

CAREER MOVES

Diana Smith/Pat Dunn

"Yo, Jack!"

Jonathan MacKensie hurriedly folded up the letter he'd been reading and stuffed it inside his breast pocket. When Edgar Benedek, known to all as Benny, burst into the anthropology professor's office, Jonathan was sitting at his desk pretending a great interest in a pile of manila folders.

Benedek's blue eyes narrowed suspiciously at the innocent smile of greeting. "What's cooking, JJ? Any new bumps in the night from Dr. M?"

"Actually Dr. Moorhouse is on vacation," Jonathan said, gathering up the pile of folders and carrying them to a filing cabinet near his only office window.

"Whoa! Doctor M cutting loose? Is she lying on some tropical beach with a drink in one hand and a surfer boy in the other?" Benny asked, perching on the edge of Jonathan's desk.

Jonathan's brows drew down as he turned to glare at his shadow-chasing partner. "Hardly. I believe she's taking a tour of haunted castles in Scotland, or some such thing."

"Geez, and she didn't take us?!" Benedek objected. "I know some great old castles, with tons of spooks..."

Jonathan sighed. "It's a package tour arranged by some parapsychological association or other. I understand she'd been planning it for months."

"Oh." Benedek looked subdued for a minute. "Well, you and me can still find some shadows to chase on our own, right? Listen, I've got this lead on a leprechaun living in New York's Central Park..."

"Well, actually, I, uh, thought I'd take a little vacation, get away for a few days--"

"Grrreat! I know this little seaside place where the drinks and the girls are tall and cool--"

"I appreciate the offer, Benedek, but I, well, I've made some plans," Jonathan interrupted, smiling apologetically. "With Moorhouse gone this is a perfect time to work on my project."

Benedek's grin faded, and he shrugged. "Sure, Jack, if you'd rather spend your time digging up some old bones instead of with your buddy, that's all right with me. I can understand that..." He jammed his hands into his pockets and turned away. "Give my regards to Ramapithecus when you find him."

"Benedek, wait," Jonathan called. He sighed as the other man turned to look at him. "I'm not going on a dig this time. I've had a letter from Nicholas Tannek of the Gryphon Foundation, about my grant application." He pulled out the envelope and unfolded the letter. "He says my work sounds very interesting, and he wants to interview me before deciding whether to recommend to his associates that they subsidize my research."

"Gryphon Foundation?" Benedek repeated, taking the letter and scanning it. "Think I've heard of it-- one of those private philanthropic organizations, isn't it?"

"Yes," Jonathan said. "So I was going to fly out to the West Coast tomorrow for a few days and see him. I-- I believe I could exchange my tickets for two coach fares--"

Benny snatched the ticket from Jonathan's hand. "Whoa-ho! Check it out! First class, huh? I guess all your penny-pinching has paid off."

"The Foundation made the travel arrangements," Jonathan said in self-defense.

"No wonder you want to work for them," Benny said admiringly. "Sure would be a change from miserly Dr. M--"

"Dr. Moorhouse can't help being miserly-- I mean, she *is* responsible for the budget of the entire anthropology department--"

"San Francisco, here we come!" interrupted Benny, waving off Jonathan's explanation. "Whoa, I'd better go pack. See you at the airport, Jack!" He headed for the door, then paused and turned around. "Thanks. I appreciate this, Jonathan."

"You're welcome--" the professor began, pausing as he realized, "Did you just call me Jonathan?!"

"It's your name, pal." With a cheeky grin, Benedek breezed out the doorway.

Benedek had ways of keeping his reluctant partner off-balance and calling him by his proper name, instead of the various monikers that he knew drove Jonathan crazy, was one of them.

With a smile, Jonathan called his teaching assistant and asked her to see about handing out the last batch of graded exams that afternoon. "I've got to leave for the airport earlier than expected, Randi," he added. "See you when I get back."

"Sure, Jonathan," the girl said. "Have fun."

"I'll try," he promised, depressing the phone cradle and then dialing the airport ticket counter. The exchange of the tickets was easily but not cheaply accomplished, with Jonathan having to pay the difference. His guilty conscience decided it was worth it and perhaps there was a way to work it into the expense account...

