

The Devil His Due

by M.D. Bloemker

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"No."

Dr. Jonathan MacKensie jammed a pen back into the desk set. "For the one hundred and fiftieth time, *no*." He rose, leaning across to enunciate each syllable. "I will not dignify that sensationalist rubbish with an 'expert' comment. As a matter of fact, I absolutely *forbid* you to use my name or the name of the Georgetown Institute in your article, am I making myself clear?"

Edgar Benedek backpedaled to dodge MacKensie's stalk to the file cabinet and back again. "For one thing, pal, this isn't an article for the *National Register*, it's for the new book," he said, using his best manipulative charm. "And for another thing, you don't have to sweat bad P.R., I promise to keep your precious alma mater's nose clean. How's this: 'distinguished anthropology professor from prestigious scientific institute based in Washington D.C.'. Who's gonna know?"

Jonathan snatched the pencil that Benny was waving at him. "How's *this*: 'distinguished anthropology professor tosses flaming nuisance out fourth floor window'?"

Benny shrugged. "Lacks flair; best I could do for it would be third page filler. Come on, Jack, what's it gonna cost you? Just one quote, just one itsy-bitsy little quote. I'm telling you, this could make or break Chapter Five, you gotta do this for your old pal Benny."

"No." Jonathan, reseating himself, hunched defiantly over his work. "Go away."

"That's gratitude for you," Benny grumbled to an invisible audience. "I mean, look at this guy, willya? I lend my valuable time and expertise to babysit him through these 'investigations into paranormal phenomena'," he did a passable mimic of MacKensie's immediate superior's voice, "and he can't unbend long enough to do me this one little favor."

MacKensie glared up at him. "Let me put this to you in terms so plain and simple that even your tiny little intellect can grasp it," he said in a tightly controlled voice. "I am in the middle of a project which could very possibly become the crowning achievement of my entire career. I have been waiting all of my professional life for an opportunity like this. I cannot afford to expend my energy in any other direction. Benedek—" He held up his hands, forefingers to thumbs. "Get lost."

"Okay," the man sighed, shrugging with studied nonchalance. "I can take a hint. I suppose I'll just wander down the hall and chat up our mutual friend and compadre Dr. Moorhouse."

"You do that," MacKensie muttered, again absorbed in his reading. "Just let me know where to send the flowers."

"You wound me, truly," the man gasped, mocking pain to the chest area. "Don't you realize that Juliana Moorhouse is putty in Edgar Benedek's hands? Now there is a woman with a fine appreciation for genuine journalistic talent. Why, just the other day, she and I were shooting the breeze...."

The phone rang, and Jonathan snared the receiver as a drowning man would a life preserver. "Hello." After a moment, he tensed, moving to lean an elbow against the desk. "Yes, operator! Casey?" His face lit up. "What's the word? Uh-huh. Yes. Yes?" With a startling whoop, he jumped up, fist held high in triumph. "Fantastic! Casey, I can't *tell* you how much...yes? Right. I understand. No, really, that's fine. Where are you? How soon?" He was literally trembling with excitement as he listened to the voice on the other end. Then, with a laugh of pure delight, he slapped the desk with the palm of his free hand. "Casey, you are a true marvel! You've made my day—no, my year. Hell, my whole life! How soon can you get back here? Tomorrow? Is that the earliest—okay, okay, I understand, you can't exactly walk back from Zimbabwe, I'll...." He exhaled, struggling to regain some of his professional composure. "...I'll just have to wait. Right. Oh, and Casey...thanks. There's a steak dinner here with your name on it, and that's just the beginning, I promise. What? I understand—call me right back with the flight

info. Okay, good luck." With the phone safely back on the hook, he sank back in his chair, blissfully weary. "Thank you, thank you, *thank* you!" he crooned, closing his eyes.

Benny had followed the receiver back to its cradle, and now looked back at Jonathan, who was smiling up at the ceiling like a carefree idiot. "Bad news, huh?" he tsked.

Without bothering to move, Jonathan murmured, "The only bad news around here hasn't left my office yet."

"I gotta tell you, that sounded like the scoop of the century. Care to let an old pal in on an exclusive?"

Jonathan cracked open an eye, giving the man his most brilliant smile. "Take a hike, Benedek," he suggested sweetly.

A rap on the door heralded Dr. Moorhouse's arrival in MacKensie's office. Close behind her was another person, a tall, chestnut-haired woman with chiseled, aristocratic features and an almost tangible aura of authority and professionalism about her. About to greet Jonathan, Dr. Moorhouse frowned at Benedek's presence. "There's a reason for you to be here, I trust?", she said icily, peering over the top of her glasses at him.

He spread his hands. "Spreading a little sunshine, tracking down a hot quote, just doing what comes naturally. What did I tell you, Jack? Putty in my hands." He glanced back, but the smile faded when he saw the sick ashen color MacKensie's face had turned. He followed the man's line of vision back to the source: the woman standing next to Dr. Moorhouse. And then he took a closer look.

"I know you," he said, flicking a finger at her. "I know you, don't I?"

The woman smiled, but Dr. Moorhouse interjected an introduction. "Dr. Lucille Stoker, one of the Georgetown Institute's most distinguished alumnae."

Benny snapped his fingers. "Lucy Stoker! Yeah! We did Carson together a couple of months ago, remember?"

She nodded her acknowledgement with a smile. "Mr. Benedek, I assure you—you are unforgettable," she said with a laugh. He took her extended hand, pressing it between his in his best gentlemanly fashion. "Ah, ah," he tsked. "What did I tell you about that?"

Again she smiled. "Forgive me. Benny."

"That's better," he said, patting her hand. "Much better."

Dr. Moorhouse cleared her throat in an attempt to regain control of the situation. "I take it you two have met," she said coolly.

"We sure have. She came on right after Charo and made her look like chopped chicken liver. If I hadn't seen it, I'd have never believed it. Sensational, just great."

It was clear from the look on her face that Benny's ebullient praise amused more than flattered. "You're too kind," she demurred pointedly, gently extricating her hand from his grasp.

"Dr. Stoker," Moorhouse tried again. "May I present Dr. Jonathan MacKensie...?"

Lucy interrupted. "We...already know each other," she informed Dr. Moorhouse quietly, fixing a veiled gaze on Jonathan. "As a matter of fact, we were undergraduates together."

This was obviously news to Dr. Moorhouse. "Really? How interesting. Well, this will certainly make dealing with your little difficulty that much easier." She failed to note the reaction MacKensie had to this, but Benny didn't miss it: Jonathan winced, seemed to shudder, and thereafter took great pains to avert his gaze from Dr. Stoker.

"Difficulty?" Benny jumped into the breach. "My ears are yours."

"We don't really have time to get into specifics at the moment. Lucy and I have a luncheon engagement with the dean in fifteen minutes. I just wanted to stop by and ask you to make yourself available this afternoon,

MacKensie. My office, 3 p.m. sharp." Her gaze settled reluctantly on Benedek and she grimaced. "You, too," she sighed. "This is probably right up your alley, more's the pity."

"I'll be there with bells on," Benny promised, holding the door open for them. "Hey, Lucy, catch you later."

The door had barely closed behind them when MacKensie slammed a folder angrily on his desk. "Lunch with the dean," he grumbled, giving the door a murderous look.

"Look at you!" Benny said with a cajoling laugh, moving back to stand in front of the desk. "Five minutes ago you were bouncing off the walls, now you're lower than a snake's belly. Who unstuffed your teddy bear?"

"I was under the distinct impression that you were leaving," Jonathan growled, bent over his work once more.

"Would you mind telling me what just happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"Nothing happened? Pal, there was major dislike flying thick and fast around here."

Jonathan shifted uncomfortably in his chair, rubbing the bridge of his nose with two fingers. With a weary sigh, he began, "Benedek...it's not important. Can you get that through your thick skull? It just doesn't matter, all right?" He seemed to be recovering some color along with resolve. "I'm not going to let anything get to me. Not you, not..." He stopped himself, but not before a glance to the door betrayed him. "Not anything. I have but one thought, and that is my current project, and no, I have nothing further to say on that subject, not until Casey gets back, not until I complete the research, not until the paper is published, do I make myself perfectly clear?"

"Come on, you can tell me. I promise you won't find it framed in black on the front page of the *Register*, you've got my solemn word on that." He crossed his heart with two fingers. "Scout's honor."

Jonathan snorted, giving him a black look. "You, a Boy Scout? Give me a break."

Benny made himself comfortable on the edge of Jonathan's desk, much to the man's growing annoyance. "Let me put it to you another way, Jack. Either sign the confession willingly, or Edgar Benedek, ace investigative reporter, is going to sniff out the facts on his own. I don't know if you've ever seen me in action, but I can make *60 Minutes* look like an old Marx Brothers routine. So, whaddya say? You wanna do this the easy way, or you want I should be forced to resort to my 'Geraldo-Rivera-Has-Nothing-On-Me' persona? I'm warning you—it's not a pretty sight."

