

The Man Who Could Be King

by M.D. Bloemker
(previously published in *Prime Time* #4)

His pulse quickened with every step he took down the plushly carpeted hall. A strange exaltation filled him, that odd but pleasurable trill he knew so well. He, Edgar Benedek, was on the stalk, and his prey was nigh.

He checked room numbers against the one in his head, information that had cost him a hefty bribe to the desk clerk; a price, he swore to himself, which would be taken out of his quarry's hide in due time. Similar hunts in similar situations allowed him to zero in on the right door on the first try. Taking a moment to pull on a confident demeanor, he cheerfully ignored the 'do not disturb' sign hanging off the knob and rapped sharply on the door, keeping close to the door to foil the peephole.

Silence met his first three tries. On the fourth imperative rap, a quiet but distinctly feminine voice on the other side of the door said, "Yes?"

"Room service."

"You have the wrong room."

"Champagne—compliments of the management."

"I am sorry. I cannot let you in. I am...indisposed."

"Tell you what. Just crack the door and I'll slip the bottle to you."

"Please, if you would return later...."

"Lady, c'mon. We're talking about my job here. You can even forget the tip, all right?"

An indecisive silence brought a smile to his face, which widened as he heard the chain lock sliding back. As soon as the knob turned, he wedged himself against the door and pushed.

Tumbling into the room, he barely kept his balance and dignity as a woman, tall, blonde and a definite ten on anyone's scale, jumped back with a startled shriek. "Easy, take it easy," he soothed, backing up to kick the door closed against the possibility of interested bystanders. "I just want to ask you...."

He made the mistake of looking away for a split second. She was on him with a growl like an enraged panther, slamming him to the ground. Before he could catch his next breath, she had his arm twisted behind his back as she crushed his face into the carpet.

"Lady!" he cried, an indignant, muffled sound against the rug.

"Who are you and what do you want?" she demanded stiffly, her voice delicately flavored with an Eastern European accent.

"Get off my kidneys and maybe I'll tell you," he managed around a mouthful of carpet.

"Gerta!" A new voice, shrill with anxiety. "Gerta, for pity's sake, let him go!"

Some of the pressure eased off Benny's back, but she made no other move to comply. "He obtained entry by fraudulent means."

"Of course he did. That's how he makes his living. Gerta, please?"

"You heard the man," Benny rasped. "He said please, didn't he?"

She regained her feet with marked reluctance, but made no move to help Benny to his feet. He rolled onto his back, mindful of the dent he was sure she'd put in him, and squinted up as the second person moved into his line of vision, wearing an expression of total abashment that was truly gratifying to Benny's bruised ego and body.

"Benedek," Jonathan MacKensie sighed, shaking his head. "What are you doing here?"

"You tell me." He held out his hand until Jonathan leaned over and gripped it, helping him to his feet. "After leaving messages all over New York for me, asking me to meet you at your apartment asap, I think I can be forgiven for expecting you to actually be present and accounted for when I showed up. What I didn't expect was a cleaned out closet, torn out pages in your appointment book, and an ice-covered conversation with your beloved department head when I called to ask her where she had you chained up this time."

"What did she tell you?" Jonathan asked, holding up a hand to forestall Gerta, whose too-perfect face grew stormier with every passing moment.

"That the only reason she approved a leave of absence for you on such short notice and without explanation is because you had four years of unused vacation time stacked up in the wings. She didn't know where you'd gone, or why you'd gone, and didn't much care, unquote."

Jonathan chewed his bottom lip. "She's worried."

"Sick," Benny affirmed resoundingly. "You oughta be ashamed of yourself." He eyed Gerta, dressed in a pale-colored silk shirt and designer jeans, then Jonathan, who wore a calf-length terry robe belted tightly at the waist, and not much else. "Then again, maybe not."

"Gerta Kaminski, Edgar Benedek," Jonathan made weary introductions. "Benny to those who give a damn. Benedek, this is...."

"Yeah, we met," he muttered, rubbing his jaw. "Pleased to meetcha. That's a lie, actually, but at least it's a polite one."

"How did you find us?" Gerta asked suddenly, eyes sparking dangerously through a thin blonde veil of disarranged hair.

"You were a happy accident, sweetheart," he growled back.

"It's not important, Gerta," Jonathan told her quickly.

"It *is* important," she insisted, her hand gripping his arm. "If he found you so easily, so could others."

"Only if Jonny here drew them a map, too." Digging into his pocket, Benny produced a folded piece of paper. "Hotel stationery, conveniently stashed in the one place you'd know I'd look—in the fridge, underneath the Yoo-Hoo bottles."

As Gerta snatched the paper out of his hand, Jonathan managed a rueful smile. "I hope you left me at least one."

"Pal, you're lucky I'm leaving you teeth. You—"

"Why did you do this?" Gerta exploded in an angry hiss, waving the paper under Jonathan's nose. "You were to tell no one. No one!"

Sighing, he lowered his head not so much in guilt as in tired exasperation. "Gerta...please."

"Yeah, Gerta, please," Benny echoed sarcastically. "Give the guy a break—we'll tear him to pieces one at a time, okay? I'm first."

"Who is he?" Ignoring Benny, Gerta confronted Jonathan, seeking his averted gaze with her fiery eyes. "Why has he come here? Why did you *do* this? I have explained...."

Unsuccessful in his tacit efforts to calm her down, Jonathan reached past her and snagged Benedek's jacket sleeve. Responding to what he knew to be a plea for rescue, Benny gently but firmly nudged Greta out of his way and let himself be pulled over to the brocaded sofa.

"Nice digs," he noted as he settled back, also appreciating how Jonathan instinctively took the wing chair, which put him on Benny's immediate right, and kept Gerta at bay with a profusion of potted plants on the other side. The woman also came to the same conclusion and belligerently took up a stance a few feet away from them, glowering from one to the other in turn over crossed arms.

"I'm sorry about the subterfuge," Jonathan began, distracting Benny from his idle consideration of why she bought blouses with buttons since she didn't bother using them. "But everything's been a little...crazy lately."

"Lately?" He studied Jonathan's pale color, and spotted a slight nervous tick in one tired eye. "What's the matter, you're not getting enough vitamins?"

Catching Benny's significant glance towards Gerta, Jonathan crimsoned. "It's not what you think," he protested weakly.

"Oh, yeah? When did you become a mind reader, pal? How do you know what I think?"

"I know—" He shook his head, giving up. "You're going to find what I have to tell you rather hard to believe."

"Me? Mr. Credulous himself?" He snorted. "You're talking to the man who convinced an entire nation that Bigfoot is an industrial spy for an intergalactic commodities corporation operating out of the back side of Alpha Centauri."

"Yes, but you didn't actually *believe* that when you wrote it."

"Says you. I stand behind everything I write. And afterwards, I stand to one side. Quit stalling."

"Tell him nothing," Gerta snarled. "It's too dangerous."

"Gerta, I owe him an explanation," Jonathan said edgily, clearly at patience's end.

"You owe no one anything." A plea softened her harsh, commanding voice. "You risk too much telling him the truth."

"I risk too much not telling him," he murmured wearily. He looked away, but not before Benny caught the furtive glance he shot the woman.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"He means he doesn't trust you, sweetheart," Benny laughed without amusement, getting a startled confirmation out of the look Jonathan shot him. "At least if I try to double-deal him, he knows where and how to hit back."