§§§§§

The next morning, Jonathan was at the airport the prescribed hour before flight time. Benedek, as usual, cut it close. He settled into the seat beside Jonathan with a bustle of stowing his carry-on bag, and a friendly greeting to the young woman in the aisle seat.

Jonathan stared out the window while Benedek regaled their seat companion with one far-fetched tale after another. He breathed a sigh of relief when the plane finally landed in San Francisco.

"See, Jon-Boy, nothing to it. Just because we crashed that one time--"

"Once was enough," Jonathan cut in, following Benny from the plane. Juggling his carry-on, briefcase and garment bag, he tripped over the loading tunnel exit.

"Here, let me get that," Benny said, steadying him and reaching for the briefcase. "Let's snag a cab and find a motel--"

"Um, actually, there's a car waiting for me," Jonathan said, reluctantly releasing his briefcase to Benedek's care. "And I already have reservations at the Fairmont."

"Whoa! First class all the way." Benny was clearly impressed. "I like this Tannek guy!"

"I'm sure he'll be delighted to hear it," Jonathan said dryly, following Benny out to the passenger pick-up.

"Check it out, Jack! That's not just a **car**," Benny exclaimed when he spied the uniformed chauffeur who was standing next to a stretch limo and holding up a placard that read "MacKensie". "Sure a step up from those cheapo rent-a-heaps."

Jonathan winced at the reminder of how his penny-pinching ways mixed with a certain sentimentality, had nearly gotten Benny killed in a car accident. "I've **apologized** for renting that piece of junk, Benedek," he said stiffly, unable to hide his hurt.

"What? Oh, hey, I didn't mean--" the journalist began, as Jonathan stalked past him toward the limo. He gave up and trailed his friend, arriving in time to hear him say,

"I'm Dr. Jonathan MacKensie. This is my-- associate, Edgar Benedek."

The chauffeur glanced from Jonathan to Benny. "Very well, sir." He opened the door for them and said, "May I take care of your luggage, gentlemen?"

"Is this the life or what?" Benny exclaimed gleefully as they settled into the limo while the chauffeur loaded their luggage in the trunk. "Hey, even a bar! What's your poison, JJ?"

Jonathan leaned back in the seat, watching as Benny opened a crystal bottle and sniffed its contents. "Nothing for me, thanks," he said when Benny offered him the bottle and a glass.

"Stomach still jumpy? But that was the smoothest flight I've ever winged," Benny said, pouring a shot of very expensive whiskey.

"I would have preferred a train," Jonathan retorted, loosening his tie. "A nice, stay-on-the-ground train."

"Even trains crash, Jack."

"Yes, but they do stay on the ground-- not so far to fall," Jonathan argued.

Benny shook his head, knowing his partner would never budge in his dislike of flying. "So what now? When do you see Tannek?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Grrreat! So we can see some sights tonight." Benny had a pleased grin on his face. "I know some terrific places, boy-o."

"Benedek, I don't think--"

"Don't worry, Jack, I'll do the thinking for both of us," Benny assured him, propping his Nike'd feet on the opposite seat.

"Please don't," Jonathan shuddered. "I am quite capable of thinking--" He broke off as the limo pulled up to the hotel. He got out of the car and froze, and Benny peered around him.

"I don't think so, buds," Benny said softly as he spied the exquisite woman smiling at Jonathan.

What she did for a simple red dress should have been illegal.

"Dr. MacKensie?" she inquired in a sultry voice.

"Yes-- I'm Jonathan MacKensie," he said, feeling absurdly proud of himself for remembering his name.

"Good! I am Varina Thanos, Mr. Tannek's associate. He asked me to meet you and make certain everything was all right--?"

Jonathan smiled at the woman, ignoring Benedek until the latter poked him in the back. "Uh, that's very kind of you, Ms Thanos. I'm sure everything will be just fine, however..."

"But it is my job," she said, tucking her hand in the crook of his arm and leading him into the hotel. "You wouldn't want to get me into trouble, would you?"

Jonathan swallowed as the luscious lips pouted. "No, no of course not," he assured her hastily, his charming grin a trifle unsteady.

"Exactly what is your job, Ms Thanos?" Benedek asked, coming up on her other side.

"Liaison, Mr--?"

