him, something nebulous and indefinable. A kind of static charge had coursed through him, jolting ever nerve ending and synapse. Reeling from the blow, he had had just enough presence of mind to complete the jaunt back to the lab, and not enough to effectively fend off TIM's concern.

Still looking at the lockers, John rose, in the grip of a sudden decision.

"John?" TIM said for the third time, his normally well-modulated tones edged with mounting alarm.

John stopped, his hand inches from the handle of the locker. Slowly, reluctantly, he lowered his hand again. A dangerous experiment, TIM would say. Pulling an A.E. suit out of the locker would force an explanation and afford TIM an excellent opportunity to say it. And yet ... he had to know. He had to know what it was that had touched him in the void of hyperspace; what it was that had, for over two weeks, been attempting to pull him back, causing the spells that had plagued him all this time. Again he resisted the urge to tell all to TIM. He still didn't have enough pieces of the puzzle to make any kind of coherent explanation. Why this strangeness affected only him, for example, and not Stephen or Elizabeth. Carefully phrased questions had assured him that they had experienced no ill effects from their frequent jaunts even as his attacks of disorientation had increased. Therefore, the mystery was his and his alone. And by virtue of this latest incident, he had to find the answer himself, or at the very least, the missing pieces of the puzzle.

"John!"

The young man barely noticed the sharp, almost frightened tone of TIM's voice as he turned and bounded back onto the jaunting pad. As he dematerialized, he looked up, belatedly remembering TIM. "Don't worry, TIM. I'll be back in a short while ..." His voice faded with the rest of his form, leaving the visible portion of the biotronic computer pulsing with agitation. Bereft of John's physical presence, TIM turned to telepathic contact and found, to his increasing horror, that he could not find John's consciousness.

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Stephen was absent-mindedly chewing off the end of the pencil he had forgotten to lay down when he'd rushed out of maths on a lame excuse at TIM's urgent mental summons. He and Elizabeth were seated in the underground lab, deepening frowns on their faces as TIM related a brief account of John's behavior, including the odd dizzy spells he had been experiencing. They exchanged startled glances when TIM

finished by informing them that he was unable to make any kind of telepathic contact with John at all.

"Maybe we're overreacting," Stephen said reluctantly, unconvinced himself. "It's only been, what ...? Fifteen, twenty minutes? Maybe he really will be back in a while."

Elizabeth was shaking her head slowly, lost in worried thought. "Something is very, very wrong. All strong telepathic consciousnesses broadcast a residual trail. TIM should have been able to pick up on that, or at the very least get his positional coordinates from his jaunting belt. And John would never intentionally reject telepathic contact from any of us, especially TIM. Under normal circumstances, that is."

"You think something's happened to him."

"I'm afraid that's exactly what I do think, Stephen."

"But TIM said he tried to contact John as soon as he'd jaunted. What could have happened to him in less than three seconds?"

They had the same thought at the same moment. Elizabeth raised her head to regard TIM apprehensively. "Hyperspace, TIM? Could something have happened to John there?"

"I sincerely hope not," was the computer's fervent reply. "Although it would explain my inability to communicate with him, since I was assuming that he would have materialized within less than a second, as usual."

"I know it's difficult for you, TIM, but could you ...?"

"I have already made a preliminary attempt," TIM said, a gentle reminder that, unlike humans, he could perform disparate functions simultaneously. He had made a sweep of hyperspace the moment the possibility had occurred to them. But, as Elizabeth had been careful to remark, hyperspace was even more difficult for TIM, with his highly integrated logic circuits, to deal with than it was for the relatively undisciplined human mind. To operate in that region of paradoxes and non-logic required a special effort on TIM's part, one that he could not effectively control or sustain over a long period of time.

"Would it help if I got suited up?" Stephen offered.

"It would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack," Elizabeth reminded him. "If he were somehow trapped in hyperspace, that is. TIM, I ..."

"Wait."

TIM's quiet command froze them, hardly daring to move as the silence he had tacitly requested stretched unbearably. Then: "Odd."

"What is it, TIM?"

"I am not certain, Elizabeth," the mellow voice said slowly. "It was a strong contact, but very abrupt, as though ..."

"Was it from John?" Stephen demanded.

"Yes."

The reluctance in TIM's voice did not pass unnoticed. "What did he say?" Stephen pressed.

"Nothing. That is to say, I do not believe that the contact was specifically directed. It was almost as though a covering had slipped ... and had been as quickly rearranged."

A look of consternation grew on Elizabeth's face as the implication of what TIM was saying sank in. "You mean — TIM, you don't honestly believe that John is deliberately ...?"

"The contact was from John, that alone is not a subject for conjecture. It was not a call for help, nor did it give any indication of distress whatsoever. And it was not from hyperspace."

