

**THE
TOMORROW
PEOPLE****The Cassandra Conspiracy***by Mary D. Bloemker*

The letter he had received in the morning's post had been cryptic enough to pique his interest. Typed neatly under the letterhead of "Perkins & Sons, Ltd.," it had invited him to meet two of the company's representatives for a lunch meeting to discuss a potential business deal. No mention at all of what kind of arrangement would be under discussion, not even a hint as to why they were going to the bother of seeking him out. The choice of meeting place had been odd as well — an obscure restaurant on the other side of London, nowhere near the address "Perkins & Sons, Ltd.," had stated on their stationery letterhead.

Now, as John regarded each of the men seated across the table from him in turn, he found himself wondering if precognition had suddenly wandered into his repertoire of special powers. There was no outward reason to take an instant dislike to the two men introduced upon his arrival as Mr. Perkins and Mr. Drummond, senior executives of the firm. Both were older men, both solid business-types who behaved with all propriety and with the forced casualness of experienced tradesmen. The more John tried to analyze the reason for his feeling of antipathy toward them, the more certain he became that something was direly wrong. Having traded forced banter with them for several minutes now, he was almost sure it had something to do with the way the older man, Perkins, kept staring at him with an odd, frozen smile on his face. "Excuse me, gentlemen. John said, cutting off the conversation in the midst of a banal discussion of the weather. "I don't really understand why you've asked me to meet you here."

Perkins answered, while Drummond, as he had done since they had seated themselves, listened, his eyes flicking evenly from his companion to John in turn. "We've found this establishment quite conducive to our business endeavors. Not well-frequented, quiet unobtrusive ..."

"I see." John said, unsatisfied. "Your 'business endeavors' rely heavily on secrecy, do they?" "Confidentiality," Perkins demurred.

"And what sort of 'endeavor' did you want to discuss with me?"

"Ah. Direct, to the point. Just the sort we prefer to deal with. All right, then — here it is. We'd like to enlist you and your young friends to acquire a number of items for us." Perkins's voice lowered. "Items of great value, to be precise."

"I'm not sure I understand," John said slowly, trying to fathom the deeper meaning he sensed behind the man's words. "How could we help you do that?"

Perkins's smile twisted. "By using your special 'talents', of course."

"Pardon?" John blinked, successfully masking the shock that the man's words had precipitated.

This time Perkins chuckled lowly. "I know all about you and your friends, young man. I've been watching all three of you for weeks now. Of course you didn't suspect it — that's why I'm the best in the business. I first spotted your little friend Stephen while I was doing some investigative work for a client at his school. Lucky for me he didn't spot me before I spotted him — no doubt he wouldn't have disappeared right in front of my eyes the way he did if he'd known he was being observed. Once I'd convinced myself that I wasn't going 'round the twist, I kept my eye on him. And it's led me straight to you."

John remained still, determined not to betray the slightest reaction. Inside his mind was in

turmoil. They had always speculated on the possibility, even the inevitability, that one day they would have to come out into the open with their powers. But not this soon. Not this way. The feeling that had been nagging at him since he had arrived was now urging him to leave, to get as far away as possible from the aura of imminent danger the two men were exuding. But he refused to give into what he considered a panic reflex. He would sit tight, find out how much they really knew — or were only guessing — and just how far they intended to go with their knowledge.

"I'm sorry, I really don't know what you're talking about, John said, forcing an amused chuckle as he nonchalantly picked up his cup of tea.

"I think you do." Perkins's odd smile now held a darker overtone, and John considered it warily, wondering what it meant. "I also know that you've gone to extraordinary lengths to preserve your little secret. I'm not prepared to intrude on that; however, I do want one small favor in return."

Blackmail. So that was their game. John retained a noncommittal expression on his face, prompting Perkins to continue as he leaned confidentially across the table toward the young man. "Have you ever considered that, with your special powers, you and your friends could get around any security system in the world?"

John's calm facade shattered. "No."

"Listen to me ..."

"Absolutely not."

"I said, listen to me!" Perkins hissed, glaring at him with a visible threat in his eyes. "One short-term contract, a few well-placed hits. You get your cut, we're off to South America. That's all I'm proposing."

John shot to his feet, capsizing his chair with a clatter that startled the restaurant's few other patrons. "Good day, gentlemen."

"Not so fast," Perkins said in a new voice, one that commanded obeisance. "I think you had better consider what you're doing."

"As far as I'm concerned we have nothing more to discuss," John bit out, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Oh, but we do," Perkins insisted. "I really didn't expect you to welcome my suggestion with open arms, but I did want to make sure that you had time to think over all the consequences. I told you before — I'm the best in the business. I didn't get that way by taking stupid risks." He stopped, glancing down at the now-empty cup set in front of John on the table, and a smile suddenly broke across his face. "Ah. You finished your tea. Good."

John stared at Perkins, then at the cup, horror spreading over his face as he did. When he looked up again, both Perkins and Drummond were watching him, both with half-smiles of unmistakable satisfaction. Even as John opened his mouth to speak, the first wave of nausea overcame him. He grabbed the edge of the table as his balance wavered, his knees giving out under him.

"You ... you ... can't ..." The room seemed to shatter before his eyes. No longer able to coordinate speech or motor control, he could not move his hand to his belt, to the control that would boost his natural power of personal teleportation. Although he could jaunt without the belt control, it would have taken all his concentration under normal circumstances; now, it was impossible.

A waiter, spotting John's obvious distress, was at his side. Perkins had risen and was calling

John's name in a worried, concerned tone of voice. Unable to articulate, John shrank away as Perkins reached out for him, and collapsed against the waiter. Twisting his fingers into the fabric of the man's jacket, he held on, desperately trying to warn him as he heard, as though from a distance, Perkins's voice saying, "My son seems to have been taken ill. Please, if you could help me get him out to my car ..."

"... *no* ..." Perkins's face, above him, a combination of mock concern and flashing eyes, was the last thing John saw as unconsciousness finally engulfed him.