"Benedek, Edgar Benedek," Benny supplied when Jonathan couldn't seem to find his tongue. "But you can call me Benny. You do this often?"

"Whenever Mr. Tannek is interviewing for grants," she said, flashing a smile in his direction while clinging to Jonathan's arm. "It's my job to see to the comfort of the applicant, help them relax before the interview. So many of them are anxious, very tense, and this should be a pleasant experience."

"So you're a good time girl?"

"Benedek--!"

"If you like," she said calmly, ignoring Jonathan's protest. "The interview will go much smoother for all parties if the applicant is relaxed."

Benedek gave a mental whistle. 'Just what kind of grant are you applying for, anyway, Jack?' he thought, looking from the woman to his partner. Aloud, he said, "Yeah, I'm always telling him he needs to relax more. Look, Jack, I'll make like a tree and leaf, okay? I can find something to do tonight."

Jonathan looked guilty. "Benedek, I--"

"Yeah?" the journalist said, cocking an eyebrow.

"Er-- excuse me, Miss Thanos," he said to his escort, "your offer is very kind, but I don't think I feel much like going out tonight..."

"Then we can stay in," she suggested, then frowned slightly. "I didn't misunderstand Mr. Tannek-- he led me to believe you were unattached, Dr. MacKensie--?"

He flushed. "No--yes-- I mean, I am single, Miss Thanos, but what you're suggesting is highly improper-- we've only just met..."

Benedek rolled his eyes, then smiled to himself as Varina said reasonably, "I'm suggesting nothing other than an opportunity for us to dine together, Dr. MacKensie."

"Oh, I'm sorry-- I thought--" the professor stammered.

"Catch ya tomorrow, Jack," Benny murmured, slapping him on the back.

"Benedek--" But the journalist had already disappeared into the crowd

in the lobby, and Jonathan was staring into Varina's eyes. He took a deep breath. "Perhaps we should start again, Miss Thanos. Without any misunderstandings?"

"Perhaps we should, Doctor." She smiled and put her hand on his arm. "No misunderstandings. We shall have dinner and conversation. But first let's get your luggage settled-- will your friend be staying with you? It is possible, for the Foundation maintains a suite, and it does have two bedrooms."

Jonathan noticed both his and Benedek's luggage on a porter's cart by the front desk. Varina spoke to the desk clerk, then turned and smiled at Jonathan, a room key in her hand.

"When Mr. Benedek returns, he'll be given a key," she said, once more tucking her hand around his arm and guiding him to the elevator. "If you like, we can order room service and relax here. And of course the car is at your disposal-- you have only to call the desk and request the Gryphon driver."

Jonathan said honestly, "I must admit I'm overwhelmed by all this. I didn't realize the Gryphon Foundation was so interested in anthropology."

"Oh, we are interested in many things. The Foundation was established to promote research in the sciences, as well as the arts," Varina told him.

Jonathan looked up at the floor indicators, then said, "Miss Thanos, I hope you weren't offended by anything Benedek said-- he **can** be crude sometimes. I will admit there's something-- well, medieval about Mr. Tannek's concern for his guests..."

"How kind of you to notice. Graciousness does seem to be a thing of the past, doesn't it?" she said, smiling up at him. Jonathan stared into her eyes then blinked and tried to pull his attention back to the matter at hand. "Mr. Tannek and I go to great pains to ensure that all guests of the Foundation are treated with the care and respect one would give royalty. And since Mr. Benedek is your companion, he is included. Had he not run off, I would have seen to his comfort and pleasure as well. I'm afraid I was not as welcoming as I should have been. I apologize."

Jonathan's conscience nudged him into saying, "I'm afraid I was as much responsible for his disappearing so abruptly as anyone. I'll have to apologize to him."

She studied his profile, and gave a slight approving nod, as if mentally noting something to herself. "I hope you find the accommodations comfortable," she said as the elevator halted.

"Oh, I'm sure it'll be just fine," Jonathan began as they stepped out into a carpeted hallway. He checked the number on the key Varina had given him, then opened a door into a large suite. "Ah-- this is wonderful," he said, a grin of boyish delight on his handsome face.

"I'm so glad you're pleased," Varina said, smiling as he prowled around the suite. "Anything you need-- or desire-- just let me know. Or call the front desk."

