

SHADOW OF A BEAST

Diana Smith/Pat Dunn

"I can't believe I'm traipsing around Central Park after midnight, looking for some figment of an old man's imagination," Jonathan MacKensie complained as he huddled in the bushes beside his partner. It was cold and damp, and they'd been skulking about for hours. "I've had enough of this nonsense--"

"Quiet, Jack, or you'll scare him off," Edgar Benedek cautioned, peering over the bush.

"Him? There is no 'him', no man-beast," the anthropology professor insisted, pulling the lapels of his jacket closer as he shivered. "We've been out here for the last three nights and all we've seen are bums--"

"Stopped a mugging, didn't we?"

Jonathan touched his swollen eye. "She wasn't very grateful," he complained.

"Hey, she thought we were with him," Benny protested. "She did apologize, didn't she?"

"**After** she nearly put out my eye with her heel," grumbled Jonathan. "She turned out to know more about street-fighting than the mugger did-- and certainly more than I do!"

"Relaxavision, J.J.," the journalist said. "This **is** New York City, you know-- it's a jungle out there. Lots of people know hand-to-hand combat-- even pretty little assistant DAs like Ms Chandler." He smiled at his friend's expression. "She gave me her card."

"**You** she didn't hit," Jonathan pointed out, his British accent more pronounced than usual.

"Wonder what she was doing alone in the park so late at night?" Benny mused, ignoring Jonathan.

"Maybe she likes moonlight jogs," Jonathan said, blowing on his hands and rubbing them together. "Any more tea in that thermos?"

"Sorry, Buds, you drank it all," Benny said cheerfully.

After a few minutes, Jonathan stood up. "That's it-- you can stay and watch for this imaginary Big Foot if you wish, but I'm going back to the hotel."

"That's not a good idea, Jon--" Benny began. "Hey, what about the camera? If you get mugged, it's going on the expense account!"

Jonathan paused, shoulders stiffened as he stood with his back to Benny. "I'll authorize it," he said after a moment, letting his shoulders sag. "Better that than a hospital bill for pneumonia."

Benny watched his partner stalk off, and considered going after him. It was nearly 1 a.m. and from all reports, the creature wasn't sighted that late. Maybe it would be best to call it a night and reconsider all the evidence, study all the notes and clippings...

A rustling sound caught his attention and Benny forgot about his partner. A dark form was emerging from a large drainage tunnel, and Benny clutched his flashlight as he tiptoed after the figure. Longish blond hair shone in the moonlight but it wasn't the free-flowing mane he'd seen described in the clippings.

"Maybe he went to the barber," Benny muttered to himself, hiding behind a tree and peering around.

While the movements were cautious and stealthy, there was no panther-like grace as he expected a lion-man would possess. Benny was torn between the desire to follow and the desire to go back and inspect the tunnel. Did it live there? And if so, why hadn't anyone found its lair? He wished Jonathan hadn't been so impatient...

He was led through alleys and side streets to a large junkyard, where the figure slipped through a hole in the fence. Tabloid-journalistic nose twitching, Benny followed.

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"Why do I let Dr. Moorhouse bully me into these things?" Jonathan mumbled, slapping at his arms in an effort to warm himself. "I should be back at Georgetown, preparing finals, not chasing Big Foot in the heart of New York City! Is my research grant worth all this? A few months doing her research, she said! It's been three years: three long years of chasing ghosts, UFOs--" He broke off his monologue as two men stepped in front of him. The muzzle of a handgun gleamed in the glare of a street light. Jonathan automatically raised his hands, palms outward and at shoulder-height.

"Learns quick, don't he?"

"Shut up," the one holding the gun growled. "Clean 'im and let's go!"

Jonathan swallowed hard, tried a harmless grin and turned his hands to show he was unarmed. "I don't have much money--"

The smaller of the duo was patting his pockets and found his wallet and the camera.

"Fifty bucks? That's it?" he snarled in disgust, pulling the credit cards from the wallet before throwing it in the bushes.

"Get the watch," ordered the gunman.

"No! That was my father's--" Jonathan protested, grabbing at the robber who was trying to pull the watch from his wrist.

"Now it's ours," the gunman said, the muzzle of the Saturday-night special coming up menacingly. "Hand it over!"

"NO!" Jonathan shoved the second thief against his companion and tried to run. He heard the gun's retort and felt a blow between his shoulders, the force of which knocked him to his knees.

"That was stupid, mister," the first thug said as they moved into his field of vision. "You're dead, buddy."

Jonathan peered up at them, hot anguish radiating from his back. He saw the muzzle of the gun take aim at his face, and squeezed his eyes shut.

Instead of a shot, there was a ferocious roar and muffled cries from the muggers.

Jonathan tried to stand but only succeeded in doubling over, his forehead touching the damp grass.

"You're bleeding," came a whispery voice as hands grasped his shoulders. "Can you stand?"

"I--" Jonathan tried but his knees refused to support him. Blood roared in his ears and he slumped to the ground.

The hooded figure knelt beside the wounded man, and touched a gloved hand to the victim's neck, then looked quickly around the

darkened pathway. The assailants had fled without a fight, and no one had appeared in response to the gunshot.

After a moment's hesitation, Jonathan's rescuer lifted him and moved swiftly away, back into the park.

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Benedek trailed the scavenger through the junkyard, becoming more convinced with each step that his quarry was wholly human, and a decidedly single-minded one at that.

The blond youth carried a burlap sack and paused to examine each pile of scrap, occasionally snatching a length of pipe or a coil of wire and putting it into the sack.

'Just a street kid,' thought Benedek. 'Probably lives inside that big drainpipe, poor guy...' He was about to slip quietly away, when his attention was caught by ferocious barking.

"Hey, look out!" Benny shouted, as a dark shape hurtled toward the intruder. Without a second thought, he ran at the dog, shouting and waving his arms.

Mouse turned, his expression startled as a stranger interspersed himself between him and a snarling mass of teeth and fangs.

The slight man bounced a stone off the German shepherd's muzzle, and it yelped and skidded to a stop.

"Get out, kid," he said, shoving Mouse toward the fence. "That stuff isn't worth getting bitten for, is it?" He backed up as the dog growled and advanced on them.

"You come too," Mouse said, grabbing the stranger's arm and pulling him along.

"Good idea," the defender said, taking to his heels after Mouse.

Benny squeezed through the hole in the fence, scant inches ahead of the dog. Fortunately, it proved to be too narrow to admit the animal's wide shoulders and the dog wasn't smart enough to twist his shoulders, and the frustrated shepherd howled its rage after them.

"Thanks," Benedek gasped, when he finally paused to catch his breath. "You okay--? Hey-- kid?!"

He looked from side to side, then shone his flashlight at a rustling in the bushes. The scavenger's patchwork coat was just vanishing into the darkness.

With a sigh, Benny turned toward the street and his hotel.

Jonathan wasn't in their room, but Benny remembered the coffee shop downstairs was of the 24-hour variety, and shrugged it off, deciding his partner was probably sulking over a cup of tea.

Yawning, Benedek went to bed.

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"He should be in a hospital, Vincent."

"You were nearer, Father. Is it serious?"

Father sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose, removed his reading glasses. "He's lost a great deal of blood-- he should be in a proper hospital--" Looking at Vincent, he sighed again. "I'll do what I can, but it may be beyond my capabilities. If I can stabilize him for

the trip Above-- really, Vincent, you must stop bringing strangers down here."

"I should leave them to die?"

Father looked suitably chastised. "Would you go fetch Mary? I'll need her assistance."

"Thank you, Father."

Father looked down at the patient Vincent had carried into the Infirmary. He was a man in his late thirties and firmly muscled, and did not appear to be of a sickly nature. Perhaps that would count in his favor... he began removing the injured man's clothes.

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Benny awoke and turned on his side, fully prepared to harass Jonathan about his late night. At the sight of the still-made bed, Benny sat bolt upright. "Jack?" he called, looking around the hotel room. Everything looked exactly as it had the night before; no sign that Jonathan had returned.

"Jonny?" he called again, leaping from his bed and sticking his head in the open bathroom. Both Jonathan's toothbrush and shaving brush were dry, and only Benny's used towel littered the tiny bathroom.

"Come on, Jack, this isn't funny," Benny said desperately as he searched the desk in vain for a message.

Scrambling into his jeans, Nikes and favorite short-sleeved white shirt with the yellow stars, Benny snatched up his black jacket and hurried from the room.

The only messages at the main desk were from his editor about his deadline, and one from Dr. Moorhouse for Jonathan to call her.

Shoving both pieces of paper into his pocket, Benny raced out of the hotel lobby.

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"How is he, Father?" Vincent asked when Father came out of the small chamber that served as an operating room.

"I removed the bullet and luckily it missed the spine and vital organs. We were able to get a match on his blood and Jamie got a couple of bags from Peter. He also sent some IVs and antibiotics." Father peeled off his rubber gloves and pulled down his surgical mask. "If infection doesn't set it, he should recover. We'll need to keep a close watch for the next few hours."

"I checked his clothing, but it appears the muggers made off with his wallet," Vincent informed Father as he poured a cup of tea for the older man. "He has no i.d., only this." He placed a gold watch on the table. "He was holding onto it very tightly."

Father dropped tiredly into his chair and stirred milk and sugar into his tea. "Let's hope he pulls through and can tell us who he is, hmm? I wonder why he was in the park so late, and alone. And what were you doing Above so late?"

"Following Mouse."

Father sat back in his chair at that. "The scrapyard?"

Vincent nodded.

"Mouse has been **warned** about going to that place-- it's too dangerous...!"

"Mouse is Mouse," Vincent said. "Words mean little to him. I was following him to stop him, when I came across the thieves preparing to kill that man." He picked up the watch and turned it over. "There is an inscription: 'To L.M. from R.S.M.'" He handed the watch to Father.

"He's had it quite awhile-- look how worn the back is." Father fingered the brushed metal backing, rereading the inscription. "Perhaps a graduation gift?"

"Perhaps," Vincent agreed. "But for whatever reason, he values it highly."

Father sighed and sipped at his tea. "I hope he survives to tell us."

§§§§§

"Yo, Ms Chandler! I gotta talk to you! Remember me from the park-- my buddy and I chased off the mugger? I gotta talk to you, please!"

Catherine looked up from her desk to see a slightly-built man struggling with Joe Maxwell at the main office door. He was haggard-looking, his blue eyes blood-shot and a day's growth of beard shadowed his sharp-featured face. "Mr. Benedek?" she asked, rising from her desk and walking toward the struggling pair.

"That's me, Edgar Benedek. Will you call off this gorilla? It's a matter of life and death!" Benny shot daggers at Joe.

"Cathy, you don't have to deal with this guy," Joe said, keeping a firm grip on Benny's arm. "I think he's looney-tunes--"

"Hey, only Jonny can call me that," Benny protested, pulling his arm free. "Please, Ms Chandler-- I think Jack's been killed! And the police won't do anything because I can't produce the corpus delicti."