Stephen interrupted as TIM was about to continue. "Were you able to get coordinates, TIM?"
"Yes, of course. I ..."

"Great." Stephen landed on the jaunting pad in three running steps. "Send me there and I'll see for myself what's going on."

"Stephen ..." Elizabeth and TIM said in concert, both with a familiar cautionary tone. Not willing to give them a chance to talk him out of what they obviously feared was a potentially dangerous situation, Stephen overrode their burgeoning protests with a stubborn, "I'm not going to sit around her worrying about it. The only one who knows what's going on is John, so it only makes sense to ask him, right?"

"Stephen, be careful," Elizabeth found herself saying in place of the protest she had been forming. TIM was more reluctant to be persuaded, and since it was the computer who would control Stephen's jaunt to the coordinates recorded from the brief contact, the young boy now turned anxious and impatient eyes upward. "Look, give me five minutes and you can jaunt me right back in. Is it a deal?"

"TIM, let him go," Elizabeth said, her expression betraying her uncertainty that she was making the right decision. "Stephen's right - it's the only way we're going to get an answer."

"Very well." TIM's voice communicated his displeasure so vividly that Stephen could almost imagine a glowering face in place of the colored display. The amusing mental image was still in his mind as he disappeared from the jaunting pad.

Barely three minutes later, Stephen reappeared on the jaunting pad. Without even a glance at Elizabeth, who had been waiting with growing anxiety for his return, he jumped off the platform. Throwing himself into the nearest chair, he buried his chin into his jacket as far as it would go. Immediately sensing his dark mood, Elizabeth crossed the distance quickly to stand next to him. "Stephen?" she asked gently.
"Stephen, what is it? What happened?"

He stirred slightly, his mouth working as though to find words. Failing, he sighed sharply, slumping further into the chair.

"Did you find John?" she persisted.

"I found him, all right."

Elizabeth blinked at Stephen's uncharacteristically bitter tone.

"He said if you or I or any of the Tomorrow People come after him again, he'd kill them."

"Stephen!"

"He even threatened to kill *me* for trying to find him."

"That's impossible," she whispered, numb with shock. "I don't believe it."

"I wouldn't have believed it either if I hadn't been there. He was — he was *wild*, Elizabeth." His belligerence was melting away, replaced by acute distress. The young woman instinctively placed a hand on his shoulder, a mute gesture of concern. "I've never seen him like that. And I know it's impossible for a Tomorrow Person to kill, but — he meant it, Elizabeth. He really *meant* it."

Disconcerted, sick with fear, Elizabeth inclined her head upwards. "TIM?"

"I find Stephen's report of John behavior very odd — and disturbing," replied the computer's quiet voice. "I must ask you, Stephen to provide me with as much information about your confrontation with John as possible."

"Weren't you listening in?" Stephen turned a puzzled gaze toward the biotronic device whose visual manifestation was set in the ceiling of the room.

"I was unable to eavesdrop. The same anomaly that has prevented my contact with John was obviously affecting you while you were with him."

"Is it possible," Elizabeth said slowly, "that the source of the anomaly is John himself?"

"Pardon?" TIM replied.

"I mean, is it possible that John's powers could have somehow ... I don't know - mutated? Perhaps he's developed some sort of negative field that could, in turn, have affected his mind?"

"Or vice versa?" Stephen suggested grimly. "Maybe something that's affected his mind in turn affected his powers."

Again, Elizabeth looked up. "TIM?"

"It is not outside the realm of possibility."

"Which theory?"

"Both your theories are valid. However, all I know for certain is that this anomaly is not within my experience. I cannot definitely state whether it is indeed a mutation of John's powers."

"TIM, he's the oldest of all the Tomorrow People," Stephen said, sudden fear in his voice. "What if this mutation is something that's going to happen to all of us?"

"I think it highly unlikely. I must point out that I also have access to the Galactic Federation historical records, as well as medical and psych-profiles of registered telepaths and psychokinetics, which I have already referred to in an effort to trace the source of the anomaly. There is no recorded instance of mutations of telepathic or psychokinetic powers. No record, indeed, of any kind of analogous situation."

"In the Galactic Federation, yes," Stephen said. "But this is Earth, and we're the first to have these powers. And John the first of us."

"We cannot draw such conclusions on the data currently available to us," TIM said firmly. "Now, I must know everything John said to you, Stephen."

"I'm not sure I remember all of it," he admitted, pain sweeping his face again as he reluctantly searched for the memory. "I was so stunned that a lot of what he said didn't register. He was

saying things — horrible, nasty things about ... about us. About me, about ..." He wet his lips. "... about TIM ..."

"About me," Elizabeth prompted quietly.