"I certainly will do that," Jonathan said, turning to hold the door for the woman's departure. But she surprised him by crossing to the sofa

and sitting gracefully upon it, her legs crossed and her hands clasped demurely.

Jonathan looked at his hand on the doorknob, then quietly closed the door and approached her. "Er-- would you like anything to drink, Miss Thanos?"

Varina smiled and patted the sofa beside her. "I don't care for anything just now, but you must have something. The bar is stocked, or I can call down for you. And I believe the refrigerator must have juice and soft drinks."

"Really?" Jonathan looked around and found the small refrigerator. He opened its door, saying, "I wonder if they have any milk?"

"It's not that usual of a request, but we could call Room Service if you--"

"That's all right," Jonathan told her, as he settled for a small bottle of orange juice. "This is fine." He smiled and went to sit beside her on the sofa. "So, here we are."

"Yes," Varina agreed.

"Are you from San Francisco, Miss Thanos?"

"For now," she said softly, sliding closer to him and gazing into his eyes.

"I mean, where were you born?" he persisted, jerking his gaze from hers and taking a swallow of orange juice.

"Ah." Varina tucked her hands around his arm. "I was born on the Isle of Crete."

"Really? I've been there on a dig," Jonathan said, smiling the boyish smile of delight that never failed to charm. "The palace at Knossos, of course. It was my first field seminar during graduate school. I enjoyed it very much. Crete is beautiful..." He trailed off, forgetting what he was saying as he gazed into Varina's eyes. "Rather like you are," he finished gallantly.

"How kind of you to say so," she said, one hand stroking his arm. "You must tell me about your visit-- I have not been home in a very long time." There was a wistfulness in her dark eyes that tugged at Jonathan's innate compassionate streak.

"Surely Mr. Tannek gives you time off," he said, covering her hand. "And he must pay fairly well--"

"Oh, he does," Varina assured him, smiling. "It's just there is nothing for me-- my family is gone. There is much sadness in standing among the ruins of one's life."

"Oh, I am sorry," Jonathan said at once, squeezing her hand in sympathy. "But surely it can't be that bad, really? I mean, you're an attractive and intelligent woman with your life ahead of you-- there must be someone you love, who loves you?"

"What about you, Dr. MacKensie? Are you alone?" she asked, not answering his question. "Why do you travel with Mr. Benedek?" Her hand was stroking his cheek and moved down to his throat where her thumb caressed the throbbing vein.

Jonathan was suddenly aware of how warm he was, and he wondered

fleetingly if there was something wrong with the room's air conditioning. "Oh, eh, Mr. Benedek's just an- associate of mine," he stammered. "And a friend." He blinked, surprised at the admission. "We work together sometimes, on projects for Georgetown Institute."

"What sort of projects?"

He chuckled nervously. "Oh, just the occasional, uh, investigation-- it's not very interesting..." He stared into her eyes and abruptly kissed her.

Jonathan drew back, apologetic. "I'm terribly sorry, I didn't mean-- it's just that you--"

"I know," she said softly, finger tips caressing his lips. Her mouth followed her fingers and Jonathan found his arms sliding around her luscious form. Before he knew what was happening, he was reclining on the sofa, Varina straddling his lap while her fingers threaded through his hair.

"Uh, this isn't-- we shouldn't-- we've only just met," Jonathan stammered, maintaining some shred of his chivalrous nature.

"As you say," Varina said with a soft sigh of disappointment. She slid to the sofa, allowing Jonathan to sit up. His hand went to his tie, only to discover it was gone and his shirt unbuttoned to the waist. "The day is still young," she said, ignoring his fumbling attempts to button his shirt. "Perhaps you would care to see a bit of the city? It is barely noon-- museums are still open. I am at your disposal."

Jonathan dug around the sofa cushions and finally found his tie. He couldn't remember when it was removed-- or how. Maybe she really was a 'good time girl'... "Perhaps I should just stay here-- alone-- and prepare for tomorrow's interview."

"None of that," Varina said firmly, taking his tie and slipping it around his collar. "You mustn't give the interview another thought. There's really no way to prepare for it-- Mr. Tannek will ask questions and you will answer them. Would you like to visit the California Academy of Sciences? Ghirardelli Square? The Cable Car museum?" She knotted his tie and gave it a pat of approval, then smiled up at him.