There was a long pause; a smile grew on Benedek's face as he anticipated finally having gotten through to the man. The grin abruptly disappeared when MacKensie suddenly jumped to his feet, gathering up all the papers strewn on the desk and stuffing them into a folder. "Whoa, whoa," Benny cried, hopping off the desk just in time to avoid being hit by flying papers. "Where are you going?"

"Out. Away," Jonathan told him tersely. "Anywhere I can get some peace and quiet." He had taken four steps toward the door when he swung back, stopping Benny in mid-step and mid-protest. "If a call should come in for me, have the switchboard forward it to the library. Thank you." And he managed to make it out the door just in time to slam it between him and Benny.

Benny fell back a step, considering the door with raised eyebrows. "Interesting," he mused, nodding to himself. "Very interesting." He was in the middle of deciding whether to continue harassing MacKensie at the library, thereby risking the continued wrath of the man, not to mention the undying enmity of the librarian on duty, when the phone rang again. With a smile of anticipation, he flipped the receiver neatly up to his shoulder and ear. "Dr. Jonathan MacKensie's office," he crooned. "Yes, operator, I'll accept the call. Hello? No, he's stepped out for a moment. Casey, right? Yes, he was just discussing the particulars of the find with me. Who am I? Why, just his most respected colleague and dearest friend in the whole world. No, really, you can trust me." He slipped into Jonathan's chair, propping crossed ankles up on the desk. "Yes, that's right," he smiled, nodding benignly. "You can tell me *everything*."

Jonathan was the last to arrive in Dr. Moorhouse's office, seven minutes late, with a stiffly formal apology, and an even stiffer greeting for Dr. Stoker. She gave him a nod in return, again with that peculiar veiled look she had given him at their first meeting. Then she returned to fending off the hand that Benedek kept unobtrusively homing on hers as he bent forward in conversation.

Jonathan seated himself on Benny's far side; the man, glancing back, saw the tautness of his friend's features, and did not miss the fact that he had managed to take a chair that put him at farthest range from Lucy Stoker. To the woman, he smiled, "Excuse me, just one moment," and swiveled to lean in Jonathan's direction. "Hey," he whispered conspiratorially, startling Jonathan out of his black reverie. "I just want to tell you, I think this Zimbabwe thing is going to put your name on the map. Congrats, pal. I mean that, really."

Indignation visibly welled up in Jonathan MacKensie. "What?" he sputtered in as loud a voice as his whisper allowed. "How...? Who...?" He glanced up, mindful of Dr. Moorhouse, who was occupied on the telephone, and in turn sparing only the briefest glance in Lucy's direction. "Benedek, so help me, I am going to...."

"Take it easy," Benny soothed, unperturbed by the man's rage. "And don't blame Casey, I kinda led him on, but, hey—I realize you didn't have time to fill me in on what was going on, I understand."

"MacKensie, you're late." Dr. Moorhouse was in the process of hanging up the phone. Ignoring his second, more abject apology, she looked up, folding her hands before her on the desk. "Dr. Stoker has come to me and to the Georgetown Institute for help. Her problem is...well, I'm not sure if I could call it unique, but I can, with complete assurance, say that it certainly falls within the scope of our paranormal research program here at the Institute. As I have explained to you, Lucy, Dr. MacKensie has been assigned to head this program, which is why I have asked him to meet with us." She paused, her gaze settling reluctantly on Benny. "Mr. Benedek is..." she cleared her throat slightly, "...not affiliated with the Institute. He is, as you may know, something of a self-styled expert in metaphysical matters."

"Well put," Benedek grinned. "Can I quote you on my next dust jacket?"

"I am familiar with Mr. Benedek's...reputation," Lucy nodded, with a twinkling glance aside at Benny, who gave her a look in return to tell her he'd picked up on the facetious note in her voice. "Actually, I'm quite satisfied to involve him in this, ah...matter. It would seem to me that some of the contacts he's made in the course of his writing career could be of use. If I'm not being too presumptuous...?"

"Lucy, sweetheart, you can be as presumptuous as your little heart desires," he told her warmly. "But maybe we can skip to the main course now, okay? Let's start by defining some of the words we've learned here today, words like 'difficulty' and 'this matter' and 'problem'?" He nodded with arched eyebrows, encouraging her to continue where he had left off.

Her composure, so icily cool, began to give way. "This is not exactly an easy thing to explain."

"No problem," Benny assured her. "Just take your time."

She spoke haltingly, plainly embarrassed. "I have reason to believe that I may have ... inadvertently ... entered into a contract to, well—sell my soul to the devil."

Benny's mouth formed an 'o', his interest sparked. "Hold it right there for a moment," he said with a sudden frown. "You're not *sure*?"

She was nervously rubbing at her forehead. "The circumstances were...confused."

"Yeah, but even so, that's a pretty heavy deal to go down while you weren't paying attention."

"Let me start from the beginning," she offered, visibly composing herself once more. "Just before I completed my undergraduate studies, I decided that doing the best I could in my chosen field wasn't enough for me."

She darted a look in Jonathan's direction at this, which Benny ached to check out, but couldn't think how to turn around without interrupting. "I had to be *the* best," she continued. "Nothing less would do. And I know that I must have said on more than one occasion that I would willingly sell my soul for that kind of success."

"I can think of a few times when I've said that myself," he said with a shrug. "So?"

"All I know is that since that time, everything has been too easy. I haven't worked hard enough for the success I've had. I don't deserve it."

He cut her off with a sharp motion. "Hold it, hold it. Have you given any thought to the possibility that what you might need here is a psychologist, *not* a parapsychologist?"

"You don't understand," she insisted. "I know that I'm very good at what I do. What I'm saying is that circumstances and coincidences have lined up too easily for me. If there's a right place and a right time, I always manage to be there. I've lived with this for years, I know that it's beyond the laws of probability, beyond even blind luck. There is an outside force directing all of these opportunities my way, I'm sure of it."

Benny gave it some more thought, then fixed her with a narrow-eyed look. "You didn't happen to offer to sell your soul within earshot of someone named Susie, did you?"

She shook her head. "Mr. Bened— Benny, I don't know who I said it to, and I certainly don't have any idea who might have taken me seriously."

"No one approached you? No one asked you to sign anything?"

When she shook her head again, he frowned, settling back in his chair. "So you want us to find out one way or the other?"

"I want you to help me break the contract."

He was still frowning, clearly having difficulty with the entire concept. "You're *that* sure you didn't become the Margaret Mead of the 80's on your own merit?"

Whatever reply she may have made was cut off by Jonathan's sudden, violent jump out of his chair. Only then did Benny turn to see the angry red flush on MacKensie's face, and only then did he realize that the color must have built up along with the fury he was barely managing to control.

Tightly, "Dr. Moorhouse, please forgive me, but I must ask to be excused from this investigation."

The woman stared at him, flabbergasted. "I most certainly will not excuse you, MacKensie!" she managed to choke out.

"Then I must insist on being excused. I'm sorry—I can't help you, Dr. Stoker. I'm sorry." And with that, he was out the door before anyone could stop him.

"Jonathan!" Dr. Moorhouse called after him indignantly. "Jonathan, this is unforgivable! MacKensie!"

Benny jumped for the door, pausing long enough to say, "Talk amongst yourselves, be back in a flash," before disappearing himself.

He took a moment outside the door to calculate the possibilities. Not the office—it would be too easy for someone, such as a livid Dr. Moorhouse, to track him down and trap him there. The elevators would be too slow for someone in such an agitated frame of mind, so that left the stairs. Sure enough, when he peered around the corner, he saw that the door at the end of the hall was still swinging.

On tiptoe, he covered the distance as quickly as he could, stopping to carefully peer through the small square of glass. The stairwell was illumined only by the sunlight streaming in through the far window; it sharply outlined the figure standing on the landing one flight down. With palm flat against the wall, weight shifted to one foot, head bowed, the man was unmoving.

As soundlessly as possible, Benny eased into the stairwell. He considered a couple of opening gambits, rejected most of them, and went with the one that was left. "So," he began, feigning casualness. "What couldn't you handle? The part about the contract with the devil, or the way she was undressing me with her eyes?"

Jonathan seemed to flinch, and Benny spent an anxious moment waiting to see if the man would run or hold his ground. With an agitated, jerky movement, MacKensie half-turned, then stopped, hand held out to nothing. "You wouldn't understand," he said in a voice that he had to fight to keep under control.

"Oh, I don't know about that," he shook his head, venturing down a step or two. "But it's a safe bet Moorhouse doesn't."

Jonathan's only reaction was a slight movement that could have been another failed attempt to turn around.

"Come on, Jack, if this was supposed to be some sort of deep, dark secret, I gotta tell you, you blew it a long time ago."

That finally got Jonathan glaring in Benny's direction, but he changed his mind about whatever it was he was about to say; he sighed, shook his head, and let himself fall back against the wall. "Sold her soul to the devil," he muttered with a derisive laugh. "Can you believe such utter nonsense? A trained professional, no less." Again shaking his head, he exhaled explosively through his teeth. "Then again, she never *was* too tightly wrapped to begin with." His voice faded, as though he was aware he'd said too much; his gaze settled on the far wall, staying there.

