

## Over the Rainbow

*A Shadow Chasers Fantasy*

By Jane Tesh

Edgar Benedek had had a long day. He was tired, hot, and thirsty; the monster in Wichita had been a bust; Jonathan had fought him every step of the way; and now they were driving down an apparently endless highway in the most desolate corner of Kansas. He had entrusted the wheel to Jonathan only because it was the straightest stretch of road he'd ever seen, and they'd been up very late tracking the non-existent beast. Benny was about to fall asleep. Jonathan had insisted they drive, only one of the many arguments they'd had over the past few days.

Benny glanced at his friend, noting the serious frowning expression that seemed permanently encamped, and wondered how he was going to put up with MacKensie today. Which of his annoying traits could he put to use to goad Jonathan into a response? He'd already tried the radio, but it crackled with an abundance of static, too much even for Benny's ears. Maybe if he beat out a little rhythm on the dashboard.

"Do you mind?" Jonathan said irritably. The hot air tangled his already disheveled long light brown hair, and it kept getting in his eyes. "I'm trying to concentrate."

"On what, the road? There's nothing to it, Jack. Why do you think you're sittin' over there?"

Jonathan gritted his teeth. "If I hear one more crack about my driving ability."

"What driving ability?"

"Benedek--"

"It is really dumb to spend our lives in a car when we could be flying in air conditioned comfort, slurping down martinis--"

"And heaving into paper bags. No, thank you."

"Jack, I know this great hypnotist who could put you under and rid you of your fear of flying, bud. Calls himself Elmo the Human Eyeball. Wouldn't take five minutes."

"I don't hypnotize."

"Oh, ho! I suppose you've conveniently forgotten Rockville?"

"Since your word is all I have to go on regarding that incident, you'll forgive me for being slightly skeptical."

Benny put his feet up on the dashboard and leaned back comfortably. "I got it all figured, Jack. Your trouble is you're still too uptight. We been chasing shadows for what, almost a year now? And you still go to pieces on me."

"And you still believe the most outlandish nonsense," Jonathan returned, provoked. "Anything for a story."

"Yeah, well, it beats kowtowing to Dr. Moorhouse over the slightest hint of money. At least I don't have to suck up to anybody for my groceries."

Jonathan's dark eyes were smoldering. "You're just taking advantage of other people and their suffering. That garbage you write about Siamese twins and alligator men, for heaven's sake! How do you think those people feel?"

"They love it, Jon-boy! They can't wait to see their pictures in the Register. Whoa, stay on the road, will ya?"

"I'm getting sick and tired of your wild ideas," said Jonathan, his attention back on his driving. "A monster in Wichita! What a waste of time."

"Hey, I still got some great headlines: Mystery Beast Vanishes. Desert Tracks Reveal Traces of Ancient Monster."

"There are no monsters. There are no ghosts. There are no zombies."

"You've met all three, Jack." He sighed as the car swerved. "You want me to drive? I think I should drive."

"It's this wind," said Jonathan. "It's picked up quite a bit." He held on to the steering wheel tightly, glancing anxiously at the sky. "Maybe we should have flown."

"Fine with me, pal. You're the guy with all the phobias."

"And that's another thing," Jonathan said heatedly. "I do not have phobias! You're the one who's afraid of heights."

"Once, just once, I'd like to see you enjoy some phenomena," said Benny, warming to his theme. "Just jump in with both feet and damn the consequences. Just go with the psychic flow."

"Well, just once, I'd like to see you approach things scientifically."

"Can't be done, bud. Life's too short. You gotta have fun."

"Your idea of fun usually ends with me in the hospital." The car swerved violently as a gust of wind hit it broadside. "Good heavens!" Jonathan exclaimed, fighting to keep the car on the road. "What was the weather report for today?"

"Sunny and warm with occasional wind sheers," Benny replied, bracing himself as another gust socked the car sideways. "Yow! How're you doin', Jonny?"

Jonathan gripped the wheel. "Maybe we'd better stop until this blows over."

"Stop where? There's nothing for miles. It's getting darker, too."

"Maybe we'll go on."

"Yeah, we can outrun this cloud," said Benny. His eyes widened as he saw the approaching funnel. "But we can't outrun that one!"

"Good God!" Jonathan slammed on the brakes. "Get out of the car!"

"What?"

"Get out of the car! We'll be safer in a ditch. Hurry!"

Benny scrambled out, feeling the wind tug wildly at his clothes. He stumbled and would have been rolled along like a tumbleweed had Jonathan not grabbed his arm. There was a terrible thunderous roar, an eerie rushing noise as if some huge mad engine were bearing down on them. They flung themselves on the ground, choking in the clouds of dirt and dust.

Benny felt as if the wind would pull the bones from his body. "Jonathan!"

"I've got you!" came the muffled reply, and he felt the strong grip tighten. "Hang on!"

"It's pulling me up!"

Jonathan flung an arm around the smaller man. The wind was incredibly strong and the noise was deafening. It was trying to pull Benny up! The wind tore at them frantically, but Jonathan refused to let go. Then something very hard struck his head and the world went black.

Benny woke suddenly, blinking in the bright sunshine. Cautiously, he sat up, feeling for injuries. No, he was okay. This did not look like the highway, however. The grass was very green. Large flowers swayed in the pleasant breeze. Birds were singing in a beautiful misty

forest just beyond the grassy plain. Staggering to his feet, Benny gazed around in astonishment. Whoa, this was some high-powered dream. Cartoon colors. Nifty scenery. Must be some heavy duty drugs they were using in the hospital today. A pleasant little hallucination. He grinned at the rabbits who were waving at him from a thick patch of pink clover. Hi, guys.

He rubbed the back of his neck and stretched a little. All systems go. He then heard a groan and found Jonathan under a near-by tree, just sitting up, blood oozing from a gash in his forehead.

“Woo, boy, that is one nasty-lookin’ cut, Jack,” he said, coming to give assistance. “Let me see.”

“Handkerchief,” said Jonathan, fumbling in his pocket.

“I got it. Here you go.”

Jonathan winced as he pressed the cloth to his head. “Is the storm over?”

“Yeah, and we are havin’ one heck of a drug-induced fantasy, color by Deluxe. Wait a second.” Benny looked around. “We can’t both be having the same dream.”

“Where are we?” Jonathan asked, getting up unsteadily. “This doesn’t look like the highway.”

Benny walked down the grassy slope and stared in all directions. “Well, you got your basic cornfields, a forest, flowers, shade trees – whoa! I gotta feelin’ we’re not in Kansas any more.” Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the rabbits playing jump rope in the clover. Knowing Jonathan wasn’t up to this sight just then, he steered his friend in the other direction. “Suppose we find someone and ask. How’s your head?”

Jonathan removed the handkerchief. “It’s stopped bleeding. I don’t understand all this. We were on the world’s flattest highway. And where’s our car?”

“Does this look like a path to you?” asked Benny.

“Yes, sort of.”

“Okay, good. We’ll try it.”

“I wouldn’t go that way if I were you,” said a deep voice.

They halted.

“You don’t want to run into the Merry-Go-Round Mountains,” the voice continued. “It’s true they’re made of rubber, but they’re very difficult to cross.”

“Who said that?” Jonathan asked, standing very still.

“Sounded like it came from that tree,” said Benny.

“Of course it did,” said the voice. “I just thought I’d give you two travelers some kind advice.”

Jonathan grasped Benny’s arm. “Benedek,” he said in a voice that was much too calm, “a tree is talking to us.”

“Uh, yeah, and thanks for the tip,” Benny said to the tree, which had a large jolly face and two bulging eyes. “Which way would be the best way to go?”

“Depends on where you’re headed,” said the tree. “Loonville? Bunbury? Bourne?”

Trying to look as though he talked to trees every day, Benny said, “I guess we’re lookin’ for the quickest way outa here.”

“I’d head east,” said the tree, pointing a leafy branch. “That way.”

“Thanks very much,” said Benny. “Come on, Jon.”

"What is going on?" Jonathan said in a voice rising with panic. "Did you see that? That tree had a face!"

"Yeah, friendly guy, wasn't he?"

"That's not the point!" he put a hand to his forehead and spoke calmly to himself. "You've hit your head. You're not seeing too well. This is all some absurd dream."

"If you say so, bud," Benny grinned, admiring the bright scenery. "But a more imaginative guy like me might have another theory."

"I don't want to hear it."

Benny whistled "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." "Kansas, a tornado, a magical land that makes Disneyland look like Beirut, talkin' trees. All we have to do is follow the yellow brick road. Next stop: the Emerald City."

"What are you talking about?"

"We're in Oz, Jack."

Jonathan stared at him and then began to laugh. "Benedek, you are unbelievable! Oz! Why not heaven? You seemed to think that's where we were before."

"Everything fits, J.J. We're magically carried off by a big wind and land in Oz, just like in the movie," Benny said, gesturing enthusiastically.

"We may have been carried off by the wind, but we have landed in a hospital, and any moment now, I'm going to wake up and wring your neck."

"Doesn't it look like Oz to you? No, I forgot. Mr. PBS probably never even saw the movie."