He met her gaze, basking in the pleasure that it gave him, then said rather tentatively, "Perhaps I could convince you to let me buy you some lunch, Miss Thanos, and we could go from there?"

"All right," she agreed.

"Please choose the restaurant," he added as he stood up and offered her his arm.

"I'll be happy to do so," she said. "But you must promise to do something for me."

He looked inquiring, then flushed as she continued, "Please call me Varina. I think we are entitled to the familiarity of first names now, don't you?"

"Yes-- er, of course-- and you must call me Jonathan."

She smiled as she took his arm and turned for the door. "You prefer 'Jonathan'-- not 'Jack'? I thought your friend..."

"That's Benedek's little joke," the professor said. "He enjoys attaching nicknames to people-- just one of his quirks."

"Ah." Varina smiled. "I see."

"You do?" The elevator door opened and Jonathan escorted her inside. "I'm afraid I don't understand Benedek."

"Some people use nicknames to irritate, and others do it out of affection," Varina said, both hands firmly hugging Jonathan's arm.

"Irritation-- Benny definitely loves to do that." Jonathan was quite content to let her cling. "He purposely drives Dr. Moorhouse mad."

"And you envy him that ability and freedom," she said softly.

"Well, yes, I suppose--" he broke off and stared at her, his mouth open. "How did you know that?!"

"I am very good at reading people," she said with a delicate shrug.

"Ah-- Liam, Dr. MacKensie should like some lunch. I believe the English Tea Shoppe would do," she continued, speaking to a giant dressed in a chauffeur's uniform who was waiting in the lobby.

"As you wish, madam," Liam agreed, turning to lead them to the car.

Jonathan raised an eyebrow and looked at Varina. "Tea? That's an excellent idea, but how did you know I like tea?"

"Well..."

"Did my accent give me away?" he chuckled.

"Something like that."

He looked happily relieved and offered her his arm as they went outside.

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The afternoon proceeded pleasantly enough. Jonathan enjoyed an excellent luncheon at the tea shop, and took advantage of the small but well-stocked grocery shelves to pick up some distinctively British food-stuffs which he hadn't tasted since his boyhood.

Afterwards, they visited several San Francisco landmarks, and finally capped the day with a visit to an English-style pub where Jonathan drank a Guinness and participated in a lively game of darts.

"That was wonderful," he said to Varina as they headed back to the Fairmont. "Thank you."

"I'm so pleased," she said with a smile that sent tingles along his spine.

"But you hardly ate a thing," he said, frowning. "You must be famished."

"Oh, you mustn't worry about me," she dismissed. "I'll-- catch a bite later. I have a very sensitive digestive system and must follow a strict diet. Besides, I have to watch my figure."

"Oh, but your figure is just-- perfect," Jonathan said earnestly.

"Varina, I hope I'm not being presumptuous, but I would just like to--"

"Yes?" she prompted, her voice soft and seductive.

"Kiss you," he said, catching her hand and leaning toward her as the car paused at a stoplight. "May I?"

"Please do, Jonathan," she invited, her free hand reaching around his neck and drawing him closer.

Their lips touched for long pleasurable moments, and Jonathan broke away with reluctance. "That was very nice," he said, feeling flushed and warm, though whether from his last beer or her closeness he couldn't tell. "Very nice," he added, kissing her again.

"Yes... yes, it was," she agreed, pulling back and looking a little uncertain. "Shall we check at the desk to see if your friend has signed in?"

"What?"

"We're back at the hotel," she said gently.

"Oh. Yes, so we are," Jonathan said lamely as the chauffeur opened the limo door. He got out and turned back to offer Varina his hand. He swallowed hard when her skirt rode up as she slid across the seat.

She swung her legs out, stood up and smoothed down her skirt. "Shall we go up?" she asked, smiling up at him. Even with her stiletto heels, the top of her head only reached his chin.

"Up? Er, inside?" Jonathan said absurdly, grinning in delight when she nodded. "Yes, that would be splendid," he agreed enthusiastically, offering his arm to escort her into the hotel.