Benny nodded to himself, leaning his elbows against the outside rail to clasp his hands together. "Well, then, if that's what you *really* believe, there's no problem is there? We can go through the motions, make Lucy feel better, get Dr. M off your case and go on with our lives."

No reaction. Benny sighed, hopping down the rest of the steps until he came to last one before the landing. "You're not being straight with me, Jack. There's more to this than just professional jealousy. Trust me, this one-man I-team can tell, don't try to deny it. Now, if I had to make a wild guess, I would say...oh, a lover's spat. Admit it, I'm right, aren't I?"

The look Jonathan gave him was withering, as was the snort of derision.

"Ah, you protest, but it's been my experience that the more violent the hate, the deeper the waters flow, pal."

"Save it for the lonely hearts column," Jonathan told him flatly. "We knew the same people. We socialized. That's *it*."

"Okay, okay, fine," Benny demurred. "So—you wanna maybe tell me now, or should I give this another shot?"

"Spare me," Jonathan winced. Benny was getting some encouragement from the fact that the man was finally talking and reacting almost normally to his calculated insouciance. With any kind of luck he could keep him talking long enough to get whatever was eating him alive out into the open.

"Look," Jonathan said after a moment, studying the tips of his shoes. "It's...it's personal, all right?"

"I'd say you made that pretty clear already."

"No, no, what I mean is..." He paused, seemed to hold his breath. "I'm not sure this is going to make *sense*."

"I'll raise my hand if I have any questions."

Now he was studying the ceiling, head resting back against the wall. "Benedek, if I tell you, I just *know* I'm going to live to regret it."

"If I solemnly promise to tell you something that you can hold over my head for the rest of my life, would that make you feel better?"

Jonathan gave him a mildly startled look; it was clear that the prospect intrigued him. "Really? What?"

"It was a rhetorical question. If you insist, I'll consult my diary and get back to you in the morning. Now, come on, straight. How come Lucy crashed you so hard? What is it with you and her?"

"It's silly," he said after a moment struggling for words. "I mean, it was such stupid misunderstanding."

"What? *What?*" Benny urged.

He spoke haltingly. "We were at a party, some fraternity thing. I think we were celebrating the end of finals, and it was getting a little, well—crazy. I don't know how it started, but there were several of us off in one corner talking about our career choices and our future plans. Lucy was going on and on about how she was planning to set the scientific world on its ear, and I...I said something...."

"Something?" Benny prodded.

"Something stupid. Something very stupid." He gave Benedek a pointed look. "Something very chauvinistically stupid."

Benny was beginning to understand. "Oops," he sympathized.

"Yes," Jonathan sighed, in total agreement. "What I said was that she couldn't expect to amount to very much because she was a woman. What I *meant* was that she'd have to fight twice as hard to make any kind of mark at all in a heavily male-oriented science such as anthropology, but...."

"But she didn't give you a chance to explain," Benny guessed.

"She wouldn't listen," Jonathan amended. "Over the years, she's managed to prove me very, very wrong, and on the few occasions we've met at national seminars, she made it very clear that she never once forgot—or forgave."

"Look at it this way, Jack—you spurred her on to greatness! That's something to be proud of, isn't it?"

"You convince her of that. First she spends years humiliating me in front of my peers, and now she's trying to lay a guilt trip on me."

"Whoa, hold the phone. You lost me. What guilt trip?"

"Benedek, the woman thinks she sold her soul to the devil for her success. Think about this for a minute. If we suppose for one demented moment that this is actually *true*, then it was my idiotic comment that drove her to it. If we suppose, as I do, that she's merely become unhinged and paranoid, then who was it who 'spurred her on to greatness' as you so crudely put it, and caused the mental breakdown in the first place?"

"That's one heavy guilt trip," Benny agreed solemnly. "There's only one problem with it—you're the one that's laying it on yourself. Will you turn on your headlights, MacKensie? You didn't exactly hold a gun to her head, did you? Tell me something, the truth now. Are you more upset that she might have sold her immortal soul for wild fame and fortune because of some adolescent remark you made, or are you maybe annoyed that you didn't think of doing something like that yourself?"

He got the reaction he was trying for. Jonathan, with a murderous look, cocked his arm back as though to connect his clenched fist with Benedek's jaw. "I *knew* this was a mistake, I just *knew* it," he snarled. Another moment passed where he shook his fist, still wavering on the edge of temptation; then, with an exasperated sigh, he let his arm drop. "Benedek—do us both a big favor and get out of here before I do something that could get me twenty to life, all right?"

Only then did Benedek let the arms he'd raised in defense drop; while he was sure that MacKensie would never resort to physical violence, it was also true that he'd once had his nose broken by someone else of whom he'd made a similar assumption. Despite the fact that Jonathan was still shaking with agitation, Benny cracked a grin to see that his ploy had worked; the man was starting to pull out of his inner-directed blue funk. Not only would it make Jonathan easier to deal with now, it would also probably go a long way towards heading off the bleeding ulcers he seemed destined for in the not so distant future.

"Tell you what I'm gonna do," Benny told him in his usual tone of voice, the one that MacKensie had once told him reminded him of a carnival barker at a three-ring flea circus. Jonathan had settled with a sigh against the wall again, looking up at the ceiling as though praying that just once Benedek would go away when asked. "I think I can handle this woman's problem by my lonesome," Benny went on, knowing that Jonathan was listening despite his best efforts to ignore him. "If you don't feel like dealing with her, fine. I understand, really." He paused, becoming a little more serious. "Hey, uh... I'm sorry about that crack. No offense, okay? In the words of a great Oriental philosopher, you shouldn't try to kid a kidder, pal, and...well, I just wanted to make sure you weren't kidding yourself, know what I mean?"

Jonathan looked at him levelly for a long moment before saying, quietly, "No. I don't know what you mean. I *never* know what you mean." His voice had risen to end on a quiet note of frustration; he went back to his study of the ceiling on the last word.

Benny clapped him on the shoulder. "My reputation as a man of mystery is intact," he grinned. "Okay, now...."

The soft squeak of metal hinges interrupted him. Both glanced up to see that Lucy had managed to find them. Framed in the doorway, she was looking down at them, her expression a mixture of apprehension and puzzlement.

Benny caught the curse Jonathan muttered under his breath as he looked away again, towards the window.

Heel clicks echoing in the stairwell heralded her approach; Benny saw that, while the muscles in Jonathan's face had gone taut, he did not seem inclined to bolt. Encouraged, he greeted the woman brightly. "Lucy, sweetheart! My learned colleague and I were just going over the particulars of your case, and we've come up with a few ideas...."

"I was under the impression that Dr. MacKensie was disinclined to help me with my...problem," she said, her voice lacking the coolness he was expecting. Instead, she sounded almost apprehensive; almost apologetic. She was staring intently at Jonathan, who refused to meet her gaze.

"I think I managed to clear that misunderstanding up, but—hey, you know?" He made a show of looking as though he'd been struck by a sudden thought. "I just remembered that some of those people we wanted to contact have banker's hours, so I think maybe I should just run along and make those phone calls right now. Catch you later, Luce." Three jumps up the stairs later, he turned back, all seriousness. "I will convey to Dr. Moorhouse your willingness to pursue this matter to its logical conclusion, Dr. MacKensie," he said before spinning to take the rest of the steps in four more leaps.

This time the muttered curse was for Benny, but to deliver it in the departing man's direction inadvertently caused Jonathan to meet Lucy's eyes. This time he did not look away, although he faltered for a moment or two before resolve took over. "Dr. Stoker," he greeted her with a stiff nod.

She was standing ramrod straight, her hands clenched tightly before her, her solemn brown eyes regarding him with an indefinable searching look. Quietly, she said at length, "I owe you an apology."

Lowering his head, he laughed softly. "An apology," he repeated in a carefully modulated voice. "Now that certainly covers a lot of ground. Just what precisely do you expect me to forgive you for?"

"I should have come to you first, given you some warning. I know how awkward all this must be for you. I had no intention of causing you any embarrassment."

He smiled without warmth. "Interesting. Very interesting. You didn't want to cause me embarrassment." Another cold laugh. "I'm sorry, but I find that rather amusing."

His voice had grown hard with open hostility, his eyes glinting resentment as he glared at her. A hot flush crept into her face as she briefly averted her gaze. "Please," she said. "I realize you have every right to be bitter, I've treated you very badly in the past. You didn't deserve any of it."

He seemed to consider her words for a moment, his lips pursed. "It doesn't matter," he said at length. "I didn't let it bother me, so you shouldn't let it bother you, all right?"

She gave him a searching look. "I could almost believe that. But you're right, it doesn't matter. It's too late for me to apologize now, even if I expected you to forgive me for wasting all these years being angry with you for something that was entirely my fault."