Stephen walked down the school corridor, shoulders slumped disconsolately. He had not been able to concentrate since mid-afternoon, when TIM had contacted him in the middle of a particularly sticky maths problem. That TIM had interrupted him was cause for concern in itself; his news had been even more disquieting. John had not returned from an appointment he had kept earlier in the day. TIM's attempt to contact the young man had met with failure. He had forbidden Stephen to jaunt back to the lab immediately, as had been the boy's first inclination. There would be time enough for that after he and Elizabeth had finished their respective days at school; in the meantime, TIM would work on the immediate situation as much as he could from his end.

So engrossed in his thoughts was he that he collided with someone as he turned the last corner toward Elizabeth's classroom. He apologized quickly as the other man reached out to steady them both. As if he didn't have enough problems already, now he was bowling over people in the halls. Wonderful.

Something the man was saying snapped him out of his glum introspection. "... just the one I wanted to see. I want to talk to you about your friend, John."

Stephen stared at the man, his mouth falling open. *Elizabeth, TIM — did you hear that?*

Yes, Stephen, came TIM's prompt reply, followed by Elizabeth's affirmative touch. *Keep him talking.*

"What about John?" the boy blurted, belatedly remembering that he should not yet be aware that anything was wrong. "Nothing's happened to him, has it?"

"No, no, nothing has happened to him," the man said with a placating tone that infuriated Stephen, and Elizabeth by association. "A situation you can do much to enhance, I might add. My name is Perkins, by the way," he continued cheerily, shaking Stephen's reluctant hand. "You're Stephen Jameson, I know. I've been keeping my eye on you these past few weeks."

"Me?"

"Oh, yes. Found you quite an interesting study, both you and your friends."

The simple emphasis and the odd smile that accompanied it made Stephen's heart sink. *He knows about us, TIM. He knows.*

"This is my associate, Drummond," Perkins continued, gesturing toward a man behind him whose presence Stephen had not immediately noted. His attention was now being divided between what Perkins was saying and the message TIM was giving him sub-mentally. *Those are the names of the two men John was asked to meet today. They are most probably responsible for his disappearance.*

Stephen's hands clenched at his side; it was all he could do to keep them there and not flying out at the face of the man before him as he went on, "Just this morning we were discussing with your friend John the possibility of establishing a business partnership. We are interested in acquiring

quite a number of items as quickly and as quietly as possible. And from my observations these past several weeks of you and your friends, I was able to determine that you are, indeed, the ideal people for the job."

"I don't know what you mean," Stephen lied gamely, both his face and voice carefully expressionless.

"It's quite simple, really. You see, my associate and I know all about those special powers you all seem to possess. We're prepared to keep your little secret to ourselves, but in exchange we'd like you to enter into a small business venture with us."

"What did John have to say about this, anyway?"

Perkins made a casual gesture. "He was upset about certain aspects of our proposal. But we're convinced that you'll be more amenable to our terms — especially if you ever expect to see your friend John alive again."

TIM, what do I do now?

Agree to help him.

But I can't do that!

You must insist on seeing for yourself that John is unharmed. Obviously they have taken the precaution of removing John's teleport belt, which accounts for my difficulty in locating his present position. If you can get to him, I will be able to send another belt with which to attempt John's rescue.

Relief washed away the icy knot of fear in his stomach at this ideal solution. Ideal, that was, if he could convince the two men to take him to John. Still, he possessed one advantage — he had something Perkins wanted, and he was, by implication, ready to resort to extreme measures to get it. Badly enough to acquiesce to what would hopefully seem a harmless enough demand.

"I won't agree to anything until I'm sure John is all right."

"You'll have to take my word for it," the man replied, the veneer of geniality dissipating.

"Not good enough by half. I want to see for myself. "

Perkins's eyes narrowed. Not wanting to give the man a chance to think of a way out, Stephen pressed, "Once I've seen for myself that you haven't done anything to him — I'll do anything you ask.

The suspicion abated slightly at that. "Well. I think we could arrange a meeting, then. My car is outside."

TIM, don't let him go! It's too dangerous!

I have to go, Elizabeth. Stephen unobtrusively removed his arm from the hand Perkins had placed on it to usher him toward the school's main entrance. *Look, it'll be all right — if anything happens, I can always jaunt away.*

The way John didn't?

We will be in constant contact with Stephen, Elizabeth, TIM soothed. *We must pursue this chance to locate John and to jaunt him to safety if we can.*

Elizabeth had dashed from her classroom the moment she had sensed Stephen moving off with

the two men; she reached the main entrance just in time to see Stephen getting into a strange car.

Can you make out the registration number?

She could, and relayed it to TIM as the car drove off. *Stephen?*

It'll be all right, Elizabeth. Really. I'll be all right.

P

erkins fitted a key into the lock as he said, "I wouldn't mind over much if his conversation is a little limited."

He ushered Stephen forward to step into the room. He did so, cautiously. The one small window was heavily shaded against the sunlight, and it took Stephen a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. He spied a bed at the far side of the room. Lying atop the nearly tucked covers was a familiar form.

"John?" he called hopefully. "It's me, Stephen." He hesitated when no response came. "John?" He edged closer, concern mounting in him. John's face was turned toward him on the pillow, his eyes closed. His only movement was the slow fall and rise of his chest, giving Stephen at least that small reassurance. He turned to where Perkins stood at the door of the room, Drummond a shadow behind him. "What have you done to him?" he demanded heatedly.

"You don't take us for fools, do you, young man?" Perkins chided. "I told you — we know all about your special powers. Do you think for one moment that we'd be able to keep someone here who could disappear in the blink of an eye? No, don't fret — he'll be all right. That is, if you do your part. We have to keep your friend here drugged. I'm told that if a person is left under like that for any considerable amount of time without special precautions — intravenous feedings, and the like — some rather nasty complications could crop up. I know you wouldn't want anything like that to happen to your friend, would you? I think you can understand then when I suggest we get our partnership underway as quickly as possible."