"Liam, I won't be needing you for the rest of the night," Varina said softly, her eyes on Jonathan as she addressed the chauffeur.

"Very good, madam," the tall man answered, his tone neutral. But his lips quirked in a smile as he watched the couple walk away.

"I suppose Benedek will show up eventually," Jonathan said as they rode the elevator up to his suite. A check at the registration desk had revealed Benedek had not returned to the hotel. "He always does-- and usually with incredible timing."

Varina stretched up on tiptoe and kissed the corner of his mouth as she unknotted his tie. "I imagine **your** timing is incredible."

"I have excellent timing," Jonathan admitted, putting his arms around her. "It's a prerequisite for anthropologists." He kissed her lingeringly and murmured, "You have to be slow-- and careful..."

Varina wrapped the tie around his wrists and pulled him from the elevator down the hall to his suite. Jonathan was her willing captive, and offered no protest as she led him into the bedroom.

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Jonathan stretched and put his hands behind his head, crossed his ankles and leaned back against the chaise lounge by the pool. He wore a thick knee-length terrycloth robe, thoughtfully provided by the hotel, over his red swim trunks, a towel draped around his neck, and sunglasses perched on his nose. He was utterly, completely contented with his situation, and beginning to drift asleep...when he heard a familiar voice.

"Yo, Jack-- **there** you are!"

Jonathan sighed and lowered his sunglasses enough to peer over them. "Good morning, Benedek."

Benny dropped onto the neighboring lounge and studied the contents of the table between them. "Gone California on me, Jon-Boy?" he asked, picking up the nearly-empty glass of orange juice and sniffing it.

"It's just juice," Jonathan said, leaning back and closing his eyes.

"You seem mighty relaxed for a man facing a major career interview," Benny observed, draining the glass.

"I feel wonderful, Benedek," Jonathan said. "The interview's not until eleven, and I do not intend to waste this beautiful morning inside worrying about it. Would you care for a cup of tea?"

Benny stared at his friend, then closed his mouth. "Uh, yeah, that'd be nice, Jack..." He observed Jonathan closely as he lazily reached over and lifted a quilted cover from the teapot at his elbow. He filled a bone-china cup with the amber liquid, replaced the tea-cosy and gestured at the other items on the tray.

"If you want to add anything besides milk, sugar or lemon, you'll have to get it yourself. Have a muffin." Jonathan resumed his relaxed pose, hands folded over his stomach.

Benny sugared his tea generously, sneaking worried glances at the anthropology professor. "So-- did you have-- er, ~~fun~~ yesterday, Jonny?"

"Very much, thanks. What happened to you? Your luggage is still up in the suite," Jonathan said as Benny helped himself to a huge blueberry muffin.

"Hey, you know me, buds," Benny said with a careless shrug. "I know when to fade to a shadow. I have a friend that was expecting me."

"I'm sure she made you feel welcome," Jonathan said, logically assuming that Benedek's friend was of the female persuasion.

"Yeah, Sylvie's--" he stopped, frowning at this evidence of how well Jonathan knew him, then shrugged. "I've been making some calls, too, Jack, doing some checking on this Gryphon Foundation you're getting yourself involved with."

"So?" Jonathan sounded uninterested. He stood up and removed the robe, then padded towards the pool, the towel still around his neck. He didn't bother to remove his sunglasses.

"So you'd better give second or even third thoughts to hooking up with 'em. AND I did some digging on Varina Thanos," Benny said, leaning forward on the end of the chaise lounge, his hands dangling between his knees. "I think we should say 'thanks-but-no-thanks' and make tracks for Georgetown. At least with Dr. M there are no surprises."

Jonathan sat on the edge of the pool, his legs dangling in the pale blue water. He scooped up handfuls of water and splashed his chest and arms, then hopped into the pool. Standing in waist-deep water, he said, "All right, Benedek, what are you babbling about now?"

Benny took a deep breath. "I'm talking about how come when I ran Varina Thanos's name in the library computer, the only thing that came up was a mention of her in the San Francisco Chronicle..."

"What's so unusual about that?"

"**For 1906??!**"

Jonathan raised his head and stared at his associate. "What?" he asked, taking off his sunglasses and blinking in the glare off the water.