Her curious admission startled him, betrayed in the sharp glance he gave her. A rueful smile crept onto her face. "You were right—I never gave you a chance to explain."

Realization dawned. "Just how long were you listening to us?" he demanded, his heart sinking to suspect that she had overheard his tirade against her.

She made a quick motion, dismissing his consternation. "It's taken me this long to realize something Benny saw right away—you *didn't* hold a gun to my head. You said something that hurt me, and I overreacted because...because you were right, and I couldn't admit that to myself. So I made you the scapegoat. If I had had any confidence in my own abilities, I wouldn't have let you get to me like that, would I?" Her words came faster, almost an impassioned plea. "You put my worst and most hidden fears into words, and I just couldn't forgive you for doing it. Not just because I knew you were right, but also because your timing couldn't have been worse."

She had ended with a sigh, covering her forehead with the palm of her hand, which slid down to briefly touch her mouth before dropping back to her side. He waited, sensing that she was getting her courage up for another, more sensitive confession. Her eyes fixed on some distant point near the ceiling, she began, more composed, "Do you remember that chemistry major I was dating?"

He nodded, frowning at the strange turn her discourse had taken. It took her another moment more before she could bring herself to speak again. "Did you know I'd given him his walking papers just before finals?"

This time he shook his head, the frown deepening. He was beginning to suspect his original hypothesis was right: she was unraveling around the edges right before his eyes. He kept silent, wondering how to handle the situation should she take a sudden turn for the worse right there in the stairwell. "The reason I broke up with him," she continued, her speech becoming more hesitant, "was because I hoped that by doing so, I could encourage a fellow anthropology major to ask me to be his escort to the senior mixer after finals."

Her gaze was fixed on the fingers she was twisting together, so she didn't see Jonathan's face go white. That her confession was genuine, he had no doubt; what unnerved him so violently was that it had awakened in him a feeling he had banished long ago. It had been a feeling that had grown gradually, finally reaching a point where, once the pressure of finals week was off, he had decided to test the waters, to see how solid the social relationship between a certain chemistry major and a certain anthropology major actually was. He'd deliberately knocked back several potent mixed drinks at that fateful frat party, despite the fact that he hated the taste of alcohol, because he had hoped it would aid him in his quest. All that it managed to do was to speed him on his way to putting his foot solidly in his mouth.

The full weight of his folly and the years of consequences that had followed came crashing down on him like a physical weight. Drained, he slumped back against the wall. "Damn," he muttered hoarsely. "*Damn.*"

It was clear that she understood his reaction; had, indeed, anticipated it. She looked as though she were torn between laughing and crying. "Looks like I really made a mess of things, doesn't it?" she said in a thin voice.

He wanted to protest but couldn't; his pride still blocked the way. But a curious thing was happening—he could feel all his pent-up bitterness and resentment slipping out of his grasp. Somehow, in the face of Lucy's genuine distress, his bruised ego really didn't matter anymore. Pride had always been as important to Lucy Stoker as breathing, and now she had come to humble herself before him. In the face of a minor miracle like that, what purpose would continued pettiness on his part serve?

And the simple truth of the matter was that a small part of him still harbored wild envy for that chemistry major whose name he couldn't even remember.

"I need your help, Jonathan." She had composed herself again, speaking quietly and evenly. "Please. Help me."

Something inside violently rejected the impassioned plea in her voice. "You're a *scientist*, for pity's sake. How can you possibly believe in this superstitious nonsense?"

She inclined her head, puzzled. "You're in charge of a paranormal research project and can still ask me a question like that?"

"I'm in charge of this project because Dr. Moorhouse gave me very little choice in the matter," he told her emphatically. "I don't believe in the supernatural."

"You mean that you don't want to believe."

"Excuse me?" he blinked.

"I didn't want to believe, either, but matters finally reached the point where even *I* had to stop kidding myself."

"I can't believe we're having this conversation," he said, rubbing his forehead tiredly. "You, of all people...."

She held up her hands. "Jonathan, this is a pointless argument. Benny has the right idea—if you don't agree with me, then humor me. Please. Will you help me?"

He nodded before he even realized what he was doing, and was rewarded by the warm smile of relief that spread over her face. She opened her mouth to say something, but was interrupted when the door to the stairwell opened again. This time Dr. Moorhouse stood glaring down at them, with Benny peering around her, making strange, frantic gestures.

"I've just glanced at your monthly expense report, MacKensie," the woman announced, her stern voice holding a note of bewilderment. Behind her, Benny froze, wincing; as she continued, he slunk away down the hall. "What's all this about sending a graduate student to Zimbabwe?"

"You found the driver I sent?" MacKensie juggled the phone receiver, a pen and a small yellow writing pad. "No, really, I'm sorry I couldn't get away to meet you myself. You don't *know* how sorry I am. What's that? Yes, I know what you mean, I didn't sleep at all last night either. You've got everything with you? Fantastic. Casey, listen—I'm in Sciences, Conference Room B. Third floor, that's right. No, don't wait, just come right up. No, trust me, you won't be interrupting anything important. Casey, Casey, listen to me. The sooner we get off the phone, the sooner you'll be here. Conference Room B, if you value your life. Right. Goodbye." With the telephone safely hung up, he allowed himself a brief exclamation of triumph before turning back to continue the interrupted conversation. "I'm not finished with you, so wipe that smug look off your face. And get your feet off the table, that's school property."

Benedek gave him a wide-eyed innocent look. "Look, I got Dr. M off your case, didn't I? I had to do something to distract her, she was chewing nails about everybody running out of her office like that yesterday."

"But my *expense* report? What in heaven's name possessed you to show her that?"

Benny shrugged. "It worked, didn't it?"

"I had a time and a place planned for approaching Dr. Moorhouse and you—you...." He broke off with an exasperated sigh, shaking his head. "Why is it that whenever you're around I start feeling like I'm losing control of my life?"

"You gotta look at the big picture," Benny assured him. "Once your kid gets here, you can let your boss in on the big secret and you'll be the man of the hour. Don't unstarch your collar, relax! And I *am* on the inside track for your exclusive story, right?"

Jonathan glared at him. "The day that I allow the *National Register* to break the news of the anthropological discovery of the century is the day that—"

"Excuse me?" A trim, dark-haired woman stood in the doorway, peering in. Her face lit up when she spied a familiar face. "Benny!" she smiled, entering with her hand extended. "I'm not late, am I?"

Benny took her hand, pulling out a chair for her. "As a matter of fact, a little early—your client hasn't shown up yet. Marge, you remember Jonathan MacKensie, don't you?"

"We were never formally introduced," she said, turning to Jonathan. "Marge Glorioso—Ollie's paralegal?"

His eyebrows shot up. His only memory of the woman was of a shadowy face in the back of Ollie's stretch limo, and a hand that had produced various items within seconds of demand. Then he realized that she was holding out her hand to him, and he took it, saying the first thing that came to mind. "I can't tell you how sorry I am about what happened to Ollie, I feel somewhat responsible."

"Responsible?" she repeated blankly. "I don't understand."

He hesitated, wondering just how much she knew about the circumstances of Ollie's demise. "I mean, he wouldn't have...that is, he was helping us with an investigation when he—"

"Oh, yes, I know," she said calmly. "But really, there's no need to feel that way. If anyone's to blame, it's Ollie for failing to take the proper precautions."

"Precautions? Now *I* don't understand."

Benny had obviously decided he had been excluded from the conversation long enough. "She's trying to tell you that Ollie got a little too cocky—or senile," he said, guiding them both to their chairs with a firm hand on their respective shoulders. "Forgot to take his good-luck charm with him."

"I found it in his desk drawer," Marge nodded, sounding a little wistful as she allowed Benny to push in her chair.

"Hope you remembered yours," Benny said meaningfully as he settled between them.

"I never leave home without it," she assured him with a smile. "Now—let's see. I made some notes when we talked on the phone last night." She had carried in a briefcase, which she now opened on the table, removing a pair of reading glasses, two pens, and a yellow legal pad. Adjusting the glasses, she scanned down the closely scribbled notes on the top page. "Your client has reason to believe that she entered into a verbal agreement with an unknown agent for unspecified services in exchange for ownership of her immortal soul." She glanced at Benny, who nodded. "All right. Our next step is to determine the specifications of the existing contract."

Jonathan, who had been listening with increasing dismay, now leaned in with his hand held out. "Wait a minute, wait. Would someone mind explaining to me what's going on here?"

"What's to explain?" Benny spread his hands. "I got to thinking that this sounded a lot like that business with Gwen Page, so the only logical thing to do was to go with what worked last time. I mean, sure, Ollie got a little careless, god rest him, but he delivered the goods, right?"

Jonathan paused, struck by a sudden, horrible thought. "Benedek, you're not planning to...?" He lost the words he wanted to use, and substituted a weak gesture towards the ceiling.

"Nah," Benny waved away his apprehension. "Marge here has taken over Ollie's practice, or at least she will once she passes the bar. She did all the heavy research anyway, Ollie was mostly show, wasn't he, Margie? Hey, how did you make out with the gypsy, anyway?"