Stephen?

Wait, TIM. I have to get closer.

Wetting his lips nervously, he stepped forward toward the cot. "John?" he called again, hoping to give the impression that he was unwilling to accept Perkins's assurances on face value. It wasn't hard to do. Even in the dim light, he could make out the ashen color of John's face, the dark hair sweat-plastered on his forehead, and he could hear the faint rasping of his breath in his throat. Stephen leaned over John even as Perkins barked out a warning for him to step away. Ignoring the threat implied in the man's voice Stephen shook his unconscious friend's shoulder as though to jar him awake.

Now, TIM!

Even as the solid form of the transporter belt materialized in his hands, an iron grip clamped on his shoulder, pulling him roughly back, Stephen fell with a cry, more of frustration than of fear. He looked up to see Perkins advancing menacingly on him.

TIM!

Perkins's hands closed on thin air. Cursing, he regained his balance, giving the other man in the doorway a disgusted look. "We've lost him!"

"No, no," Drummond laughed mirthlessly. "He'll be back." He inclined his head toward where

John was lying. "Count on it, Roland. He'll be back."

"S

Stephen! What happened?"

The young boy got to his feet, giving the jaunting belt in his hands a disconsolate last look before discarding it onto a nearby table as he descended from the teleport platform. "He pulled me away before you could jaunt us. He must have known something was up."

"It doesn't matter, Stephen. I have John's coordinates now."

He brightened. "I could try again, then!"

"I would suggest waiting for a while, when we can be sure that you wouldn't be stopped again."

"The middle of the night would be best," he said, and as soon as the words were out of his mouth, his face fell again. "I don't like having to wait that long."

"We have little choice, Stephen."

"Were you able to find out anything about these people, TIM?"

"Some relevant data has turned up, but nothing of much practical use I'm afraid. Elizabeth was able to provide a registration number of the car you were taken away in. It belongs to a Mr. Roland Prescott, the owner and sole employee of a private investigation firm."

"Anything on that Drummond fellow?"

"A possibility only. The house at the coordinates is leased to Prescott's younger brother, Edwin."

"Now that you mention it, I think I noticed a resemblance," Stephen nodded. "He doesn't ever say anything — Perkins or Prescott and whatever-his-name is seems to do all the talking. But ... why are they doing all this?"

"That would seem to be rather obvious, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. Right," he murmured dispiritedly. Now he could understand something of John's obsession for secrecy wherever the Tomorrow People and their extraordinary powers were concerned. They would have probably fallen into the hands of unscrupulous people long ago if not for John's insistence that they keep entirely to themselves about their special abilities. But hindsight wasn't especially useful now that he was caught between a rock and a hard place. He could only hope that he was successful with this next rescue attempt. If he failed again, he didn't want to think of what might happen to John as a consequence. At the very least, he would have only one real option left open to him, and that would be to agree to Perkins's demands. "I don't know if I could steal things for the likes of him, TIM," he said quietly. "I really don't think I could do it."

S

Stephen looked up as Chris entered the lab. The young man's characteristically jaunty step threatened to depress Stephen even more. Spotting him, Chris directed a cheery greeting to him as he tossed his jacket across the back of a nearby chair. "And a good day to you, too, TIM!"

"Welcome, Chris," TIM replied.

Chris stopped at the center of the room, looking about him with a frown. "So, you're the only one here, are you?" he asked Stephen. "Where's John off to?"

Stephen found, to his chagrin, that he could not shake off his dark mood enough to reply readily. His distress, or perhaps just the hesitation, must have been obvious enough for Chris, not always particularly observant, to note it immediately. The young man's pleasant expression faded, replaced by puzzlement. "What's it, then? Has there been trouble?"

"I'll say," Stephen affirmed dejectedly.

"Well, come on, give out!" Chris urged with an impatient wave of his hand. When Stephen sighed, hunching further down into the chair, Chris directed his gaze upward. "You'll tell me, won't you, TIM?"

"I'm afraid that John has been ... abducted, Chris."

"What?" He stood, open-mouthed, for a long moment. "Someone snatched John? Why?"

"They found out about our special powers," Stephen told him. "They got hold of John by faking a business meeting, and then drugged him somehow."

"And they are attempting to force Stephen to use his psychokinesis to commit a series of robberies in exchange for John's continued safety," TIM finished.

"Why, those ..." Chris's fierce grimace completed his unspoken curse. "TIM, you can jaunt him out, can't you?"

"We've tried, Stephen told him. "They're keeping him unconscious with the drugs, and without his belt, TIM can't get John back. They stopped me when I tried to get near enough to get a belt to him."

"You've seen him, then?"

"I've seen him. At least I know he's alive, if not much else."

Chris smacked a closed fist into an open palm. "Then you must know where he is."

"Well ... yes. TIM was able to pinpoint the coordinates ..."

"Good. Tell me where, and leave it to me. I may not have special powers like you lot, but I've got all I need to take care of ..."

"No, Chris, you can't," Stephen said with an exasperated sigh. "It's too dangerous."

"I agree," TIM enjoined.

"You can't very well expect me to sit here and do nothing, can you?" Chris exploded.

"Look, we're going to try to get to him later tonight," Stephen placated. "The only thing we can do right now is to wait."

"And hope that John has not been moved in the interim," TIM amended.

"Oh, yeah. That's right." Stephen held his aching head in his hands, overwhelmed. "They just might do that, now that they know that I know where they were keeping him."

This mollified Chris only to the point of realizing that he could not go rushing off after John if they were no longer sure where his friend was. "Look, ah ... where's Elizabeth?"

"Right here." The woman stepped off the jaunting platform. One look at her face deepened Stephen's dejection even more than Chris's ebullient mood of several minutes before. "Nothing, TIM. A waiter at the restaurant remembers John all right. He says that he was taken 'suddenly ill' and that his *father* took him home in the car. He didn't think anything was peculiar about it at all, even when I brought up the fact that they hadn't arrived together."