Jonathan paused, wondering how he was going to get through this. Once an idea took hold of Benny, it was almost impossible to redirect him. The trouble was, the countryside did look like the illustrations in the Oz books.

Taking advantage of Jonathan's hesitation, Benny added, "Here's a nice poppy field we're gonna stay out of, and over there's a bird building a house – with a hammer. I know the movie by heart, Jack. We'll be okay. This'll be fun."

"But the movie is based on just part of one book," Jonathan said. "There are fourteen Oz books."

"How many?" Benny said, surprised.

"Fourteen. Well, actually, there are forty, but Baum wrote the first fourteen. My father read most of them to me. The Road to Oz, Lost Princess of Oz, and so on."

As usual, Benny was impressed by his friend's store of odd knowledge. "Forty! Well, I've seen the movie about forty times. That oughta help."

"Not necessarily," said Jonathan. "The movie leaves out a great deal, like the trip to the Quadling Country, for instance."

"So what else do you remember?" Benny asked.

"Not very much – except everything talks." He took a nervous glance back at the tree, now a distant form. "All the animals talk, practically everything's magic, and people are always being turned into things – why am I having this conversation. This isn't Oz!"

"Okay, then, what is it?"

Jonathan looked around, groping for an explanation. "It's well, I – maybe it's a theme park! Wasn't there one somewhere called Land of Oz? Maybe that's what this is."

Benny chuckled. "A theme park. Yeah, there was one – in North Carolina. Went

bankrupt. Those Munchkin unions are tough.”

“Well, why couldn’t this be another one? That makes sense. All we have to do is find the main gate. It must be around here somewhere.”

“Oh, ho, better face it, Jack. We are book number forty-one in the old series: The Shadow Chasers in Oz. All we have to do is find the yellow brick road. Then we reach the Emerald City, do a favor for the wizard, tap our heels together three times, and we’re back home. We gaze at Dr. M and say, ‘And you were there, too!’ As the Wicked Witch of the West, no doubt. Jordy’d make a great Cowardly Lion. Let’s see, and theo as the Scarecrow, and--”

“This isn’t Oz,” Jonathan repeated slowly and carefully, as if Benny were three years old. “Oz does not exist. It is a make believe place. It isn’t real.”

“Hey, I for one believe in Oz,” Benny said cheerfully. “Oz, wonderland, Narnia, all those places.”

“Wonderland was Alice’s dream, and the Narnia series is religious allegory,” Jonathan argued. “No wonder you’re so bizarre! You can’t separate fact from fiction.” Again he put his hand to his head where a dull pain was pushing forward. “I’m sure there’s a logical explanation for all this.”

“Sure, pal. Suppose you explain the jack o’ lantern comin’ up the hill?”

“Oh, God.”

The creature approaching was tall and gangly with a grotesque jack o’ lantern for a head. It moved in a jerky disjointed fashion that was comical rather than menacing, but Jonathan moved back, pulling Benny with him.

“What’s the matter?” Benny asked, fascinated by the creature. “Will it bite?”

Jonathan couldn’t get his voice to work. He had been able to maintain some sanity to this point, but the figure coming toward them was Jack Pumpkinhead, a main character in several Oz books. It wasn’t possible! This had to be a dream, a hallucination.

“Greetings, strangers!” said the jack o’ lantern. “Lovely day, isn’t it?”

“The best,” Benny answered, grinning. “I thought we’d meet the Scarecrow first, but you’ll do. Are you off to see the wizard?”

“Not today,” he said pleasantly, cocking his huge head and peering at them from the holes carved in the pumpkin. “He’s off to Pingaree Island for the coronation of Prince Inga. I’m Jack Pumpkinhead, at your service.” He extended a long thin hand made of sticks.

“Just call me Benny,” Benny replied, shaking hands. “The fella makin’ gasping noises is Jonathan. Correct me if I’m wrong, but this is Oz, isn’t it?”

“Why, of course!” said the jack o’lantern. “The Winkie Country, to be precise. Welcome, welcome.”

“Thanks very much,” said Benny. “Are we anywhere near the Emerald City?”

“You are not far,” said Jack.

“It’s very important that we get there. Could you show us the way?”

The pumpkinhead tilted, thinking. “The wizard won’t be back for several days, but I’m sure Ozma could help you.”

“Ozma?” said Benny, puzzled.

“Princess of Oz,” Jonathan put in faintly. “Rules the whole place.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. Sounds great. So, what do you say, Mr. Pumpkinhead?”

“I would go with you,” said the creature, “but I’m expected at the Tin Woodman’s castle

tonight. Let me find a paper wasp and I'll draw you a map."

As the awkward figure lumbered off into the fields, Benny turned shining eyes to Jonathan. "Is this a story or what? Oz Exists!" he drew excited headlines in the air. "Fantasy World a Reality! Am I gonna make a fortune? Pinch me!"

"I'd like to smack you," said Jonathan recovering some of his color.

"Now do you believe me? We are in Oz, J.J. O-Z, Oz. We have boldly gone where no man has gone before!"

"It's just not possible," Jonathan said, a pleading tone to his voice.

"You recognized that critter, didn't you?"

"Yes, it's Jack Pumpkinhead, but he can't be real!"

"I shook hands with Harry Halloween there, pal. He's real, all right."

The creature made its awkward way back to them, holding a large insect that buzzed angrily. Its wings were white sheets of paper. "I don't have a pencil," he apologized.

Silently, Jonathan handed over his pen. The jack o' lantern carefully drew some lines and squiggles on the insect's ring wing and handed it to Benny.

"Look at this, Jon. We're near the Wise Acres! Can you beat that? We just follow this river to Lake Quad and bingo, we're there?"

"Do we have to carry the insect?" Jonathan inquired, still striving for calm.

"Nah, just this wing, see?" Benny tore it off. "He's got plenty more. Thanks, Jack." He let the paper wasp go, and it flew off, buzzing loudly.

"Good luck," said the creature, shaking Benny's hand once more. "Good day to you both," he called cheerfully, swinging on his lopsided way.

"Nice guy for a squash," Benny commented. "Did he say he was going to the Tin Woodman's castle? I didn't know he had one."

Jonathan nodded, watching the odd figure disappear around the bend. "The Tin Woodman was made ruler of the Winkie Country after successfully defeating the Wicked Witch of the West."

"You are better than a Michelin Guide, Jonny."

"Benedek, I don't really think--"

"Now don't go off the deep end just yet," said Benny. "For the moment, assume everything is real. Even if it's a theme park, everybody's got to abide by the rules, right? Stay in character? You keep yourself busy trying to remember what went on in those books. It might come in handy."

Jonathan took a deep breath to steady himself. "All right," he said. "Which way do we go?"

"To the Emerald City, as fast as lightning!"

"Chapter Seven: Lost in Oz," Benny remarked several hours later as they trudged along. "I don't get it. In the movie, it took about an hour to get to Emerald City."

"We're on the other side," Jonathan said patiently. "Dorothy landed in the Munchkin Country to the east. We're in the Winkie Country. That's west." He rubbed his forehead. "I'm really dizzy. Let's stop for a while and look at that map again."

"What, your head givin' you trouble?" Benny asked.

“Just a little. I’ll sit h--”

“Don’t sit on me!” said a shrill voice, and Jonathan leaped up. An angry-looking rock glowered at him balefully. “I’m here, minding my own business, basking in the sun, and everybody who comes by wants to make me their favorite chair!”

“I’m sorry,” Jonathan stammered.

“Benny gave a low whistle. “Gee, don’t you just hate it when everybody takes you for granite?”

The rock looked at Benny approvingly. “Well said, sir! I am indeed the finest feldquartz and redstone. I do not wish to be covered up by anyone’s posterior!”

“Okay, okay, no harm done.”

“I’m very sorry,” said Jonathan.

“Apology accepted,” said the rock.

“Do you suppose you could tell us where we are?” Benny asked it. “We were headed for the Emerald City, but I’m pretty sure we made a wrong turn somewhere.”

“I am not an information bureau,” the rock said. “You are in Quadling Country, that’s all I know.”

“Ornery little pebble, isn’t he?” Benny remarked.

“We are way off course,” said Jonathan. “The Quadling Country is to the south.” His head was aching so fiercely now, he could hardly keep his eyes open. “Could you point us north?” he asked the rock. “Not point – I mean, I know you can’t – could you direct us northward?” I’m talking to a rock, he thought. I am talking to a rock.

“You’re asking me?” said the rock in a belligerent manner. “I told you I don’t know anything. I just like to bask in the sun, so if you don’t mind, you’re blocking my light.”

“Yes, but--”

“Save it, Jon,” said Benny. “It’s like talkin’ to a stone wall, know what I mean?” He led Jonathan away. “Let’s try this path. Some rocks are cranky this time of day. Must not be getting enough minerals in his diet. We’ll find an agreeable tree or something. Yo!” he exclaimed suddenly. “My camera! I forgot I had my camera! I oughta be takin’ pictures of this.” He leaned down to pull the small camera from his sock. The camera sprouted legs and ran from him.