"He had everything I needed," she said, her interest sparked. "Someday you've got to let me in on some more of your sources—Rudi had some of the best quality powders I've ever seen. Oh, and I got the candles from him, and while the Japanese guy didn't have anything helpful, I did get his business card in case I needed any silverwork done. He does great filigree, doesn't he?"

"Joey-san is a class act all right," Benny nodded. "They had everything ready for you, right? Great. Let's see, who else did I call last night?"

"Just where did you make these calls from?" Jonathan demanded. "In other words, where were you hiding last night, Benedek?"

"I wasn't hiding," he protested, offended. "I was on the case, setting up this meeting."

"You weren't in my office, you weren't in Dr. Moorhouse's office, and there was no answer at your hotel room. Believe me, I *know*," he said, leaning in with a menacing glare. "I *checked*."

Benny smiled weakly. "Yeah, I'll just bet you did. Hey, look, do you think we could put aside this petty squabble for another time, okay? I'm sorry, Marge—we interrupted you. Go on."

Jonathan took one last shot, pointing a finger while mouthing, "I'm not finished with you!" before settling back in his chair with a smile for Marge to continue.

She hesitated a moment to make sure they weren't going to start again before going back to her notes. "The good news is that this kind of thing isn't all that uncommon."

Jonathan frowned, then emitted a mildly derisive laugh. "You mean people sell their souls to the devil every day?"

She surprised him by nodding solemnly. "Oh, yes. The typical agreement is in exchange for success, fame, or fortune, most times all three. That's not to say that every successful, famous or wealthy person in the world has entered into such an agreement; the chief difference lies in the methods employed to achieve these goals."

"I'm not sure I'm following you," Jonathan admitted.

"When a mortal enters into an agreement to surrender his or her immortal soul, he or she is inevitably presented with a series of circumstances which, if exploited one way or the other, will culminate in said person reaching the desired goals. The circumstances, however, usually involve illegal, immoral, or merely unethical actions on the part of the person involved; the contract *can* be broken at that point should said person decide against employing these methods to achieve their goals. It *is* possible to realize one's dreams without hurting anyone or compromising your own beliefs, but as you can well imagine, it's far more difficult to travel that road alone. Not surprisingly, many people opt for a little outside help, and consider their soul a small enough payment for it."

He nodded, then blinked. "No, I meant I don't think I understand why you called that the *good* news."

"I meant that it makes things a little easier to research with so many case histories to choose from. The bad news, however, is that this kind of contract is nearly impossible to break."

"Nearly impossible?" Benny pounced. "Then there's hope, right?"

She slipped off her glasses, tapping them against her open palm. "I'll be honest with you. I don't think so. She's been benefiting from this contract for a long time. Payment will be due."

"Hold up here a second, I don't get it," Benny said, genuinely puzzled. "What worked for us last time won't work this time?"

She shook her head, her eyebrows arching apologetically. "Sorry, Benny. That last time was a contract between a mortal and a wizardress."

"So what's the difference?"

"Without getting technical, the wizardress in question made her own contract with the devil in exchange for her supernatural powers and extended lifespan. She in turn has been given leave to make her own contracts for whatever purpose she chooses. Although she appears to us to be other than human, the fact remains that she still has mortal status, which tends to downgrade the holding power of her pacts, making it relatively easy for someone or something of greater power to void the agreement. However, this contract is...well, let me put it this way. This is the big time. There are no precedents for renegeing on a contract like this."

"But according to Lucy, she didn't know what she was getting into," Jonathan protested. "Surely that counts for something?"

"Well, I won't know for sure until I interview her, but I can tell you this much—I won't be able to help her if she knowingly committed any kind of crime, unethical act, or intentionally hurt anyone in the course of achieving whatever goal she contracted for."

Benny's lips pursed for a whistle that did not materialize; Jonathan flinched slightly, putting his head in his hand for a moment. Marge glanced at both in turn, then settled back in her chair with a sigh. "This should be an interesting interview," she said to herself, shaking her head.

Dr. Stoker arrived then, and Benny took it upon himself to make the introductions while guiding her to a chair next to Marge. "Will Dr. Moorhouse be joining us?" she asked him as he seated her.

"I'm afraid that more mundane matters have ripped her from our bosom," Benny said smoothly, settling back down in his chair between Marge and Jonathan. "Regents meeting, I think. Those regents are really hot on meetings, aren't they? What *is* a regent, anyway, does anyone really know?"

Jonathan was consulting his watch. "Ah, Benedek—could we get on with this, please?"

"Oh, right. Gotcha. So, Marge, whaddya say we get this show on the road? Jonny here's got a kettle on the stove."

Marge nodded, slipping her reading glasses back on to consult her notes. "Dr. Stoker, I just need a few questions answered before we start. You believe that you entered into a pact to surrender your immortal soul as payment for certain services? What were those services, as defined by you?"

She cleared her throat, and began hesitantly. "Unqualified success in my chosen career."

Marge scribbled for a moment. "Was there any provision for your personal life?"

"No. That wasn't important to me. It still isn't, not really."

"I see. How about personal finances?"

"I've done quite well as a result of my success, but that really isn't important either."

"And what would you consider to be important? Your work or the notoriety it has brought you?"

"Both," she admitted after a long pause, making an obvious effort not to glance at Jonathan. "Actually, the attention was quite gratifying to me for rather personal reasons, but I fear I may have... misused it."

Marge grimaced slightly at that. "Hm. I see. That's, ah...too bad." She shook her head as she made another, more lengthy note.

Her quiet statement brought Lucy leaning forward out of her chair. "You don't sound very encouraging. Is there any reason to hope?"

"First I have to know two things. One—when did you first suspect that a contract indeed existed?"

"I think I've suspected for quite some time," she admitted after some thought. "But as a scientist, I persuaded myself to dismiss it; I never considered myself a superstitious person."

"And how long have known for certain?"

"For at least three years, maybe less. It's difficult to explain...."

"It's not necessary," Marge assured her. "That brings us to the second thing I need to know: why did it take you three years to become concerned about the eventual disposition of your immortal soul?"

She took a deep breath. "Because, I suppose, it took me this long to face the truth about what I was doing. Three years ago, even two years ago, I wouldn't have cared anything about what happened to my immortal soul, as you call it, because I...I truly thought I was invincible. If my soul was the price to pay for the wave of success I was riding at that time, then I paid it gladly. I thought it was worth it. Three years ago, success was the only thing I cared about. Three years ago, I didn't know that I would be dead within four."

Jonathan straightened with a snap. He exchanged a startled glance with Benny, who shrugged his own surprise. Marge, on the other hand, merely nodded and made another note as though she heard the same story hundreds of times over.

Lucy had ended with a hand pressed against her forehead; when she did not volunteer any more information, Jonathan leaned over towards her. "Lucy...."

"Don't." Her initially sharp voice softened on the next words. "Don't say anything, all right? There's nothing you can say, nothing you can do, nothing that anyone can do."

"Unfortunately, you may be more right that you know," Marge said with a sigh, still shaking her head over her page of notes. "As far as I can tell, the terms of the contract have been met to the complete satisfaction of one party; the other party is fully entitled to expect its terms to be complied with—in full."

"But there's got to be some way," Benny protested. "The good guys have got to win, right?"

"You've been watching too many old movies," she told him patiently. "The facts are that I just don't have a case here."

"Fine, we'll make an out-of-court settlement," Benny said, an edge of frustration creeping into his voice. "A change of venue—we'll appeal!"

"Wait a minute." Marge's hand had darted out to grab Benny's sleeve, her features twisting into a thoughtful frown. "That's an idea."

"An appeal? Do they have an appellate court down there in Damnation Alley?"

"No, no. A settlement." Whatever idea had grabbed her interest was now catching fire; she leaned forward, her eyes sparkling. "The terms of the contract are nebulous enough that it's just possible that the payment could be renegotiated."

Benny was having trouble with the concept. "Renegotiated to what?"

She gave him a mildly disparaging look. "Obviously we're going to have to talk to a representative for the other party involved to find out what they would consider a suitable substitute."

"Wait a minute, this is getting too weird for me," Jonathan protested. "Miss Glorioso, you strike me as being an intelligent, fairly well-balanced person. Just how far do you intend to take this charade?"

She regarded him dispassionately for a long moment, then glanced at Benny with a nod towards Jonathan. "I see he hasn't changed much. Losing your touch?"

Benny gave her a cheeky grin in return. "Well, he still needs a lot of work, but he's coming along, coming along." He glanced at Jonathan, who flinched away when he suspected Benedek was going to reach out and pat him on the head.

Marge was all business again, turning to Dr. Stoker. "Now, I can't guarantee anything," she explained carefully. "There are no precedents for this sort of thing, so I have no idea whether renegotiation is even a feasible option."

"Are there any risks involved?" Lucy asked matter-of-factly, only the slight hoarseness of her voice betraying any anxiety.