"This bears the markings of a remarkably well-conceived scheme," TIM said. "The men who planned and executed John's abduction knew precisely who and what they would be dealing with."

"You mean they've got you at every turn?" Chris said, incredulous. "Come on, they're just ordinary 'saps' like me, aren't they? There's got to be something you can do."

"There is — something." Stephen sighed heavily. "We can hope that they haven't thought to move John."

T

eleportation was like second nature to him now, but going from the brightly-lit lab to this pitch-black room was unnerving. Stephen blinked in an effort to clear away the disorientation. He stood very still, listening intently as he gave his eyes time to adjust to the gloom. No sound intruded on the silence save for the distant rumble of a car motoring up the street somewhere outside the house.

The details of the room slowly came into focus encouraging Stephen to take a step forward. He spied the window, the faint light of a street lamp edging the drawn shade. With that point of reference, he turned to where he remembered the cot had been.

Empty.

Just as that fact was registering, before he could communicate his anger and despair to TIM and Elizabeth, the room light switched on. Stephen reeled, shielding his eyes against the painful assault. He looked up to see what he had missed before — Drummond seated in an armchair on the far side of the room. The man, smiling, adjusted the brightness of the table lamp beside him, then calmly interlaced his fingers. "Welcome, young man. I've been expecting you."

T

he morning paper whizzed by, an inch from Stephen's nose, slapping onto the table in front of him. The boy flinched. His backward motion was arrested by Chris, leaning in with one hand on the back of Stephen's chair, the other on the table effectively cutting off any easy attempt to escape.

"Come on, Chris," Stephen said, a plea for sympathy.

"You want to explain that headline to me, do you?" Chris said, his voice deceptively genial.

"Ease off, all right?" Stephen pushed the paper away and turned his head to keep from looking at it. Chris followed him, shifting to the other side.

"It was you, he said firmly. "I knew it, it had to be. Only someone with psychokinewhatsis could have floated three million pounds worth of diamonds past a security system that makes the Tower of London look like a Sunday school."

"Please, Chris," Elizabeth admonished as she came down the spiral staircase into the main part of the laboratory. "I think Stephen feels badly enough as it is."

"You gave into them, didn't you, kid?" Chris said accusingly.

"It wasn't as if I had a choice, was it?" Stephen returned defensively. "They were waiting for me

when I went back last night. What was I supposed to do?"

"That defence ought to sound right nice when you're up in the dock.

"For what it's worth, getting caught is the one thing Stephen doesn't have to worry about," Elizabeth said ruefully.

"See there?" Stephen tapped a glaring headline with his finger. "'Authorities Baffled'. 'Perfect Crime'."

"Yeah, and that makes you the perfect criminal, doesn't it?"

Stephen sighed, almost a groan, and settled his head down against folded arm. Elizabeth gave Chris a long, reproving look. "He got all this and more from me already, Chris. You aren't helping matters at all."

"So what happens now, eh?" Chris said, his voice edged with belligerence as he chafed under Elizabeth's reprimand. "Bank of England, maybe? How about the Zurich Exchange? Better yet — Fort Knox!"

"Chris." Elizabeth's tone made it clear that she considered this her last warning.

"Chris is right," Stephen said suddenly, his voice muffled against his sleeve. He raised his head, giving them both a bleak look. "I gave in last night because I didn't know what else to do. But we just can't let them get away with this!"

"You said you know who these fellows are, right?" Chris offered. "Put the police on them! They'd be caught with the stuff, wouldn't they?"

"And they'd also still have John, and they'd also point the finger right at us," Elizabeth said. "We'd spend the rest of our lives in cages in some scientific research lab."

"You lot, in cages? Not for long."

"That's not the point Chris," Elizabeth said. "Sure, we could jaunt out of any cage they try to put us in ..."

"Or any prison cell," Stephen added glumly.

"But where would we jaunt to? What sort of life could we have if our special powers became common knowledge? This all may look wonderful and exciting to you, but has it ever occurred to you why this lab is hidden away? Do you think for one minute we'd actually choose to hide like this, if we had a choice? Believe it or not, this is as normal a life as any of us could ever lead, and it's not a situation any of us are easily prepared to jeopardize."

Chris, subdued, seated himself heavily. "I guess I never really gave much of a thought to it. Bit rough on you, eh?"

"I wasn't complaining," she said, a smile easing back on her troubled face. "Look, we understand you're upset. For that matter, we're all upset. But we're not going to make things any easier by letting our emotions get the better of us."

"I'm sorry I gave you a hard time, kid," Chris said, giving Stephen a sheepish look.

"Maybe I can even understand why you did it, but do you have any idea what it was like to see that headline this morning, knowing what I do about you? And how long are they planning to

keep this up, anyway? They've got the flamin' goose that lays the golden eggs, haven't they? I don't see them giving up without a fight."

"They're going ta get one," Stephen said, staring morosely into space, his chin propped on folded hands. "I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I'm going to get out of this mess one way or another." He stopped, his expression changing. "What time is it, TIM?"

"8:56 a.m.," came the prompt reply.

"I've got to meet them at nine," Stephen said, making a face.

"Not alone you don't," Chris told him.

"I'd like to see you try to follow me.

"Come on, kid, give me a break," Chris said, annoyed.

"Don't worry, Chris, he won't be alone," TIM said reassuringly. "He'll always have Elizabeth just a few seconds away."

"Yeah, lovely," Chris muttered. "Leaves me out in the flamin' cold again, doesn't it?"

"They asked you to show up at nine in the morning after keeping you up all night?" Elizabeth's face wore an expression of mild disbelief. "Besides being despicable, unscrupulous and reprehensible, they're rather thoughtless as well."

"I'd call it greedy," Stephen told her, mustering a weak smile in acknowledgement of her attempt to put a single light note into the grim situation.