He nodded, lowering his eyes. "He said he was tired of playing nanna to the lot of us. We were useless whining children, and Earth would be better off if we were drowned like a litter of kittens." He stopped, his mouth a thin, white line. Elizabeth winced, not so much for the harshness of John's words, but for the obvious distress it caused Stephen to remember and relate them.

"Was there more, Stephen? I must know everything."

"He did say something else, but it didn't make much sense."

"Everything, Stephen."

"He said ..." He paused, struggling to recall. "He said that Wendy was right from the start. He should have gone with her in the first place, instead of playing nursemaid to the worthless lot of us. And ..." he raised his eyes to look up at TIM's multi-colored display, "that I should tell you from him that now that he's finally realized what Wendy was about, he never wants to see any of us again."

"Wendy?" Elizabeth repeated, confused. "Who is Wendy?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Stephen said, a bitter edge still in his voice. "TIM?"

The two young people exchanged startled glances at the unexpected silence. "TIM?" the woman ventured, her puzzlement deepening when again the computer did not answer.

"TIM, you *do* know who Wendy is, don't you?" Stephen said, realization dawning.

It was a long moment before TIM answered, "Yes."

"Tell us, please," Elizabeth begged.

"I'm not sure I should."

"John was giving me a message!" Stephen exclaimed, his sullenness evaporating. "I'm right, aren't I, TIM?"

"That is entirely possible, yes."

Elizabeth and Stephen exchanged smiles, relieved for even the slimmest hope that there might be a method to John's apparent madness. But the curiously strained quality of TIM's usually placid voice intruded. "TIM, who is Wendy?" Elizabeth asked. "Please, you must tell us."

"Is she a Tomorrow Person?" Stephen put in.

"No. That is — not anymore."

"What does that mean?" Elizabeth asked, suddenly unsure as to whether she wanted to hear the answer.

"When John first broke out, he was, as you are both aware, very much alone. That he survived at all, without the help that he in turn was able to offer each of you when your special powers broke out, can be considered quite remarkable."

"It must have been awful for him," Stephen said softly, remembering his own traumatic ordeal precipitated by the sudden blossoming of his telepathic and psychokinetic powers. Elizabeth's expression mirrored his own as she too remembered her own, more recent experience. TIM's small silence was tacit agreement.

He then went on. "He made good progress in the early days, considering the fact that he had nothing to guide him, no one to advise him. In many ways, you are all very lucky that John was the first."

"I think you're trying to tell us that you don't believe his mind has broken now, if it was able to survive the shock of breaking out unaided," Elizabeth said.

"But where does Wendy fit in all of this?" Stephen said impatiently.

"Wendy was the second person to break out."

"I thought Carol was?"

"We allowed all of you, including Carol, to believe that, Stephen. But the truth is that Carol was the second Tomorrow Person, not the second Earth human to break out."

"What happened to Wendy?"

"I'm not sure, Elizabeth. John, who related these events to me much after the fact, was never sure. He was not able to reach her in time. His powers of personal teleportation developed late and by the time he had gained enough control over it to try to help her, she was gone."

"Gone?" Elizabeth dreaded the ominous sound of such a simple word.

"From what little he was able to find out, it seems that her psychokinetic powers had become erratic, out of control. Her new-found telepathic powers may have driven her mad."

"And she must have jaunted, like I did when I broke out," Elizabeth said, mentally wincing at the unwelcome memory. "Only I had Stephen and John to come after me, shock me back to the real world after I'd teleported myself into hyperspace by mistake. There was no one to go after Wendy if the same thing had happened to her; even if John had been able to, he wouldn't have known where or how or ..."

"That is a possibility, of course."

"There's really nothing John could have done, was there, TIM?"

"No, Stephen. John has accepted this, but I still feel that he bears some unwarranted guilt. He took her loss very hard — and very personally."

"So what could John's mysterious 'message' mean, TIM?"

"I'm not certain, but I think he may have been trying to tell us that he's found Wendy. And for some reason ..." He hesitated. When he resumed speaking his voice was subdued and bodeful. "... for some reason, he's determined to keep us from finding her. I sense a warning of very real danger behind his words; his inexplicable behavior toward you, Stephen, was likely the only way he could keep you from asking too many difficult questions."

"If it was, it certainly worked," the boy agreed, remembering how speechless he had been during John's diatribe. There was a warm feeling spreading in the pit of his stomach now, unknitting the fear he had been nursing since his return to the lab. "TIM, whatever's going on, we've got to try and help John."

"I agree. But I am at a loss to know how precisely we could help him. He has deliberately put himself beyond our reach. It occurs to me now that the brief contact that allowed me to direct you to him was calculated rather than accidental. I don't think we'll get another chance."