She seemed about to erupt in indignation, but controlled herself with an effort. "I see," she said stiffly. "You do not trust me. I suppose I can understand that, although I find it difficult to accept."

"Give it your best shot," Benny growled, dismissing her to turn back to Jonathan, who cradled his forehead in one hand. "Come on, give."

After several attempts to form words, Jonathan gave up, shaking his head. "I don't know how to explain."

"C'mon, it can't be *that* ridiculous a story. At least, not as ludicrous as if you were to tell me, oh...that your mother, raised by adoptive parents on a small Yorkshire farm, was in reality the Crown Princess Anna-Elizabeth of Agraria, who as an infant was smuggled out of the county in a picnic basket in advance of an invading army, and whose subsequent disappearance puts her right up there in the august company of Princess Anastasia, Amelia Earhart and Judge Crater."

Jonathan stared at him, expressionless. "How long," he asked softly, "have you known about this?"

Benny let a cocky smile grow despite the dark glare Gerta turned on him. "Depends on what you mean. Anna-Elizabeth of Agraria has been in everybody's unsolved column for as long as I can remember. That she was still alive and living somewhere in England as late as World War II, I got the same place everyone else did—that London *Daily News* headline last week. The rest, as they say, is history." From his jacket pocket, he dug out an envelope, from which he extracted a carefully folded clipping. "Call it a leap of logic, if you will."

Gerta sidled over to peer at the paper Jonathan took from Benny. It was a follow-up article to the *Daily News* bombshell, a concise history of the rise and fall of the tiny kingdom of Agraria. Two photos accompanied the text, one of a matronly, sleep-eyed woman identified as Queen Catherine-Maria; the other, labeled as King Octavius, deposed monarch of Agraria, depicted a man, haughty and regal, whose visage bore a stunning resemblance to that of Jonathan MacKensie.

"Chip off the old royal block, eh?" Benny remarked, one eyebrow raised.

"Worse and worse," Jonathan groaned, rubbing his forehead as Gerta pulled the clipping out of his hand for closer study.

"So give," Benny prompted quietly. "How long have *you* known?"

"Since I was fourteen," he said with a long sigh.

"Fourteen? Fourteen?" Benedek spluttered. "You've known since you were fourteen? And you didn't tell *me*?"

Jonathan stared at him disparagingly. "You'd be the last person I would have told, if I'd told anyone, which I didn't."

"Why not?" Benny's voice went shrill with incredulity. "Look, maybe you don't fully understand this. The princess in the picnic basket is legend, modern folklore, one of the sweet mysteries of life, a mystery, I might add, whose solution you've been selfishly keeping to yourself, for which I'm finding it very hard to forgive you. You're royalty, Jack! Jonathan MacKensie of the House of Rottweiler, Crown Prince of Agraria!"

"I'm a college professor, Benedek," Jonathan interjected with surprising heat. "The House of Rottweiler is extinct. Agraria ceased to exist over sixty years ago. My so-called royal pedigree is completely worthless, and quite frankly, I like it that way."

Gerta skittered out of the way as he shot to his feet, pacing agitatedly with a brief pause to tighten the sagging belt around his robe. "Maybe you don't fully understand this," MacKensie mimicked angrily. "For the forty-three years that Agraria existed as an independent monarchy, the cows outnumbered the citizens by 500 to 1. It had no major industry, no cities, no roads, and no army or civilian defense force. The country was little more than 50 square miles of pastureland, and the only reason it became an independent kingdom was because Queen Victoria got tired of hearing her second

cousins squabbling about water rights. As my father so carefully explained it to me on my fourteenth birthday, Agraria was created out of pure spite by a monarch who had no business poking her nose in in the first place. Maybe I can by right tack twenty or thirty titles after my name, but the only title that really means anything is the one spelled Ph.D."

"That isn't the point!" Benny protested.

"He is right," Gerta affirmed. "Whether or not you choose to accept your heritage will make no difference to your enemies."

Benny's glee at getting unexpected support vanished. "Enemies? What enemies?"

Deflating abruptly, Jonathan flopped back down into the wing chair. "You tell him," he told Gerta with a weary sigh. "I still don't understand it."

"Yeah." Benny turned to her, eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You tell me. Like, who the hell are you, anyway? His royal bodyguard?"

She tilted her head up imperiously as she sniffed, "Yes. I am."

"Self-appointed," Jonathan hastened to add. "She literally showed up on my doorstep yesterday morning and took charge of my life."

Benny eyed her again, more appreciatively. "All your fantasies come to life, eh?" he muttered with a mocking laugh.

Before Jonathan could go farther with his disparaging glare, Gerta crossed the room to snare a leather purse, producing a card from it on the way back. "My identification," she said crisply, handing the card to Benny.

"Third Adjutant, Royal Legation of Agraria," Benny read, his voice rising in question on the last syllables. "You got this printed up at a joke shop, right?"

"It's quite legitimate," Gerta said coldly.

"It is," Jonathan affirmed to Benny's questioning look. "What was left of the government after the invasion emigrated first to England and then to the States. They received 'government-in-exile' status, which apparently they've managed to hang onto for over nearly seventy years while they searched for the Crown Princess and/or her legitimate offspring."

"Dedicated search, no doubt," Benny snorted derisively. "Took seventy years before someone cracked the old British emigration records to find out if someone had even let the kid out of the picnic basket. So, they finally found you. Who's the enemy, then?"

"Agraria was eventually absorbed into what is now known as Czechoslovakia," Gerta said, settling on the arm of the sofa. "It has come to our attention that the Czech government is very interested in learning the fate of the Princess Anna-Elizabeth, in particular whether she produced an heir. They recognize that the mystery surrounding the princess' disappearance has obtained mythic proportions, and if the true heir to the Agrarian throne exists...."

"Oh, yeah," Benny said, lost in a scenario that brought a wicked smile to his face. "Oh, yeah. Big bad socialist government beating up on little rural monarchy. Never mind that Agraria got mopped up by the First Republic—all the credulous public is going to see is red once this news gets out."

"Precisely," Gerta nodded.

He assessed the smug look on her face and grinned. "And that's exactly what you want, isn't it?"

Jonathan started violently, staring at her aghast. "Now wait a minute! I refuse to be used as a propaganda ploy!"

"You have very little choice in the matter," she told him, not unkindly. "We found you easily enough, as did your friend. It is only a matter of time before more people discover the truth, and you will not be able to escape them or yourself. You must know that we will do everything we can to protect you. You are, after all, our king."

"No!" He jumped out of the chair again, as though yanked by strings. "No, this is...this is a *nightmare!* I'm not anyone's king!"

"But you're everybody's pawn," Benny told him, shaking his head ruefully.

"That's not funny," Jonathan glowered at him.

"Sure it is. It's hilarious," he said with a deepening frown, chewing his bottom lip in thought. "But I think we're still waiting for the punchline."

Jonathan stopped pacing, genuinely confused. "What do you mean?"

"Namely, what does the Royal Legation of Agraria expect to get out of this?"

Gerta straightened under the scrutiny of two pairs of questioning eyes. "Gratitude," she offered defensively.