“I’m gone!” it shouted merrily. “Gone in a flash!”

“Hey!” said Benny, chasing after it. It turned and flashed him in the eye. “Ow! Sheesh!” The camera ran on, laughing. Benny came back to Jonathan. Rubbing his eyes. “Ow, when they said totally automatic, they meant it. What made it do that, Jon?”

“Occasionally, inanimate objects that come to Oz take on a life of their own,” he replied. “I remember a record player in one story. . .” His voice trailed off.

Benny could tell Jonathan was losing it. His friend’s eyes were getting larger and more bewildered. “Come on, this looks like a good place,” he said, spying a patch of bright green grass under another tree. “Let’s take five.” He checked to make sure it was an ordinary tree and sat down. Jonathan sat down beside him and put his head in his hands as if trying to shut off the scene. Deciding it was time for a little subterfuge, Benny remarked, “I tell you, Jon-boy, I am beginning to feel really strange about all this.”

Jonathan raised his head. “Benedek,” he said, concerned.

“I mean, this is really screwy,” he said, keeping his face averted. “Talkin’ rocks, rubber mountains, my camera going AWOL. Maybe somebody slipped us some magic mushrooms. Maybe I’m just going crazy.”

"No, you're not," said Jonathan. "I'm seeing the same things, aren't I? There has to be an explanation. We just haven't found it yet."

"I dunno, Jack. It was a lot of fun at first, but now I don't feel so hot."

"Look, we are going to get out of here," said Jonathan, sounding more like himself. "All we have to do is stay calm. We stay calm, we use our heads, we'll figure this out."

"I hope so, pal," Benny said with a sigh, wondering if he'd laid it on too thick. No, Jon was in control now, though he still looked a bit lost. Well, they were lost. He was having the time of his life, but it would be nice to have a beer and some fries. Probably a beer tree around here somewhere, a talking beer tree – no, a beer barrel. And he needed to check in with the Register. This was going to be one hell of a story – if they ever got home.

"Benedek," Jonathan said seriously. "I know I've been a little unsettled by all this, but I'm fine now, really, and we're going to find a way out of here. I don't want you to worry about going crazy, because first of all, you're already crazy, and second, this is your kind of place. It's bright, it's loud, and everybody talks in puns. You should feel right at home."

"Well, I do, sorta," said Benny, still keeping up the façade. "But I don't want to be stuck here forever."

"We aren't stuck here forever," said Jonathan. "We've gotten out of worse scrapes, haven't we? What about Whitewood? That was a close call." He paused. "You don't suppose this is another asylum, and all the patients are acting out 'The Wizard of Oz'?"

"That doesn't explain the tree, J.J. Or our friendly little boulder back there." There was a faint rumble of thunder and rain began to fall. "Could be worse. Could be raining," Benny remarked as they huddled further under the tree. "I thought the sun always shone in Oz. It did in the movie."

"Would you please get off the movie?" Jonathan said. "We may not be in a real place, but we're not in any MGM Production."

"Do you suppose this rain is alive, too?" Benny asked curiously, holding out a hand. "Nah. Plain old rain. You know, if Dorothy had met the witch on a day like today, it would've saved her a lot of trouble."

"If I'd stayed out of a certain cemetery, I would've saved my self a lot of trouble, too," Jonathan muttered under his breath.

The rain lasted only a few minutes, and the sun came out.

"That wasn't so bad," said Benny. "Ready to – whoa, who's the good-looking doll in the fancy clothes?"

Jonathan saw a slim young woman come dancing up from the woods. Clouds of golden hair formed a halo around her small sweet face. She was dressed in filmy silks of all colors. He stared, blinking to clear his rapidly clouding vision. "It's Polychrome," he said in a voice faint with disbelief.

"Polly who?"

"Polychrome, the Rainbow's daughter." He got to his feet. Of all the characters in the Oz books, she had been the one who most intrigued him as a child, a lovely multicolored spirit who often recklessly left her palace in the sky to wander the earth.

"Oh, yeah?" said Benny, interested. "Can she lead us to the pot of gold? Jonathan!" he said suddenly as his friend swayed. "Hang on, bud!" He grasped him by the arm.

"My head," he murmured.

"Is it worse? Oh, brother. Maybe Miss Technicolor can help. Yo, miss! Miss Rainbow!"

The young woman twirled their way, her violet eyes widening. "My goodness," she said.

"Who are you?"

"My name's Benny, and this is Jonathan," Benny answered. "Is there a doctor anywhere around here? Any place we could go for some help?"

"Oh, my, no," she said. "There are no doctors in Oz. Nobody ever gets sick."

"Not ever?" Benny said in surprise.

"They don't die, either," Jonathan muttered, rubbing his head.

"Boy, the insurance salesmen around here must be goin' nuts," Benny remarked. "Look, miss, um--"

"I'm Polychrome," she said, concerned eyes on Jonathan. "The Rainbow's daughter."

"Got it in one, Jonny. Is there someplace my friend could lie down and rest?" he asked the girl. "He's got a major league headache."

"Oh, my, I'm so sorry," said the young woman, all sympathy. "There's a very nice family living near-by. I'm sure they'll be glad to help."

"That would be great, thank you," said Benny.

"I'll lead the way," she said, skipping before them.

"A very nice family," Jonathan repeated, trying to stay upright. "A very nice family of what, I wonder?"

"Pal, at this point, they could be cabbages for all I care. You look like you been rode hard and put away wet."

"If this headache would just go away," said Jonathan, massaging his temples. "I can't see straight."

"Well," said Benny, slowing his steps, "I don't think you want to, bud."

They had rounded a corner and had come to a little red house. Polychrome was talking to a large pig who was leaning out the window. The pig looked in their direction, smiled, and a hoof. Benny waved back, attempting a cheerful grin. "It's the Porkers, Jack, Mr. and Mrs. Don't look for any bacon with our eggs in the morning." Jonathan's eyes were glazing over. "Don't conk out on me yet, Jon," he warned.

Polychrome came skipping back to take Jonathan's other arm. "There's a comfortable bed and some nice herb tea waiting, Jonathan. I do hope you'll feel better soon."

"Thank you," he said. He was trying very hard to keep a grip on reality, but it was difficult when one was shaking hands with a large upright pig wearing red overalls. He managed to hold in a sneeze, not wanting to offend his host.

"Come right in, sir, come in," said the pig.

The little house was surprisingly clean, the rooms painted red. The bed was not straw, as he expected, but a regular four-poster with red sheets and blankets. Jonathan sank down gratefully, resting his aching head on the pillow. He was dimly aware of Benny removing his shoes, of Polychrome's anxious little face hovering overhead, and then everything faded into darkness.

"This is real nice of you folks," said Benny, pulling up the covers.

The pig handed him a cloth to use as a bandage. "My wife is brewing some tea," he told Benny. "We have little use for medicines here, but occasionally one of the children stubs a toe or bangs into something."

"He'll be okay," said Benny, noticing the rainbow girl was still hovering. "We've come a long way and things are different here."

The pig pulled up a red chair and invited Benny to sit down. "Where are you from, my friend?"

"Georgetown," said Benny, choosing the simplest. "Don't suppose you've heard of it. It's not in Oz."

The pig shook his head. "But I have traveled very little. Where are you bound?"

"We're off to see the wizard," Benny grinned, having waited all day to use that line. "But I think we're off course."

Polychrome floated over. "Your friend seems to be sleeping," she said to Benny worriedly. "But he is awfully pale. Will he be all right?"

"Sure," said Benny, amused to find the MacKensie attraction worked even with fantasy women. "He's real tough."

"You say you are traveling north?" she asked. "Are you on a quest?"

"Nah, we're just tryin' to get home, like the story says. Got any ruby slippers on ya?"

The girl looked puzzled. "Ruby slippers?"

"You must be in a later chapter," said Benny, unconcerned.

"I don't know about ruby slippers," she said, "but if you're trying to find your way, perhaps Glinda could help you."

"The Good Witch? Big sparkly dress? Rides around in a soap bubble?" Benny was interested. "Yeah, bring her on." Seeing he had further confused his new companions, he added, "Where can I find her?"

"This is her country," the pig said proudly. "A few day's journey should bring you to her castle."

"I'll be happy to guide you," said Polychrome with another fond glance at Jonathan. "The way is perilous, but with a true heart and hope, we can succeed."

"My thoughts exactly," said Benny.

Jonathan opened his eyes, gazing sleepily at the red flowered wallpaper. Someone had taken off his jacket and tie. He felt very relaxed, and his headache was gone.

"Good morning, sir. How do you feel?" said a little squeaky voice.

Jonathan turned his head and found himself eye to eye with a small pink piglet whose little bead eyes and pink snout were peering over the edge of the bed.

"Oh," he said faintly. "Just fine, thank you."

"That's good," said the piglet. "I'll go tell Daddy."

Jonathan lay very still. Was this the same dream? Was he never going to wake up? After a while, he cautiously pulled himself up to a sitting position, leaning back on the red pillows.

"Benedek?" He looked around worriedly.