Benny pressed his advantage. "There was an old engraving, Jack. It looked just like her. Apparently the last time Varina Thanos was in San Francisco she was a singer with the Opera--"

"The **last** time?!" Jonathan snorted. He plunged forward into the water and swam the length of the pool, then returned. Grabbing the pool's edge, he informed the journalist, "You've gone too far this time, Benedek. Miss Thanos is perfectly innocent-- and I can assure you she's not eighty years old!"

"A succubus doesn't show her age."

"A **what**?!"

"Succubus, Jack! A female demon who torments a man in his sleep--"

"I wasn't asleep."

"--and good-times him to death."

"Really, Benedek! Sometimes you are **such** a slug!" Jonathan dolphin-dived, splashing Benny while he was at it, and swam underwater to the middle of the pool. Surfacing, he tossed dark wet locks from his eyes and called, "Do I look dead to you, Benny?"

The journalist had to admit that Jonathan was looking pretty darn lively. "Okay, so maybe she's not a succubus, exactly... But I'll lay you dollars to doughnuts she's some kinda weirdie--" He broke off as the professor stroked back to the poolside and levered himself out onto the concrete, splashing Benedek again. "Hey, cut that out, Jack!"

"A little water won't hurt you," Jonathan said, standing up and dripping as he returned to his lounge chair. He picked up the towel and began swabbing at his chest and legs. "Besides, to hear that nonsense you're spouting, you could use a little cooling-off, Benedek." He draped the towel around his neck and slipped on the robe.

"Thank you very little," the other man said, standing up quickly. "All I'm trying to do is help you out--"

"I didn't ask for your help, did I?" snapped Jonathan.

"Okay, fine. How do **you** explain what I found?!" He unfolded a copy of the microfilmed article and picture in question and thrust it under the professor's nose.

Jonathan blinked, at a loss without his reading glasses. He held the paper at arm's length, then handed it back to Benny. "Well, I don't know-- perhaps an ancestor of hers, a grandmother or something. It doesn't matter, anyway."

"Why not?!"

Jonathan smiled. "Because I think I just may be falling in love with Varina."

"Huhh?!" Benny's jaw dropped. "Jack, you can't **do** that!"

But Jonathan was already walking back towards the hotel, whistling an aria.

"Jonathan!" Benedek called after him, shoulders slumping dejectedly when he received no response. After a moment he straightened his shoulders and a determined look glinted in his eyes. "Okay, pal, if that's the way you want to play it. But my grandma didn't raise a quitter." He pulled a silver crucifix from his pocket and stared at it a moment. "I'll save ya, buds."

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Benny rubbed his eyes and slumped back in his chair, then glanced at his watch. Nearly ten, and Jack's interview was at eleven. He needed a miracle if he was going to pull this one off.

He forced himself to sit up and study the computer screen. There was no end of information on the Gryphon Foundation and all it had produced, but there was almost nothing on Nicholas Tannek or Varina Thanos. "He owns a string of art galleries," Benny muttered, tapping the return key. "There has to be more; birth records, passports, drivers licenses-- **something**. If I only had time to dig..."

"Any luck?"

Benny looked up at the grinning face of the reporter who owned the terminal where Benny sat. "Not much of a database, Syl. There is nothing on these guys."

Sylvia Brockman leaned over his shoulder to read his notes. "The Gryphon Foundation? You **are** barking up the wrong newstree, Benny," she said, straightening up and placing her hands on his shoulders. "That is such an upstanding organization they make the Girl Scouts look dirty."

"No one is **that** good."

Sylvia grinned and massaged his shoulders. "Since when is dirt your bag? I thought you went for little green men from Venus or Big Foot shopping at Discount City."

"Yeah, well, this is a personal thing," Benny said, not rising to the sally. He sighed, relaxing a little under her ministrations. "I don't know what I'm gonna do, Syl. My buddy's fallen for this Thanos cupcake, and if I can't convince him to cut bait, there's no telling what he'll do..." He trailed off as she nuzzled his neck.

"You can't argue with love, Benny," she murmured into his ear.