Catherine gave Joe a nod and motioned for Benny to follow to her desk. "Now Mr. Benedek, why do you think your friend has been murdered?" she asked, keeping her voice deliberately calm and professional.

"Call me Benny. It's all my fault-- he didn't want to come to New York but I got Moorhouse to put pressure on him. I should never have kidded him about being mugged!" Benny ran a hand through his straight brown hair. "I should have gone with him-- Jack's too much a babe in the woods to be on his own in the concrete jungle."

"Let me get you some coffee and we can discuss this in more detail," Catherine said smoothly. "We can go into an interview room and have some peace and quiet. It can get rather hectic in here." She placed a hand on Benny's arm and he seemed to calm a bit at the contact. "Do you take your coffee black?"

Benny nodded absently and he allowed Catherine to escort him into an interview room where he paced while she fetched two cups of rather strong coffee.

"Now why don't you start at the beginning," she said, sitting at the table and leaving Benny to sit or pace as he preferred.

"We were staking out Central Park--"

"Stake-out? Are you cops?"

"Nah. Jonny and I are the Georgetown Institute's paranormal unit. We check out reported sightings of ghosts and other goodies." Benny

finally sat in the chair opposite Catherine.

"Ghosts? You were looking for ghosts in Central Park?" Catherine was incredulous and she tried to recall her impression of Jonathan MacKensie. Somehow he hadn't seemed the type...

"Of course not," Benny scoffed. "We were checking out the lion-man sightings."

Catherine froze in horror, her hands tightening around her coffee cup. "Lion-man?"

"Jack thought it was a waste of time, but my sources said it was worth checking out," Benny said, unaware of Catherine's distress. "I thought it was a great way to get him here for a few days, and on the expense account. 'course we had to check it out... why did I insist on going back there?" he ended in a moan, putting his head on the table. "They killed my best bud!"

"You don't know that for certain, Mr. Benedek--"

A wallet hit the table between them. "I found it in the bushes, money and credit cards gone," Benny said, his voice strangely flat in light of his hysteria. "Near a pool of dried blood-- Jonathan's wallet, Ms Chandler, and no J.J. He never came back to our hotel and never left a message. And he hasn't returned to D.C. or contacted Dr. M. I've been looking for three days."

Catherine picked up the wallet and looked at the driver's license. It had belonged to a Jonathan MacKensie of Washington, D.C., and the photograph showed a good-looking sandy-haired man. She vaguely remembered him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Benedek," she said at last. "Have you talked to the police?"

Benny rolled his eyes. "They finally let me file a missing person report on him, but that's it. They said I haven't enough evidence for them to start a homicide investigation."

"I'm afraid they're right," she told him reluctantly.

"It's as if he's vanished off the face of the Earth!" Benny exclaimed in frustration.

Catherine's head snapped up sharply but she merely returned the wallet. "Have you checked the hospitals? If he had no i.d. and was unconscious, he could be admitted as a John Doe."

"First thing I did, after the cop shop stop. And even the morgues," Benny added, running a hand over his face. "I gotta find him."

Benny's despair tugged at Catherine's heart, even as she was still concerned over his "mission" in Central Park. "I don't know what I can do, but I'll ask around," she finally said.

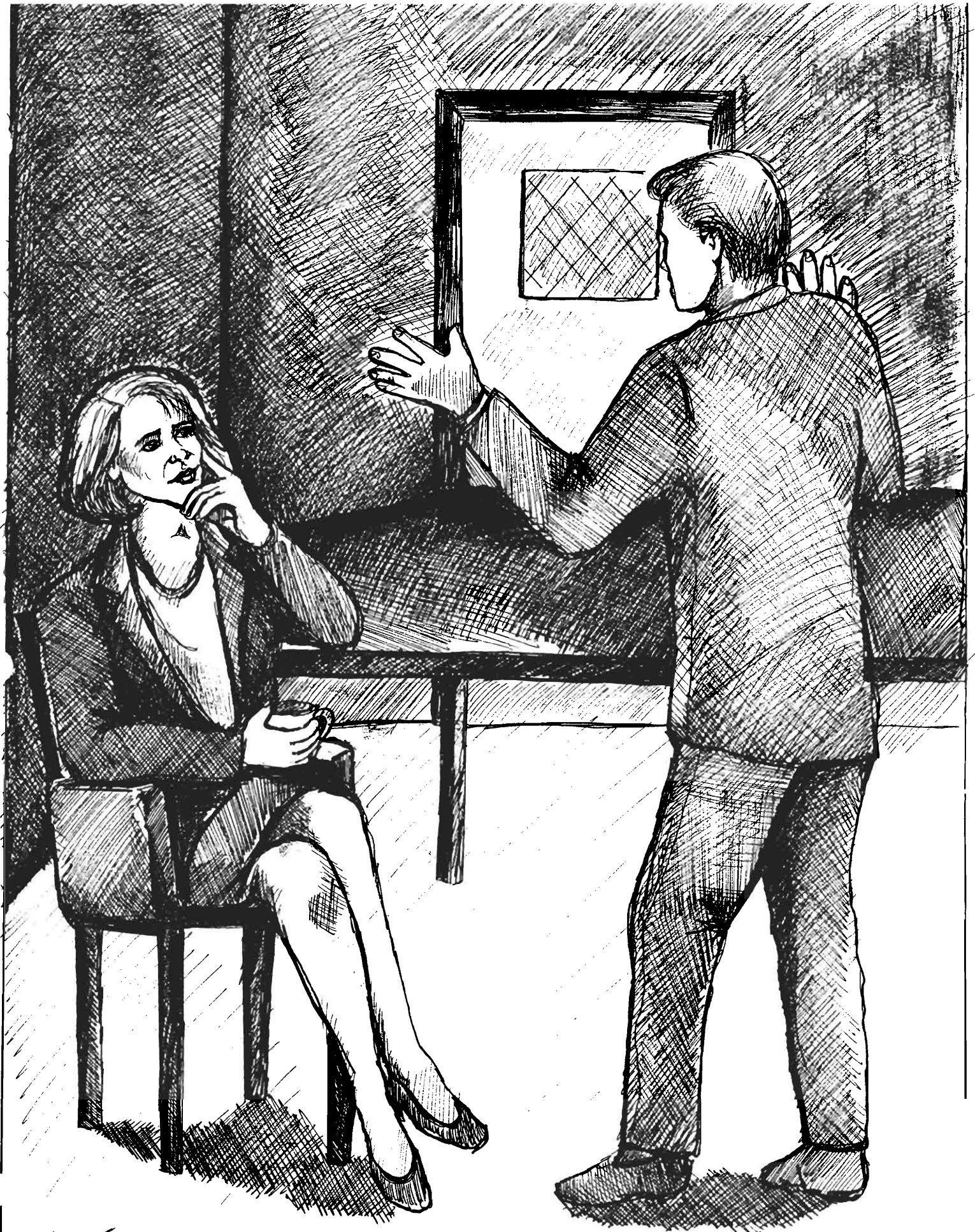
At that, his blue eyes brightened a bit. "Thanks, Ms Chandler."

"But in the meantime, you need to get some rest and take care of yourself. I'll do some checking and get back to you," she said, standing up and placing a hand on his shoulder. "I'll call you at your hotel later this evening. May I keep his i.d. for awhile?"

"Yeah, sure, it's the only picture we've got," Benny agreed, handing her the driver's license from the wallet.

"Go on back to your hotel and wait for my call," she instructed, offering a flash of a smile.

Benny nodded and stood up, suddenly looking like a lost little boy. "I don't know what I'll do if--"



-West-

"I'll do my best, Mr. Benedek." Catherine watched as he left the interview room and she suspected the dejected shuffle was not his usual style. She glanced down at MacKensie's license and frowned. Vincent needed to be warned.

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"I don't like it, Vincent. He's developing a fever," Father said, standing next to Jonathan's bed and glancing at Vincent who stood in the doorway. "I'm afraid infection may be setting in."

"The antibiotics--"

"May not be enough," Father cut in. "The facilities here are so inadequate."

"Father?"

Startled, Father looked down at his patient. Eyes closed, his head was moving restlessly on the pillow.

"Father?" he called again.

With a helpless shrug, Father bent closer and said, "Yes?"

"Read me a story, please?"

"A story? You want me to read you a story?" Father asked, incredulous.

"Uh-huh. I promise I'll go to sleep if you read." The tone of voice was that of a wheedling child. "Please?"

"Well, um, I suppose--" Father faltered and looked to Vincent for support.

"Robin Hood?"

"We have a copy of that in the classroom," Vincent said, not fully hiding his amusement. "Shall I bring it?"

Father sighed. "I suppose you'd better, Vincent. He's delirious, and if it will help keep him calm..."

Vincent was gone, off on his errand and Father pulled a chair up to the bed. His patient was still restless and he touched the man's forehead. He was burning up.

"Come on, man, fight it!" Father urged as he bathed the sweaty face.

"I'm sorry, Father, I won't do it again," Jonathan said, grabbing at Father's hand. The brown eyes were opened but unfocused.

"It's all right," soothed the doctor. "I'm sure you didn't mean to do it, hmm?"

"It was an accident," came the response. "I didn't mean to break your engine, Father!"

"Yes, well, that's fine," said a nonplussed Jacob Wells. "I'm not angry," he hesitated, at a loss for the man's name, and finished, "son. Now get some rest."

"I'm **hot**," he complained, even as his eyes drifted shut obediently.

"I know," Father said, continuing to bathe the delirious man's face. "I'm sorry." He looked up as Vincent returned with the book. "Now try and get some rest--"

"Robin?"

"Yes, I'll read," Father promised, opening the book. As he began the much-loved story, Jonathan calmed down and was soon sleeping. When Father paused and looked over his glasses at his patient, Jonathan stirred so he cleared his throat and continued.

Vincent stood in the shadows for a while, then slipped out for his meeting with Catherine.

She had sent an urgent message, requesting he meet her in the tunnel beneath her building. She had also warned him to avoid the park tunnels.

As he neared their rendezvous place, he sensed that Catherine was waiting, and that she was very anxious. He quickened his steps, finally placing one hand on the breach in the stone wall leading to Catherine's basement.

"Catherine, I'm here."

"Vincent!" she whispered, running into his arms. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course." He looked down at her, his blue eyes puzzled. "Tell me."

She stepped back and met his concerned gaze. "Vincent, I think you may be in danger." She told him about Benedek's visit and his search for his missing friend. "This is MacKensie's picture-- have you seen him?" She held out the driver's license.

Vincent accepted it and nodded after one glance. "Yes. I brought him Below four days ago. He had been shot--"

Catherine interrupted, "Vincent, has he seen you?!"

"I don't think so. He has been unconscious, Catherine." He clasped her hands. "Why has this upset you so much?"

She took a deep breath, calming herself. "Vincent, Benedek said he and MacKensie were in the park that night because they were investigating reports of a lion-man that had been seen there."

His eyes widened in shock. "Are you certain?"