"Good morning, sir!" said the large pig in a jovial voice. "Glad to see you feeling better."

"Thank you," said Jonathan, accepting for the moment that pigs could talk. He sneezed. "Excuse me, please. My friend--?"

"He's out in the garden this morning," said the pig. "Here, have some tea."

Jonathan took the red teacup and thanked the pig. He took a cautious sip.

"Breakfast will be ready soon," said the pig. "I'm sure you're hungry."

"I'd really like to talk to my friend," said Jonathan, attempting to get out of bed. The little red room reeled drunkenly, and he felt a strong hoof on his arm.

"You may be a bit dizzy still," said the pig. "Lie down. I'll fetch your friend."

Benny was out in the garden talking to the flowers. "So what you're sayin' is, Glinda is the Good Witch of the South, and there was a completely different Good Witch of the North?"

"That's right," the flowers chirped.

"So the movie just combined the two. Wow, learn something new every day."

"Benny!" the pig called. "Your friend's awake."

"Be right there," he called back. To the flowers, he said, "Catch you later, buds."

He jogged to the house. He and the pig stared at the bed. It was empty.

"Where'd he go?" Benny asked, surprised.

The pig was just as startled. "He was right here! I told him to lie down while I went to call for you."

"Was he okay?" Benny asked, looking around the small room, perplexed.

"A bit dizzy, but – but this is terrible," the pig moaned. "Evil magic has been at work! Something dreadful has happened, I just know it."

Benny looked under the bed. "What do you mean, evil magic?"

"Many powerful sorcerers try to take over Oz," the pig replied, wringing his hooves. "They work all sorts of fearful spells."

"You're saying somebody or something spirited Jonathan away?"

The pig nodded. "Does your friend have any special powers or magical objects?"

"He's just your ordinary straight-laced anthropologist," Benny replied, becoming more and more concerned. Up to now, this had all been a lot of fun, a real adventure, but the thought of Jonathan out there along among all these strange talking creatures was making him a little nervous. "Look, I gotta find him and fast. What's the quickest way to Glinda's castle?"

"I'll go, Daddy, I'll go!" squeaked the little pig. "Let me! Let me! I've always wanted an adventure!"

"Francis, you're far too young," his father said.

"Please, please, please!" Francis squealed. "I want to help Benny!"

"I appreciate the offer, kid," said Benny, "but maybe your dad's right."

"Pleeeeeease," said Francis. "You gotta take me. I know the way to Glinda's castle."

"How do you know that?" his father asked sternly.

Francis looked down at his toes. "I've been as far as the Laughing Meadow."

The pig sighed, exasperated with his child's behavior. Benny shrugged. "Kids today. You just never know."

"Very well," said the pig. "Since you've been that far, you may go. But be careful."

The piglet danced about the room. "Adventure! Adventure! Wheeee!"

Sheesh, thought Benny. Jonathan's missing, and I've got a hyperactive hambone for a guide. "Well, come on, Frank, let's hit the road."

The piglet trotted along beside him, talking constantly. "I'm so glad you agreed to take me along! I never get to do anything. Daddy thinks I'm too young, but I know lots of things."

Glinda is really beautiful. I can't wait to see her. You'll like her, Benny."

"Yeah, sure." Well, Benedek, you're always wanting excitement, something new. But, aside from the movie, you don't know a thing about this place. Jonathan's the one with all the info, and where the hell is he? This is beginning to pale just a little. "Say, Francis, is there anything really bad that could happen? I know you guys don't die, but what about pain? Any chance of that?"

"More than likely your friend has been transformed into something else," the piglet replied. "But never fear. Glinda can restore him to his former self."

"Does that go on a lot around here?"

"Oh, yes. All the time."

"Oughta be a law," Benny grumbled. He knew how he'd react if he found he'd been changed into something else. It'd make a great story. But Jonathan would have full-fledged hysteria. "Come on, let's speed up the pace. What sort of things are we talkin' here?"

"Well, I remember Woot the Wanderer was turned into a green monkey, and our own lovely Princess Ozma was once a golden peach pit."

"Two outstanding choices."

"The evil magician Ubu was changed into a dove, but he liked it so much, he stayed a dove. And Ozma herself was once a boy."

"Yup, this is real National Register country," said Benny. "Maybe I could set up my own branch office."

"What's a National Register?" asked Francis.

"That's something a lot of people would like to know, Porky."

Jonathan blinked. He'd been sitting in bed, hadn't he? Now he was sitting in what appeared to be a cavern. He still had the red teacup in his hand, so he set it down and carefully stood up. It was a cavern, all dark stone and musty smell. Part of him said, this is it, give up, curl into a ball and howl, while the other part tried to be more courageous. Come on, MacKensie! You can get through this! Benedek is counting on you.

Yes, but where was Benny? Where was the pig? He'd be glad to see even a friendly pig face.

"Ah-haaahh!" screeched a voice.

Coming toward him was a sour-faced little man with a fat body and spindly arms and legs. He had a plume of white hair and a long tangled white beard that came to a point just below his waist. Good heavens! Jonathan recognized this character. The Nome King! He was always trying to take over Oz, and though he made a great show, Jonathan recalled he was basically harmless if incredibly bad-tempered.

"Ah-haaahh!" he screeched again. "There you are! I knew my magic would bring you here. Now we'll see what Glinda has to say. Thinks she'll outsmart me, does she? Well, I've got you this time!" he bounced up and down in triumph.

Jonathan had reached his limit. "Now look here," he said sternly, advancing. "I want to know why I'm here and what you're up to. And then I want you to send my back to – to that pig's house."

The little man gave a jump and moved back. "Don't come near me! I am the Nome King, ruler of the caverns, the Metal Monarch, the soon-to-be-conqueror of Oz!"

"No, you're not," said Jonathan. "You never did succeed, and you won't this time, either."

I don't know who you think I am, but I'm not playing this game any more."

"Back, back! Stay back!" the little man said. "My magic confines you to this space. You can't fool me! Even in that disguise, I know the great and powerful wizard."

"The wizard?" Jonathan echoed. "Of Oz? You think I'm the wizard?" He burst into laughter. "This is too much! Benedek, I wish you were here to hear this."

His laughter incensed the Nome King further. "I knew it, I knew it!" he exclaimed in a frenzy. "Only the wizard would laugh in such dire peril!"

"Oh, give it a rest," said Jonathan, still chuckling. "I'm not the wizard. I'm just a traveler. I don't know what sort of hocus-pocus you used, but you got the wrong person. Now send me back."

"Never, never, never!" he raged and spouted a long string of nonsense words.

"All right, I'll find my own way," said Jonathan. He started to move forward and bumped hard against an invisible surface. "What the--?" He tried another direction and smacked against another wall.

"Hee, hee!" the Nome King laughed. "You're trapped! I told you my magic would keep you here. And here you'll stay until you tell me the secrets of your black bag of magic!"

After several unsuccessful tries, Jonathan realized he was indeed trapped behind invisible walls. He glared at the little creature capering with glee. "Let me out!"

"Never, never, never!" he sang. "Tell me the secrets of your black bag, and I might let you go."

"You can see I don't have any sort of bag," Jonathan said, exasperated. "For the last time, I am not the wizard!"

The little man spun about. "Glinda can do nothing now that I have you in my power. Soon I will rule all of Oz!"

"Fine," said Jonathan. "Wonderful. Why don't you give her a call? Let's get this straightened out."

Laughing madly, the Nome King danced away. Jonathan sat down on the ground and leaned back against one of the invisible walls, trying to think. Oddly enough, he didn't feel his usual panic. He needed to stay calm and find some way out.

I'll panic later, he decided. Now what do I remember about the Nome King? He had an irrational fear of something – what was it? If he thinks I'm the wizard, I may have to act like one to get away. And what was happening to Benny?

Jonathan is going to be completely nuts, Benny thought as he and Francis hurried along a pathway that led through golden fields and meadows bright with blue and red flowers. Fruitcake City. I never should have left him alone and with a head injury, too. I can see it now. Oh, gee, sorry, Dr. M. We took a wrong turn. Flat Tire on the Road to Oz. Jonathan's okay. He's been turned into a teapot, but other than that, he's fine, just fine.

Jon-boy, wherever or whatever you are, hang tough and handle it, pal. I'm doin' the best I can to find you.

"Hungry, Benny?" Francis asked, trotting along cheerfully.

"Yeah, sure. Is there anything we can eat that won't object?"

The piglet indicated a road sign. "We're coming to Bunbury. There's plenty to eat there."

"How much further to Glinda's castle?"

“Oh, it’s a longway yet,” said Francis.

“Isn’t there any way to call her? When Dorothy fell asleep in the poppy field, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man hollered for help, and Glinda heard them.”

Francis frowned and wrinkled his little snout. “I don’t remember that, Benny.”

“Sure you do! It’s a big scene in the movie. Glinda makes it snow, and the Lion wakes up and makes a crack about the weather. . .” he trailed off, realizing Francis wouldn’t have seen the movie. And anyway, hadn’t Jonathan said the book was different? This Oz was real – or existing on a level of reality far removed from any movie.