John pressed his hands tightly against tired, burning eyes. He was afraid to look up; afraid that Stephen would still be there, and that might goad him into an action both of them would regret. He remained still a long moment, listening. Around him he heard the gentle stir of trees in the breeze, a distant bird call. Nothing else. He looked up then, and sighed with deep relief to find that the spot where Stephen had stood only moments before was indeed empty. John now found himself the only occupant of the tiny park, but he knew instinctively that he wouldn't be alone for long. The vague tingling that heralded her arrival was beginning to spread throughout his nervous system, an echo of the first time he had sensed her in hyperspace. He suppressed a shudder, drawing the negative field closer around him. The shield was still a strong one, despite his lack of rest. Even so, she was getting stronger. He wasn't sure how long it would be before she breached his last defense. And when that happened ...

... someone ... was ... here ...

"I sent them away," he replied, too quickly. He cursed himself for the slip. He tried to force himself to turn around and failed. Another slip.

... who ...? ...

"No one." At least he was more successful at keeping edging desperation out of his voice, although he knew that to a human ear he must sound oddly strained. It was a small favor that this was one time that was not a consideration. "Don't worry about it. I sent him away, and I made sure he won't bother to come looking for me again."

In the ominous silence that followed, he gathered every shred of will-power he had left and turned around. He barely managed to quell a wince. Even though the personal negative field he had summoned to protect himself, he could feel the awesome power she possessed. It wouldn't be very much longer before it would try to overwhelm him — and succeed.

The core of the apparition was vaguely human. He had recognized it as Wendy only after her aura had touched him the second time, when he had inadvertently led it out of hyperspace. Referring to the pulsating, glowing phantom as Wendy was only a convention, however; from that second contact, he had known that little of the Earth human known as Wendy still existed. This was a mutation, a freakish concentration of sheer mental energy. Energy without control or direction. Unharnessed insanity.

He could only guess how it could have happened. They knew so little about the effects of an extended stay in hyperspace. Their one valid conjecture was that it induced an entropy effect in any matter from this universe unlucky enough to become trapped in that alternate non-universe. If Wendy had become imprisoned in hyperspace by her own inability to retrieve herself, there was no doubt that she had been effected by the entropy effect. Perhaps this mutation was the result. Somehow, this thing-that-had-been-Wendy, from that one, brief contact he had had with her mind years ago before she had disappeared, had found him, identified him as something, someone familiar. And somehow had followed him from hyperspace before he was aware of what was happening. Whether the Wendy-thing was conscious of it or not, she/s was now desperately trying to absorb him, make him part of herself. He had tried, but eventually realized that he knew no way to break her hold. The only thing he could do was to try to keep her away from his friends, the other Tomorrow People, to prevent her from attempting to absorb and to eventually destroy them as well.

The voice, the faint specter of Wendy's mental voice, spoke in his mind again, seemingly unaware or unconcerned with his agitation. ... *search place ... not find ... not ... find ...*

He tensed, not knowing how to answer. What it was Wendy was searching for, he did not know; he suspected that she — or it, whatever it could properly be called — did not know either. Telling her that her answer might lie beyond the confines of the planet had been an effort to keep her occupied long enough to get his message to TIM. A theory only, he thought that Wendy, lost those many years ago, must have tried desperately to return. But as her very form mutated, so must her purpose have changed with it. She was trying to find a place she no longer belonged to or had a rightful place in, but could no longer identify the specifics of her quest. Only the quest remained; the purpose was long along with the integrity of her corporeal form.

Whatever this thing was, this mutation, it was lethal to telepaths. Outside of hyperspace, it used the special telepathic and psychokinetic energies for sustenance and as he had sensed this, he had also sensed that it was something over which the Wendy-thing had no control. When he had first become aware of what it was attempting to do, he had been able to summon the negative shield to keep her/it from drawing off his energies, which he had instinctively known would have fatal consequences for him. The shield, however, inhibited the powers he sought to protect from the Wendy-thing's voracity, effectively cutting off his contact with the other Tomorrow People. To get his message to Stephen and Elizabeth, he had chanced letting the shield down just long enough to give TIM that fleeting contact, hoping that his wild goose chase would keep Wendy distracted long enough for his gamble to pay off. Now he could only hope that he had been convincing enough to keep Stephen and Elizabeth from coming after him again until he either found a way to deal effectively with this deadly menace — or at least to draw it away from Earth somehow. If his steadily waning shield could not hold out against Wendy's relentless siege long enough ...

"I will find you help," John said, hoping he sounded convincing. There was no change in the intensity of the flow around the blurred human core, nor any fluctuation in the pressure it was constantly exerting against his shield. No way to tell if she/it believed him, even when it said, ... *must find ... must ... return ... must go ... back ... must find ...*

"You will search again and this time I will help you."