She squeezed his hands. "They're some sort of paranormal investigators from the Georgetown Institute of Science. Edgar Benedek is a journalist for a tabloid newspaper called The National Register. He also writes books about the paranormal-- ghosts, ESP... And Jonathan MacKensie is an anthropologist. You know what that could mean!"

Vincent nodded slowly, remembering all too clearly his previous encounter with a scientist. "Come with me-- Father should hear this."

"I was hoping you'd say that-- we have to get MacKensie Above, right away!"

"That may not be possible, Catherine," Vincent said gravely. "He is very ill. There is infection from the gunshot wound--"

"Is he going to die?"

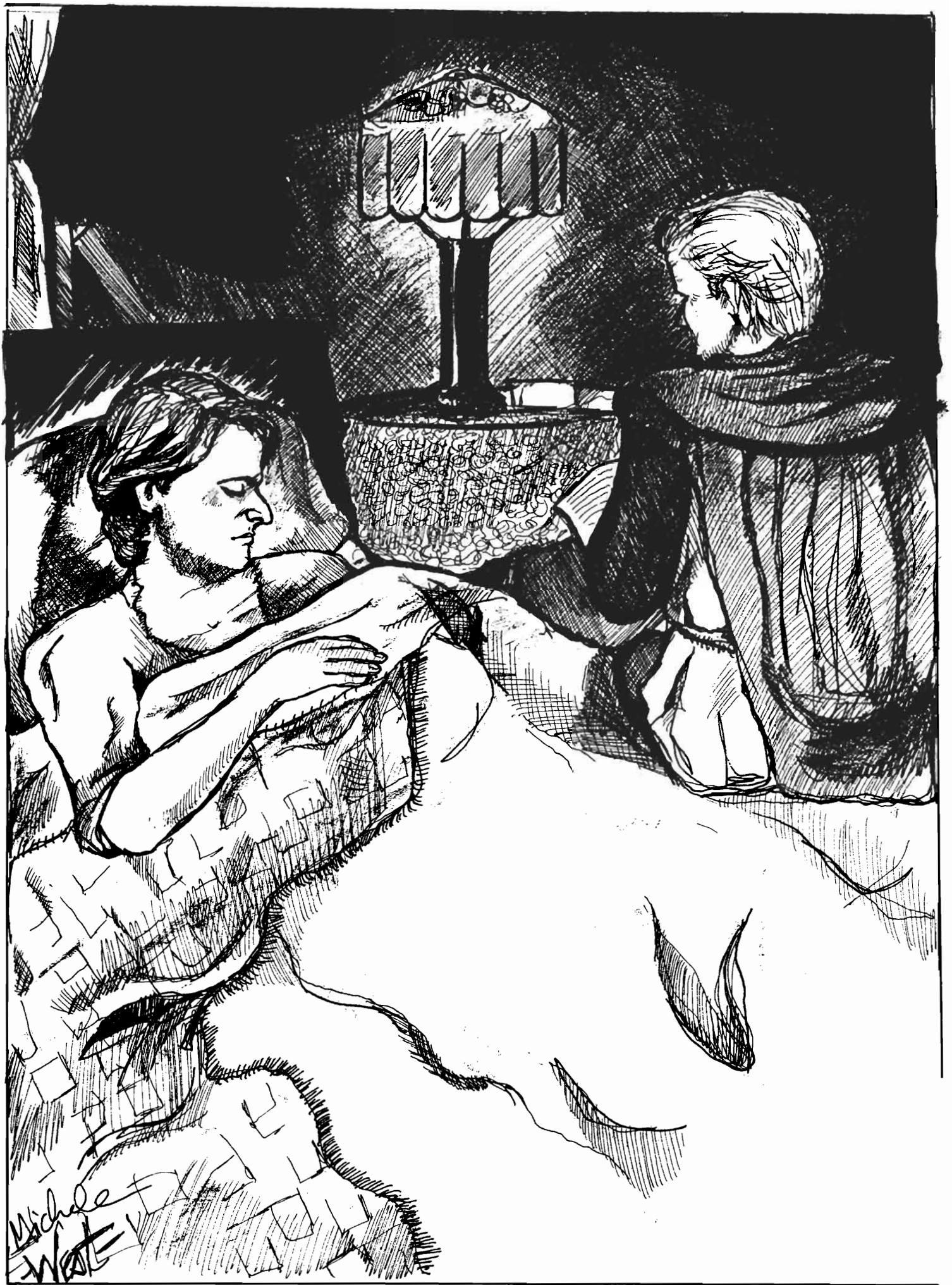
"We hope not. Father is doing his best," Vincent assured her. "He hardly leaves the man's side and his voice is getting hoarse."

Catherine blinked at this last bit. "His voice-- what has that to do--"

"The only way we can get him to lie quietly is by reading to him. And it's Father's voice that is the most effective."

"But it's dangerous to keep him there! His partner is looking for him and he won't give up easily. And what if he **does** recover? How will you explain where he is, how he got there? What if he sees you?" Catherine grabbed his arm. "He was in Central Park, looking for **you**!"

"Catherine, I understand your concern," Vincent said gently. "But when I intervened, he had been robbed and shot. They were going to kill him, for no reason; simply another senseless act of violence. I couldn't leave him to die."



"But if he's a threat--"

Vincent shook his head. "Even knowing his identity, I would do it again, if I had to."

"Of course you would," Catherine said, touching his cheek and gazing into his eyes. "That's what makes you so special, Vincent. We'll worry about how to handle him later. And I'll have to think of what to do with Mr. Benedek."

"Perhaps he should find Mr. MacKensie," Vincent said thoughtfully.

"What?!"

But Vincent merely shook his head and led Catherine through the tunnels to the Infirmary. They found Father dozing in the chair next to a soundly sleeping Jonathan.

"Father?"

Father gave a start and looked at the book in his lap. "'Hold!' cried Robin Hood, when he saw the stranger raising his staff once more. 'I yield me!'"

"Father, it's only me," Vincent said gently. "He seems to be sleeping."

Father rubbed his eyes, then realized Catherine stood behind Vincent. "Ah, Catherine, I suppose Vincent has caught you up on our news?"

"And I have news for you, Father. I know who your guest is," Catherine said, keeping her voice low.

"Let's go to the outer chamber," Vincent suggested.

Father nodded and stood up, placing the book on his chair. In a gesture that had become a habit, he touched Jonathan's forehead. "Thank heaven," he said, smiling at Vincent and Catherine. "I believe the fever has broken at last."

"Good," said Vincent, after a swift glance at Catherine.

She studied the sleeping man thoughtfully, then accompanied Vincent and Father into the library.

"Well," the older man said, sinking into the chair behind his desk. "Who is he?"

Catherine offered the driver's license. "His name is Jonathan MacKensie. He teaches anthropology at the Georgetown Institute in Washington D.C." She hesitated. "There's more, Father."

"Why do I get the feeling I'm not going to like this?" Father asked with a sigh. He sat back in his chair, fingers steepled as he listened to Catherine's information.

"I can't keep Benedek away from the park forever," she said in conclusion. "It **was** the last place he saw MacKensie and I know he'll return to look for clues-- I would."

"Well, MacKensie can't be moved; his fever's only just now broken. The trip Above would be too much for him," Father said firmly, one arm on the table and his fingers tapping the tabletop.

"But if we move him before he regains consciousness, our secret's safe," Catherine argued. "He'll never know he was down here--"

"No, Catherine. I'll not jeopardize his condition, not after all we've been through," Father interrupted.

"I think Father has gotten a little fond of our friend," Vincent said.

Father harrumphed at that. "Yes, well, he is a fellow countryman."

Come to think of it, I knew a MacKensie once... brilliant man, won a Nobel Prize, I believe." He frowned and picked up Jonathan's watch, turning it to look at the inscription. "His name was Leonard MacKensie, and he was married to a Rose Stuart MacKensie. They had a son..."

"Jonathan?" queried Vincent.

"Possibly." He looked up at Catherine. "Even if he is not related to my friend, I can't jeopardize his recovery. Jonathan will have to remain here for at least a week, perhaps longer."

"But Father--"

Vincent said quietly, "I can go into the deeper chambers, perhaps visit Narcissa. MacKensie would not have to see me, Catherine."

"Chased out of your home because of your good samaritan nature," Catherine replied, clearly not pleased with the idea. "And in the meantime, I have to placate Benedek and keep him out of Central Park."

§§§§§

"So, Sibyl, you getting anything?" Benny asked anxiously as he sat near the spot where he'd found Jonathan's wallet and blood.

"Quiet, Benny," the red-headed woman cautioned. Her skirt was made up of many colored flowing scarves, and her low-necked blouse *Completed* the image of the stereotypical gypsy. She stood on the grass where the blood had been but was now soaked into the ground, no longer visible. Over her own clothes she wore one of Jonathan's suit jackets, and she held the wallet in both hands.

"Fear... a flash of pain... then darkness. A gentle spirit--"

"The Grim Reaper?!"

"No, not an image of death, Benny," she said, closing her eyes and lifting her face to the sky. "Love and compassion... Jonathan's life force waning, but not gone. Growing stronger... he has not left this plane of existence."

Benny let out the pent-up breath he hadn't known he was holding. "So where is Jack? What hospital?"

Sibyl fingered the wallet, then shook her head. "I'm getting confusing images: hospital equipment but stone walls; a hooded man; a lion walking upright; brilliant auras of love everywhere... I'm sorry, Benny, but that's all." She handed Benny the wallet and carefully removed the jacket. "Listen, I've got to get back to the theatre or the director will throw me out of the show."

"Hey, thanks just the same, Sibyl," Benny said, draping Jonathan's jacket over his arm. "I appreciate you using your lunch hour to help out. Anything I can do for you, just say the word."

"Buy me a dog with kraut to eat on the way back, okay? And find your friend, that'll be thanks enough. I wish I could have done more," she said, picking up a tote bag and slinging it over her shoulder.

"Hey, knowing Jack's still alive is the best news I've had in a week. And it sounds like he's being taken care of by people who care. I'll get you a dog and orange juice," Benny promised, taking her by the arm and walking toward a hotdog vendor.

Their path took them near the large drainage tunnel where Benny had seen his blond street kid. Sybil froze, clutching at Benny's arm. "Near here... a strong sense... Jonathan was here."

"Here?" Benny looked around, almost as if expecting to see Jonathan's boyishly-grinning face. "This is where I saw that kid."

"I don't know if there's a connection, but I get a strong sense of Jonathan and his rescuer. Maybe they rested here," Sibyl said with a shrug.

"Listen, angel, can you take it from here?" Benny asked, shoving a wad of bills at her. "I gotta check this out--"

"Of course, Benny," Sibyl assured him, taking one bill and handing the others back. "Let me know what you find out!"

Benny waved over his shoulder as he ran for the opening of the drainage tunnel. He pulled his ever-present flashlight from his pocket and shone the beam around the interior. Even though it was noon, very little outside light seeped in and there was a dampness that made him shiver. "Jonny?" he called softly as he walked deeper into the tunnel. He noticed bits of trash which showed people had taken refuge in the tunnel at one time or another, but no signs of permanent habitation. So where had the blond kid come from?