I wish you were here, Jack. You don’t believe in this stuff, but you’ve got the facts. All I’ve got is some cockeyed Hollywood version.

Francis had been thinking. “There wasn’t any snow, but Daddy says the field mice pulled them out of the poppy field.”

“So you know the real story?” Benny asked, his hopes rising.

“I know about Dorothy. Everybody knows her.”

“Could she help us? No, what am I saying? She went home.”

“Home?” said Francis. “No, no. She lives here in the Emerald City with Ozma.”

“But she was trying so hard to get home to her aunt and uncle.”

“They live here, too.”

“Yow! I close my eyes for one second and miss the sequel. When did all this happen?”

“Oh, years ago,” said Francis.

Benny was shaking his head in amazement. “I gotta do some reading when I get home. So what do we eat in Bunbury? Buns, I presume?”

“Oh, no, no, no. Don’t eat the Bunns. They would be most upset. There will be some outdoor objects and old furniture we can eat,” Francis explained.

“Swell,” said Benny. “I could polish off a pile of old furniture right now.”

Francis looked pleased as he led the way.

Jonathan had felt all around his prison and found himself in an invisible square. He tried digging out, but the cavern floor was hard as stone. He tried to tip the square over, but it was too heavy. At last he sat down wearily, thankful that at least he was no longer dizzy. It would be nice to have his shoes, however. Shoeless in Oz. Not a bad title. Barefoot in Oz. More than likely, this adventure was going to become A Lunatic in Oz.

When he heard the noise, he lifted his head. He saw Polychrome tiptoeing up, a finger to her lips.

“I’ve come to rescue you,” she whispered, bumping against the invisible surface. “Oh, dear, what’s this?” She pressed her hands flat on the wall. “Oh, that wicked Ruggedo! He promised Betsy Bobbin he would reform!”

“How did you know I was here?” Jonathan asked as she felt along the square.

“I saw everything from my father’s palace in the clouds,” she replied. “I begged my uncle, the Rain King, to make it rain, so that I might come again to earth. Dear me, this is a dreadful puzzle!”

“Just do me a favor,” said Jonathan. “I need to know if my friend is all right. Could you go tell him what’s happened?”

"But your friend is at the other end of Oz," she said.

Jonathan was astonished. "What?"

"This is the dominion of the Nome King, far past the Deadly Desert," said Polychrome, pausing for a moment to gaze at him sadly. "You were carried many hundreds of miles away."

He went blank for a moment, then recovered. "Could you take a message to him, then, tell him where I am?"

She put her graceful little hands up to the invisible barrier, placing them to his. "I'm going to rescue you," she said in all seriousness, "and restore you to your friend."

"That's very kind of you," said Jonathan, "but I think you'd better go before the Nome King gets back. You'll find yourself in the same dilemma."

"Not me," she laughed. "I'm a sky fairy. I'm too light and quick for any nome." She twirled about in a swirl of colors, her feet well above the ground.

Seeing this, Jonathan said, "Wait a minute. I've got an idea. Could you fly up and see if this thing's got a top?"

Polychrome's eyes sparkled. Quickly she floated up and laughing, floated down beside him. "How clever you are!" she said. "It's like a big invisible box without a lid." She sailed up again and perched on the invisible rim, looking as if she were suspended in the air.

"It really doesn't do much good," said Jonathan, disappointed. "I can't reach that high, and the sides are too slippery to climb."

"I'll pull you up," said Polychrome, but they soon discovered she was not strong enough.

"It's no use," said Jonathan, letting go of her hands. "I'm too heavy."

"You must never give up!" she said. Once more she floated down to stand beside him, her pert face with its violet eyes gazing up at him earnestly. "There is nothing one can't accomplish without hope and courage."

Jonathan smiled. "That's very nice, and I appreciate your help, but it's going to take a little more than hope to get out of here." He was finding it difficult to believe he was actually talking to this lovely imaginary creature.

Polychrome put her hands lightly on his chest. "I've kissed only one mortal man in all the thousands of years I've existed," she said, smiling, "and that was the Shaggy Man's brother, to break the spell of ugliness. You are the handsomest man I've ever seen, and I should very much like to kiss you." Without waiting for an answer, she stood on tiptoe and pressed her delicate little mouth to his.

For a fantasy, she felt very real. Jonathan had been worriedly thinking she was only a young girl, but her remark about thousands of years and the sweet taste of her lips went a long way toward easing his conscience.

"How very pleasant!" she sighed. "I will kiss you again."

"Maybe later," said Jonathan, reluctantly pulling away. "I really need to get out of here."

"Never fear," she said brightly. "I will confront Ruggedo and make him release you."

"No, no. I don't want to make him any angrier. I seem to remember something he hated, some sort of food. Do you know what I mean?"

"Eggs!" said Polychrome. "Of course! How could I forget? The nomes have a great fear of eggs."

"If you could find some," Jonathan began.

"I'll be back in the twinkling of an eye," she promised. She flew up, paused, came back

for one more lingering kiss, and then flew away.

Jonathan sighed and sat down again to wait.

The pathway to Bunbury zigzagged through the fields, but Francis had no trouble following it to the little town. Benny stopped and stared. All the buildings were made of crackers, bread sticks, and wafers, and there was the smell of fresh bread in the air. To his further astonishment, he found the town populated by walking doughnuts, crackers, muffins, and buns of all sizes. These creatures ran in terror when they saw him and the little pig.

"Just pick something," said Francis, munching contentedly on a fence made of waffles. "Try that watering can."

Benny found a watering can on the porch of a cracker house. It was made of cookie dough and tasted delicious. "Don't these folks care that we're snackin' on their property?"

"As long as we don't eat them, they don't mind," said Francis.

"Well, I mind!" said a little voice.

Benny saw a fat cinnamon bun, hands on hips, glaring at them from the breadcrumb sidewalk.

"That was my best fence," it said, annoyed.

"Sorry, pal," said Benny. "We're just passing though and needed a bite to eat."

"You might have asked," said the bun.

Benny grinned. "Where are my manners? Could I please have something to eat?"

"Well," said the bun, "there's an old sponge cake sofa you can have, I suppose."

"You got any chairs to go with that?"

Francis finished the fence and started on a bread dough wheelbarrow with cookie wheels. The sofa was very tasty. As Benny ate, he noticed the cinnamon bun had taken an interest in his shirt, one of his more colorful Hawaiian prints.

"What country are you from?" the bun asked curiously.

"Georgetown," said Benny, his mouth full.

"Ah," said the bun wisely. "And where are you bound?"

Benny swallowed and said, "Glinda's castle."

At this, the bun got very excited. "It has always been my greatest wish to see the wise and beautiful Glinda! May I come with you? I am very small. I would be no trouble. Please let me come."

"Sure, why not?" said Benny agreeably. "So what're you after? Brains? Courage? Raisins?"

"I just want to travel and have an adventure," said the bun.

"Me, too," said Francis, now munching on the sidewalk.

"Yeah, you can come," said Benny. "My name's Benny, and the one-pig demolition crew is Francis."

"I'm Flakey," said the bun.

Benny grinned. "Couldn't have said it better myself, pal."

Polychrome returned to the cavern carrying several eggs in the folds of her multicolored

skirt. "I found Billina the hen, and she was more than happy to give us some of her eggs," she said happily.

"Great," said Jonathan. "Now, if you could stay up near the ceiling of the cavern out of sight and wait for my signal."

She nodded and floated up. "I'll be ready."

Jonathan banged on the invisible walls. "Hey!" he shouted. "Nome King! Get in here!" When the little man bounded in, eyes blazing, Jonathan had a moment of doubt. Would this work? This was fantasy, but so far, it was playing by the rules. He drew himself up to his full height and spoke in deep portentous tones. "Ruggedo, I am indeed a great and powerful wizard, and unless you release me and return me to the Quadling Country, I shall be forced to deal with you severely."

"Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed. "And what can you do? I have you trapped!"

Jonathan folded his arms. "I shall make it rain eggs," he announced.

The Nome King gasped. "Impossible! My magic confines you to this space. You can do nothing."

Jonathan raised a finger. "Now."

The Nome King shrieked as two eggs plopped down, narrowly missing his curling toes. "Ahhh! Stop! Stop! If one touches me, I'll wither away!"

"Release me at once," said Jonathan.

"Very well," the little man grumbled and spoke another long string of nonsense words. "You are free."

Jonathan put out his hand. The walls were gone. "Now send me back to the Quadling Country and forget any plans you have about invading Oz. I know all about your plans, and I will inform Ozma and Glinda."

"Then I won't send you back, you wretched man!"

Jonathan said, "Then you leave me no choice." This time he pointed right at the Nome King. "Bomb's away!"

Eggs fell all around the little man, causing him to cry in horror. "Stop! I surrender! I'll send you back and good riddance! Go! Go!" He flung out his hands and shouted more strange words.

The cavern vanished. "Polychrome!" Jonathan cried, but everything was gone. He landed with a bump on the red bed and fell off.

"You're back!" said the pig, astonished.