"I don't think so," she replied, with a shrug of mild uncertainty. "I believe I brought enough with me to protect Jonathan and Benny, and you—well, quite honestly, you have nothing to lose by trying. Do I have your permission to proceed?"

Lucy exhaled, closed her eyes, and after a moment, nodded.

Marge reached into her briefcase, drawing forth a locked box. The key turned out to be the jeweled pendant she wore around her neck. Jonathan, his curiosity piqued, craned his neck to see the contents of the box as she opened it. All he could see were some whitish objects wrapped in plastic, and some other odd lumps covered with what appeared to be pieces of velvet. Each item was carefully lifted from the cloth-lined box and unwrapped, set out in front of her like a line of toy soldiers. Jonathan identified several candles, a small copper bowl, a stoppered vial of what appeared to be water, and five other vials containing colored liquids and powders. With the empty box closed and set aside, Marge selected a container filled with white powder, and worked off the cork seal as she said, "Now we'll see how well Rudi the Gypsy knows his stuff."

Jonathan watched in growing amazement as she proceeded to lay a thin stream of powder on the floor around the table. When she closed the circle near them, she cautioned Jonathan, "Make sure you don't disturb the perimeter," when he turned to stare down at her agape. Her task completed, she stood, paused a moment to critically inspect her handiwork, then nodded, satisfied. Taking an extra chair from against the far wall, she placed it at the head of the table, outside the circle. Then it was back to her equipment to select a large white candle, which she lit and set into a small holder. The copper bowl was used to receive a mix of the colored powders and liquids, to which she added several drops of tallow from the candle.

"Amazing," Jonathan murmured, impressed by the deftness with which she performed her strange tasks. Benny, overhearing him, leaned over to whisper, "Ain't it, though? And she's only a journeyman, can you believe it?"

"A lawyer *and* a sorceress?" Jonathan was incredulous.

"Ah, ah." He wagged a warning finger. "A witch, Jack, *not* a sorceress. Big difference. Remember that."

Marge had lit two smaller candles from the flame of the large one, and now paced out a strange pattern. From the doorway, she would take a few steps, pause to trace an odd waving design in the air with the candles, then take another few steps to repeat the process. She continued in this fashion until she had approximated the circle around the table, ending back at the doorway. Returning to the table, she paused for a moment's thought, then reached over to tip out a small dollop of melted wax onto Jonathan's shoulder from one candle, and Benny's shoulder with the other. MacKensie jumped with a yelp, more from surprise since the heat of the wax did not penetrate his heavy wool suit jacket. "What the...?"

"No." Her sharp command stopped him from reflexively brushing the wax off his shoulder. "You can't have too much protection; leave it. It will dry clean."

She spoke without looking up from her new task, mixing some more colored powder into the copper bowl, which she now lifted to heat over the flame of the white candle for several seconds. Setting it down again, she passed her hands over the dish several times, murmuring something under her breath. Then, with a flick of her fingers, she tipped one of the smaller candles over the bowl. The melted wax splashed in, igniting the contents in a brief but brilliant conflagration.

"This is great stuff, just great," Benny said. "There's nothing like watching a true artist at work, know what I mean, Jack?"

Marge was moving her hands through the oily smoke tumbling up from bowl, seeming to sculpt and shape it as it rose up and dispersed throughout the room. Then she stepped back and crossed her arms, deep in thought. "Well," she sighed, seemingly satisfied with whatever she had accomplished. "Now we wait."

"Wait for what?" Jonathan prompted when she reseated herself without further explanation.

"I issued a summons; now we wait to see if it will be answered," she told him, beginning to close up some of the vials. "Oh, and make sure you all stay inside the circle? Thanks."

"A summons?" Jonathan repeated in a dread whisper. "What is going *on* around here?"

"I think I follow her, Jack," Benny said, grabbing his sleeve for his attention. "See, she hasn't summoned the devil; that just isn't *done*, if you catch my drift. What she's calling on is a junior exec type, you know—lower level management, that sort of thing. Someone with the authority to negotiate for the higher-ups."

"A proxy," Jonathan guessed, immediately feeling ridiculous for lowering himself to Benny's level.

"Whatever. Anyway, if this works the way I think it does, this proxy-type will have to take on a form that will allow it to communicate with us, and that's usually done by way of temporary possession."

"Benedek, it constantly amazes me how you always seem to make it sound like you actually know what you're talking about."

Benny used the back of his hand to lightly rap MacKensie on the shoulder. "Hey, you think a couple of PhD's makes you an expert on experts, pal? Listen to me, I'm feeding you the real stuff here."

"Temporary possession? What kind of nonsense is that?"

"The next person who walks through that door is going to be the devil's advocate, pal, you see if I'm not right. You'll probably know the person, but you won't *know* them—they'll be possessed." He waggled his fingers ghoulishly in MacKensie's face.

Jonathan pushed Benedek's hands away with a grimace. "If that's the case," he commented sardonically, "you'd better hope Dr. Moorhouse's meeting doesn't end early."

Benny's eyes widened in delight. "Whoa, what a concept. I always thought that lady had a little bit of the devil in her."

Jonathan shook his head in disgust, then leaned over to check on Lucy, who was in low-voiced conversation with Marge. Benny followed his gaze. "Hey, don't worry about her, Jack. She's holding up. More than I can say for you, though. I gotta tell you, I've seen you jumpy before, but today you're going for the gold."

"I want to get this over with," he insisted defensively. "I have got *work* to do today."

"Yeah, right. Zimbabwe, how could I forget? Hey, look, while we're cooling our heels here, why don't we start the interview? I see a front page splash, right? Your picture, with me, of course—I guess we should work Casey in there somewhere...."

"Benedek," Jonathan snapped irritably, but his complaint was cut short by someone calling his name from the doorway. "Casey!" he cried, his eyes lighting up. "Come in, come in!"

He had jumped to his feet to welcome the young college student, but two things stopped him in his tracks: Marge's imperious shout and Benny's iron grip on his arm, pulling him back into the chair. Stunned, he stared at both in bewilderment. "What in the name of...?"

"Looks like I win the bet, pal," Benny told him ominously, staring at the doorway. "Sorry."

Jonathan followed his gaze to Casey, who had taken only a step into the room. The young man was regarding them with mild interest, the beginnings of a smile on his face. After a moment, he settled on Marge, and grinned. "Hey, not bad!" he exclaimed, sauntering into the room to stop at the edge of the powder circle. "Not bad at all." He tilted his head as he gazed down at the line inches from his feet. "But you really didn't have to go to all this trouble, you know," he said, addressing Marge matter-of-factly. "You'll find me to be very reasonable guy."

"I'm sure," Marge replied dryly. She gestured towards the chair that remained outside the circle.

"Oh, wow. Thanks." He seated himself, swinging the heavy case he'd carried in with him under the legs of the chair. Jonathan started to rise but Benny pushed him back again, this time with a sharp glance of warning. "I mean that, really," the young man continued. "You don't know how many times people have forgotten to leave me a place to sit. Gets pretty annoying after a while, you know?"

"I guess you don't like being annoyed, do you?" Benny said with a nervous laugh, watching Casey intently.

Casey gave him a smug smile. "I guess," he agreed lightly.

Jonathan was also subjecting the young man to intense scrutiny. This brash, breezy young man bore little more than physical resemblance to the serious young graduate student he'd sent to Zimbabwe. "Casey?" he queried tentatively. "Are you all right?"

The young man gave him a blank look. "Casey? Who...? Oh—*right*. Hey, don't worry about him, he's fine, really."

"He's fine?" Jonathan mouthed, looking to Benny for help. Sensing that the man was about to have a close encounter with hysteria, Benny clapped him on the shoulder reassuringly, still keeping his eye on Casey. "Keep it cool, Jack," he warned under his breath. "Keep it cool."

"So." Casey made a show of relaxing back in the chair, giving all of them his brightest smile. "What can I do for you folks?"

Marge adjusted her reading glasses once more. "Do you have a name?" she inquired professionally.

"Oh, I guess Casey will do. Doesn't really matter one way or the other, does it?"

"I suppose not," she agreed, making a note. "Now—do you recognize anyone in this room as a mortal with whom your, er...employer has an outstanding agreement?"

"Yeah, sure." He sighted down his forefinger. "Her, right there. Matter of fact, it comes due next year, but I guess you know that already. That's why I'm here, right? Hey." He held up his hands just as Marge was about to speak again. "Let me save you a little trouble here. Forget it. Whatever all this is about, just forget it. A deal is a deal, that's our golden rule. Now, if there are no further questions, I'll...."

"Are you or are you not empowered to negotiate in this matter?" Marge interjected firmly.

"What negotiate?" Casey scoffed. "Clean out your ears, lady, I said forget it. Look, think about this a minute. What could any of you possibly negotiate with? Hm?"

"Why don't you tell us?" Marge challenged. "What would you, or your employer consider to be suitable recompense in this instance?"

He gave her a puzzled frown. "You're really serious, aren't you? Wow, that's a switch. Most people just want out, they don't offer to pay up with something else. Let me think about this a minute."