"Expressed how?" Benny shot back. "Let me guess. You want Jonny here to present himself to the State Department as the heir to the throne of Agraria, thereby justifying the continued existence of your legation, which has been happily sponging off old Uncle Sam for seventy years?"

She shifted uncomfortably. "You make it sound so...so...."

"Yeah, I do, don't I?"

"Is it so much to ask?" she demanded sullenly.

"Yes." Jonathan, looking ill, nodded his head emphatically. "Too much. I won't do it."

Gerta sprinted to block him as he stood, heading for the bedroom. "Where are you going?"

"Home, where I belong," he said, shaking her off.

"You cannot! The danger...!"

"What danger?" Hand on the doorknob, he turned back with a sweeping gesture. "I've been here a full day and a half, and the only danger I've detected is the one to my brain cells if I'm forced to watch one more game show. Gerta, you've been very helpful and very kind, but I'm much calmer now, and I think I'd like to start taking matters into my own hands. Benedek? I'd like a word with you?"

Benny gave Gerta a cheeky grin as he passed by. "Think you could shake down room service for a pot of coffee, black?" he tossed over his shoulder, following Jonathan into the room.

Mackensie pulled open a suitcase lying on the bed, sorting through angrily as Benny shut the door and promptly announced, "I don't trust her."

"Neither do I," Jonathan muttered, pulling out a wrinkled shirt and frowning.

"Then why did you follow when she crooked her finger?"

"Because she made a lot of sense yesterday. Because...." He threw the shirt back angrily. "Because I didn't know what to do, and she seemed to have the answers."

"Oh, brother," Benny snorted softly, landing on the edge of the bed, then stiffening as a thought occurred to him. "Is that why you left all those messages for me? You wanted someone to tell you what to do?"

"I want...I *need* answers." His anger faded as he stared down at the new shirt in his hands. "There's one thing I've always admired about you, Benedek—when you really want something, you get it, somehow. I was willing to hand you the entire story if you could find the answers for me this time."

"What do you mean, answers?"

He shrugged, then slowly pulled on his shirt. "Why is it so important? Why, after seventy years, does it even *matter*? And...." He hesitated, lost in thought. "And what's going to happen now?"

"You get your picture in the newspapers, a feature spread in *People*, a shot on all the talk shows, probably a knock-off biography or two, and in three months, no one will remember your name." He inclined his head and laughed. "Or not. Who knows?"

"I'd hoped you would," was Jonathan's quiet reply as he retrieved his trousers from the back of a chair.

"Well, you can't stay here. Hiding, even in a \$500 a day luxury suite, isn't going to solve anything, and there's something about this set-up that stinks of dead fish. She make any moves on you yet?"

Jonathan grimaced. "Benedek."

"Check—it's been separate bedrooms so far. How about restricting your movements? Screening your calls? Has she let you talk to, see or be seen by anyone?"

"No, but I haven't...." He paused, his frown deepening. "She warned me against leaving you a note when we went back to get my clothes. I did think that was strange...."

"Strange enough to leave one for me anyway. That may turn out to be the smartest thing you've done in this whole mess, pal."

"I'm getting the strong feeling that you may be right." Jonathan settled on the far edge of the bed to tug on his socks. "But we'll know for sure in a few minutes—when I try to walk out the door."

"Wanna lay odds?"

"No." He concentrated on lacing his shoes. "Not particularly."

"Where do you want to go?" Benedek said when the silence grew too heavy for comfort.

"Home."

"She could be on the level. I mean, it's possible, after all. And if she's right, home is trouble waiting to happen."

"Then I'll deal with it. Somehow." With an exasperated sigh, he stood and tucked in his shirt tail. "You're right—hiding isn't going to solve anything. Maybe the best way to go is a direct frontal assault. Break the story on my own terms, control it, make it work for me instead of against me." He stopped, his frown returned in force as he glanced at Benny. "Is that possible?" he pleaded quietly.

Benedek smiled in growing delight. "Do my jaded ears hear you offering me an exclusive on the story of the year?"

"Benedek," he sighed. "Get me out of this with my life and sanity fairly intact and I'll sell you my soul."

"Naw, I don't want to be greedy. I'll settle for a 75-25 split on the knock-off bio royalties. Royalties! Get it? Edgar Benedek, royal biographer! This is gonna be *great*, Jonny! Are you due for sabbatical yet? We can do the talk shows first, then the pub tours...."

"First we have to get out of here," Jonathan reminded him.

"Hey, no sweat. In the words of the immortal Bard, woe betide the fool who stands between me and a scoop. You ready to make a run for it?"

Jonathan finished dumping his clothes in the suitcase, and slammed it closed. "Ready. Let's go."

"Just let me do the talking," Benedek told him as MacKensie followed him to the door. "Given the circumstances, I'm less likely to be swayed by a gorgeous pair of flashing Slavic eyes."

Jonathan harrumphed, a barely suppressed smile telegraphing his growing relief. But his smile along with Benny's laugh died abruptly as they came two steps into the living area and stopped dead in their tracks.

"Uh-oh," Benny muttered, taking one more step that put him between Jonathan and the three dark-suited men who stood next to Gerta. "I don't think these guys are from room service, Jack."

The woman, who had turned from her head-to-head conference with her new companions, spotted the suitcase in Jonathan's hand and shook her head almost sadly. "Gregor."

The tallest and burliest of the three men responded to her commanding gesture, and Benny tensed at his approach. "Hold it, big guy. Let's get some serious talking done here before we—"

Gregor's arm flashed out, knocking Benny aside with remarkable ease and in the same fluid movement yanking the suitcase out of Jonathan's startled hand. Crashing to the floor, Benny started to scramble back up, but his angry growl dissolved abruptly into a low moan as he tumbled back to the rug.

The hand Jonathan raised in self-defense ended up in Gregor's powerful grip. MacKensie froze, reading in the man's granite expression no doubt that he would and could shatter the bones if he offered more than token resistance. Torn, he looked down at Benny, huddled in pain on the floor, then up at Gerta, who had moved to stand just behind Gregor. "What are you doing?" he said, barely managing to keep his voice steady. "What do you want?"

"Gregor, take him back inside," Gerta said, unzipping the handbag she held in one hand and producing a flat box. "Josef, Stefan—please make sure that Mr. Benedek is made comfortable."

The two men scooped him up, hauling him back to the sofa. Benny landed with a groan, clawed hands to either side of his head. His eyes came open in time to see Jonathan, frantic but unresisting, shoved back into the bedroom by Gregor, followed by Gerta, who paused long enough to give Benny a strange, appraising smile before shutting the door behind them.

Benny's first attempt to jump to his feet was promptly foiled. A massive hand pushed against his shoulder, slamming him back to the sofa. Glaring up at the dour faces of his captors in turn, he snarled, "Look, bozo, I don't know what your game is, but you can't—"

From behind the closed door came a sharp cry of protest, half anger, half fear, abruptly silenced.

"Jonathan?" Reason deserted him, not returning until he gasped under the full weight of two grown men crushing him into the carpet. With his rush of blind panic went all his manic strength, leav-

ing him drained and unable to protest as they dragged him to his feet and dumped him into an arm-chair. It was all he could do to breathe without pain let alone resist as he felt ropes tighten around his wrists, binding him to the chair arms.