Chris's anger had been only a faint echo of the diatribe she had subjected him to when he had reluctantly related to her the ill-fated rescue attempt and the subsequent events culminating in the spectacular diamond heist that had the entire country buzzing. When reason had returned, she realized that Stephen felt much worse about the entire predicament than she did, and that there had been, as he had repeatedly insisted, nothing else he could have done. Support was what the young boy needed now, not continued vilification. Support was what she had resolved to give him, and this knowledge had helped to ease a good part of Stephen's anxiety. Stephen pushed away his untouched breakfast and rose from the table. About to say something, he hesitated, and changed his mind, raising his hand with two crossed fingers instead. Chris returned the gesture with strained smile. Elizabeth laid her hand briefly on Stephen's arm as he moved past her to the jaunting platform. "Be careful, Stephen. Be very, very careful.

Perkins regarded Stephen steadily, not a hint of emotion betrayed in his expression. "You are hardly in a position to make demands, young man."

Stephen straightened, determined to hold onto his resolve no matter what happened. "I've already done what you wanted. You know that I can and that I will. But there has to be an end to it, an end that I can see."

"An added incentive?" Drummond suggested tonelessly from his chair on the far side of the cluttered study. He looked perfectly at home here among ancient hunting trophies and slightly worn velvet curtains, leaving no doubt that TIM had accurately identified the names of the men behind the aliases of Perkins and Drummond.

Stephen turned to Drummond, gazing at him unwaveringly. "You said yourself that something could happen ta John if he's kept under for too long."

"Without precautions, yes," Drummond amended. "Dehydration being among the more undesirable symptoms."

"You promised me that he'd be unharmed. So there has to be an end to it soon."

"Agreed," Drummond said readily, taking Stephen somewhat by surprise. Suddenly it was Perkins who receded into the background as his partner/brother took control of the situation. Somehow, Stephen sensed that Drummond had been in control all along.

"I must admit that you've exceeded even our modest expectations." Drummond continued. "And we really don't want to prolong this business any more than you do. So, I think we can afford to be amenable to your request — with one small reservation."

Stephen held his breath as the man produced a folded piece of paper from an inner coat pocket and held it out. When the young boy did not move to take it, Drummond's smile became reassuring. "I've already made the necessary preparations. Take it."

He did, reluctantly, smoothing out the paper carefully before daring to read. At the top of the page was a short paragraph in neat, precise handwriting. At the bottom, an address and a meticulously drawn line map of a cross section of streets and buildings.

In answer to the quizzical look Stephen gave him, Drummond said, "At the top, you will find instructions as to what you will bring with you to the site marked by "X" on the map at the bottom. Tomorrow afternoon at three. In exchange for the items we've requested, we will give you your friend. I hope you will agree that it is an equitable trade."



Chris's brow furrowed. "I don't get it. What does it mean, anyway?" Both he and Elizabeth were leaning in to read the paper Stephen held in his hands. "Bearer bonds?" Elizabeth said, equally puzzled. "That's all they want?"

"What are bearer bonds, anyway?" Chris wanted to know.

"They are a certificate of loan made to a municipality, or, in this case, to a country," TIM answered. "Interest payments are, as a rule, made semi-annually to the bearers of coupons issued with the bond. Since the bearer bonds require no signature, no identification of any sort, they are virtually untraceable. While the interest payments are rather small by current standards, they are, in fact, guaranteed, and would, in the amount specified by these people, provide them with quite a respectable tax-free income for many years to come. And when the bonds eventually reached maturity ..."

"I think we get the idea, TIM, thanks," Chris said.

Stephen had disregarded the instructions for the moment, intent on the map at the bottom. "Chris, do you know where this is?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I think so. Miller's Court, Wright's Road ... nothing but abandoned buildings there."

"No witnesses."

"No anything," Chris agreed. "Those houses should have been pulled down ages ago."

Stephen gave the paper one long last look before he sighed and, folding it tightly, placed it in his jacket pocket. "I suppose I'd better get started."

"Hold on, just a minute," Chris protested. "You're not going to ... not *really*?"

"Chris, we've run out of options," Stephen said. "Except for one, and we're still going to need something to bargain with if that plan fails, too."

"Plan?" Chris pounced. "What plan?"

"When we meet them at the rendezvous point tomorrow, we'll be armed with stun guns," Elizabeth explained. "If they don't suspect anything ..."

"I can be there with you, then!" Chris said, brightening.

"No, Chris, please," Elizabeth said. "If things start going wrong, we can't protect both you and John."

"Hey, look, I can take care of myself, you know. And if you ask me, you're going about this business all wrong."

"Chris, I am forced to agree with Elizabeth and Stephen," came TIM's stern yet not unfriendly voice. "It would be far too dangerous for you to accompany them."

Chris scowled up at the biotronic computer. "Oh well, thank you very much for that vote of confidence. You know, I'm not so sure about you lot anymore. You almost had me believing all that nonsense about a better world, and how everything was going to be sunshine and roses once your kind came into its own. Seems to me that you can't even stand up for yourselves. I used to have a lot of respect for you, you know."

"Chris," Elizabeth said, recognizing that his frustration had turned into bitterness, which he was now turning against them. "Please, don't."

The young man had snatched up his jacket and was striding toward the door of the lab. "Look, don't mind me. I'm just a Sap, aren't I? I'm a regular Neanderthal, and you won't ever let me forget it. Well, I'll just go now and leave you *homo superiors* to it. If you ever decide you need a little amusement and come looking for me, I'll be swinging in the trees with everyone else. Ciao!" And the door hissed shut behind him before either Elizabeth or Stephen could think of what to say to stop him.

"I hadn't realized," Elizabeth broke the tense silence at length. "He really feels the difference, doesn't he?"

"In this particular case, yes," TIM said. "John is, after all, his friend."