Jonathan picked himself up. I did it! He thought, pleased. "Hello," he greeted the pig cheerfully and sneezed.

"Glad to see you, sir," said the pig. "My goodness, what a mix-up! Your friend has gone looking for you."

"How long ago was that?" Jonathan asked anxiously.

"He left early this morning, accompanied by my youngest, Francis."

Jonathan was pulling on his shoes. "Which way did they go?"

"Dear me, dear me," said the pig as his wife and other piglets gathered around, staring. "You'll need a guide, and I really can't spare another of my children."

"Oh, no, I couldn't ask you to do that," said Jonathan and sneezed again. "Excuse me. I'm afraid I'm allergic to you. No offense." He found his jacket on the back of a red chair and

stuffed his tie in the pocket. "Just point me in the right direction. I'll be fine." He felt surprisingly confident and eager to be on his way.

The pig showed him the path Benny and Francis had taken. Jonathan thanked him for all his help, assured him once more he didn't need a traveling companion, and hurried off. He had recalled a certain grim episode from The Wizard of Oz that had frightened him as a child, a group of nasty creatures called Hammer-Heads that lived somewhere in the Quadling Country near Glinda's castle. Maybe he could reach Benny and the little pig before they met with any trouble.

I oughta be skipping along in a little checkered dress, Benny thought. Here are my faithful companions, a pig and a cinnamon bun. All I need is one more and a little dog. Jon-boy, I miss your beaming face and your arguments. These two are so cheerful, they're putting my teeth on edge.

Flakey was riding on Francis's back and singing merrily. Occasionally, Francis would snort in rhythm. Benny had enjoyed this the first hour.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" he asked. The countryside had become progressively wilder, the pathway winding about large shaggy trees hung with grey moss and tangled vines.

"Well, I think so," said Francis. "It looks like the right way."

"You said you knew, Pinky." Benny gazed around uneasily. "Looks like it's about time for a chorus of lions and tigers and bears."

"Oh, my," said Flakey.

Benny gave the bun a suspicious glance. Then he shook his head. Nah. Coincidence. Besides, they were coming out of the gloomy woods. The land sloped upward, studded with large rocks and thick yellow grass. Maybe the castle was up ahead. He had to find that damn castle, find Jonathan, get out of this place.

Flakey and Francis had resumed their duet when Benny shushed them. "I don't want to alarm you two, but there are some real ugly things lookin' at us."

Up at the top of the grassy slope were three short stout men. Their enormous heads were flat on top and supported by thick wrinkled necks.

"Stop right there!" one shouted. "Come no further!"

"What's your problem?" Benny said, annoyed by yet another obstacle.

"Hammer-Heads," said Francis in a frightened whisper.

"What, you afraid of these jerks?" Benny said. "They can't grab you. They don't even have arms."

With surprising suddenness, one of the men leaned forward and shot his head toward Benny as if it were on the end of a large thick rubber band. The flat part of the creature's head caught Benny squarely in the stomach.

"Oof!" Benny rolled over, more surprised than hurt. There was an outraged squeal as Francis was the recipient of a similar blow.

The men laughed harshly. "This is our hill! You will not cross!"

Benny sat up in the grass, holding his middle. "Francis? Flakey?"

The bun peered out of a hollow in a tree. "Whew! It's a good thing I'm self-rising!"

"How are we going to get past these rubbernecks?" Benny asked, provoked.

"We'll have to go another way," said Francis, breathing hard. "Ow, got me right in the

tenderloin.”

“There isn’t time for that.” Benny glared at the strange men. “No flat-headed fantasy’s gonna get the best of Edgar Benedek. Come here, Flakey.” He took hold of the cinnamon bun. “Hey, you creeps! Here’s a nice tasty snack for you!”

“Benny!” the bun cried, horrified.

“Try to look delicious. Yo! Flat-head!” Benny maneuvered until he was in front of one of the large rocks. He dangled Flakey appealingly. “Yoo-hoo! Over here, anvil-dome!”

As he’d hoped, the creature shot its head forward. Benny yanked Flakey out of the way, and the creature’s head slammed into the rock, its long neck collapsing like a wet shoestring.

There were angry snarls of surprise from its fellows.

“Next!” Benny called. “Come on! You couldn’t hit the broadside of a barn! Come on, come on. Hit the bun and win a kewpie doll.” He dangled Flakey again and a second creature slammed into the rock.

“Benny!” Flakey shrieked. “That was too close!”

“One more, pal, one more. I’m hot now. I’m on a roll –sorry. Come on, flat top! Are you as stupid as Curly and Moe here? Come on, what are you waiting for?”

Wham! The third Hammer-Head, angered by Benny’s taunts, flung its head forward and crashed.

“Home team 0, Visitors 3,” Benny cheered. “How ya doin’, Flake?”

The bun inspected itself. “I’ve lost a few crumbs, but I’m all right.”

“Francis, you okay?”

The piglet came puffing up. “I’m all right, Benny.”

“Let’s move it.”

They scrambled up the slope and found themselves in a beautiful countryside. Fields of golden grain waved gently in the warm breeze. There were fragrant red blossoms and sparkly little brooks with bright red bridges across them.

“Now this is more like it,” Benny remarked, relieved to see a castle looming ahead. I’m hurrying, Jon! As they neared the imposing structure, Benny heard a little voice calling.

“Benny! Benny!”

He turned to see his camera trotting up, shame-faced. “Whoa! The prodigal Polaroid!”

The little camera ducked its head and drew a circle in the dirt with one toe. “I’m out of film.”

“Too bad, shorty.”

“Please take me with you,” it said. “I’m sorry I was so snappy.”

“Yeah, come on,” said Benny, amused. “I gotta have three of you to make this right. Join the gang. This is Francis, and this is Flakey.”

The bun shook hands. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Flash,” said the camera.

“Hop on,” Francis offered, and the camera climbed up to sit by Flakey.

Benny whistled “We’re Off to See the Wizard.” Flakey sang and Francis snorted while Flash made clicking sounds. At the castle gates, they were stopped by three girls in red and gold uniforms and asked to state their business.

"We'd like to see Glinda," said Benny, wondering what sort of ritual or test he'd have to pass, but the girls made them wait only a short while before escorting them into Glinda's throne room.

Benny knew he shouldn't have been surprised to find this Glinda in no way fit the movie description, but he was still amazed by the beauty and splendor of the sorceress. She was tall and slender with long rich red-gold hair and calm blue eyes. Her dress was a simple gown of pure white, trimmed in elegant lace, and she sat on a ruby throne.

"I am Glinda the Good," she said in a soft clear voice. "Welcome."

"Edgar Benedek, um, your majesty," he replied, a bit awed. "But just call me Benny. These are my friends, Francis, Flakey, and Flash. I'm trying to find my friend Jonathan."

"Yes," she said, smiling. "I know. I have been following your progress."

"Then you know where he is? Is he okay?"

"I'll show you," she said.

"Oh, yeah, I'll bet you've got a big crystal ball, like the witch," Benny said enthusiastically.

Glinda laughed. "Oh, my, no. Everything is written in my Book of Records, everything just as it happens."

She led Benny to another grand room. There, on a golden table fastened with golden locks, was a huge book with many thin gold pages. Glinda put a slim finger to the open page. "He has escaped from the Nome King and returned to the Quadling Country. He is on his way here now."

"Escaped from the Nome King? Jonathan?" Benny said, amazed. He looked at the book and saw written in golden letters: "With the aid of Polychrome, Jonathan escaped from the cavern of the Nome King, forcing Ruggedo to return him to the Quadling Country where he set forth to find his friend."

"Wow! Way to go, pal!" He grinned at Glinda. "This is some super computer you got here."

"Everything that happens in Oz is recorded in this book," she said.

"So you know all about us, how we got to Oz?"

She nodded. "We have not had any visitors from your country for a long time. Your adventures make interesting reading."

"Look, Benny," said Flakey. He was perched on Benny's shoulder. "There's our adventure with the Hammer-Heads." He pointed to more gold letters on the opposite page.

"Yeah, great, huh?" Benny's grin faded as more letters appeared. "Uh-oh."

"Weary from his long journey, Jonathan sat down to rest, unaware of dangerous Kalidahs lurking near-by."

"Hey," said Benny, alarmed. "What are Kalidahs?"

Glinda's face paled. "They are dreadful beasts with bodies like bears and heads like tigers."

"Well, do something! Come on, do some magic fast! Get him out of there."

She turned back a few pages to check an earlier entry. "My sawhorse is in that area. I will send him to fetch your friend." She placed her slim hands to her temples and closed her eyes. In a few moments, she opened them.

"Did you reach your horse?" Benny asked.

"Yes. Now we must hope he gets there in time." She turned back to the page where the

letters were appearing, and they leaned over to read.

Jonathan sighed, disgusted with himself. Why had he rushed off so heedlessly? He had no sense of direction; he never had. Lost again.