"Bastards," he rasped. They ignored his glare, settling down in chairs halfway between Benny and the bedroom. "You're gonna regret this," Benedek growled. "If it takes the rest of my life, I'm gonna make you regret this."

One of them glanced at him before leaning over to retrieve a discarded magazine, and Benny swallowed, overwhelmed by the certainty that the duration of the brief, disinterested eye contact har-bingered how much longer the man figured Benny had left to carry out his threat.

Having given up on getting any kind of response from his keepers, despite a steady barrage of taunts and outright threats, Benny subsided into silence, outwardly calm but inwardly stretched to the breaking point as he stared at the closed bedroom door, willing it to open. He hadn't heard a sound since the one that had cost him a few dozen bruises, and that both relieved and troubled him. The four or more times he'd demanded to know what was happening had, as with everything else he'd said, fallen on deaf ears, so he was left with only his imagination which, given his own desperate situation, was running wild.

He got some satisfaction out of the fact that his silence seemed to bother the two men more than his ranting; the furtive glances his way were becoming more frequent, the frowns more pronounced. It was just as well; the pain from his bruised muscles faded with his continued quiescence, making it easier to breathe, think, and, unfortunately, worry.

It was also putting him to sleep from sheer boredom. Stifling a yawn, Benny muttered, "The least you could do is turn on the TV. I'm missing *As The World Turns*."

To his surprise, one of the men dropped his magazine, turning a contemplative stare towards the console TV in one corner of the room.

The bedroom door opened, and Benny's idle muse as to the afternoon viewing habits of strong-arm goons vanished in a rush of adrenalin. Gerta emerged first, barely glancing at Benny as she stood aside. Jonathan, with Gregor providing a giant, silent shadow, moved with a distinctly unsteady step out into the living area, his head coming up with obvious difficulty. For a moment, Benny glimpsed a fear-paled, exhausted face, but Jonathan's eyes flamed into life the moment he saw how his friend had been 'made comfortable'.

"Untie him," he barked, challenging Gerta with a fearless glare, which, to Benny's complete surprise, sent a flash of unease through the woman's icy demeanor. She motioned to one of Benny's guards. "Stefan."

The shorter and beefier of the trio obeyed, snicking away the ropes with a sharp penknife. "Thanks for nothing, Harpo," Benny glowered, rubbing his wrists.

"Benedek?" As Jonathan moved forward, Gregor followed, but immediately fell back at Gerta's gesture. "Benedek, are you all right? No macho lies, please—this is important. Did they hurt you?"

He hesitated, confused by the strange intense light that burned in otherwise glassy eyes. "Nothing that a few gallons of Ben-Gay won't cure eventually," he replied warily. "What the devil's going on around here?"

Seemingly satisfied that at least Benny's fighting spirit was intact, Jonathan stepped forward again, reaching for his friend's arm. "We have to talk."

This time he was aware of Gregor's move, either peripherally or merely a very good guess. Without looking back, his hand shot up. "Alone."

Gerta nodded to Gregor's silent questioning glance. "It's all right. Josef, Stefan, you may return to your posts. Gregor?"

Jonathan waited until the two men had left, and Gerta had taken Gregor into a low-voiced conversation on the far side of the room before closing his hand on Benny's arm, guiding him towards the sofa. Once there, Benedek deftly switched, making a show of easing the man down as he whispered near Jonathan's ear, "Are you okay? What the hell did they *do* to you?"

"I'm all right," he insisted without strength, waving Benny to be seated in the accompanying wing chair. Halfway down, Benny paused, then squinted into MacKensie's pale face, into eyes that persistently refused to focus. Leaning over, he grabbed Jonathan's wrist, pushed up the unfastened sleeve to expose the inner arm. There, his sharp, trained eyes picked out a tiny purplish splotch, no larger than the head of a pin. "Bastards," he spat softly.

"It's just a mild tranquilizer," Jonathan said, pulling free and hastily rearranging his sleeve.

"Oh, yeah," Benny said derisively. "Out of the goodness of their hearts, I'll bet."

Jonathan caught his friend's arm, restraining his angry start. "Benedek—please. It's bad enough, don't make it worse."

"They're not getting away with this," Benny hissed, in the full grip of fury and indignation. "Dammit, I am *not* gonna let them—"

"You have no choice."

The strange intensity of the flat statement stopped Benny cold, but the shudder that suddenly ripped through MacKensie turned anger to anxiety in a blinding flash. "I'm all right," Jonathan insisted weakly as Benny placed a supportive grip on MacKensie's upper arm. "I'm just...tired, that's all."

"Doped to the gills, more like it. What do you mean, it's bad enough? How bad is it? Damn it, Jack—what do these ghouls *want*?"

"Me." Jonathan steadied himself with a deep breath. "Just me. They said...they promised me that you could leave, unharmed, as long as you gave your word that you would forget everything you've seen and heard here today." He looked up in the silence to see Benny staring at him. "Will you?"

"Yeah," Benny said with a short, stunned laugh. "Sure. When pigs fly."

"Benedek, this isn't funny. They're serious, deadly so. If you don't agree, you won't be allowed to leave. If you continue to refuse—they will kill you."

"Let them try," Benny harrumphed, some of his bravado disintegrating under the genuinely distressed look Jonathan gave him.

"Why?" Benedek said after a tense silence. "Why do they want you?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. Benny, just leave before—before they change their minds."

"Sure, yeah. Only I got two small problems with that. Number one, I wouldn't give these jokers the time of day let alone the satisfaction, and number two, when I leave, you sure as hell better believe that you're going with me. We've got a contract, Jack. No two-bit fascist hood is gonna beat me out of a 75-25 split."

Mackenzie's eyes closed, in pain. "Forget the contract," he pleaded quietly. "Forget everything and just...leave. *Please.*"

"Oh, wake up, willya?" he growled angrily. "Do you really think my promise is gonna cut it with these guys? What's to stop me from lying through my teeth here, then hightailing it down the the State Department or even the nearest UP wire and blowing up this scam in their ugly little faces?"

"You'll be watched," Jonathan informed him softly, eyes fixed on the carpet near his feet. "Even if you successfully elude them, I'll denounce anything you tell anyone as an outright lie. They've threatened to frame you on espionage charges, and they can do it. And I would back them up."

"Why?"

Jonathan visibly flinched from Benny's quiet incredulity. "Because," he said thinly, "it would be the only way I could keep you alive. And...others."

Benedek stiffened. "Who else have they threatened? Dr. M?" At Jonathan's terse nod, color suffused Benny's face, sending sparks into his already angry eyes. "Who else?"

"It doesn't matter. Benedek—if I have to beg, I will. Do as they say. Leave, now."

For a time, Benny sat immobile, staring down at the hands he clasped between his knees. "This stinks, y'know?" he muttered, lifting one hand to rub at the bridge of his nose. "This really stinks. You're giving self-sacrifice a bad name, you know that, don't you?"

Some of the stiffness eased out of Jonathan's shoulders as he gave Benny a thin smile. "Thank you," he said softly.

"I'm not promising anything," he glowered. "But if there's a way out of this mess, I'll find it, Jack. No, listen—you got my word, I won't do anything stupid. I won't give anyone an excuse to touch a hair on Dr. M's old grey head, I swear. But—" He gave Jonathan a confident nod. "If there's a way, I'll find it."