Stephen was shaking his head. "And the worst part about it all is, I don't think John's going to understand why we're doing this any more than Chris does."

John sat back, letting his head rest against the inside window frame of the car, his eyes closed. He was making a special effort to remain as still as possible, to conserve his strength. For some reason, they were letting him come out of the drug-induced coma. His still-fogged mind was finally making sense of the low-voiced conversation that Perkins, in the front seat, was having with Drummond, we was beside John in the back seat. He had heard enough to know that Perkins was unhappy about the decision to discontinue use of the Nembutal.

"I still think we shouldn't take any chances," Perkins growled.

"Roland, we're not going to take any chances. You can't pull out a gun and start shooting. You'll leave a lot of very messy hard evidence around, for one thing, and the only reason we agreed on the bearer bonds was to eliminate the possibility that we'd be traced. So, we let this one go, his little friends will be happy, and we're on our way to Buenos Aires. What can they do to us? They can't go running to the police, not without admitting their own culpability as well as their rather

unique abilities. We've observed enough to them to know they won't be anxious to do either."

Perkins was silent, apparently mollified by Drummond's arguments. From the fragment that John had previously overheard and understood, he knew that Perkins had been endorsing disposing of "witnesses"; however, his heart did not seem to be in the argument, and it hadn't taken much on Drummond's part to dissuade him from that course of action. Greed may have motivated them to extremes, but outright murder didn't seem to be one of them.

John was hot. A dry, dusty feeling was in his mouth and throat. His face was burning, when he suspected meant that he was in the throes of a low-grade fever. He was running the risk of chronic dehydration if he couldn't do something to rectify the situation and soon.

He became aware of Perkins leaving the car; Drummond pulled John back from the door with a hand on his shoulder and arm, preventing him from tumbling out as Perkins opened the car's back door. The other man took his arm and together they eased the young man, too groggy to resist or initiate movement of his own, out of the vehicle.

The exertion was nearly enough to send him spinning back into unconsciousness, but he kept tenuous hold on the blurred reality around him. Even as his head, too heavy to hold upright, dropped forward, he sensed a subtle clearing of his senses, growing with each passing moment.

"You think those kids are going to try to double-cross us, don't you?" he heard Perkins say.

"I'm sure of it. And if they try anything at all, they'll regret it."

"I thought you said ..."

"I said, 'no shooting'. And I mean it. But if they try anything at all, their friend here gets a fast injection of this."

John could not focus on the small object that Drummond, supporting him with one hand, was displaying to Perkins with his other hand. Perkins exhaled abruptly. "That stuff will kill him."

"And we'll be well out of the country before anyone figures out what did it. Wait — they're here."

Stephen, clutching a large case, and Elizabeth materialized a short distance away from them, sparing only an apprehensive glance at the secluded, deserted courtyard that had been chosen for the rendezvous. A small alleyway, barely wide enough to admit one car, was the only access to the outside world.

At a gesture from Drummond, Perkins went forward, approaching Stephen. The boy wordlessly held out the case. Taking it, Perkins glanced back, and, at a nod from Drummond, set the case down on the ground and unlatched it.

TIM. John doesn't look well, but he may be conscious.

Can you make contact with him, Elizabeth?

I'll try.

TIM, will I hurt John if I try to stun Drummond?

I can't be sure, Stephen. If possible, wait until John is clear.

Satisfied with the contents, Perkins closed the case up again. He was about to lift it when his head snapped up. He had caught the movement of Stephen's hand near his jacket pocket.

Instantly, Perkins's gun was in his hand; he moved back a few steps to include Elizabeth in his range. "All right. Whatever you have in your pocket, I want you to take it out, slowly."

Stephen started to protest, but realized quickly that he had given himself away. His heart sinking, he produced the stun gun and, obeying Perkins's abrupt gesture, tossed it to the ground. Elizabeth, responding to another gesture, drew forth her stun gun from the depths of her bulky cardigan, also discarding it on the ground.

Perkins retrieved both; then, keeping his gun trained on the two, tucked the case under his arm and began to back up to where Drummond and John stood. "You were right, Edwin."

Drummond regarded the weapons in Perkins's hand stonily, with only a faint glimmer of puzzlement at the odd design of the guns. "I had expected something rather more clever than that. Still, they *are* children, aren't they?"

Stephen and Elizabeth remained still, frozen with fear, trying desperately to interpret the reaction the two men were having to the discovery of the guns. Protesting that they were only stun guns would be fruitless; they had been caught attempting to renege on their part of the 'deal'. Both were now desperately afraid that the two men would react badly and that John would suffer the consequences.

"You have what you want," Elizabeth called out, her voice tense and strained. "Please, let him go!"

Perkins tossed the stun guns to the ground, glancing back at Drummond. "Well?"

Drummond inclined his head slightly, appearing to consider. "You just can't trust anyone these days, can you?" His hand went into his pocket and drew forth the object which John, from the corner of his eye, finally saw clearly. A subcutaneous needle, meant to be jabbed quickly and painlessly against the skin. Even as John stiffened, suddenly realizing what the object meant for him, Drummond was removing the small plastic cover protecting the point.

Suddenly, a new sound intruded on the tense scene. The sudden roar of a revving motor burst into the courtyard. Behind the wheel of the battered old Army jeep was a familiar, determined face.

"Chris!" Elizabeth cried out in alarm.

The jeep skidded to a halt, nearly blocking the narrow entranceway. Chris bounded out, heading straight for the two men, fists balled tightly at his sides.

"Chris, *don't!*"

John took advantage of Drummond's distraction to do the only thing his weakened condition would allow him to do. He collapsed heavily against the man, jarring the arm that held the lethal needle.

The needle went flying, disappearing into the overgrown grass. With a curse, Drummond shifted his grip on the young man. Chris was brought to a dead stop as Perkins turned his drawn gun on him. In the silence that followed, Drummond produced his own gun and was now pressing it to the side of John's head.