"Another soul, maybe?" Benny suggested, shrugging.

Casey dismissed it with a wave. "Are you kidding? If the owner of the exchange soul didn't agree, we couldn't take it, and if they *did* agree, chances are we could get it on our own anyway. Wait a minute—yeah, I've got it. A sacrifice. That would do it."

Jonathan, who was holding his throbbing head in his hands, looked up blearily. "I hope you're not talking about oxen and goats," he pleaded.

Casey gave him a disdainful look. "Man, you guys are really a prize. I'm talking about giving up something precious; a sacrifice, you know?"

"I'll give up smoking," Benny offered promptly.

This got him a pitying glare from Casey. "Mr. Benedek, you don't smoke."

"That doesn't count?"

"Look, get serious, okay? I don't have to do this, you know. I'm giving you a break because you're not giving me a hard time about renegeing on the deal, and you remembered to give me a chair. No fooling around, now. What have you got for me?"

"Let me understand this," Marge said, removing her glasses. "This personal sacrifice could be made by any one of us?"

"No. It has to come from either you or those two guys, not Dr. Stoker."

"So you want one of us to give up something dear in exchange for Dr. Stoker's soul?"

"Yeah." He nodded, pleased with himself. "And I'll be the final judge of whether the sacrifice is suitable. Don't take too long, I'm on a tight schedule."

Marge waved them in for a conference, but before she could say anything, Jonathan's patience broke. "I don't believe this!" he whispered desperately. "That's *not* Casey! What's going on here?"

"Down, boy," Benny said soothingly. "Repeat after me: there's no place like home. There's no—"

"*Benedek!*"

"Time out!" Marge's sharp voice cut Jonathan's promised threat short. "Come on, guys, a little cooperation here would be nice. We need ideas."

"Hey." Benny's hand went to Marge's arm; he was looking past her and nodded to redirect her attention. Lucy had risen from her seat, moving a few paces to stand inches from the line separating them from Casey. He remained seated at her approach, regarding her without interest. "I've changed my mind," she began calmly. "I'll fulfill my part of the bargain. I'm sorry to have troubled you."

"No trouble," he assured her, spreading his hands. "As a matter of fact, I'm enjoying this."

"There's no need to take this any further," she insisted. "Please."

He made a show of shrugging an apology. "Sorry. Once I get hold of a great idea like this, there's just no turning back."

"I don't want them to make a sacrifice for me, don't you understand?" she said, her voice rising with desperation.

"Lady, *you* understand something, okay?" Casey's voice had grown hard; he leaned forward to address her in no uncertain terms. "You blew it a long time ago; you've got nothing left to bargain with. I'm calling the shots here. Sit down."

She turned, and only then could the others see that she was on the verge of tears. Looking up, she made a visible effort to compose herself. "Jonathan...I'm sorry," she managed before sliding back into her chair, covering her face with her hands.

Jonathan's puzzled frown was interrupted by an exclamation of disgust from Casey. "Terrific, lady. Had to spoil it for me, didn't you? Thanks loads." With a sigh, he got to his feet. "Okay, here's the deal. I already know what I'll accept." He sneered in Lucy's direction again. "How *you* figured it out, I'll never know."

"What are your terms?" Marge spoke quickly, hoping to head off what looked to be a lengthy grouse.

Instead of answering, Casey bent down to retrieve the case from under his chair, hefting it up to the chair seat. "This will do quite nicely," he said with a grand gesture.

"No!" Jonathan shot up out of his chair, wild-eyed. "No, you can't. You don't understand, you just *can't*."

Casey laughed, slapping his hands together. "Great, just great! Oh, man, this is perfect!"

"Perfect?" MacKensie repeated weakly. Benny jumped up, grabbing Jonathan's arm in a bracing grip, managing to ease him back down into his chair. Casey was still talking. "Of course, I can't take it until you give it to me. You have to give it to me. Hello? Dr. MacKensie, are you still with us?"

"Just back off, okay?" Benny snapped over his shoulder. "At least wait until he starts breathing again."

"Well...all right, but don't take all day," Casey grumbled.

Lucy had raised her head, holding out her extended hands, palms down, on the table before her. "Don't do this," she pleaded quietly, desperately. "Please, don't do this."

"Lady, I told you once already—butt out. I'm not going to tell you again. Remember, you've only got a year left, so don't push your luck, okay?"

"You call this negotiation?" Marge demanded, incredulous.

"I've got hot news for you, sweetheart," he smirked. "I can call it anything I want. You called me, remember?"

Lucy, thin-lipped, turned towards Jonathan, who was fending off Benedek's attempts to fan him with a notebook. "You don't have to give him anything," she told him earnestly. "Just tell him no, and he'll leave."

He stared at her, then took a longer look at the suitcase that Casey was patting possessively. "Is she right?" he managed to croak.

"Yeah," he admitted readily. "I'll leave, and I won't even charge you a penalty for wasting my time. I told you, I'm a reasonable kind of guy. If you don't believe me, ask your lawyer, she'll tell you."

"Tell him to leave," Lucy insisted, her gaze focused on her tightly clasped hands.

Marge reached over to touch Jonathan's hand. "It's up to you, now," she informed him lowly. "He won't leave until you give him that case or tell him specifically to go without it."

Benny watched the last remaining color drain from MacKensie's face. "Hey, Case, old pal, you sure we couldn't talk about this some more?" he offered, extending a hand toward the young man. "I'll give up women. I'll join a monastery. Oh, sorry, that's probably not something you want to hear. You can have all my royalty checks, whaddya say?"

Casey dismissed him with a dry smile, flicking his gaze back to Jonathan. "So, what's the word, Dr. MacKensie?" he challenged.

Jonathan's eyes were closed, in pain. His chest hurt with the effort of breathing; his heart was hammering against his ribcage and his head was threatening to burst from the pressure building up inside it. Days, weeks, years of work, the anticipation, the dreams—he was being asked to give it all up and for what? For the immortal soul of a woman he didn't even like. She had come to him for help, though, and he had given his word. But now she had made it clear she wouldn't hold him to his pledge; was, indeed, insisting that the promise be voided. And she didn't even know what it was he was being asked to surrender.

He felt sick; something inside him was twisting and churning, and he knew what it was—his morality in fierce struggle with his pride and vanity. The latter was all tied up with his daydreams of finally making his own mark in his chosen profession, finally managing to struggle out from under the long shadow his father's wild success had cast over him. The former was what he was, what his parents had forged in him, everything he had ever believed in in his entire life. Whatever he decided now would in turn determine which side would control the rest of his life.

And with that realization, the decision came startlingly clear. He forced open eyelids that had become strangely heavy, looked up at the expectant faces around him. Benny cracked a smile of relief. "Had me worried there, buds—thought you'd zonked out on me," he murmured. "You okay?"

"I'm...fine," he managed, suddenly very weary. He leaned out of his chair now, propping himself against the table on his arms. Swallowing, he drew in a deep, steeling breath. "Take it."

"What's that?" Casey held a cupped hand to his ear. "Speak up, I can't quite hear you."

"I said..." He paused, summoning strength. "Take it. Take the case."

Casey grinned, turning to grip the handle. "You're sure, now?"

"Don't make me say it again," Mackenzie pleaded, letting his head sink onto his crossed arms. "Just leave."

"Okay." Casey swung the suitcase up into the air. Just as he released it, the case burst into flames, disintegrating as if it were nothing but a piece of tissue paper. With a chuckle, Casey dusted his hands, nodding to the assemblage. "Real nice doing business with you folks. I gotta tell you, this is the best time I've had in ages. Hey, anything else I can do for you while I'm here?"

"Yeah," Benny said, chucking a thumb towards the door. "Hit the road, pal."

Casey nodded agreeably, arriving at the door in three hopping jumps. He paused, leaning back in to address Benny. "You know, you've been on the thin edge for a long time now. Are you sure you wouldn't want to take this opportunity to commit yourself one way or the other? We can make you a very attractive offer?"

"I said *beat* it, jerk."

He scowled, feigning offense. "You wanna come over on this side of the line and say that, pal?"

"Marge, sweetheart, you got anything I can throw that's guaranteed to hurt?"

"Only kidding!" Casey protested cheerily. "I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again, Mr. Benedek—keep in touch!" And then he was gone.

He left behind a silent tableau. Jonathan still had his head down on the table; Lucy was sitting back in her chair, staring fixedly at the hands she held clasped in her lap. Benny, leaning his hand on the back of Jonathan's chair, exchanged glances with Marge and shrugged resignedly. The woman in turn sighed, shaking her head, then resumed packing up the remnants of her materials.

Benny slipped back into his chair, giving some thought to his next move. This situation was beyond his ability to make better with sparkling wit and repartee alone. Something simple and direct was called for. "Hey, Jack," he said quietly, giving the man a comradely slap on one shoulder. "What say I get you home? This is a hell of a place to catch forty winks, know what I mean?"

"Benedek!" Jonathan's growl was muffled against his coat sleeve.