Ms Chandler had been almost no help, and Benny had even gotten the feeling she was hiding something from him, impeding his search. Dr. Moorhouse had threatened to come out of her lair to help look, once she was convinced Jonathan was truly missing and not skipping out on the assignment, but Benny had talked her out of it. If he didn't find Jack soon, he suspected the good doctor would be on her way. A grin split his face as he envisioned her reaction to his greeting: he knew he was far from being her favorite person, and a big smacking kiss would probably send her into hysterics. But by that point he'd be so glad for the backup that he'd sweep her off her feet.

As he searched, he recalled his first meeting with Jonathan three years ago. J.J. scoffed at the idea that it was destiny that had brought them together in that cemetery in Fartham, California, but what else could it have been? He'd been in New York while Jonathan lived in D.C., yet they both had ended up researching the same phenomenon clear across the country. He had also been in search of a respectable type to improve his own image, and the strait-laced professor had been in need of someone just like Benny to give him a new perspective on life, to drag him out of the hallowed halls and into the real world.

Benny was not about to give all that up now. Their adventures over the years had shown that Benny had needed Jon's friendship as much as Jon had needed his, and Jonathan had proven his devotion many times. Benny had lost track of how many times the professor had saved his life, oftentimes at risk to his own.

"Don't worry, Buds," Benny muttered, running his hands over one particularly intriguing patch of tunnel wall. "I'm not giving up."

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Jonathan opened his eyes, blinked, and looked around the room. Well, he supposed it was a room as there was furniture but the walls reminded him of a cave. He tried to push himself upright, but his body refused to cooperate and he lay as limp as a rag doll. "Benedek?" he called, plucking at the blanket that covered him. He stared at the ruffled sleeves of his shirt. What sort of hospital gown was this?

"Hello? Is anybody here--?"

"We weren't expecting you to waken so soon," a brown-haired woman said, approaching his bedside. She smiled and said, "Lie quietly, Dr. MacKensie. I'll get Jacob."

"Where am I? Who are you?!"

She paused. "You're in a safe place. My name is Mary. Jacob will answer your questions."

"But how did you know my--" Jonathan stopped, realizing she had already left the room.

He looked around, his gaze falling on a book laying on a chair beside his bed. He reached out and picked it up, smiling as he saw the cover. He opened it to the place marked by the ribbon and began to read.

"Well," a British-accented voice said a few minutes later, "I see you're feeling better, Dr. MacKensie."

He looked up as the older man limped toward him. "This is extraordinary: Howard Pyle's Robin Hood was my favorite book when I was a boy-- my father used to read it to me at bedtime..." Realizing he was rambling, he stopped and gave Father a boyish grin.

"You don't say," Jacob Wells said dryly, determined never to reveal what part that book had played in his patient's recovery. It would embarrass both of them if Jonathan ever found out. "How do you feel?" He sat in the chair and took hold of Jonathan's wrist to check his pulse.

"Awful," the patient said honestly. "Is Benedek here? My friend? I really should call him--"

"That would be difficult," Father interrupted. "We don't have a telephone here. I could send someone with a message to your friend, I suppose..." He sounded doubtful.

Jonathan heard the undercurrent of hesitation. "This isn't a hospital, is it?" He met the bearded man's gaze directly. "Where am I? And who are you?"

"My name is Jacob Wells," Father told him. "My son found you and brought you here after you were wounded. I am a doctor, and you have been very ill, Dr. MacKensie."

Jonathan frowned. "How do you know my name?"

Father replied with half the truth. "Your wallet and identification were found. Also this." He gave Jonathan's watch back to him.

Jonathan's eyes brightened as he accepted the treasure. "I thought they took it and I'd never see it again! This was the watch Mother gave Father on their first anniversary. He gave it to me when I graduated from Georgetown."

"You did defend it staunchly," Father assured him. "We had to pry it out of your hand."

Jonathan fumbled with the band, trying to replace it on his wrist but his fingers wouldn't cooperate so Father reached over and fastened it for him. "Everything is so fuzzy," Jonathan said, lying back on the pillow and looking quite pale. "I remember there were two of them... and I was shot, wasn't I? I heard a voice... your son's?"

"Yes, that was Vincent."

"I should like to thank him--"

"He's... not here right now," Father said hastily. "He's away... on business."

"Well, perhaps he'll return before I leave. I am grateful--"

"I'll tell him. Now you need to get some rest," Father said, standing up. "I'll have Mary bring you some broth--"

"And tea? I'm perishing for a good cup of tea."

Father couldn't help smiling at that. "I believe we can arrange that, Dr. MacKensie."

"Jonathan, please. And I do need to get in touch with Benedek. He's probably worried-- or thinks I skipped out on him," Jonathan said, eyes drifting shut.

"We'll take care of it," Father said, touching Jonathan's forehead and looking relieved at the coolness. "Rest now, Jonathan."

Jonathan sighed and snuggled down, quite exhausted. Father gently took the book that Jonathan had let fall on his chest, and laid it on the chair. No point in putting it away, just yet.

§§§§§

Benny kicked the tunnel wall in frustration. It was too bad there wasn't time to send for Melody Lacey... "I bet ol' Mel could feel what's behind this," he said, sinking down on the ground and resting his back against the wall. "She's the best wall feeler in the business."

He hadn't done so badly himself. He'd found the seam which indicated the wall wasn't solid, but he couldn't find a way to open it up. It was like a metal plating, perhaps once used to control the flow of water through the drainage system. "I bet there's a whole other tunnel back there. I know there's a system of abandoned tunnels under the City, and Jonny's got to be there."

Sibyl had done a lot to restore Benny's confidence. Now it wasn't so much **if** Jack was alive, but **where** he was and how to get to him.

Benedek's stomach growled, and he realized he hadn't eaten lunch yet. A glance at his Edgar Cayce talking wristwatch told him it was nearer dinnertime, and he decided he'd rest a minute, and then go find some food.

He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

Benedek was startled awake by a scraping sound from behind him, and he scrambled to his feet, finding himself in dim light. He flicked on his flashlight, and jumped at the motion of the wall. Ducking around the opening of the tunnel, Benny switched off the light and waited, listening as the scraping noise continued.

Benny could hardly contain his elation when the metal plating slid open to reveal yet another tunnel. The blond kid scurried out, not pausing to close the opening and Benny dashed toward it, throwing himself through as the plating started to slide shut. He ducked and rolled, landing just a few feet beyond the entrance as the plating slammed tight.

He sat there for a moment, looking around. Two more tunnels branched off, and he wondered which one to try first. "I shoulda brought Sib," he said, scrambling to his feet. A backwards glance showed that he had dropped Jon's jacket and he went to pick it up. "What the heck?" he said, eyeing the dusty jacket. "It worked for Sib."

He slipped the jacket on, and pulled Jon's wallet from his own pocket. "Maybe it'll work like dowsing." Clutching the wallet, he aimed it at first one tunnel, then the other.

His eyes closed, Benny concentrated on his partner's face. "Come on, Jack, we've got shadows to chase! You're not deserting me now, Buds. Where are you?" He swung slowly from side to side, then paused and opened one eye. "Right-hand tunnel it is! Don't worry, Jon-Boy, I'm coming for you!" He started off down the passageway.

§§§§§

It was the sound of constant, rhythmic metallic tapping that awoke Jonathan. He pushed himself up on the pillows, then looked around the chamber. There were pipes running along the ceiling, and the sound was coming from them. "Bad plumbing," he muttered, shoving the cuffs of his nightshirt back up to his wrists. He threw back the covers and swung his feet over the edge of the bed, tried to stand up and fell back.

"What do you think you're doing? Did I say you could get out of that bed?"

Jonathan looked at the doorway to find Jacob standing there, glaring at him. For some odd reason, he suddenly felt about five years old. "I'm sorry, Fa-- Dr. Wells," he said, pulling his feet back under the covers. "I was just--"

"Yes, well you can just forget about it. You've been very ill, and I won't have any setbacks. I was planning to get you up later, but with someone to help. Ah, here's Mary with your tea."

The sweet-faced woman Jonathan had seen upon his first awakening was carrying a tray, and he made a move to get out of bed. It was his instinct to take the tray from her, but he didn't have the strength to act on his gentlemanly impulse.

Mary smiled as she set the tray on the table beside him. "You're looking so much better, Dr. MacKensie! You had us quite worried," she said, pouring a steaming cup of tea. "Cream and sugar?"

"Yes, please. And it's Jonathan," he said, reaching eagerly for the china cup.

"He does look better, Father," she said to Jacob.

Jonathan blinked and stared at the pair. They looked to be of a similar age, so he doubted that Jacob was her father... but sometimes a long-married couple would refer to each other as 'mother' and 'father'. His Aunt Lily had always called her husband Father around the children. "I feel much better," he assured Mary, giving her the patented charming MacKensie smile.

"Well, that's fine," she beamed. She let him take the cup and saucer, warning, "Careful, it's a little hot."

"This is wonderful," Jonathan said after a tentative sip. "So, do you and Dr. Wells do this frequently? Taking in injured strangers, I mean?"

"Sometimes," Mary admitted.

"Isn't that a bit dangerous?"

Mary glanced at Jacob, then said, "We take that risk, if we can." She left the tea tray and went out.

"Your wife's very kind," Jonathan said to Jacob, pausing at the expression on the doctor's face. "Er, she is your wife, isn't she? I mean, I thought--"

"Mary is a very dear friend and helps in the Infirmary. Drink your

tea, Jonathan. If the tea and broth do well, I'll have her bring you some toast. I might even get William to make some scones," Father added as a bribe.

"William?"

"He cooks for us."

"Us? You and Mary, or are there others? You called this an Infirmary, not just a spare room. And there is some medical equipment," Jonathan observed. "What is this place?"

"It's our home," Father said after a moment. "And you're our guest."

Jonathan felt as if he'd just had his hand slapped for touching his father's prize model train without permission. "I'm sorry-- that was rude of me. I'm just naturally curious; occupational hazard. I'm a professor of anthropology at Georgetown Institute."

"Anthropology... how interesting," Father said, busying himself with refreshing Jonathan's teacup. "And how did you come to be in Central Park? That's where my son found you."

"Well, I prefer to forget about that," Jonathan said, motioning at the sugar bowl. "I was with a friend on a wild goose chase. Benedek gets the most ridiculous notions sometimes. Did you contact him?"

"He has been away from the hotel. What wild goose?"

"This will sound bizarre, but he thought, well, there have been rumors of a lion-man sighted in the park," Jonathan said, looking quite embarrassed. "I tried to tell Benedek that in all my years of study, I've never seen evidence of such a thing: no skulls, no bone fragments, no traces that such a creature ever existed. But he had photos, and eye witnesses... although the photos were probably faked, and his so-called witnesses were either infirm, mentally unstable, or sensation-seekers. But then he dragged my superior, Dr. Moorhouse, into it and so here I am. She can be... most persuasive."