"Now, young man," Drummond's voice rang clear in the canyon of the courtyard. "I suggest you return to your vehicle and move it — *quickly.*"

Chris hesitated, giving Elizabeth and Stephen an angry, almost pleading look. Stephen, however, had been distracted by having picked up a hint of the young woman's mental effort.

John, please. You must hear me.

I can hear you. The touch was weak but tenuous. *Elizabeth, I can hear you.*

John you must jaunt. Now.

I ... don't know if I can ...

Chris was backing away, slowly, reluctantly returning to his jeep. Drummond was, in turn, retreating to his own car, retaining a firm grip on John; Perkins was scuttling around the car to the passenger side.

John, please — try!

Drummond halted as John, feigning a loss of consciousness, shifted his weight in his grasp, contorting with the mental effort of attempting teleportation bereft of the belt controls, TIM's help, and total concentration. At patience's end, Drummond, with a snarl pulled him upright just as John's form wavered. Elizabeth, chewing at her lower lip, stifled a gasp to see the effort he was exerting etched like lines of pain in his face.

Then, abruptly, he winked out of existence.

Drummond's astonishment and consternation lasted only a brief moment. With another, more violent curse, he made a dash for the car.

Elizabeth was holding her breath, praying that John, in his weakened state, had not inadvertently jaunted himself into hyperspace. They might never find him again. The next few seconds were like an eternity. It was with a sob of relief that she sensed John near her, a bare instant before he took form in front of her. With a quiet, almost peaceful sigh, John collapsed at her feet.

Chris, who had seized upon the distraction, had dashed forward toward the two men again. When John appeared near Elizabeth, free of his kidnappers, Chris skidded to a halt, torn between beating a hasty and strategic retreat, or tearing into the two men with his bare fists.

"Chris! The stun guns!"

He responded instantly to Stephen's shout. Both young men sprinted forward to where the guns lay discarded on the ground. Stephen reached them first, scooping up both. As he looked up, intending to toss one to Chris, his expression turned to horror. "Chris! *Look out!*"

Perkins had sprinted around the car, crouching behind it as though to use it as a shield. He was now near Chris, behind and out of the young man's range of vision. Stephen's warning came too late. Perkins had pinioned Chris with an arm firmly around his throat. Drummond had already made the safety of the car by now, and was regarding his partner with a look of renewed hope.

Stephen dropped the stun gun back to the ground with a sharp cry of despair. Elizabeth, who had fallen to her knees, was cradling John's head in her lap. The jaunting had drained him. They could not leave him, even if Chris's life were not now in immediate danger. Helpless, Elizabeth and Stephen exchanged bleak glances.

Chris had frozen when Perkins had accosted him and he had felt what he instinctively knew to be the cold metal of a gun pressed to his neck. Then, the full import of the situation dawned on him. Realization that the tables had been turned, that he was now the one being used as a pawn, filled him with a rage that contorted his face. With a startling yell, Chris made a move that his judo teacher had spent weeks making him perfect. Perkins went flying over Chris's shoulder, landing senseless on the ground.

Chris stared a moment, overwhelmed by his success where his judo teacher had consistently failed. Then, behind him, the Fiat's engine came to life.

Both Stephen and Elizabeth's cries of warning came too late. The car surged forward; Chris could not dodge in time.

Stephen jaunted, materializing seconds later near where Chris, still conscious, was starting to sit up, groaning, clutching at his arm protectively. The screech of the turning Fiat, prevented from escaping the courtyard by Chris's jeep, brought Stephen whirling in time to see the car bearing down on them again. While Stephen could escape with ridiculous ease with just a touch on his belt controls, there was no way that he could hope to rescue Chris from the path of the car in time. Reacting instinctively, Stephen ran.

As he had hoped, the car swerved to follow him. Stephen ran for the entranceway, the Fiat bearing down on him relentlessly. Then, suddenly, he stopped, and turned to face the car. He flashed a smile, waggled his fingers and touched his belt controls. Seconds later, the car roared over the spot where Stephen had been standing. Unchecked it careened into the stalled jeep, smashing both vehicles against the wall.

Chris looked up as Stephen materialized at his side. "I really wish you could teach me how to do that, kid," he murmured moments before he passed out.

Chris shifted restlessly in a vain attempt to get comfortable; giving up, he glared at the culprit — the plaster cast that encased his arm up to the shoulder joint, resting in a rigged-up sling designed to keep his arm at a ninety-degree angle. How they expected him to sleep in this ridiculous position, he couldn't begin to guess. He'd gotten the lion's share of sympathy from his parents during visiting hours, but he'd gotten nothing but grief from his brother Ginge. Cracking up the jeep was one thing; getting himself messed up at the same time was, to Ginge's mind, the height of stupidity. Chris bore his brother's good-natured ribbing as well as he could with his parents present, and never did get to tell Ginge the real story.

Chris sighed, picking at the dessert he'd kept back from his dinner tray. It had taken a while, but he thought he'd finally identified it as some sort of baked apple thing. If he didn't eat the rest of the food they'd laughingly called supper, he certainly wasn't about to have a go at this. He turned to find the wastepaperbasket, wincing when the sling brought him up short. Cursing under his breath, he sat back, trying to figure out how he was going to dispose of the piece of apple-thing if he couldn't move more than a few inches in any one direction.

The little plate suddenly flew out of his hand, landing with a solid thunk in the bottom of the bin underneath the night table. Chris stared after it, blinking once, twice. Before he could react, a low chuckle gave the culprit away.

"Funny, kid, real funny," he said, greeting them with a baleful glare as John, Elizabeth and a very smug Stephen cautiously entered the room. The latter approached Chris's bed, his eyebrows arched. "Bet you thought you'd suddenly developed special powers, didn't you?" he said with a broad grin.

"You're just lucky I'm tied down, that's all," Chris growled. "Hey, how'd you get in here, anyway? Visitor's time was hours ago."