... *someone ... was ... here ...*

Was it possible that a hint of Stephen's strong telepathic aura lingered, enough for her to sniff the tantalizing trace? If so, John had to distract her, or she might decide to track it down.

"I will help you find. We will search together." This time he made no effort to disguise his desperation. He couldn't delay the decision any longer — he knew what it was he had to do. He'd known all along; the finality of the act was what had prompted him to make certain he had exhausted all possible alternatives before resolutely facing what was now the only alternative left. He had led Wendy into this universe; he now had to lead her back into hyperspace — and stay there. His heart twisted as he met the verdict square-on, finally, reluctantly accepting the fate he was resigning himself to.

A new impression impinged on the Wendy consciousness, transmitting itself to John through the tenuous link it had established with his mind. It took him only a moment to analyze the intrusion, and when he identified it, his heart leapt to his throat.

"No."

Whirling, he saw Elizabeth and Stephen standing at the edge of the wooded area a short distance away, confirming his worst fears. In the same instant, he sensed Wendy's reaction to the new, unshielded telepathic presences. She was preparing to reach out and envelop them, responding

instinctively to her hunger reflex.

John dropped his shield for a brief, fatal moment, directing a mental shout to TIM in the breach. Wendy sliced in before he could erect the barrier again. With a cry, he clutched at his head as she burned into his mind, saturating every nerve with blinding pain.

Elizabeth started forward, grabbing at Stephen's arm as John pitched forward onto the grass near the weirdly pulsating light. At the same moment, she became aware of TIM's familiar touch in her mind; he was implanting, not words, but an entire concept in a single instant of time. The next moment, she shrank back as an invisible wall seemed to leap up around her perception of reality, her consternation lasting only the brief second it took her to realize that she was the one who had erected this new mental shield. A peripheral sensation indicated that, nearby, Stephen was now similarly protected. *TIM*. TIM had given them the concept, implanting the instructions and the imperative order to utilize those instructions. Before she could gather her wits to fathom out these new developments in an already bewildering situation, her mental barrier reverberated, almost a physical blow, as though something had been thrown against it. Again and again it hit, the shield wavering but holding firm at each onslaught.

Elizabeth found herself staring open-mouthed at the strange apparition hovering near John even as the siege continued. It was pulsing violently, obscuring the already hazy human form at its center; she knew without question that it was the source of the assault.

"Elizabeth, I can't reach you," Stephen was saying, his voice strained with effort.

"It's the shield — it inhibits our special powers," she replied, still watching the specter with fearful fascination as she knew Stephen was doing. "That — *thing* — is trying to get at us."

"It's already got John."

Stephen's anguished words galvanized Elizabeth into action. She stepped forward, cautiously, toward where John lay crumpled on the ground. The battering at her shield was sporadic now, but the blows, when they came, were frenzied, insane. She had the uncertain feeling that her protection would yield long before the being's energy waned.

As she neared, she noted with relief that John was stirring, starting to get up. He stopped as his eyes focused on her as she was about to reach toward him. "Elizabeth, don't touch me."

She froze as he spoke, his voice unnaturally hoarse and urgent. "Don't come any closer!"

"I can extend my shield, John ..."

"It's too late. You'd just be letting her inside your shield. She's ... *it's* already got me, but it's not too late for you and Stephen. Get *out* of here!"

Elizabeth stared up at the awesome creature, filling with anger even as John was pleading with her. "We can't leave you like this!"

"You *have* to," he insisted desperately. "If you don't get out of here right now, neither of you will have a chance."

"The only reason you're still alive right now is because that thing is too busy trying to get to us to bother with you," Elizabeth said. "You *know* we can't leave you to that."

"Yes, you can. You *must*. Elizabeth, Stephen, please — *go!*"

His last word was a choked-off moan; he twisted as though struck, collapsing to the ground once

more. In the same instant, Elizabeth felt the siege lift and knew, with growing horror, that the thing was once again redirecting its attack.

She let her shield fall away, attempting a direct contact with John's mind. The resistance she met threw her effort aside as carelessly as a child discarding a toy. But, as she had hoped, the source of the resistance just as quickly became aware of this new source of psychic energy was now unshielded, open — vulnerable. It took form in her mind, rationalizing as a huge vulture, glistening talons extended, swooping in to tear her apart.

Her scream died in her throat. Before the claws could rend at her sanity, the mind-image suddenly shattered. Something had interposed itself between her consciousness and that of her assailant. With a subhuman howl that reverberated through Elizabeth's mind, the creature retreated, venting its inarticulate fury at the mysterious presence that had thwarted its attack.

Bereft of her protective shield, Elizabeth found that she could identify her benefactor. When Stephen abandoned his shield, she wasn't sure — perhaps he had been attempting to extend his shield to her when he realized what she had done — but he, too, recognized the new presence, and voiced the relief both of them felt. "TIM!"