He reached over, taking Mackenzie's hand in a warm clasp. For a moment, Jonathan's face reflected a strange amalgam of fear, relief, pain and panic, and his hand tightened on Benny's, as if unwilling to let go. But the moment passed too quickly for Benny to respond, and Mackenzie was turning to Gerta, announcing, "He's agreed."

"Very sensible, Mr. Benedek," the woman said, crossing the room to approach them. "And you are fully aware of the consequences should you consider betraying the trust we're placing in your word as a gentleman?"

"Sweetheart, trust has nothing to do with it, and you know it," Benny snarled, gaining his feet. "Threatening old women—you guys are pathetic, you know that?"

Gerta smiled tautly. "Then you do understand. Good. Please make note of the fact that you will be followed, Mr. Benedek. Good day."

Benny shot up a warning hand at Gregor's move towards him. "Hands off, pal. I know my way out." Turning back to Jonathan, he made a vague gesture. "Listen, uh—I know we haven't exactly been Roland and Oliver here, if you know what I mean, but...you gotta know I, um...I...."

"I know," Jonathan said with a faint smile. "And thank you."

"Yeah. Well. I guess...."

Gregor moved closer and Benny spared him a sneer. "Yeah, okay, I'm leaving already. Jack—I mean, Jonathan...." He paused, shooting a strangely defiant sideways glance at Gerta and Gregor in turn, then cleared his throat. "I'll be seeing you."

With that, he turned and moved briskly to the door, pausing only long enough to discover, to his complete unsurprise, that Gregor was close on his heels. But just before the silent giant firmly closed the door in his face, Benny caught one last glimpse of Jonathan, slumped wearily against the sofa arm, and Gerta, standing over him like a sleek cat guarding her prize catch.

Wanting nothing more than to curl up and sleep for a week, Jonathan looked up as her shadow fell across him. "You did very well, your highness," she said, taking the chair Benny had too recently vacantly.

"Do me a favor." He propped his head up, rubbing his eyes. "Don't call me that."

She shrugged with a coy smile. "You would do well to accept the inevitable. This need only be as difficult as you choose to make it."

"Why are you doing this?" he said quietly, eyes covered by a trembling hand. "What do you really want from me?"

"Only your continued cooperation. You will act and speak only as you are directed, by me and in due time, by others."

"This has nothing to do with the Royal Legation of Agraria, does it?"

Her smile widened appreciatively. "You are very astute, Dr. MacKensie. The legation, in fact, is still unaware of your existence, and quite frankly, they'd never be able to meet our price."

His head came up, revealing shock-widened eyes. "Price?"

"Your friend Mr. Benedek was quite right when he guessed that you would prove to be an invaluable propaganda tool—both ideologically as well as monetarily. The government of Czechoslovakia has expressed guarded interest in having this bothersome mystery resolved, and the true heir to the throne of Agraria revealed to the world, preferably during a press conference in Prague. No, we are not their agents. We are—what is the term? Free-lance? They have indicated to us that they will reimburse all expenses, with, of course, a small bonus, should we deliver you to them—of your own free will, of course."

"Of course," Jonathan murmured, his heart sinking as his eyes closed.

"You need to rest now," Gerta said, unzipping her purse. "We will be leaving here in a few hours for another hotel, where we will stay until we obtain the necessary visas. With luck, your friend will do nothing so foolish as to attempt to follow us."

Jonathan barely heard her, staring at the box she produced from her handbag. "That's not necessary, really," he pleaded softly.

Unswayed, she assembled the syringe and drew off a dosage from a small vial as she said calmly, "Please, humor me. It will help you sleep, and I believe you would prefer this to more conventional restraints."

Closing his eyes again, he averted his face, barely flinching as she expertly administered the injection. "Gregor, Dr. MacKensie is very tired," she said quietly, repacking her equipment as Jonathan cracked open his eyes, staring at her as he unconsciously rubbed his arm. "Please, see that he is comfortably settled."

The sedation hit him broadside as he gained his feet. His tumble barely staggered Gregor, who calmly caught and steadied him, then patiently guided his way back to the bedroom. Reality vanished the moment he fell onto the bed, taking with it his last absurd thought that he hadn't had time to brush his teeth.

She allowed him brief lucid periods, long enough to eat, bathe, and sometimes to watch TV and read newspapers, but always under the silent, watchful eye of Gregor or herself. He resisted sleep for the most part, managing a soft, but aware lassitude that at least let him get and keep his bearings. The move to the new hotel was little more than blurred fragments of being shifted from wheelchair to van and, after a short drive in heavy city traffic, back to the wheelchair and from there up to yet another luxury suite. Gerta found him fumbling through the drawers in search of hotel stationery and, without a word of reproach, ushered him back to the bed and calmly increased his dosage. When he resurfaced, in time for a dinner for which he had no appetite, not a matchbook or even an imprinted soap bar remained in the room and the telephone had been removed from the nightstand.

His sense of time had less to do with the clock as with his meals, promptly provided whether he bothered touching food or not. Neither Gerta nor Gregor objected to his insistence on being allowed to watch the news on TV, which somewhat allayed his fears as to whether the next news item would spotlight an ongoing murder investigation involving a rather infamous author and tabloid reporter.

By his best calculations, four tense days of captivity, marked by the stoic silence of his keepers, had passed before Gerta entered with the lunch tray and an announcement.

"We'll be leaving tonight." She put the glass of milk carefully into his hand as he stared at her, startled. "A commercial flight to Zurich, and from there a private jet will carry us to Prague."

"I see," he murmured, staring down at the white liquid, trembling slightly in the glass. "What...what happens then?"

She shrugged. "Quite frankly, that doesn't concern us. We have agreed to deliver you to Prague, and that is where our involvement ends."

"And if I've changed my mind?" he said suddenly, raising calm yet defiant eyes to her. "If I choose not to cooperate?"

Mildly surprised, she settled on the edge of the bed and seemed to consider. "You've been told that the consequences of such an action on your part would be quite...drastic. Is it that you don't believe me, or perhaps that you no longer care?"

"I don't trust you. I want to talk to Benedek."

As she shook her head, he pressed, "I want proof that you haven't decided not to take any chances with him. You'll have to ship me to Prague in a wooden box if I don't get that proof. I mean it."

"I'm sure you do," she said cajolingly. "But I'm afraid that Mr. Benedek is out of the country."

He straightened. "Where?"

"London, I believe. His editor sent him on assignment. The last report from our agents was that he was, ah...quite active on the social circuit there."

Jonathan fought to breathe past the tightening in his chest and throat. While part of him wished Benny well and far away, another part had hoped...hoped....

"Then I want to speak to Dr. Moorhouse," he said. "If you've kept your word and left her alone, then...I'll keep my word. I won't tell her anything."

Gerta's eyes narrowed, sizing him up. Then, nodding stiffly, she rose and left the room, returning with a telephone which she connected before handing the set to Jonathan. "You have five minutes. You will tell her that all is well, and that you will not expect to be in touch with her for at least another week."

He agreed with a nod as he punched out the well-remembered number. Exchanging painful pleasantries with the secretary ate up two of his allotted minutes, and to his chagrin, he couldn't keep the nervous quaver out of his greeting when Dr. Moorhouse finally picked up the call.

"MacKensie? You sound strange. You're not ill, are you?"