He sat down, first checking for any signs of life, and pushed his hair out of his eyes. Some slight dizziness had returned, but whether from his head or just hunger, he wasn't sure. He was more concerned about Benny, who, for all his physical agility, was not that sturdy. Sure, Benny would have a good time in Oz, but Jonathan thought he detected some real anxiety beneath all that – no, come to think of it, it was probably all a show for his benefit. Yes, that was it. Benny didn't have an anxious bone in his body. He'd probably found another talking tree and was swapping jokes, tree jokes and awful puns about being out on a limb and getting to the root of the matter.

He sighed again, stood, and squared his shoulders, trying to choose a likely-looking route. Well, so far, this hadn't been so bad. There weren't any real danger sin Oz, other than the Deadly Desert, as he recalled.

A low growl from behind a tree made him turn slowly. His heart gave a convulsive leap. Real dangers! He had forgotten the ghastly Kalidahs that had menaced Dorothy and her companions early in their adventure. There were two of them stalking him, snarling tiger heads on thick bear bodies. They slashed out with long claws, causing him to stumble back against a tree. Jonathan knew any minute he'd start to sneeze and it would all be over. Oz people didn't die, but what about regular humans?

A loud clattering noise made the Kalidahs stop in their tracks. Jonathan saw was appeared to be an animated log with legs galloping up, pulling a sparkly red chariot.

"Get in!" it cried as it dashed by. "I can outrun them!"

Jonathan managed to leap into the chariot, grabbing the sides as the curious beast shot off, leaving the snarling Kalidahs far behind. "I thought those things were just in the east," he gasped.

"They are everywhere," said his rescuer. "Hold tight."

The curious wooden animal ran surprisingly fast on its stiff legs. It had a branch for a tail and two knots for eyes. This must be the sawhorse, Jonathan realized. "Can you take me to Glinda's castle?" he asked, trying to keep his balance in the odd wagon. He remembered that the sawhorse was Glinda's favorite steed.

"That's where we're going," came the cheerful reply as the sawhorse slowed its pace a bit. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you," he answered. "You came just in time. Do you suppose Glinda could help me find my friend? He was headed this way."

"Glinda can do anything," said the sawhorse confidently. "Sit back and enjoy the ride. I'll have you there before you know it."

Benny had read of Jonathan's narrow escape. Now he came bounding down the steps of the castle to meet him as the ruby chariot came to a halt. "Jon!"

"Benedek!" he said, delighted. "I might have known you'd land on your feet. Are you all right? I was so worried."

"You were worried? The fearless Dr. Jon alone in Oz, fighting off Nomes and Kahoochees or whatever?"

"And this is--?" He turned wondering eyes to the serene young woman who was standing

by Benny.

“Jon-boy, say hello to none other than Glinda, Good Witch of the South.”

“of course,” said Jonathan with his most charming smile. “I would have known her anywhere. It’s a real pleasure to meet you, my lady.”

She returned his smile warmly and shook his hand. “Thank you. Welcome to my country.”

“Glinda’s gonna get us home,” Benny said cheerfully.

“I don’t know why you want to leave,” said the bun on Benny’s shoulder.

“Yes, why don’t you stay?” said the piglet by his feet.

“I like being alive,” the camera on the pig’s back remarked.

“Well, it’s been fun,” Benny agreed, noticing that Jonathan seemed amused rather than perplexed by his new friends, “but I got a deadline to meet, and Jon here’s got classes to teach. So, what do you say, Glinda? Do we get the ruby slippers?”

At Glinda’s puzzled look of inquiry, Jonathan explained, “He means the silver slippers.”

“Nah, the ruby slippers, Jack.”

“Benedek, you are thinking of the movie. There are no ruby slippers. They were silver, and Dorothy lost them in the desert.”

Glinda gave him an admiring gaze. “You are perhaps a historian?”

“Well, I do know a little about Oz,” Jonathan admitted modestly.

“It is true I no longer have the silver slippers,” she said, “but I have other powers.”

“Got your glasses on you, Jonny? You gotta have a look at this,” said Benny. He led him inside to the golden book.

“The Book of Records!” said Jonathan, recognizing it. “This is wonderful.” He found his glasses still in his jacket pocket and put them on, reading the golden letters, fascinated. “You managed very well without me,” he remarked to Benny with a grin.

“Look who’s talkin’.”

Jonathan gave a delighted laugh. “This is all about the eggs! And what happened to Polychrome? Ah, here it says she returned to her father’s palace. That’s good. I was worried about her.”

“She is a brave and resourceful girl,” said Glinda. “She has been of use many times to those on adventures in Oz.”

Jonathan was relieved to see no mention of those kisses in the book. “Yes, she was very helpful,” he said, feeling his face grow warm at the memory.

“So what about getting us home?” Benny asked Glinda.

“Benedek, there’s no rush, is there?” said Jonathan, still reading.

Benny was nonplused. “Well, no, I guess not,” he managed to say, eying Jonathan askance.

“I mean, this is a wonderful opportunity. We could really learn a lot, and you could get some great stories.”

Benny stared. “Yeah,” he said. He backed off a little, frowning.

Glinda said, “Would you and your friends like something to eat? I’m sure you must be hungry. Come, let Jonathan read if he wishes.”

"I think I'll stay here," said Benny, his intuition pricking uncomfortably.

Francis announced he was hungry, so Glinda escorted him and the bun and the camera out.

"Jon-boy," Benny began. "How're you feeling? Your head okay?"

Jonathan smiled. "Look, you were right. I admit it. I'm always taking things much too seriously."

"Yeah, but--"

"This is fantastic! Glinda is – well, she's gorgeous, far more beautiful than I ever imagined, and this castle, and the Book of Records. I've just been scanning over what's happened in the past year, and there are things I've never even heard of."

"Jonny," he said. "Jonathan, these are just stories, remember? You and Dad in the old armchair? Fourteen by Baum, forty altogether? You're getting' strange on me, pal. I won't have it."

"Strange?" he repeated. "You should be out of your little mind with happiness. You've got a – a dinner roll and a pig and lord knows what else to talk to. 'Just once I'd like to see you enjoy some phenomena,' I believe you said."

"Whoa," said Benny. "Hold on. I got it. You're havin' me on, aren't you?" He grinned. "Nice try, Jack, but let's get things back to normal and leave the cons to me."

"I'm not trying to con you, Benedek. I'm just following your suggestion."

"What are you doing listening to me?" Benny asked, amazed. "You never did before." But Jonathan's eyes were back on the Book of Records. Confused, Benny watched him a while. Something was wrong here. By all rights, Jonathan should be either shaken or completely skeptical. He'd wanted him to loosen up, but this was eerie. "Let's go get something to eat," he said. "Come on, Jon."

He convinced Jonathan to leave the book, and they found the others seated at a long table in a ruby dining room. Glinda smiled and indicated Jonathan should sit by her. Francis was snout-deep in cherry pie. Flakey was eating out of the ruby sugar bowl and getting fatter by the minute.

Benny helped himself to some cheese and apples, his senses alert. Could this be enchanted food? Glinda was supposed to be Glinda the Good, wasn't she? Just how good? She certainly had eyes for Jonathan, but this was not unusual. Benny had gotten used to women falling all over his friend. Occupational hazard. Still, something just wasn't right.

Glinda was listening attentively to Jonathan's description of his adventures. She paused only to pour more red wine for her guests. Francis asked Jonathan to please pass the bread.

Whoa. Francis was sitting by Jonathan, and MacKensie wasn't sneezing his head off?

Benny watched carefully. Nope. No reaction. As a matter of fact, Jonathan hadn't sneezed once since he came to the castle and met Francis. What's goin' on here?

"Something wrong, Benny?" asked Flash. The little camera had been amusing itself by setting up shots of the feast. Now it came to stand near his plate.

"I'm not sure," he replied. "You see, ordinarily, Jonathan would be chompin' at the bit to get home. Doesn't look like he's in any hurry to leave, does it?"

"Hmm," said the camera. "A curious development. But Glinda is very lovely. Pretty as a picture, I'd say."

"Yeah," said Benny, "and I get the feeling she's lonely, too, with nothing but talking objects all around. Lonely enough to want to keep Jonathan here."

“What can we do?” asked Flash.

“Keep your eye open, pal. I’ll think of something.” Well, this is typical, Jack. You get the ladies. I get a bun and an instamatic.

Jonathan found Glinda one of the most enchanting young women he’d ever met. A vague uneasiness hovered at the back of his mind, an odd sense of have I forgotten something? But her calm smile and caressing voice smoothed the worry away. He’d be perfectly content to stay a while and – no, he couldn’t stay! He and Benedek had to get back. . . but why hurry? There wasn’t anything pressing at the Institute. They could manage without him a few more days. What a beautiful smile she had! And her glorious hair, the color of a sunset. . .

By nightfall, Francis was still eating, and Flakey had gone to sleep on the table. Jonathan and Glinda were still talking, leaving Benny and his camera in deep thought.

“She’s put a spell on him,” Benny said under his breath. “If I just knew for sure.”

“Why don’t you look in the Book?” Flash suggested.