"I see," Father said, his tone carefully neutral. "Did you see anything-- unusual?"

"Of course not," Jonathan said. "Because there are no such things as lion-men, and even if there **were**, what would one be doing in New York City? It's ridiculous!"

The older man studied him, then nodded in agreement. "I have read of a great many strange things happening in Central Park, but lion-men..." He raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "I take it your friend isn't as easily convinced by rational arguments?"

Jonathan sighed. "Benedek's stubborn when it comes to his paranormal theories. I must admit I've seen a few things I haven't been able to explain..."

"Oh?"

"Well, not yet anyway, but I'm sure there are logical, rational explanations," Jonathan continued, unaware that his words sent a great wave of relief crashing over Father. "I mean, there must be, mustn't there?"

"Yes, there must," Father agreed, taking Jonathan's empty teacup and handing him the cup of chicken broth. "You finish that, and get some rest--"

"Can't I stay up for awhile? I mean, I only just woke up..."

Father's mouth twitched with amusement. "You sound just like Vincent when he was a small boy. Just promise you'll stay put, hmm?"

Jonathan blushed, but nodded. Something about this situation and this man made him **feel** like he was a small boy again. "It's your voice! You sound like my father. I've been dreaming about my father, and how he would read to me... he was reading Robin Hood... it **was** you, wasn't it?"

"I often read aloud to the-- others," Father said dismissively. "It seemed to help you rest."

"Oh, well, I-- thank you," Jonathan said, somewhat flustered. "I'm sorry to have been such a bother-- I'll repay you, of course..." He remembered the robbery, and added, "As soon I get to a bank, that is."

"Don't worry about it, Jonathan," Father advised. "I'll check in on you later, all right?"

"All right." Jonathan watched the doctor leave, and was halfway through the broth before he remembered that he had forgotten to ask if they would keep trying to contact Benedek. And Jacob hadn't volunteered to do so... Why not?

He frowned, then dismissed it, deciding that they had probably left a message for his partner, and that Benny would show up eventually. Emptying his cup of broth, he set it aside, picked up the book and settled back to reread the classic story of Sherwood Forest.

§§§§§

Benedek trudged on through the miles of winding tunnels, his initial burst of energy flagging as he realized that he wasn't going to locate Jonathan immediately. He was constantly amazed by the size of the labyrinth of passages, which varied from obviously man-made tunnels, to natural formations.

He could also hear a series of tappings, as of metal on metal, sometimes far-off and muted, at other times louder and nearer.

These puzzled him, until he noticed the pipes running along the walls and ceilings of certain passages. He paused and put his ear to one of the pipes, and was able to make out tapping sounds, obviously caused by an intelligence. "Check it out," he muttered, "**somebody** lives down here! I just hope they're taking care of Jonny."

He sighed and went on, wondering if they'd ever be able to find their way out of this maze, once he'd rescued Jonathan.

The sound of falling water grew louder, and Benny stepped out of one tunnel into a huge chamber. A waterfall spilled out of the opposite wall, and there was a glow that gave the chamber an eerie, other-world feel. "Check it out!" Benny exclaimed, his voice excited but hushed. "This is incredible! Wait until Jack sees this--"

Jack. Still no sign of the professor, no indication that he'd even been down here. Yet Benny was growing more and more certain that he was on the trail, that he would find Jonathan in this world beneath New York City. Benny sat on a ledge, and stretched out for a brief rest.

He awoke a short time later, feeling rested but still hungry. "Too bad there's no hotdog stand," he said as he got to his feet. "And I think this is outside Pizza World's boundaries."

He was glad for the added warmth of Jonathan's jacket, as it was getting damper and cooler. He patted the pockets, but unfortunately Jack was not the type to hoard old chocolate bars or jaw breakers. "Not even a lint ball," he muttered, sticking his hands in the pockets.

With a philosophic shrug, he continued on his search.

He became aware of the sensation of being watched. "Yo, anybody there?" he called, turning around. "I'm mostly harmless."

There was no reply, and the silence was more unnerving than the secret observation. "Look," Benedek called, "I'm just looking for my friend Jonathan MacKensie. If he's here, and okay, that's all I need to know. Please?"

He turned around in a circle, hands up to show that he was unarmed.

"You are a seeker of truth," a voice said behind him.

Benny jumped and whirled to find an elderly black woman standing looking at him. She leaned on a staff, and carried a basket over one arm. "A seeker of many things, I think."

Benny took a step towards her, then paused as he saw that her eyes were white with cataracts. "I'm-- I'm looking for my buddy Jack, that's all. Do you know where he is?"

"I know many things," she said, her soft voice accented with the flavor of the West Indies. "Is he the only one you seek, truly?"

"Well, I know that blond kid came out of here, but I was only looking for him to see if he knew where Jon was... You're talking about the lion-man, aren't you? The reason Jack and I were in the park in the first place. You've seen him, haven't you? Is he down here too?"

"Why would you harm one who has never harmed you?"

"I don't want to hurt him," Benny protested. "I just want to know the truth--"

"The truth can be dangerous. Go back, and forget you ever saw this place."

"I'm not leaving without Jack. He's my best bud," Benny said stubbornly. "I've come this far, and I know he's here."

"I have not seen him."

"This is a big place."

Narcissa's blind eyes seemed to be looking through to his very heart. "Come. We will ask the Father."

"A priest? You've got a priest down here?" Benny asked, following her through the tunnels.

"The Father will answer your questions," she said, neither confirming nor denying his comment.

Benedek hurried to keep up with his guide who was moving quickly, despite her blindness. The pace made conversation difficult at best, but he was able to introduce himself and elicit her name in return.

After his other questions met with cryptic responses, or were ignored completely, however, he gave up and merely trotted after the mysterious old woman. Over the years he'd met his share of people with unusual talents and unconventional lifestyles-- bizarre or eccentric, in Jonathan's words-- and he accepted them on their terms.

She took him even deeper down, to her own chambers away from the others.

"Been here long?" Benny asked when she pointed to a chair.

"What is time?" she replied, stoking a fire under her tea kettle. "You eat, then we see the Father."

"Whatever you say-- you're the boss," Benny said agreeably. "Can I help?"

"Maybe-- maybe not. We will see."

"I am kinda hungry," Benny admitted, sitting on the chair she had indicated.

"Hunger must be appeased," she said, "before the rest." And she began dishing up a bowl of stew for him, from a pot hanging over the fire.

§§§§§

Father listened to the pipe tappings, then looked at the Council members gathered around the large table in his chamber. "Pascal relays that the lookouts **have** spotted an intruder within the Tunnels. Their description of him seems to coincide with Catherine's description of Mr. Benedek."

"Where is he now, Father?" asked Mary.

"Luke reports he was last seen with Narcissa," the bearded man answered. "If she can keep him away from the Hub passages for awhile, we can decide what to do with him and Jonathan."

"They're too dangerous--"

"William, calm down. We're not going to consider drastic measures," Father interrupted, giving William a stern look.

"Other than Catherine's suspicions, we have no proof they are a threat to us. Father has said MacKensie seems quite rational and level-headed. I believe he will not reveal us, once he realizes the importance of our anonymity."

"We can't risk it--"

"Are you suggesting murder?"

"Of course not! We'll just keep 'em down here--"

"William, you know that is **not** the way we do things," Father said. "We can't force anyone to stay merely to protect--"

"I say we do anything to protect our world! What happens to Vincent if we get discovered?"

"I stay here, going deeper into the tunnels," Vincent said softly.

"Why should you have to do that?"

The strange voice brought a halt to all conversation. Jonathan stood at the railing, leaning heavily on the framework. He was extremely pale and shaky, worn out from the exertion of the trip from the Infirmary to Father's chamber.

"Jonathan, I told you to stay in bed!"

"I heard voices, arguing," Jonathan said as a tall hooded figure came forward to catch him as his knees started to give. "Thanks-- I'm a bit woozy still... You must be Vincent?"

Silence filled the chamber, as if all of the occupants were holding their breaths.

"Yes," came the response from within the sheltering edges of the hood.

"I've been meaning to thank you for saving my life," Jonathan said, closing his eyes against a sudden stab of pain.

"We must get you back to the Infirmary," Father said, rising and moving around the table.

"I'll take him, Father," Vincent said as Jonathan leaned against his supporting arm.

"Vincent--"

"It will be all right." Vincent helped the wounded man walk away from the chamber.

"Father, is that wise?" Mary asked worriedly.

"That is Vincent," Father said, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"This is some sort of secret society, isn't it?" Jonathan asked as he leaned against Vincent. "You're not a cult or something, are you?"

"No cult," Vincent assured him. "But our world is a secret from those Above. Everyone here is an outcast from your world; children or elderly that no one wants, people who had given up hope, people who need a new life. We're not criminals or insane, just living in harmony with each other."

"Well if it works, we could certainly use the likes of your plan for the rest of the world," Jonathan said, dropping onto his bed. As Vincent bent over to pull up the blankets, Jonathan noticed long reddish-blond hair sticking out of the hood. "You know, I first thought Jacob was a character from Robin Hood. Does everyone dress this way?" He indicated Vincent's cloak and then his own nightshirt.

"We find our clothes, or make them, from scraps discarded by those Above, or given to us by our Helpers. They may not be fashionable, but they keep us warm."

"Oh. Well, I suppose that's the important thing," Jonathan said, a little embarrassed that his prying question had received such a matter-of-fact answer. "Vincent, has anybody gotten a message to my friend Benedek yet? He's probably worried about me-- unless he's gone off on another monster hunt, of course..."

"Monster?"

"That's why we were in the park-- he had the idiotic notion a lion-man... inhabits the park..." Jonathan trailed off as he looked at the hand Vincent suddenly pulled away and hid behind him. It was furry and the nails... "Ridiculous really," he said, his voice a notch higher than before.

"I-- should go and leave you to rest," Vincent said, turning away, his hands concealed in the folds of his cloak.

"Yes, all right," Jonathan said, wondering if he'd hallucinated that glimpse of a human hand furred like a paw. "Vincent?"

Vincent paused, but did not look at him. "Yes, Dr. MacKensie?"

"I'm sorry to have put you and your father to so much trouble on my behalf. I'd like to repay you somehow--"

"Keep our secrets," Vincent said, his gaze meeting Father's as the latter stopped in the doorway to the Infirmary. "That is all we ask." And Vincent brushed past Father and was gone.

Father gazed after him for a moment, then limped to Jonathan's bedside.

The anthropologist was staring thoughtfully at his hands, and he glanced up at the doctor interrogatively. "Doesn't **anyone** know you're down here, in these Tunnels?"

Father considered carefully. "The existence of the Tunnels has been largely forgotten by most people. Our World is known to some, those we call our Helpers. They live and work Above, but take the time to give of themselves, in whatever way they can, to help us exist. We trust them to protect our secret from the outside world." He hesitated. "I hope we can

trust you too, Jonathan. I believe your father was a good friend of mine."

Astonished, Jonathan said, "You knew my father?!"