"I'm fine, Dr. Moorhouse. Really. I was just...I mean, I, uh...everything's all right there, isn't it?"

"Everything's fine." Her voice held open suspicion. "Why shouldn't it be?"

"Have you heard from Benedek?"

"As a matter of fact, he called Liz yesterday. Something about wanting access to your case files. The impertinence! MacKensie, I fail to see why you cannot seem to control that...that *parasite*."

"I'm not sure I'd want to," he murmured, heart sinking to his feet. Gerta cleared her throat softly. "Dr. Moorhouse, I...I have to go."

"MacKensie? Why on earth did you call?"

He sighed, closing his eyes as his grip tightened on the receiver. "It's not important. I...I just...goodbye, Dr. Moorhouse."

Gerta removed the telephone from his unresisting hands. She stood a moment, considering his bowed head and averted face with a taut, unamused smile. "Get some rest, Dr. MacKensie. We have a long journey ahead of us."

Two heartbeats echoed one tick of her wristwatch. She stood immobile in a boiling sea of humanity, eyes glued to the Customs Area exit, painfully aware of the passage of time. Then, finally, the grip on her heart lessened to see a familiar, harried face emerge through the doors and she hurried forward to greet him.

Six hours of nail-biting, stomach-churning anxiety crystallized into two terse words. "You're late."

"I was pedaling as fast as I could," Benedek huffed, shifting the strap of his carryall. "Besides, the jerks in Customs thought my Madonna pj's were a real hoot."

"Never mind that. The Zurich flight leaves in less than an hour."

"And you're *sure* that's the one?"

"Young man...."

"Yeah, yeah, silly question. So, c'mon—tell me. How did he sound?"

Dr. Moorhouse glanced around, then placed her hand on his arm to usher him away from the worst of the crowd. "Not well. Not well at all," she said *sotto voce*.

"At least he called," Benny sighed. "The guy's still got his head attached."

"I wish I could have told him more. Reassured him...."

"You did just fine," he said hastily. "Anything more would have gotten one or all of us into more hassles than we can handle right now. What have we got for backup?"

She indicated a direction with her head. A few paces away, a young, dark-suited man took her motion as an invitation, stepping up to them. "Mr. Benedek? I'm Evan Farrell, U.S. State Department."

Benny shook hands readily, appreciating the amiable features that overlaid a confident demeanor without masking it. "Pleased to meet you—*really*."

"As I was explaining to Dr. Moorhouse a short while ago, the State Department wants to thank you for throwing this into our laps. We've been trying to nail these jokers for over five years."

"You know them?"

"Oh, yes. They are what you might call, oh...international brokers. What usually happens is that they either detect or create a need, then step in to fill it—for a substantial fee, I might add."

"I don't get it—if you've got their m.o. down cold, why haven't you shut down their shop before now?"

"Because so far, they've committed no crimes. All their 'deliveries' have been perfectly legitimate, or at least covered by diplomatic immunity."

"Swell," Benny muttered.

"I hope you appreciate the difficult position we're in," Evan continued earnestly. "It's one thing to stop your friend from boarding that plane tonight, but he's got to say, in front of witnesses, that he's being forced to do so before I can act."

"Yeah. That's the difficult part, all right," Benny agreed with a sigh as he dug into his front pocket. "But I think this might help."

Even took the paper Benny offered, unfolding it for close study. His head snapped up in surprise even as Dr. Moorhouse edged in for a peek. "Is this genuine?"

"It'll hold up under investigation, official or otherwise," Benny demurred with a cocky smile. "That's what's important, right?"

"Right." A smile of admiration blossomed on Farrell's round face as he allowed Dr. Moorhouse to take the paper from his hand.

A sudden squawk erupted from beneath Farrell's jacket. "Excuse me," he said, removing a walkie-talkie from his belt and holding it to his ear. Dr. Moorhouse took advantage of the distraction to grab Benny's arm, holding out the piece of paper with her other hand. "Is this genuine?" she whispered, in shock.

"It's as genuine as it needs to be," he told her pointedly.

She accepted the answer reluctantly, her troubled eyes scanning the words again. Then, with a sigh, she folded it and handed it back to him. "But will it work? From what Mr. Farrell has told me, these people are extremely dangerous. If they're crossed or impeded in any way, they might react...badly."

"Don't worry. I promised J.J. I wouldn't let anything happen to you and I...."

"Not me, you idiot. I'm worried about Jonathan."

Benny nodded, ducking his head away from the anxiety shining out of an otherwise stoic face. "Yeah, I know. Believe me, I know."

"They're in the terminal now." Evan replaced the walkie-talkie. "I've instructed my men not to make a move until I give the word. And that goes for you, too. I don't want any stupid heroics."

"You know me too well," Benny retorted sarcastically. "Can I say something here? I think I got a better idea how to handle this and wipe that 'silly amateur' smirk off your face, willya? The guy they got with them may have a funny accent, but that doesn't make him James Bond. You can't go in there cold and expect him to pick up on what you're doing. But I can."

"What are you talking about?"

"Me and the prof, we've been working together a long time. We got a history, get what I'm saying?"

"No, I don't," Evan shook his head, confused.

Dr. Moorhouse interjected, "What Mr. Benedek is attempting to explain is that Dr. MacKensie is more likely to...to accept help from him rather than from a relative stranger."

"Bingo, Dr. M!"

"I don't know...."

"Give me five minutes," Benny said hastily over what looked to be a vehement refusal. "Five minutes, that's all."

"Three minutes," Evan growled after a long moment for thought.

"Four."

"Three. Not a second longer." When Benny acquiesced with a nod, Evan's glare faded. "All right. They're in a VIP lounge near International Departures. If they let you in, I'm going in with you—don't bother arguing about it. If you get into trouble, I just have one word of advice for you: hit the floor and keep your head covered. Understand?"

"Elliot Ness couldn't have put it better himself," Benny agreed with a taut smile.

"I'm going in with you," Dr. Moorhouse announced.

Evan began an instinctive protest, but Benny managed to wave him silent. It was, after all, an all-or-nothing proposition, and in the short run, they would waste more time than they had to argue down that light in the woman's eyes. Picking up on Benny's impatient gesture, Evan consulted his watch. "Come on. Tell me your plan on the way."

Despite the crowd already gathering for the evening's international departures in the main terminal, the VIP lounge was nearly deserted. Jonathan, sprawled in a black leather armchair, appeared to be engrossed in a magazine. But Gerta, relaxed in the chair opposite, noted long ago that his eyes focused past the printed page, staring at something only he could see.

Gregor approached, and bent to speak softly near the woman's ear. At her nod, he moved back to the door, nodding to another man who removed himself as quietly as he had entered.

Gerta leaned forward, studying her clasped hands for a moment. "You will be pleased to know that everything is going according to schedule."

He barely reacted, glancing at her before pulling the magazine closer.

She smiled. "Your friend Mr. Benedek has returned."

This time his full attention was hers, but only as long as it took him to look away in chagrin for having jumped at her bait.

"He arrived on the Concorde flight from London over two hours ago, although Customs cost him a considerable delay. You'll be interested to know that he was met by your colleague, Dr. Moorhouse. And a representative from the State Department."