Both of you, you must make physical contact with John! TIM's mental voice was strained with the effort of protecting them and keeping the furious creature at bay. Quickly!

They obeyed, each grasping one of John's hands. As soon as the contact was completed, they found themselves the spectators of an awesome struggle. Again the mind-images rationalized. The being was a primordial maelstrom, raw emotion and unleashed destruction. And John's consciousness was being inexorably drawn into it.

And ... TIM! TIM was there, a paradoxically solid image, a blaze of blue-hot light that pulsed with psychic energy. Even as the edges of the maelstrom reached out, tentacle-like, threatening to engulf the comparatively weak glows that were the rationalized consciousnesses of Stephen and Elizabeth, the TIM-image interposed its brilliance. The sickly black non-stuff roiled back with a shattering howl of defeat, thrashing convulsively.

John was falling, faster and faster, into the eye of the evil storm. Thin tendrils of light extruded from the TIM-image, enveloping Elizabeth and Stephen, suffusing them with strength and completing the vital union of their collective consciousnesses. From the newly formed gestalt, blazing appendages snaked out, touched John, started to curl around him. Thick, reeking tentacles flailed uselessly at the insubstantial light. Abandoning attack, the entity redoubled its efforts to fully claim John's consciousness. The already painfully thin strands stretched, dangerously close to the breaking point as the desperate, silent battle raged.

Just as it seemed that the gestalt's lifeline had to break, sacrificing John to an unthinkable fate, the maelstrom abruptly exploded, sending an unearthly howl pounding through the void as the oily, evil mass reared up, threatening to engulf them utterly.

Then, sudden calm. The gestalt was shattered; Elizabeth, bereft of the unique contact, did not move, dared not breathe. TIM's light no longer enveloped her; Stephen's consciousness was no longer comfortingly close. Blackness surrounded her now — she was alone. Fear knotted in her throat, preventing her from screaming, as she had been sorely tempted to do, or crying, as she now wanted to do.

Tentatively, she reached out into the silence. TIM?

I'm here.

Elizabeth! Relief colored Stephen's contact. Are you all right?

With a boundless joy, Elizabeth realized that the blackness was caused only by her tightly closed eyes. She raised her head and looked around at the peaceful park, at the sunlight streaming down through the trees. Nothing had been disturbed, nothing to mark the horrific battle that had been fought here. Meeting Stephen's gaze, she saw that his eyes were as glazed over as she knew her own must be. Together, they broke out in weary smiles of relief and embarrassment.

They still tightly held John's hands as he lay between them on the ground. Elizabeth noted with mounting concern that his skin was cold to her touch, and his face had an unhealthy pallor.

"TIM?"

"Yes, Stephen." They knew it was not their imagination that TIM's voice sounded very, very tired. "I suspect you do not fully comprehend all that has happened."

"Is it gone, TIM?" Elizabeth ventured. "Is it really gone?"

"Yes, Elizabeth. And it will not return to threaten or harm any of you, ever again."

"We almost lost John, didn't we?"

"Yes, Stephen."

"Is he all right?" Elizabeth asked worriedly.

"He has undergone a tremendous strain, both mental and physical," TIM replied, and Stephen and Elizabeth exchanged a look at the markedly reserved tone of the voice. "His life force has been dangerously drained by his ordeal."

The words were like a hand pressing against her heart. "TIM, will he survive?"

The answer came, reluctantly. "I am not sure."

"Isn't there something we can do?"

"The reanimation technique!" Stephen said suddenly. "TIM, Elizabeth and I could transfer enough of our life energy to John to get him past the danger point, couldn't we?"

Elizabeth was regarding him oddly. Noting her confusion, Stephen explained quickly, "Kenny did it for John and me once. He saved both of our lives. So I know it's possible."

"Possible, yes," TIM enjoined. "Do not forget, however, that at that time I was available to augment the transfer. I will not be able to perform that function this time. My own resources are dangerously low and to jaunt John back to the lab would further endanger his life."

"It's worth a try. Elizabeth, concentrate as hard as you can."

She did, at first unsure of what she was expected to do. Stephen reached out with his free hand to grasp her wrist and with his mind to guide her through the essential steps. Only then, as the vital contact was closed, did she become aware of how much the battle with the entity had drained their own energy reserves. A moment of panic verged at the thought that they would not have enough to spare to save John, but TIM's mental voice calmed her fears and redirected her concentration.

We're doing it, Elizabeth! It's working!

Stephen was right — she could feel the life energy flow from her, diffusing through her fingertips

where they grasped John's hand. She could feel him warming as the transfer coursed through him, knew that his failing bodily systems were rallying with the sudden inundation of new strength. She could also feel herself weakening fast, however, prompting another moment of fear that she would not be able to keep it up for as long as might be needed. Just as she thought she could continue no longer, however, TIM's welcome voice said, "It's done."