"I didn't always live down here," Jacob Wells said, sitting in the chair beside the bed. "Leonard MacKensie and I attended the same college, as a matter of fact."

Jonathan's brow furrowed. "How did you--"

"I saw the initials on your watch," Father told him. "And you do rather resemble Leonard."

"No, I don't," said Jonathan. "I'm nothing like him-- he was a **genius--!**"

"Yes, he was," agreed Father. "He was also one of the kindest, most decent men I've ever known. And I think that in that respect you **do** resemble him. I'd like to think so, at any rate."

Jonathan flushed. "Thank you, Dr. Wells. I-- er, I won't tell anyone about your community, I promise. But Benedek won't give up-- what if he finds his way in here, somehow?"

"Actually, that **has** become a problem. He has come in search of you, determined that you are alive and he will find you. Unfortunately, that mean he will find **us**."

"Someone could take me away from here, lead Benedek away. I think I can convince him not to do the story-- he would understand the need to keep mum. After all, where's the sensationalism?"

"An entire world beneath New York City?" questioned Father, raising an eyebrow. "Just the sort of thing the newspapers would print, don't you think?"

"Well, the tabloids, perhaps," Jonathan said, "but no one pays any attention to **them**."

"Your friend Benedek does, apparently."

Jonathan nodded glumly. "But it might work, anyway-- Vincent could help me get away from here, he's strong enough--"

Father cut in, "Vincent-- would not be a good choice for that task."

Jonathan met Jacob's eyes, and a chill of realization ran down his spine. He remembered the hand he'd glimpsed, the carefully concealed face... "No," he said at last, "maybe not. But what are we going to do?"

"For now, you're going to get some rest. If you are going to attempt the trip Above, you'll need your strength. I would prefer you stay here until you're recovered, but that may not be possible."

"I'm feeling stronger," Jonathan said, his pallor belying his words. His trip from the Infirmary to Father's chamber had drained him, and he suspected he'd never make the extended journey if he had to do it now. But for the sake of these good people, he'd force himself even if he had to crawl.

"Ah." Father's tone and expression made his disbelief clear, but he merely said, "Good. Do you want a pain pill, or can you get to sleep without it?"

"Without," Jonathan said after a moment's hesitation.

"I think perhaps with," Father said. "We wouldn't want you wandering around. The tunnels can be dangerous and confusing to strangers. One can easily get lost."

"Is Benedek? Lost, I mean."

"I don't think so," Father said as he went to the glass-fronted cabinet for Jonathan's medication.

§§§§§

"Well, it's been real, Narcissa," Benny said, "but I can't hang around here any longer. I've gotta find Jonny."

"He is with the Father," Narcissa said.

"Then let's go!" Benny leaped up from the chair, ready to follow the blind woman.

"Give me your hands."

Benny shrugged and complied.

Narcissa's hands contained a surprising strength and she held on tightly. "There is much goodness in your heart."

"Yeah, well, don't spread it around-- you'll ruin my image."

"You wear a mask to hide your true self," she told him gently, "but Jonathan MacKensie has seen what lies behind it."

Benny's smile faded and for once he didn't respond with a joke. "I guess that's true-- and he still hangs around with me, believe it or not. Narcissa, you've **got** to help me find him, or I'll do it myself. I mean it!"

"Yes, you will try, but these tunnels protect their own."

"So, you saying they're booby-trapped?"

"This world must stay safe."

"Listen, all I want is to find my pal and take him back to Georgetown--"

"And the creature?"

"Creature?" Benny frowned and then his blue eyes grew wide. "The lion-guy? You **do** know about him!"

"This world protects its own."

"Okay, I'll cut you a deal-- my pal in exchange for my silence. Heck, even if Jonathan met him, puss to face, he'd never believe in him."

Narcissa tilted her head as if listening to an inaudible message, then nodded. "Wait here. I will send for the Father." She released his hands and turned away.

"But--" Benny broke off as she hobbled into an adjoining chamber, leaving him alone.

He hesitated, then pushed up the sleeves of Jonathan's jacket and walked resolutely toward the entrance. He stopped and looked back as a tapping sound came from the inner chamber. Shaking his head, he left a few dollars on the table, and went out into the tunnel beyond.

He wasn't going to wait around for an old lady and a priest to talk him out of his quest. Not as long as Jonny needed him.

§§§§§

"Father?"

"Yes, Pascal?" Father looked up from studying his chess board where he'd been planning his next move in his game with Kipper.

"Narcissa sends a message: 'He seeks his friend and walks the tunnels'."

"Oh dear," Father sighed, sitting back in his chair and removing his reading glasses. "Send out word for the sentries to keep an eye on him. And warn Vincent that Benedek is coming from Narcissa's chambers. He had thought to seek refuge with her, but to go now would risk an encounter."

"We could lead him away, Father," Kipper suggested eagerly. "Like follow the leader!"

"I think it's too late for that, Kipper. If Jonathan was well enough, perhaps, but Benedek will not leave our world until he has found his friend." Father rubbed his bearded chin. "Let him wander for awhile and realize how difficult it would be to find not only his way out but also his way **back** here if he should consider trying to locate us later."

§§§§§

Benedek roamed on, but every turn seemed to lead to more tunnels and caves, all deserted and with no signs of habitation-- human or lion-guy. He paused and shone his light back down the passageway he stood in, wondering how far he had come from Narcissa's cave. Six turns-- or was it seven?

His heart jumped as he heard a skittering noise behind him. Rats? Benedek wondered, moving the flashlight's beam back and forth across the stone floor. He finally discerned a raccoon, who froze in the spotlight, sat up on his haunches and chattered at Benny, then scurried rapidly past the journalist.

Benedek followed it with the flashlight beam, and saw it disappear into a chamber. Curious, he followed the animal, halting at the cave's entrance. It was definitely occupied, to judge from the clutter of junk, tools, oddments and everything else littering the floor and wooden table.

A youth in a patchwork coat whirled at the raccoon's alarm, and Benedek recognized his mystery kid from the scrapyard.

"Hiya, kid," Benny said casually, flipping off his flashlight. "Nice place ya got here-- a bit out of the way, but nice and cozy."

"Shouldn't be here," Mouse said, picking up Arthur and hugging him.

"Yeah? Well, I have a habit of turning up in places I shouldn't be," Benny said with a careless shrug. "I'm looking for a friend of mine, Jonathan MacKensie. Have you seen him?"

"Maybe," Mouse said cautiously.

"Great! I've been pretty worried about him-- he gets into all kinds of trouble without me to look after him."

"Like Arthur."

Benedek nodded at the raccoon in the young man's arms. "That Arthur?"

"Arthur," agreed Mouse. "My friend."

Benny's lips curled up in amusement at the thought of Jonathan's reaction to being compared to a pet raccoon. "Yeah, like Arthur, I guess. What's your name, kid?"

"Mouse," the teenager said, after a moment.

It didn't seem odd that a boy should have an animal's name, and an animal should have a boy's name, in this underground realm. "Well, Mouse, my name's Edgar Benedek, but you can call me Benny. Narcissa said J.J.'s with Father somebody-- can you take me to him?"

"Make Father mad-- shouldn't be here," Mouse warned.

"Yeah, well, neither should Jonny so I'll just gather him up and take him home."

"Won't tell?" Mouse asked, his head titled warily.

"I won't tell anybody you helped me--"

Mouse shook his head. "Not that. Won't tell about Tunnels?"

Benny frowned, then realization dawned. "No one knows you're down here, do they? It's a secret, huh?"

"Secret place," Mouse agreed. He set Arthur down and looked around his cluttered chamber, then met Benny's gaze. "Home," he said simply.

Edgar Benedek felt a tug at his heart. Everybody needed a place to call Home-- heck, if he hadn't had a grandmother who'd cared, he might have ended up like Mouse... "I won't tell anyone about your home, Mouse."

"Promise?"

"Promise," Benny said solemnly, extending his hand. "Shake on it?"

Mouse's hesitation vanished, and he grinned broadly. "Okay good," he said, shaking Benny's hand vigorously. "Okay fine! Come on!"

He brushed past the startled journalist, who grinned and hurried after the youth.

§§§§§

"What **is** going on? First Narcissa says she is escorting Benedek here, then she says he's disappeared but all will be well! And now MacKensie is gone, no doubt wandering around and getting into trouble," Father complained to Vincent.

"I thought you said you had given him something to make him sleep, Father," Vincent responded. "Why didn't it work?"

The doctor sighed and held out his hand, palm up. "I found this next to the empty water glass. It's been a long time since a patient of mine has gotten away with that trick. I believe you were the last, in fact."

Vincent smiled a little at the memory. "Devin taught me how to palm pills, but I was never as adept at it as he was."

Father snorted. "You boys were the reason my hair is as gray as it is now..."

"Father!" shouted Mouse, bursting into the library chamber with his usual clatter. "Found someone!"

The two men turned toward him, both hoping he had located the missing Jonathan.

"Yes, Mouse, what--" Father broke off at the sight of the stranger with Mouse.

Benedek's quick blue eyes darted around the book-strewn chamber, then rested on the men standing before the desk.

Vincent recoiled a step, then stood his ground and met the slight man's eager gaze. He'd seen many things in the faces of those looking at him for the first time-- astonishment, repulsion, fear-- but rarely had he seen so much outright wonder and joy on an adult's face.

"You're real," Benny said softly, still staring in awe. "I **told** Jonny you would be!"

Father looked swiftly at Vincent, then stepped forward, placing himself between his son and the intruder. "Mouse!" he bellowed, glowering at the blond youth. "**What** is the meaning of this?!"

Mouse tugged at his earlobe. "Told him you'd be mad, Father."

Benny said, "Look, it's not his fault! I told him I was just trying to find my buddy--"

"You had **no** business bringing him **here!**" Father continued, ignoring Benedek's comment.

"Won't tell," Mouse said, looking up shamefacedly.

"And how do you know that?!"

Mouse glanced at Benny, then shrugged. "Promised not to."

Father sighed. "Mouse--"

"Benny's good," the youth offered eagerly. "Helped Mouse get away from the dog."

"What dog--" Father stopped himself, hand upraised. "Never mind. We'll discuss it later." He rubbed his forehead, then looked at the visitor. "I take it you are Edgar Benedek?"

"Yessir," Benny answered. "Can I see Jonathan now-- please? He's all right, isn't he? Sib said..." He trailed off as Father looked uneasy. "Where is he?!"

"Apparently off looking for **you**," Father said. "He wanted to help keep you away from here but I warned him to stay in bed."

"How badly was he hurt? Is he okay?" Benny asked anxiously.

"He would have died if Vincent hadn't gotten him prompt treatment. There was infection from the wound, but he recovered from that," Father said, wanting Benedek to know how serious it had been and how much he owed to Vincent.

"He's okay?"

Father lowered his gaze, and it was Vincent who answered, "The Tunnels can be confusing for anyone who does not know his way in them. There **are** dangers."