His hand shook where it held the magazine in a white-knuckled grip. When she said no more, content merely to settle back with a smug smile, he forced himself to look up. "What will you do?"

"Nothing—yet. While it is certainly regrettable that he has chosen to ignore our cautions, there is no real problem. Your passport and visa are in perfect order. You will board the plane at the proper time, and should there be any...unpleasantness, you will simply inform all interested parties that you choose to make this journey of your own free will. It is, indeed, a marvelous opportunity to be asked to give a series of university lectures in Zurich and Geneva—is it not?"

His answer was in the way he dropped his head into his hand, rubbing hard at his temples. "You should be pleased," she informed him with a soft, triumphant smile. "You'll be able to make a proper farewell this time."

Gregor's approach distracted her. As he bent to speak lowly near her ear, she kept one eye on Jonathan's tense stare, satisfied that his pale color presaged genuine fear rather than anxious anticipation. "Yes, by all means," she said, answering Gregor in normal tones as she met MacKensie's gaze calmly. "Have them join us."

"This isn't necessary," Jonathan managed in a strained voice. "Just tell them to go away."

"I can tell them nothing," she said with a light shrug. "This you must do., and I trust you will be convincing. After all—their lives depend on it."

"You don't have to keep reminding me," he said weakly, losing what little color he had left.

"Good," she smiled. "Very good."

For a moment, the eyes he raised to her sparked with smoldering hate, but it vanished as he stiffened at the greeting that rang out in the room. "Hey, thanks, big guy—just put your tip on my tab. Gerta, sweetheart, just the ghoul I wanted to see."

"Mr. Benedek," she said graciously, rising from her chair. "How very thoughtful of you to come. I'm sure Dr. MacKensie appreciates your gesture very much. And this must be Dr. Moorhouse?"

Jonathan, who had steadfastly refused to look up, jumped out of his chair. "Dr. Moorhouse?" he gasped.

"And well you should be surprised, MacKensie," the woman snapped. "After all these years, I would think I deserve some consideration. You might have told me you were planning a vacation in Switzerland."

Aware of Gerta's hard stare on him, Jonathan cleared his throat. "It's...not a vacation, Dr. Moorhouse. I've been asked to...to do a lecture tour. Very last minute—apparently I'm filling in for...."

"Oh, spare me, MacKensie. That's not the point and you know it."

"Yes," he said quietly. "I know."

Gerta turned to the last member of the trio, her eyes narrowing with the cat-like smile growing on her face. "Mr. Farrell, isn't it?"

"You remembered," the man returned warily.

"You're a difficult man to forget," she purred. "I trust we'll be spared the, ah...unpleasantness of our last encounter."

"I trust," he agreed, grimacing with the memory of some long ago embarrassment.

"Excuse me, folks," Benny piped up. "If we're through with all the social chit-chat? We're working against a definite time limit here, y'know."

"Quite right," Gerta said, checking her watch. "Our flight will begin boarding in a few minutes."

"I'm talking about *my* time, not yours. And once you hear what I have to say, you might not care so much about when that plane leaves."

All trace of amenity vanished from her face. "What do you mean?" she demanded tautly.

"From my mouth to your ears alone. Over here?"

A significant look passed between Gerta and Gregor, ending with the woman's nod and the burly man's retreat to the doorway.

"You were specifically warned about the consequences of interference," she hissed as soon as she and Benny had moved to one corner of the room.

"Ah, as gracious as ever," he smirked, taking the paper out of his jacket pocket. "Listen, sweetheart, I'm doing you a favor. Better you get the news now than in front of your prospective clients. At least this way you can turn in the plane tickets for cash."

She scanned the sheet as he spoke, her mouth closing in tight, grim line. "This is a forgery," she spat.

"Prove it," Benny smiled softly. From another pocket, he pulled out a small packet, and waited until she'd unfolded them before continuing, "That top one—looks familiar, right?"

It was clear from her stunned expression that it was. She shuffled through the remaining few pages, then returned to the original sheet. "I don't understand," she murmured, shaking her head.

"Okay, I'll give you the thirty-second capsule version. You tracked down Jonathan MacKensie's birth certificate just fine, only you didn't go far enough. If you had, you would have found the death certificate, dated just a week later. That poor schlub over there is adopted. You've got the proof right there in your hand. His real name is Oliver Percy Andrews and he's no more the true Crown Prince of Agraria than I am."

"And you expect me to believe this? Why doesn't he know?"

"Hey, who am I to second guess grieving parents? Maybe they'd convinced themselves that it was the same baby. He's probably been using the wrong birth certificate all his life. And besides, I don't expect you to believe anything. Check it out yourself, but you'd better hurry. My editor's got this story typeset and laid-out, all ready for tomorrow's press run. It'll be in the supermarkets first thing Monday morning."

Benny caught her wrist as she crumpled the papers, holding up a warning hand as Gregor reacted. "Back off, Groucho. The lady's just had a shock. I'll get her calmed down in a minute."

"Let go of me," she growled.

He pried the sheaf from her clawed hand, only then releasing his grip. "Well?" he said, giving her a guarded yet confident look. "I'm giving you a better chance than you deserve. I didn't mention you and your little business venture in the article, but my editor has the whole story in a sealed

envelope. So you got a choice here—either take us all out in a fit of pique, or cut your losses and run like true ladies and gentlemen. What'll it be?"

Gerta's furtive glance over at Farrell prompted him to add, "Don't sweat it. He's got nothing on you unless you give it to him."

Her eyes smoldered, but a sheer effort of will kept her voice low and controlled. "I counted you as little more than a self-serving fool. I was wrong—you are neither."

"From you, words of high praise," he said with a mock nod of thanks.

"Do I act the fool and accept your word that nothing will be said?"

"Well, I kinda thought that was a given, seeing as how I'm accepting your word you won't come gunning after us."

"We do prefer not to waste our energies and resources pursuing unprofitable revenge."

"Unprofitable, eh? Well, you're not worth anything to me either, sister. So do us both a favor. There's a plane leaving in fifteen minutes—be on it."

He could have sworn that the fire in her eyes became coy and admiring, but the moment was gone as she sighed, gesturing defeat. Moving past Benny, she approached the chair where Jonathan sat rigid, instinctively clutching at the arm of the hand Dr. Moorhouse had on his shoulder. Gregor, wary and alert, edged forward, stopping at Gerta's slight gesture.

"If you'll excuse me," she said coolly, retrieving her handbag from the coffee table. "Dr. MacKensie—it has indeed been a...pleasure."

Without another word and barely a side glance at Farrell on the way out, she exited with Gregor in tow.

Jonathan stared after her, then up at Benny, looking for an answer. Farrell chose that moment to whip out his walkie talkie, making for the door at a fast trot. "Wait here!" he called in a stage whisper as he disappeared out the door.

"Where's he going?" Jonathan demanded as Benny dissolved into heartfelt laughter.

"Him? He's just making sure your girlfriend there makes her flight, that's all. And if he whispers a few sweet nothings in her ear, maybe he can persuade her to make it a real long time between round trips."

"I...I...."

"Oh, sorry, Jonny," Benny pulled a mock pout, pretending to misunderstand the man's confusion. "I guessed I messed things up for you. Gee, I know how much you were looking forward to this trip to Switzerland."

"Benedek," Dr. Moorhouse chided mildly, hard-pressed to mask her own smile.