Stephen released the contact slowly, letting them return to full awareness like a swimmer resurfacing. Freeing his hands, he raised his head to the afternoon sun, closed his eyes, drew a long, heartfelt sigh — and flopped wearily onto his back in the grass. "We did it," he murmured, exhausted. "We did it ..."

Elizabeth resisted the impulse to follow Stephen's lead, and gazed down at John. Color had returned to his flesh, and his hand was now warm to her touch. All lines of pain had been erased; he was, to all appearances, peacefully asleep.

TIM?

He is well, Elizabeth. You and Stephen succeeded in restored the much-needed balance. All he needs now is to rest quietly.

He's not the only one. It was all she could do to keep her eyes open. Nearby, Stephen had already succumbed to sleep, a fact she noted with bemusement.

Barely fifteen minutes ago, John had sent Stephen away with words that would have inflicted bleeding wounds on even the most insensitive of souls. As hurt and confused as the young boy had been, however, it had been Stephen who had insisted on returning, Stephen who had unhesitatingly initiated the reanimation technique knowing full well the danger to himself because of his own weakened state.

The memory of Stephen's hurt and anguished face haunted her as she closed eyes that refused to stay open any longer. She found herself wondering if Stephen could really forget what John had done to him; what must have been more of a soul-shattering experience than the nightmarish struggle with that storm-thing. Only time would tell, she thought fuzzily, welcome sleep starting to twine around her senses. Time would tell ... and hopefully, heal.

Quietly, without fuss, TIM activated their jaunting belts, bringing them home.



TIM alerted Elizabeth and Stephen the moment he sensed John stirring awake. When the young man's eyes finally flickered open, the first thing he saw was Elizabeth standing at his bedside with a steaming cup of sweet tea. He accepted it with a readiness that assured them that John was well on his way to recovery.

He winced as the hot liquid scalded into a hollow stomach. "I think I'm ravenous," he said with surprise.

"You should be," TIM enjoined. "You've been asleep for nearly two days."

"Two da —" He sank back with a groan eliciting amused grins from both Stephen and Elizabeth. The younger boy indicated the tray he held in his hands. "TIM thought you might be in the mood for some of these."

"Scones!" John's eyes lit up at the offer of a rare favorite. He reached eagerly for one, but stopped it halfway to his mouth. His gaze flicked across both of them, then settled on TIM. "These two haven't been sitting around here all this time, have they?"

"I sent them home, John," TIM assured him.

"Not without an argument," Elizabeth amended, with Stephen offering a firm nod of agreement.

"I am relieved to see that you are feeling so well, John," TIM went on.

John stopped again, this time looking down at the half-eaten scone in his hand. "I really don't remember much of what happened after Stephen and Elizabeth showed up." His expression darkened. "Why did you come after me? You could have been killed."

"So much for your odd little messages," Stephen returned, bristling at what he took to be superciliousness on John's part. "Next time you want us to steer clear, maybe you'd better come right out with it instead of wasting our time with word puzzles."

John was staring at him, breakfast forgotten. There was an indefinable quality in the young man's expression, as though Stephen's unexpectedly heated words had struck a chord of fear in him. TIM spoke quickly. "They insisted on going after you, John. They used the coordinates from your meeting with Stephen on the chance that you would still be there."

John drew in a long breath, looking away a moment. When he turned back, it was with an obviously forced smile. "Well, we're all here, relatively sound. So, I gather one of you was able to pull a trick I hadn't thought of. Is anyone talking?"

"Well ..." Elizabeth exchanged an uneasy glance with Stephen. "When that ... thing, whatever it was, came at us, TIM got through to us and told us how to shield ourselves."

"Thanks to your timely warning, John," TIM interjected.

A subtle change came over Elizabeth's face as another piece of the puzzle clicked into place. "Oh, I understand now. That's why you didn't have any protection — you had to drop your own shield to contact TIM."

"TIM, you promised us an explanation when John was up and about," Stephen put in, unable to contain himself any longer. "It's your turn now."

"That being did not possess a reasoning intelligence," TIM picked up without missing a beat. "If it had, it might have easily destroyed all of us. It was acting on pure instinct, and, as a result, it was only able to attack a telepathic consciousness that possessed a physical presence."

"You mean — you could fight it, but it couldn't fight *you*?" Stephen guessed.

"Or couldn't *find* you to fight you," Elizabeth added.

"I believe that is correct. That is why I was able to shield all three of you."

"You didn't just shield John, you pulled him back," Elizabeth said, suppressing a shudder as the images of the mental struggle flooded back. "And then it just vanished. Disappeared, as if it had never been there at all."