Stephen waggled his fingers. "Doors are no barriers to us, *sahib*. Besides, we thought you could do with some decent food."

Chris brightened. "You fellas are mind readers. What did you bring?"

Stephen present a bag with a theatrical flourish. "Treasures from the Orient, *sahib*. A thousand and one delights from the mysterious Far East, *sahib* ..."

Chris fumbled open the bag with his good hand, and his eyes lit up. "You went to the Chinese take-away for me!"

"It meets with your approval, *sahib*?"

"Can the *sahib* business and pass the chopsticks, kid — I'm *famished!*"

"All things considered, I think you'll do better with this," Elizabeth said, producing a fork. Displaying yet another bag, she added, "And leave room for this."

"And TIM thought you might like something for afterwards — he sent along some chocolate biscuits," John finished.

Chris accepted the tin absently, his smile of pleasure fading. He was regarding John intently and the feast was, for the moment, forgotten. "How are you feeling? Are you sure you should be up? I mean, ah ..."

"I'm fine," John assured him. "I'm still a little slow on the draw, but it's nothing that time won't cure. Stephen and Elizabeth told me what happened."

Chris ducked his head in an unsuccessful attempt to hide his chagrin. "Yeah. That was a pretty stupid stunt on my part. I could've gotten us all killed."

"Chris, you saved John's life," Stephen told him soberly. This got him a sharp look from Chris that softened when he realized that the boy wasn't kidding. A nod from Elizabeth had a relieved smile easing back on Chris's face.

John, smiling, reached out and lightly rapped the side of Chris's good arm. "Thanks."

"Uh ..." Overwhelmed, Chris had to draw in a deep breath before he could speak again. "Oh, well — it was nothing, wasn't it?"

"If you believed that, you wouldn't be here, would you?" John chided.

"Well — it wasn't anything that John Wayne wouldn't have done, anyway."

"Why are they keeping you here, anyway?" Stephen put in. "It's just a fractured arm, isn't it?"

Chris pulled a face. "They were all set to let me out when some sharp-eyed nurse saw that my entire left side had turned some rather amazing colors."

"Colors?" Stephen echoed, suppressing a chuckle.

"Yeah, flamin' Technicolor," he growled. "I had to tell them about being broadsided by a Fiat, and now I'm stuck here for observations and who-knows-how-many more tests they've got lined up for me in the morning."

"Well, Chris, it couldn't happen to a nicer guy," John laughed, getting a mock scowl from his friend for his effort. Chris decided to forego a reply in favor of trying to wrestle open the container on his lap with one hand. "You did remember the sauce, didn't you? This stuff just isn't right without ..."

A small container landing in his lap finished the question for him. "I do try to think of everything,"

Elizabeth said with mock smugness.

"So," Chris went on as he resisted Stephen's effort to help him with his one-handed meal. "What's happened with our 'friends'?"

"Well, it seems that while you and I were ... indisposed, Stephen and Elizabeth had a busy time of it. All of the stolen items have been returned, thanks to Stephen ..."

"And won't that give the police a turn in the morning?" Elizabeth said with a laugh.

"And our two 'friends' won't remember anything about us, our special powers, or a single moment of the past few days, thanks to Elizabeth. As far as they're concerned, they got their lumps in a minor traffic crack-up on the roundabout, which means, of course, that they're liable for the damage done to your jeep."

Chris was frowning. "That's it, then? They get off scot free. After all they put you through? That doesn't seem hardly fair."

"It was the simplest and the best solution."

Chris gave John a long look before glancing away with a sigh. He should have realized that with all their innate restrictions against violence, the word 'revenge' wouldn't be in their personal vocabulary. "Well, at least I got my licks in for what they did to my jeep."

"I'm really sorry about that, Chris," Stephen said, genuinely abject. "It's my fault that ..."

"Don't worry about it, kid. It was all in a good cause. Besides ... I was, ah, thinking of getting another set of wheels, anyway."

"Were you, now?" Stephen said, not believing a word of it. "I'll help you look, if you like."

Chris's reply was interrupted when Elizabeth suddenly raised her hand, her head inclined to hear something. "Someone's coming."

"Hey, wait, take this stuff with you," Chris said as they rose to their feet, preparing to jaunt away. "I'm not about to try to explain it."

They were gone just as the door opened, most of the feast with them save for the container still in Chris's lap. He did his best to hide it amidst the bed covers as the sister peered in, scanning the room with a darkly suspicious glare.

"I heard voices in here," she said, regarding him accusingly.

"Voices?" Chris did his best to maintain an innocent expression on his face. "Uh ... do you hear these voices often, sister?"

This got him an even blacker look. She paced the room carefully, inspecting the closet, even checking under the bed. Once or twice she paused, sniffing the air where the faint aroma of the take-away feast still lingered. At the door, she looked back at him one last time, a look that Chris interpreted as an ill omen. He wouldn't be surprised if he woke up in the morning to find the staff psychiatrist at his bedside.

With a sigh, Chris settled back against the pillars, and ruefully regarded the lone reminder of his promised feast. Moments later, Stephen reappeared bearing the other containers and the tin of biscuits. "Any problems?"

"Oh, no. She only thinks that I talk to myself, that's all." John and Elizabeth had appeared by now and were having problems trying to contain their mirth. "Hey. I wouldn't laugh if I were you. If I end up in a padded cell because of you fellas you're going to have to bring me catered dinners from the Chinese take-away three times a day, don't you doubt it!"

John settled himself on the edge of the bed, still amused. "Chris, it would be the least we could do for our hero of the hour. As a matter of fact, I think that your saving my life deserves a little bit more than just a Chinese take-away, don't you? Name anything you want, Chris, and it's yours."

"Oh, forget it, John ..."

"No, no, I'm serious. Anything you want."

"Well ..." He appeared to consider. "Yeah, now that you mention it, there is something I want."

"Yes?"

"Something to wash this down with. I don't suppose any of you thought to bring a Coke, did you?"