“The book?” said Benny. “Oh, you mean the Book. That’s right. She said everything that happens show up in her book. Hmm, let’s you and I go for a little stroll.” He got up and put Flash on his shoulder. “Excuse us, please. We’re going to get a little air.”

Glinda smiled pleasantly. “Of course.”

Benny casually wandered out of the dining room, and then tore down the hallway to the huge open book. “Okay, here’s where the sawhorse got Jonathan. Here he is coming to the castle. Here’s dinner – yo! This is it! ‘From the moment Glinda first saw the handsome stranger, she decided to convince him to stay.’ Jonny, if you just tone it down a bit! ‘Using small spells, she made him feel comfortable in her presence in the hopes he would remain in Oz.’ No wonder he’s been so agreeable, and no sneezes, either.”

“What else does it say?” asked Flash, for more letters were appearing.

“‘A drink of the Water of Oblivion will complete the magic. He will forget his other life and be happy to live here forever.’ Come on!” Benny grabbed the camera and made a mad dash down the corridor. Glinda and Jonathan were not in the dining room. Benny ran back down the hall, checking in all the rooms in a frantic attempt to find the right one.

“The throne room!” said Flash.

Benny burst in just as Jonathan was lowering a red crystal goblet. Too late! He saw with dismay that Jonathan’s dark eyes did not recognize him. “Jonathan,” he said urgently. “It’s me, Benny! Shake it off, bud! She’s put a spell on you.”

Jonathan frowned, puzzled. “I’m sorry. . .I don’t—”

“It’s Benny! Benedek. The cretin. The jerk. Come on, Jack.” When there was no response, he turned on Glinda, his mind working fast. “Glinda the Good, is it? Well, listen, sweetheart, you’re no better than the Wicked Witch of the West. You can’t keep Jonathan here. What’s his wife and kids gonna do?”

Glinda paled. “Wife?”

“Yeah, wife and kids. Chidren. He’s got a whole family back in Georgetown depending on him for their livelihood. You can’t just snatch somebody because you feel like it, lady. His poor family’ll die without him. They’ll go straight down the tubes. Poor Mary Jane and little Edgar and Julianna. They’ll cry their eyes out.”

“I don’t remember that,” Jonathan began.

“Of course you don’t remember! This witch has destroyed your memory! I can’t believe you don’t know your own children any more. This is terrible.”

"I-I didn't realize," Glinda stammered. "I assure you, I can reverse the spell."

Benny shook his head sadly. "It's too late for that. Just send me home. I'll tell them what happened. I'll try to help them out."

"No, no!" she insisted. She placed her hands on Jonathan's shoulders and looked directly into his eyes. "There. The spell is broken. I don't know what came over me," she remarked to Benny apologetically.

"I do," said Benny wryly. "It's nearly gotten me killed several times. You okay, Jon?" Jonathan blinked at him, confused. "It's time we went home, pal. What do you say?"

"Sounds like a good idea," he said.

Glinda kissed him gently on the forehead. "I will not keep you from your family a moment longer," she said. "I am very sorry."

Family? Jonathan mouthed to Benny, who gave him a wink.

"I'll send you both home right away," Glinda said.

"Photo, too?" asked Benny, indicating the little camera still in his hand.

Glinda smiled. She raised both hands and made a slight pushing motion. "Good-by."

"Oh, wait! I wanted to say good-by to--" Benny started to say, but she was fading from sight. There was a whirl of colors and the same roaring sound of the wind. Benny reached out to grip Jonathan's arm; then he was ripped away and tumbled over and over. There was a sharp pain in his arm, more colors, and then he drifted away.

The next thing Benny saw was a nurse's blurred but smiling face against a background of pastel wall.

"Welcome back, Mr. Benedek," she said.

For a wild moment, Benny thought she was referring to his trip to Oz; then his vision cleared and he realized he was in a hospital bed.

"Glad to see you awake," the nurse said. "You're a lucky man. Worst storm in years, and you escape with a slight concussion and a broken arm."

Benny found his right arm encased in heavy plaster. "My friend," he began worriedly.

"Dr. MacKensie? Turn your head. Slowly now."

Benny did and saw Jonathan asleep in the next bed. His forehead was bandaged, and he seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

"He was awake earlier," said the nurse in answer to Benny's anxious look. "He's fine, but your car will never walk again."

Benny grinned. "Rental companies love us."

"So do tornadoes, apparently," she replied. "You were both very fortunate. Get some rest. I'll be back later."

Benny was not a bit sleepy, so he played with the bed controls until he found a position he liked and lay pondering the strange events of the past – what. Days? Weeks? His camera was on the bedside table, motionless and silent. Benny looked at it regretfully.

Yo, Flash. It was fun, wasn't it? Kinda like living in a cartoon. I wish you were still alive so you could back me up on this one. Now, what's this caught on your lens?

There was a murmur from the other bed. "Benedek?"

"How ya doin'?" Benny greeted cheerfully.

"I told you I'd end up in the hospital," Jonathan said, his eyes still closed.

"I'm here, too, bud," he replied, indicating his broken arm. "This isn't a party favor."

Jonathan waited. "Well?" he said impatiently. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"About what?"

Jonathan opened his eyes to give Benny a weary look. "About being in Oz, Benedek."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. We were there, weren't we?"

Jonathan sighed. "Let's get it over with. Give me the Benedek version in flaming color, and I'll try to think of a suitable retort."

"No need," said Benny.

After a long stretch of silence during which Jonathan waited for the inevitable, he said, "What do you mean, 'No need'?"

"Why bother? You've already convinced yourself it was all a dream or a hallucination or something else. I know I was in Oz, J.J. No need to discuss it."

"Wait a minute," said Jonathan, trying to sit up and immediately wishing he hadn't. "Ow!"

"Don't jump around, bud," Benny cautioned.

"Just wait a minute," he repeated, lying back. "Do you have any proof? Any proof at all?"

"Just this," said Benny. "Found it on Flash." He leaned over to hand it to Jonathan.

It was a strand of long silky red-gold hair.

Jonathan took it in his hand, staring.

"In case you're thinking it might belong to one of the nurses, think again," said Benny. "Nobody's got hair that color. Nobody in this world, anyway."

"Benedek," he said slowly. "Were we really there?"

"And you came through like a pro, Jonny, brain and nerves intact."

Jonathan was shaking his head. "I don't know. I'll have to think about this."

Benny reached for the phone. "While you're thinking, I'm making a few calls. Can't wait to hit the circuit with this one."

"Do you think anyone is going to believe you?"

"Who cares?" said Benny. "It makes for great television. But I'm proud of you, bud. You actually lightened up some. Sure, you were under a spell, but it was a real break-through. Dare I think of it as a trend?"

"Don't hold your breath."

"If it's any consolation, I prefer the original MacKensie," said Benny, grinning. He put the phone down. "Jon-boy, we were there, and we had one hell of a time."

Jonathan thought of how he'd outwitted the Nome King, of Polychrome's sweet little face – could he ever look at another rainbow without thinking of her? – of the sawhorse's mad dash to save him from the Kalidahs, of Glinda. . . he ran the sparkly strand of red hair through his fingers. "All right, it was fun," he admitted. "Whatever it was."

"Mr. Benedek, Dr. MacKensie, you have a visitor," said the nurse at the door.

"Dr. Moorhouse," said Jonathan, surprised.

"What on earth is this, MacKensie?" Dr. Moorhouse demanded, entering. "Can't you two handle a simple assignment without breaking something?" She gave Benny the barest of nods.

“Benedek.”

“Dr. M, I am touched,” he replied. “Here you are, traveling thousands of miles to comfort us in our hour of need. What a gal.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she said. “I was in Kansas City for a meeting when I received word of your accident. Since I was this close, I thought I’d better see what damage had been done and how much it was going to cost the Institute.”

“She’s all heart, isn’t she?” Benny remarked to Jonathan. “Wait till you hear this adventure, Dr. M.”

She was ignoring him. “What is all this about driving back to Georgetown?” she said to Jonathan. “What utter nonsense! You’re already several weeks behind in your work, MacKensie. You don’t need to waste any more time.”

“Yes, I know, but--” Jonathan tried to explain.

“Dr. M, we have been over the rainbow,” Benny interrupted.

“I’m sure you have, Benedek,” she said in quelling tones.

“No, really! We were in Oz, right, Jack? My faithful companions, a pig, a cinnamon bun, and my camera and I traveled to Glinda’s castle while Jone here fought off vicious nomes and kissed a lot of fairies. It was great! I may get a whole book out of this one: A Yellow Journalist in Oz!”

Dr. Moorhouse stared at him. “Young man, you are quite demented. I don’t know why I’m standing here listening to this. Jonathan, when you are able, I want you to take a plane – a plane, mind you –back to Georgetown, and leave this,” she indicated Benny, “here.”

Jonathan had been listening to their exchange, deriving an odd sort of enjoyment from the familiar clash.

With her frostiest look, Dr. Moorhouse said, “Well, MacKensie, did you hear me? What have to say for yourself?”

Jonathan gave Benny a quick grin. He turned to Dr. Moorhouse and smiled pleasantly. “There’s no place like home,” he said.