Benedek took that in, looking as if someone had slammed a fist into his stomach. "Well, we've gotta find him, before-- before anything..." He swayed, exhaustion and the accumulated stress threatening to overwhelm him.

"Benny, you okay?" Mouse asked worriedly, catching his new friend's arm to steady him.

"Yeah, Mouse, I'm fine." Benedek shook off the assistance and glowered at the others. "I'm not giving up now! I'm gonna go look for him, even if no one else--"

"Wait," Vincent said, raising a hand as the tapping of the Pipes increased. "Sam has located MacKensie. He's at the Whispering Gallery."

"Show you the way, Benny!" volunteered Mouse, dashing for the stairs.

Benedek was on the boy's heels, vaguely aware that Vincent and Father were following them.

§§§§§

Jonathan paused, leaned against the tunnel wall, put a shaky hand to his forehead and discovered he was sweating profusely. It was cool and damp this far underground so he could only conclude that it was the exertion causing him to perspire so heavily. He refused to consider the idea that he was feverish, and he tried to convince himself that he didn't feel as weak as he did.



Unfortunately, his body and not his mind was in control. His legs were trembling almost convulsively but Jonathan forced them to move forward as he pushed himself away from the support of the wall. If he could just make it across that bridge...

He staggered and fell to his knees, head bent and palms pressed to his thighs as he took a steadying breath. Instead of standing, he continued to lean over until his forehead touched the ground. "Just rest a minute," he muttered, eyes closed. "Protect... secret..."

"Jack! Yo, Jonny, where are you?"

"Benedek?" Jonathan lifted his head and tried to focus his vision but the world around him began to spin. He half-staggered, half-crawled to the middle of the bridge, collapsing and sprawling full-length and face down.

"Jonathan, don't move! You're too close to the edge!"

And had been, ever since Dr. Moorhouse had called him to her office and hit him with her bizarre blackmail scheme, he thought inanely.

"Jack, quit squirming around! You're not in your own little bed, Buds!"

The voices were getting closer and Jonathan tried to lift his head, rolling to his side. Only there was nothing under him, ~~just~~ the sensation of falling...

And then hands grabbed his wrists, bringing his fall to an abrupt halt. Tilting his head back, Jonathan stared up at the face of his rescuer-- a face filled with intelligence and compassion, a face that also happened to be covered in soft golden fur...

"Aslan?" he murmured confusedly. "Always wanted to meet you..."

Vincent recognized the reference to the 'Chronicles of Narnia', and smiled a little, then pulled, hauling the other man back up onto the span of the bridge.

Hands reached for Jonathan's belt and then his legs, and soon the anthropologist was lying safely on his back, staring up at the anxious face of Edgar Benedek.

"jonny--? Can you hear me?!"

"Don't shout, Benedek. And take off my jacket-- it's not your style." And with that, Jonathan MacKensie promptly passed out.

Benny grinned, slapping Father on the back. "He's gonna be fine-- he sounds just like his ol' stuffy self."

Father gave the man an odd look, turned his attention to the unconscious Jonathan. "We've got to get him back to the Infirmary, Vincent. He should have taken my advice and stayed in bed, not gone off traipsing about like some fool. I just hope he hasn't undone all my work."

Vincent knew Father well enough to understand that his gruffness masked his concern, and he suspected that Benedek's attempt at light-heartedness was one of his own masks. He knelt and draped Jonathan across his shoulders, and he couldn't help but notice that Benedek hovered beside him, touching Jonathan as if to reassure himself. "Lead the way, Father," he said softly, shifting his burden into a more comfortable position.

§§§§§

"Does he need blood, or anything?" Benny asked Father. "I've got blood, you know."

"He did start bleeding again, but it's under control," the doctor told him. He gave Benedek a critical look. "You're about ready to collapse. How much sleep have you been getting lately?"

Benny shrugged. "A little here, a little there..."

"It hasn't been enough," Father cut in. "There's an extra cot next to MacKensie's-- I want you to lie down on it and **sleep**. That's all he's going to be doing for the next several hours, anyway."

"But I oughta go upstairs and call Dr. Moorhouse--"

"That can wait until morning," Father said, guiding him toward the cot.

"Morning?" Benny said, stifling a yawn. "What time **is** it, anyway?"

"Past my bedtime," Father grumbled, his eyes holding approval as the journalist flopped onto the bed. "Good night, Mr. Benedek."

"'night," Benny murmured, stretching out on the cot. After Father had gone out, Benny rose up on one elbow and looked over at his sleeping partner. "'night, Jon-Boy," he said, knowing Jonathan couldn't hear him but saying it anyway. Somehow it made him feel better, just being **able** to say it. "Thought I'd lost you for good, Buds," Benny whispered, watching the reassuring, steady rise and fall of Jonathan's chest. "Don't scare me like that again." With that he flopped on his back and fell into the well-earned sleep Father had ordered.

He was awakened hours later by the sound of a familiar voice.

"Benedek?"

"Yo, Jack, how ya feeling?" Benny asked brightly, sitting up and stretching. Rubbing his chest, he yawned and looked around the chamber. "Nice of the old guy to leave a light on-- I know how you are about the dark. Isn't this wild, boyo? A whole community beneath the City-- who knows how long it's been here?"

"It has to stay a secret, Benedek," Jonathan said, wincing as he struggled to sit up. His voice was raspy but no less determined than when he was lecturing Benedek about his expenses. "If you print their story, this world will be destroyed--"

"I know that, Smilin' Jack. These are my kind of people-- you think I'd hurt friends?"

"Friends? You barely know--"

"Any friends of yours, pal. Wonder if they have a coffee shop or something? I could do with a kraut dog," Benny said, standing up.

"Oh Benedek," Jonathan moaned.

"Hey, no sweat. I'll see if they've got clam chowder for you," the irrepressible journalist said. "You stay put. I've gone through a lot of trouble to find you and I'd just as soon not have to do it again."

Jonathan grabbed at Benny as he went by. "Benedek, on the bridge I saw-- him, didn't I?"

"Who, Jonathan?"

Father stood in the doorway, Mary with a tray just behind him.

"He **is** real, isn't he? He's not just one of Benedek's wild stories. He--"

"--saved your life," Father cut in. "Twice. And I would appreciate it if you stay put and not risk your life a third time. Vincent **does** have work to do and he can't spend his time rescuing you from your own

foolhardiness. You're certainly not going to get better if you keep ignoring your doctor's advice."

"But-- yes sir," Jonathan said meekly, sinking back on his pillow.

"He does crumble well under the voice of authority, doesn't he?" Benny asked cheerfully. "Whoa, Jack, breakfast in bed, served by a lovely lady," he observed as Mary set her tray on the bedside table. "You always get the girl, J.J."

"Well, really," laughed Mary, causing Jonathan to blush and stammer.

"I've very sorry-- Benedek doesn't mean half of what he says-- not to say you're **not** very lovely, of course..."

"Thank you," Mary said as Jonathan trailed off. She smiled at Benedek and added, "Both of you."

Father advanced to his patient's bedside and picked up Jonathan's wrist to check his pulse. "How are you feeling today?"

"Like I fell down the Rabbit's Hole," the professor said. At the hard glare Father shot him, he continued, "Tired, sir."

"Yes, well, I'd expect that, Jonathan. Any pain?"

"Just one." He glanced at Benedek who was 'helping' Mary. "A minor one, really."

Father followed his gaze, then realized Jonathan's tone had been one of affection.

"Hey, Jack, how about we take this lady dancing? We'd be the envy of all the other guys," Benny said, taking Mary in his arms and waltzing a few steps with her.

"Yes, I see what you mean," Father murmured, rubbing his chin.

"Listen, Juanito, you stay here and eat your soup like a good little hero. Mary has promised me a breakfast to end all-- says their cook makes a mean green chile. If you're a really good boy, I might see if I can get you some ice cream-- vanilla, of course." Benny had Mary's hand tucked in the crook of his arm. "You can spare your personal body assistant, can't you? You remember how to feed yourself. Check ya later, Jack."

Father took a deep breath. "Is he always so...?" He trailed off, unable to pin down the word.

"Yes, I'm afraid he is," Jonathan said, sounding both resigned and pleased. He reached for the cup of tea Mary had managed to prepare before being whisked off by Benedek. "**All** the time."

"Jonathan, you do understand why it is so important for both of you to keep silent about what you have seen here, don't you? My son's safety--"

"Dr. Wells, if I have to sew his fingers together to keep him from typing, I will. But I don't think that will be necessary. Benedek may be a tabloid journalist and, while Dr. Moorhouse doesn't believe it, I think he has a sense of honor. He may embellish the story, he may even make up facts, but he **is** loyal to those he considers friends. I never thought I'd say it about him, but Benny really is a good person."

Father raised an eyebrow, then nodded. "I believe you're right about him, Jonathan. I certainly hope so. Now then, I'm afraid you will need to stay here a few days longer before we can send you Above to a proper hospital. Can you restrain yourself from any more unauthorized walkabouts, hmm?"

Jonathan raised his right hand. "I promise."

Father nodded, then turned his head as Catherine and Vincent entered the Infirmary.

"We have a problem," Catherine began without preamble. "Benedek is missing--"

"No, he's here," Jonathan spoke up.

"As far as your Dr. Moorhouse is concerned, he's missing."

"Dr. Moorhouse...?"

"Apparently Benedek contacted her when you went missing, and then when she couldn't find him, she flew to New York. I ran into her at your hotel when I went there to try and waylay Benedek," Catherine said. "He'd been haunting my office, trying to get me to call out the entire police force to look for you. And then he seemed to suddenly give up. I got worried, afraid he'd try to find his way here--"

"Which he did," Father cut in.

"When she could no longer contact Benedek, and there was still no word about you, Dr. Moorhouse decided to take charge," Catherine continued, looking at Jonathan. "I've managed to convince her to give me a few hours, but--"

Jonathan threw back the covers and started to swing his feet over the edge of his bed. A large furry hand centered itself on his chest, and he looked up at Vincent.

"Perhaps a note would keep her happy, at least until Benedek goes Above," Vincent suggested. "You're in no condition to make the trip Above, even if we carry you."

"You don't understand! Dr. Moorhouse can be a very forceful person, when her mind is set. If you thought Benedek was persistent, you haven't seen anything yet. She has this way about her..." Jonathan said worriedly. "I don't know that a mere note will stop her. And what would I tell her, anyway? She'd demand to know which hospital if I said I'd been injured but was taken to a hospital. And why I hadn't bothered to call her or Benedek..."

"I think Benedek will have to go Above now and pacify her--"

"**Benedek**-- pacify Dr. Moorhouse?!" Jonathan interrupted, his voice going up an octave. "That's like pouring gasoline on a fire!"

"But would she believe anyone else? If I told her you were safe, do you think she'd accept it?" Catherine asked.

Jonathan opened his mouth, then shut it again. "No," he admitted, sighing. "You're right, of course. I'll write something for Benedek to take to her, but he'll have to explain things. I'm just glad I won't have to witness it."