"Okay, okay, no more jokes. Come on, you really look like you could use a snooze. And maybe a real stiff one, straight up. Have I ever told you that I mix a mean margarita?"

He raised his head, waving Benedek off impatiently. "Look, I'm fine, all right? Just...leave it."

"Hey, all I'm saying is—"

"Leave it, Benedek." His voice was firm, yet he didn't manage to completely suppress the pleading note in it. He rose, turning away, his movements stiff and uncoordinated. A hand held up in warning stopped Benedek from trailing after him. "I said, I'm fine," he insisted, staring steadfastly at the wall that kept him from walking any farther.

Benny backed off, giving Marge another look. "He says he's fine," he shrugged, coming to stand next to Dr. Stoker's chair. "How about you, Doc? Ready to tackle Merv with me next week? I figured we'd start out with a soft-shoe number, then dazzle them with the floating anthropologist illusion. We'll have them in the aisles, whaddya say?"

A ghost of a smile flickered on her grey features as she looked up at him. "Looks like I did it again," she said, her voice a hoarse whisper.

He instinctively knew what she was talking about. "Hey—he'll survive," he assured her, low-voiced. "Jonathan's a real tough nut, trust me. Of course, the operative word there is nut, but..." His smile died when he realized that he really didn't find anything funny anymore. "He'll survive," he repeated, serious now. "Come on, do you think he could have lived with himself if he hadn't let things turn out this way?"

"Excuse me?" Benny's head snapped up to hear Casey's voice coming from the doorway again. The young blond man was peering in, looking slightly dazed. "Dr. MacKensie?"

"Hey!" Benny cried, coloring. "What's the matter, didn't you get your jollies enough already? I thought I told you to get lost, creep."

Casey frowned at him, thoroughly confused. "Huh? Do I know you?"

Jonathan turned on his heel, staring at the young man in horror. "Casey! Oh, god...."

Marge intercepted Mackensie, giving him a meaningful look. "You'd better let me handle this," she told him before accepting his help ushering the obviously bewildered young man into the room.

"I don't feel very well," Casey was complaining as they settled him into a chair. "I was...I was coming up the stairs, and...and...my head hurts."

"We'll get you some aspirin," Benny assured him.

"Here." Marge had uncorked a previously unused vial, offering it to the young man. "Drink this. It will help."

Casey hesitated until he got an affirmative nod from Jonathan, then quaffed the contents down in a gulp. "I don't understand this," he moaned. "I was coming up the stairs."

"Yeah, yeah," Benny said impatiently. "Look, kid, do yourself a favor and, ah...try not to think too hard about it."

"Oh." Casey's eyes went wide as though a terrible thought had struck him. "Dr. MacKensie. I'm so sorry."

"Sorry?" he flinched. "Sorry for what?"

"That the find turned out to be a hoax, of course. At least...I think...why am I so confused?"

"Not a good traveler, huh?" Benny clucked sympathetically. "Next time, try herbal distillates instead of Dramamine."

"I don't feel well," Casey repeated insistently. "I'm going to be sick."

"Right *now*?" When the young man nodded morosely, Benny gestured urgently for Marge's assistance. "Down the hall, last door on the left," he told her as he hooked one of Casey's arms around his shoulder to help

him to his feet. Marge grabbed her box, tucking it under her arm as Benny continued, "Hope you're not the shy type, Margie, I'm going to need all the help I can get with this one."

"Least of your worries," she assured him, letting Casey lean on her shoulder as they guided the young man out the door. "Okay, easy, easy. That's it...."

Jonathan followed them to the doorway anxiously. "You did a good job, Casey," he called after them. "Really! A wonderful job!" His voice trailed off as the enormity of his loss hit him again; he sagged against the doorframe, drained. "A wonderful job," he repeated, a despondent whisper.

Numb, he turned from the door, and started back toward the table, but a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye stopped him in his tracks. Keeping his eyes steadfastly averted, he awaited Lucy's tentative approach.

"I know I keep saying this," she began haltingly. "And I wouldn't blame you in the least for not believing me, but...I *am* sorry."

He roused himself enough to lift a hand, in thought. "Tell me something. You *knew* what was in that case, didn't you?"

"Jonathan, ours is a relatively small, relatively close-knit profession. Of course I knew about the Zimbabwe find. I was, ah... given the opportunity to be the first to authenticate the discovery. I told you—I always managed to be in the right place at the right time."

He regarded her now with narrow-eyed suspicion. "You passed on it?"

"I forced myself to ignore it—I think I was hoping it would count in my favor if I started turning my back on opportunities that came my way as a result of my...indiscretion. And I knew that another anthropologist would eventually recognize the significance of the bone fragments Dr. Alexioff uncovered. I had no idea it would be you, Jonathan. And I had no idea it would end this way."

He laughed a little, without amusement. "Perhaps it was never meant to be, then," he mused, unconvinced.

She reached out tentatively to touch his hand, a thin smile of relief appearing when he did not shy away from the contact. "Jonathan...."

"Please," he said tiredly, mustering a wan smile. "Don't say you're sorry again. Just don't mention it, all right? I mean that—don't mention it, ever."

Nodding, she tightened her grip on his hand. "Then...thank you," she whispered.

He inhaled, resolving to gather the shreds of his dignity together once more. "So. What happens now? With you, I mean. Where do you go from here?"

"Retirement," she shrugged with feigned nonchalance. "After I get my affairs in order, that is. A little travel, as long as I'm... able. Maybe I'll actually learn how to enjoy myself after all these years."

"Are you sure there's nothing—?"

"Jonathan, I've been all through this. Don't worry about me, all right? There was only one thing that frightened me, and now that's resolved. But...there *is* one thing you could do for me."

Her voice had become hesitant, telling him that she was not sure he would agree to her request. He smiled, encouraging her to continue. "My research-in-progress. I wouldn't rest easy unless I knew it was passed on to someone I trusted. Someone I knew would be able to carry through. Someone...someone I owed my immortal soul to?"

Despite himself, he laughed at her attempt to cheer him. "No," he decided, suppressing a left-over chuckle. "I couldn't...."

"Too late. It's done," she told him with a warm smile. "Come on, MacKensie, it's the least I can do for you, and you know it. Just promise to do me proud, all right?"

He hesitated a moment more, making the mistake of meeting her gaze. There was no way he could gracefully refuse her now, not with the lure of her large brown eyes upon him. "I don't suppose...." He paused, trying to figure out what had just come over him. With a shrug, he decided to go with the flow, whichever direction it took him. "I don't suppose that you'd...care to accompany me to the senior mixer, Dr. Stoker?"

She smiled, her eyes dancing. "Dr. MacKensie—I thought you'd never ask." With that, she brought up her free hand to draw him in for a lingering kiss.

Benny chose that moment to bounce into the room with a resounding, "I gotta tell you, that kid is in bad shape, but Marge'll fix him up and—whoa! Catch this action! A happy ending, I love it! You guys wanna hold that pose while I get the camera?"

Although they had separated when Benny interrupted them, Lucy was still close enough to bury her laughter in Jonathan's shoulder. For his part, MacKensie's good humor had been restored enough for him to smile benevolently in Benedek's general direction. "Take all the pictures you want, Benedek, but only if your hospital insurance premiums are paid."

"MacKensie?" Dr. Moorhouse strode into the room with an anticipatory smile. "The meeting broke up early, and I thought I'd check on your progress, what on earth...?" She had come to a complete halt upon spying the white powdered circle on the floor. "What's the meaning of this?" she addressed Jonathan, pointing down.

"Benedek will explain it all to you, I'm sure," MacKensie assured her with a smile. He had taken Lucy's hand and was now edging them both towards the door, pausing only long enough to hiss at Benedek, "Putty in your hands, eh? Good luck, Mr. Phelps."

"Where are you two going?" Moorhouse tried to no avail to stop them with her sharp tones.

"Us?" Jonathan grinned, exchanging a wink with Lucy. "Dancing." And they darted out the door, but not before Dr. Moorhouse heard their stifled laughter.

"Dancing?" she repeated incredulously. "At eleven o'clock in the morning? MacKensie! Who's going to clean the floor?!"

"Forget the floor," Benedek told her breezily. "You got a cleaning staff, right? Let them think we do kinky stuff with baking soda, it'll make their day."

"I don't suppose you would care to explain any of this to me," she sniffed, arching a disdainful eyebrow at him.

"Explain? Sure, sure, anything you want. Not here, though." Crossing his arms, he leaned in to speak in confidential tones. "Just between you and me, I think we should blow this joint." He gave her a wink, nodding his head in the general direction Jonathan and Lucy had taken off in. "Wanna make it a double date?"

Her mouth came open, preparatory to biting his head off for his gross impertinence. Just as quickly, her mouth closed, and a strangely resigned expression came over her face. She gave Benedek a long, sideways glance, then heaved a long sigh, linking her arm through the one Benedek was offering her. "Oh, why not?" she said as he escorted her through the door. "It's the best offer I've had all day."

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