"Not precisely. Having the inability to deal with unexpected resistance from an invisible source, the entity's consciousness retreated. What you sensed as a disappearance was actually a physical retreat to what it knew as a place of safety."

"Back to hyperspace?" John ventured.

"Yes. That has, after all, become its natural habitat."

"But what's to prevent it from coming back?" Stephen asked nervously. "Or finding us in hyperspace again?"

"The entity's last vestige of sanity has snapped as a result of the conflict," TIM assured them. "What little was left of the consciousness that was Wendy no longer exists."

Stephen's eyes widened. "Wendy?"

"It was that last shred of sanity that compelled her to follow John and to return to this universe," TIM continued. "Without that, she — *it* — has no reason to come back or to seek you out."

It was with a sympathetic pang that Elizabeth noted John's expression as TIM spoke. He stared ahead, eyes unfocused, his mouth drawn in a tight line. He blamed himself for losing Wendy the first time, and now he had lost her again. An empathetic twinge for Wendy intruded as well, heightened by TIM's dispassionate recital of the girl's ghastly fate.

"There's nothing any of us could have done, then, was there?" she spoke softly, regarding John intently as she did.

"No, Elizabeth." TIM's voice was firm. "Wendy — what is left of her — is now back in her natural element, with no reason to seek out any other. It would not be too much to presume that she is even ... at peace."

This gained the multi-hued ceiling display a sharp stare from John. He broke into a reluctant smile after a strained moment; an afterthought, he popped the rest of the scone into his mouth.

"Now that we're satisfied that you're all in one piece, appetite included, I think I'd better make an appearance at school. I do have a job to do, after all," Elizabeth smiled. She moved off as she spoke, gathering her purse from a nearby chair. Stephen was about to leave after her, but John reached out suddenly, stopping him with a hand on the boy's arm.

"Stephen, those things I said to you when we were in the park. You do ... understand, don't you?"

The boy stared at him for a long moment. He seemed about to say something, but hesitated. As if suddenly aware that his pause was threatening to stretch into a dangerous silence, he shrugged lightly and broke out into a laugh. "That nonsense? I knew it was an act. Never doubted it for a minute."

John remembered the shock and deep hurt in Stephen's eyes too vividly to believe that, and the strange look that Elizabeth, standing at the teleport alcove, directed their way confirmed it. Seeing that John remained unconvinced, Stephen pulled a long-suffering grimace. "Of course I understand. Honestly, John, sometimes you worry too much."

John returned his smile wanly. "I supposed I do, don't I?"

In the small silence that followed, Stephen suddenly extended his hand. An unsuccessfully suppressed grin curled mischievously at the corner of his mouth as he said, in a voice pitched for John's ears alone, "Welcome back, Nanna."

Despite himself, John burst out into a laugh. He gripped Stephen's hand warmly, gratefully. The boy nodded, finally letting the smile break out, letting John know without a shadow of a doubt that the incident was forgiven and forgotten.

Stephen seemed about to speak again, but stopped, alarm widening his eyes. "I'm late!" Scooping up his satchel on the run, he bounded up on the teleport platform to join Elizabeth as

the young woman called, "Look after him, TIM!"

The smile on John's face faded even as their forms did, and he stared at the platform for a long moment after they had dematerialized. "Was there really nothing any of us could have done, TIM?" he said quietly.

"Yours was a valiant attempt, John. But Wendy did not truly exist anymore. I assure you — there was nothing any of us could have done."

He fell silent again, thinking. There was so little they really knew about themselves, this new race of *homo nova* of which they styled themselves the forerunners. That something like what befell Wendy could have happened to any one of them unlucky enough to have become trapped in her circumstances was a sobering thought.

John shook himself free of the train of thought, settling back and closing his eyes. If there was one thing to be gained from this, it had to be experience. Valuable experience. He would never again allow a potential Tomorrow Person to slip away.

The Tomorrow People stick together. That's what makes us special, not just our powers. We'd be no better than sideshow freaks if we didn't stand by each other. We know who we are and we know what we are. And we know what we have the potential of becoming. We're the only ones who understand. The Tomorrow People stick together. It's our only hope for survival.

The Tomorrow People stick together. That's what his mistake had been with Stephen, thinking he could be pushed away by mere words.

Wendy, wherever you are ... I'm sorry. We're sorry. It was too late for you, too soon for us. The only thing we can hope for now is peace — for both of us.

But from this moment onward — the Tomorrow People stick together.

Tomorrow Child,
I can't tell you what your life will be.
Time will show you roads that I can't see.
And if they carry you away from me,
Then go with love ...

Whatever travels you may wander through,
Whatever wonders you may someday do.
Take my lullaby along with you,
And go with love,
Tomorrow Child.

Brian Neary-Enoch Anderson
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