Benny's laughter ran its course under the searching, vaguely speculative stare MacKensie fastened on him. His hand went up slowly. "May I see those?"

"Ah...." He looked to Dr. Moorhouse for help. The woman hesitated, torn. Then, with obvious reluctance, she nodded. "He has a right to know."

"Okay, but...you gotta let me explain a few things, okay?" Benny handed over the crumpled sheaf and stood back as Jonathan studied them, one by one. His expression went from bewildered to stunned and from there blank as color drained from his face. At length, he stared at one page in par-

ticular, seeming to read it five times in rapid succession as his hand began to tremble. His first attempt to speak failed. Clearing his throat, he managed weakly, "Is all this true?"

"Well...." Benny tugged on his ear, making a show of exaggerated unease. "Let's put it this way. Who do you trust more—me or your parents?"

A puzzled frown took the place of most of his shock. "My parents, of course."

"There you go," Benny grinned.

"But...but these papers...."

"Courtesy of your fifth cousin, who, I might add, was more than happy to help me out once I explained the problem and, ah...once I agreed to personally autograph his entire collection of my books—in first edition trade size, mind you. He rang up a few contacts and had them dummy up some official looking sheepskin to my specifications. I only got the photocopies of course; Chuck kept the originals in case Gerta or her ilk decide to check up on this little subterfuge."

"Chuck?" Jonathan echoed hollowly.

"Yeah, great guy. He was real tickled to find out you and he were related—he's a big fan of ours, Jack! Can you beat that? I think we can wangle ringside seats to the next family nuptials, whad-dya say?"

"Wait a minute," Jonathan protested, gesturing weakly. "This is going just a bit...fast for me right now. Could you maybe sit down and talk a little more slowly?"

"You okay, Jonny?" Benny dropped down on the coffee table, leaning forward to squint into his friend's eyes. "Whoa—I think I see cobwebs in there."

"Jonathan?" Dr. Moorhouse anxiously caught up his hand in both of hers. "Are you all right? Can we get you something?"

"No, no, I'm fine, I...I'm just confused. I didn't expect...I thought...." Clutching at Dr. Moorhouse's hand, he looked from one to the other, unable to speak. Then, suddenly, he burst into laughter.

"Uh-oh." Benny shot a wary glance at a startled Dr. Moorhouse. "The giggles. This is serious."

"No," Jonathan managed, wiping at tearing eyes as he chortled. "This is preposterous. Completely, totally, and unequivocally ridiculous! I mean, really—it started out with a princess in a picnic basket, how else could it have ended?"

"Yeah, you're right!" Benny grinned. "We've struck a blow for modern absurdity!"

"But fifth cousin? Really, Benedek, that's stretching credibility a bit far, don't you think?"

"What's not to believe? It's public record, Jack—your great-great-grandmother on your mother's side was none other than Queen Victoria herself."

"Queen Victoria?" he echoed without breath, stunned.

"Well, not as far as the world's concerned, at least for now. Oliver Percy Andrews is just a simple commoner, one of the hoi polloi." His smile faded as he gestured apologetically. "It was the only thing I could think of, Jack," he said quietly. "I had to make you useless to them. I...."

"It's all right." Jonathan gave him a strained smile. "I understand."

"I'm not so sure you do." He drew a breath and held it for a moment before releasing it in a quiet sigh. "Come Monday morning, your mom's gonna be a *National Register* headline. Oliver Percy Andrews makes his bow in paragraph five. I figured it would, well...work better that way. For you, that is. I mean, you're still gonna be in for a month or so of flashbulbs going off in your face, and you'll have to drag out of bed early for your guest shot on *Good Morning America*, but at least no one will be expecting you to sprout a crown and ermine robes on the spot, if you know what I mean."

"I think I do," Jonathan said, gazing down at the papers scattered across his lap.

When he remained silent, Benny and Dr. Moorhouse exchanged uneasy glances. "Jack?" Benedek ventured, angling for a glimpse of the man's expression. "Jonathan? Are you sure you're all right?"

Visibly distracted, MacKensie lifted a hand to his forehead, then tilted it out in mute plea. "I just...I can't believe you did this."

Guilt struck him a stomach blow, taking his breath away for a moment. Part of him wanted to spring up in righteous indignation and proclaim Jonathan MacKensie an ungrateful lout, but a healthy dose of empathy kept him in check. "Look," he said when he could speak again. "This probably doesn't mean much, all things considered, but...I'm sorry."

MacKensie's head came up, revealing confusion. "Sorry? For what?"

"For what?" he repeated incredulously. "For publicly taking your mother and father away from you, you pillock. *That's* for what."

Jonathan stared at him, a strange expression growing on his face. Suddenly, he laughed. "You thought I...oh, good lord. Benedek—I was *thanking* you!"

"Thanking me?" he frowned, puzzled.

"When I said I couldn't believe you did this, I meant that...." His chuckles faded, resolving into a quiet smile. "I meant that I couldn't believe you'd go to such extreme lengths to help me. Especially when the worst danger was to yourself."

Benny stifled an embarrassed grin, managing to look cocky instead. "Danger? The word means nothing to me, boyo. Besides, I promised, didn't I?"

"Yes, I guess you did," Jonathan agreed with another laugh. "Besides, you can't take my parents away from me. No one can. I honestly don't care what the world believes or thinks. I know the truth, and that's all that really matters."

"Yeah," Benny said brightly, as though a great truth had been revealed. "Besides, there'll be plenty of time to set the record straight after the hue and cry dies down. Blame the mix-up on bureaucratic bungling—you won't get a single raised eyebrow. And you won't have to worry about Gerta, trust me. Just tell Farrell everything that happened. No public record—he just needs it to get her visa and diplomatic status yanked."

Jonathan's eyes dimmed a little, but he mustered a smile at Dr. Moorhouse's reassuring pat on his arm. "Benedek," he said with a quiet smile. "Thank you."

"There's an echo in here," Benny cracked.

"No, I'm just trying to get it right this time. Both of you...." Gathering up Dr. Moorhouse's hand, Jonathan gave it a squeeze. "You make me proud to be a pillock." A thought struck, bringing a puzzled frown. "Where did you pick up that word?"

"Pillock?" Benny exaggerated a shrug as his eyes danced. "Just a little term of endearment that Di kept whispering in my ear."

Jonathan nodded incredulously, not bothering to hide his smile. "You know—I actually believe that."

"Whoa." Benny gave Dr. Moorhouse a confidential look. "That cinches it. Your fair-haired boy's in need of serious rest. And I think I got the cure. There's this major league psychic fair in Miami Beach this weekend...."

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Dr. Moorhouse enthused. "I've long thought that you could use some serious grounding in the parapsychological field."

From the slight arching of his eyebrows, it was clear that MacKensie also thought it was a terrific idea, though Benny was sure that the professor's mind was less on psychic matters than on the potential scenery on the beach.

"Great. We've got a some serious partying to do! We're gonna celebrate your descendency to the ranks of the common folk. And it was mighty dull without you, Jack—welcome back."

Jonathan took the hand Benny offered him in a warm, firm grip as he said fervently, "Believe me—there's no other place I'd rather be."

© [M.D. Bloemker](#). The contents of this page may *not* be copied or reproduced without the author's express written permission.