Father raised an eyebrow at that. "She sounds like a formidable lady," he said. Jonathan MacKensie did not strike him as a cowardly man but he certainly seemed to tremble at the mere thought of confronting this Dr. Moorhouse.

"Oh, she is," Jonathan agreed. "She has a way of getting exactly what she wants, and she'll even resort to-- manipulation-- to get it."

"Manipulation?"

"Blackmail."

Vincent looked puzzled. "But that is illegal, Jonathan."

"I don't mean she extorts money or anything," the professor tried to explain. "She's a little more subtle than that. It's a cut-throat business in the academic world, you know."

Vincent, thoroughly bemused, decided to drop the subject. "I'll get you some paper and a pen. Father, maybe you and Catherine should go speak to Benedek?"

"He's probably in the Dining Hall," Father said. "I'll show you the way, Catherine. And you," he pointed at Jonathan, "stay in that bed!"

Jonathan blinked at the command, opened his mouth to protest and thought better of it. "Yes sir," he said meekly. Father's authoritative tone smacked of Leonard MacKensie, and Jonathan had always obeyed his father. Well, almost always.

"Hm. See that you do." He gave Vincent a significant look, then went out, accompanied by Catherine.

§§§§§

They found Benedek polishing off a stack of flapjacks, with a side of sausage, and entertaining William with anecdotes from his career as a paranormal investigator.

Benny interrupted his recitation of a ghost story and listened to their explanation of the problem with Moorhouse.

"Jeez, I forgot about Dr. M," the journalist said cheerfully, looking unfazed at the prospect of meeting with her. "She's here, huh? Whaddya know-- guess she really cares, after all."

"Jonathan seems to think she's going to be a problem," Father said.

"Nah, it's cake," Benny said with a dismissive wave of his fork. "I can handle Dr. M."

"What will you tell her?" Catherine asked, sitting at the table and accepting a cup of tea.

"I'll think of something-- I always do," he replied cheerfully. "After I get her on the plane to DC, will I be able to come back here? I can keep Jon-Boy entertained and make sure he doesn't go wandering off."

Catherine arched an eyebrow at that, and looked at Father. After all their worry about Benedek finding his way Below in the first place, to see him asking for a return invitation...

"I suppose it would be all right," Father said, catching her astonished glance and shrugging a little, as if to say, 'Well, what can I do?'

"Great! I'll get right on the Moorhouse problemo. Thanks for the chow, William-- you're the best!" He jumped up from his seat and looked about ready to sprint off on his mission.

Father said mildly, "Benny-- perhaps it would be best if I send someone with you as a guide, hmm?"

Benedek stopped short, and turned back, his expression rueful. "A guide's good-- I could handle that."

"Good. While I arrange it, please go back to the Infirmary. I believe Jonathan has a note for you to take to Dr. Moorhouse."

"I'd better edit it-- creative writing is not his bag," Benny said over his shoulder.

"He's quite an individual," Catherine said after he'd gone out. "Do you think it's wise to let him come back? I suspect it wouldn't take him long to figure out the Tunnel systems."

"I think we can trust him," Father said. "Both of them, in fact. They have the potential for becoming two of our most unusual Helpers yet."

"Unusual certainly fits Benedek," agreed Catherine. "He can bring their luggage to my place and we can use that Tunnel. I know the way from there so I can act as his guide."

"And keep an eye on him? I do believe we can trust them, Catherine, but if a little extra caution will relieve your mind then I don't see any harm in it. You've met this Dr. Moorhouse-- do you believe Benny can handle her?"

"I don't envy him the job, but he seems confident, doesn't he? We'll see," Catherine said, standing up. "I'll go hurry him along."

Father continued to sit at the table, and he looked up as William poured him a fresh cup of tea.

"I don't know why she doesn't trust him," William said, surprising Father. "Benny's a great guy."

"Well, you've certainly come around," Father said.

William shrugged. "Once you get to know him, how can you not? He's even promised me a set of his books, autographed."

"I see," Father said, sipping his tea. "Well, I look forward to borrowing them." He also was looking forward to the return of the quiet, normal routine of the Tunnel World once Benny and his partner had returned to their own world.

§§§§§

Jonathan's roar reverberated through the chambers, and Father nearly collided with Vincent as they hurried to the Infirmary. They found Jonathan stalking Benedek, and it was only his weakened condition that saved the reporter from the murder in the professor's eyes.

"I can't believe it! What were you thinking of-- oh wait! That's right! You **don't** think! I can never go back to Georgetown--"

"Relaxavision, Buds, relaxavision! You don't think Dr. M will actually **tell** anyone, do you? She won't want them to know about her pet professor--"

"A brothel!? You told her I've been in a brothel all this time?!"

"Not as a customer, Jack."

"Oh, well that makes a difference doesn't it?" Jonathan said, dripping sarcasm.

"I told her the girls that found you in the park took you home and have been nursing you back to health. One of their regulars is a doctor and he's helped out. You had no i.d. and they couldn't very well take you to the cops, could they? Besides, you know the effect you have on women," Benny said, hands upraised in defense as Jonathan backed him around the small chamber. "They couldn't resist ya, Jack."

"You are unbelievable--!"

"Thanks."

"That wasn't a compliment! I could murder you, Benedek!"

"Nah, that's not your style, Smilin' Jack."

"Chasing Big Foot isn't my style! Lecturing on Ramapithecus, grading term papers, an occasional concert with a normal woman-- that's my style, Benedek."

"Boring, Jack! Admit it-- since we teamed up, your life hasn't been dull--"

"Dull?! I've lost track of how many times you've nearly gotten me killed--"

Vincent growled softly in the same tone he had used more than once to restore order to a tumultuous classroom full of children. It carried just enough warning of worse to come to ensure silence among the bickering pair.

Jonathan broke off, startled by the thrumming noise. He'd heard something very like it emanating from the throat of his grey house cat when he was a boy. Usually it was right before she swatted some sense into one or more of her kittens.

"Thanks, Vincent," Benny said, sighing in relief. "Uh, Jonny didn't mean the Big Foot crack-- **did** ya, pal?!"

Jonathan realized he was staring, and remembered to close his mouth before shaking his head negatively. "Ah, no, I--er-- I was **explaining** to Benedek why I object to his fiction regarding my whereabouts, and my--temper-- got away from me."

Father and Vincent exchanged glances.

"I'm sorry," Jonathan said lamely.

Vincent tilted his head. "You don't intend to murder Benny after all, Jonathan?"

The professor sighed and met the journalist's gaze. "Not today, I suppose." And with the true good-breeding of an Englishman, he held out his hand toward Benedek. "I suppose you did the best you could, under the circumstances. Although, how you managed to get her to **believe** it--"

"Hey, that's my job, Jack!" Benny said, a huge grin on his face as he clasped the offered hand and pumped it vigorously.

"Yes, I suppose making people believe the unbelievable **is** in your line of work."

Benny shrugged. "Embellishing the truth a little, so it goes down easier, maybe."

"**Inventing** it, you mean--"

Father cleared his throat. "Are you two **quite** finished, or should I remove the breakables from this room?"

Jonathan looked sheepish and gave a remarkable impression of a naughty little boy. "Quite finished," he assured Father.

"**That's** a relief," Father said. "I thought I was going to have to forbid the pair of you from attending the concert tonight."

"Concert? Here?" Jonathan asked.

"Yes, the older children have been practicing quite diligently and they are to perform for us this evening," Father informed the surprised pair.

"Great! I wonder if Cathy would like to come? Maybe afterwards have a little--"

"I'm sorry, Benny, but Catherine already has an escort," Vincent cut into Benny's musings.

"Oh? Some joe's cutting my time?"

Father cleared his throat. "Actually, Catherine and Vincent have an-- understanding."

"I shoulda known," Benny complained good-naturedly. "If it isn't Jon-Boy, it's some other good-looking, taller guy. Well, I'll see if Mary--"

Father cleared his throat again. "I'm afraid Mary has already agreed to sit with me."

"Oh, well... there's always Mouse and Arthur!"

Jonathan shook his head, gave Father a look that said 'That's Benny', and he sat down on his bed.

Father immediately noticed the sudden pallor. "Am I going to have to have Vincent sit on you to keep you from overdoing? You certainly don't want to have Benny make any more explanation to your Dr. Moorhouse, do you?"

"Good Lord, no!" Jonathan exclaimed, horrified at the notion.

Father looked satisfied. "Then you stay put, and you may get up for the concert this evening."

"Do you play chess, Jonathan?" Vincent asked innocently.

"Why, yes, but I haven't had much time lately," Jonathan said.

"We could bring in your chess set, Father."

"Excellent idea, Vincent. Why didn't I think of it?"

Vincent just smiled and went out to fetch the treasured chess set and board.

§§§§§

"We shall miss you both," Father said several days later.

"I wouldn't have missed this for the world," Jonathan assured him. "As soon as I get back to Georgetown, I'll send those books to Ms. Chandler. And you must let me know if there's anything else I can ever do for you. I have Mother's recipe for scones and my aunt frequently sends me a care package; I'll ask her to send extra, shall I?"

Father looked pleased. "I've given you the names and addresses of several of our Helpers and they can always get messages to us. If you're ever back in New York--"

"We'll have a rematch," Jonathan promised. "I wasn't aware I was so rusty."

Vincent draped an arm across Father's shoulders. "Finding an opponent he could beat is reward enough, isn't it, Father?"

Father ignored his son. "We're glad to consider both you and Benny among our Helpers," he said to Jonathan.

"Ready, Jack?" Benny asked, popping in to Father's chamber with Mouse close behind him. "Cathy sent Dr. M a telegram, so we'd better be at Dulles on time. I understand she's been filling in for you. Randi says the kids are ready to hop a plane to New York and drag you back."

"I remember my own days of sitting in her classroom," Jonathan said with a grimace. "Fascinating lecturer, but murder on exams."

"Listen, Jake, I want to thank you for all you've done," Benny said, extending a hand to Father. He grinned at Father's wince. "You're a Bud for life."

"I'm sure he's thrilled."

"Hey, Jack, what better guy to have on their team? I've got my finger on the pulse of the 'bloid world," Benny said defensively. "Any rumors about upright lions in Central Park and we got it covered. We can squash those stories, and give 'em something to really make 'em think."

Jonathan just shook his head and offered Father his hand, then hugged him. "Shall I send you a new copy of Robin Hood?" he asked with a slightly embarrassed smile. "I believe you may have worn out your old one."

Father looked surprised. "I don't know--"

"I do remember," Jonathan said softly. "Thank you."

"Shake a leg, Jack! Cathy's waiting to give us our tickets," Benny said, clapping Jonathan on the back. "We got a plane to catch!"

"I hate flying," Jonathan muttered. "Why couldn't we take Amtrack?"

Benny just grinned. "Check ya later," he said to Father as Vincent led Jonathan from the chamber. He followed his partner, and the last thing Father heard was Benny admonishing, "When you file your expenses, Jon-Boy, better be careful! Dr. M thinks you've been a toy in Babe Land these last few weeks and she's gonna question every item."

"Benedek!"