"He just met her yesterday, and today he's ready to plant roses in the garden of the ivy-covered cottage," Benny protested, trying to ignore her advances. "Lust I could understand, but no one falls in love that fast, not even Jack. Besides, I think she's a professional 'escort'. Jack brings her home and Dr. M gives birth to two-headed cows."

"Now **there's** a headline for The National Register," Sylvia laughed. She saw his expression and sighed. "Okay," she said, growing serious, "if you're really so uptight about it, why don't you talk to this woman and find out what's going on? If she's just an 'escort', she's not going to want to be tied down in a serious relationship, and she can tell your friend to take a hike."

"Yeah, I guess I could try to talk to her," Benny said, fingering the crucifix in his pocket. "Maybe she'll listen to reason." Not even to Sylvia would he mention his suspicions about Varina Thanos being a succubus or a vampire. This was one demon he'd have to face down-- and hopefully defeat-- on his own. He rose up, bumping into Sylvia who still stood behind his chair.

"Where are you going, love?"

"To have a little heart to heart with Ms Thanos," Benny said, heading for the main office door.

"Now?!"

"The sooner the better. Check ya later, Syl," he called over his shoulder.

§§§§§

"There may be a problem."

Varina looked at Nicholas as he hung up the phone and swiveled his desk chair to face her. "With Dr. MacKensie?" She stood with her back to the window behind his massive oak desk.

"No, his friend is investigating us," Nicholas said, steeping his fingers and contemplating the beautiful woman. "He seems particularly interested in **you**, my heart."

"Me? Why would Mr. Benedek be checking up on me?" She moved away from the window and settled in Tannek's lap, placing one hand on his shoulder while the other stroked his jaw.

"Mr. Benedek is a tabloid journalist and his area of sensationalism is the paranormal, the occult," Nicholas said, catching her hand and kissing her fingers.

"Tabloid? Those laughable rags that Liam brings home?"

"Not so laughable, I'm afraid," Nicholas responded gravely. "He has a rather large audience who seem to believe he speaks the truth when he tells of his adventures: searching for ghosts, tracking werewolves and battling--"

"--vampires?" Varina sat up straight on his lap, staring into his eyes. "He-- he's a vampire hunter?"

"Apparently, among other things."

"Does Dr. MacKensie know?"

"Know? Varina, your Dr. MacKensie heads the Paranormal Research Unit at Georgetown Institute."

Varina slowly stood up, catching her bottom lip between her teeth as she paced. "Jonathan seems so sensible, so rational. I can't believe he'd seriously engage in such research. Why, he never once mentioned this Research Unit. In fact, all he wanted to talk about was his anthropological studies."

"He may be very interested in the anthropology of the vampire," Nicholas said quietly. "This is one grant that the Foundation must deny. We cannot afford an association with Jonathan MacKensie."

"Are you certain? Jonathan will be so disappointed--"

Varina was interrupted by the buzz of the office intercom on Nicholas's desk.

"There's a Mr. Edgar Benedek requesting to see Ms Thanos," came the cool voice of Nicholas's very efficient secretary. The emphasis she put on "requesting" told Nicholas it was more of a demand.

He met and held Varina's gaze. "Tell Mr. Benedek that Ms Thanos is in conference but will be free shortly," he said into the intercom. "How do you wish to handle this?" he asked Varina after disconnecting from the intercom.

"Your interview with Jonathan is in an hour," she calculated. "Let me speak with Mr. Benedek first, then we shall make a decision."

"Very well," he said, raising an eyebrow. "Take him into the second interview room, so I can observe on the monitor."

She nodded, and left the office. Nicholas leaned back in his leather executive's chair, one forefinger worriedly stroking his upper lip.

"Mr. Benedek?"

Benny turned at the greeting, his gaze appraising the woman who was smiling at him. She **was** a knockout, there was no doubt on that score. Too bad she wanted Jonny... He gave her a nod and a lopsided grin that was considerably toned down from his usual grin. "Nice to see you again, Ms Thanos. Listen, I hope you don't mind my bothering you at the office, but I need to talk to you about my buddy Jack."

"Dr. MacKensie?" Varina queried, looking puzzled. At his nod, she said, "Perhaps we would be more comfortable discussing it in here." She opened a door to a conference room and led the way inside. "Please sit down, Mr. Benedek," Varina told him, gesturing at the grouping of two armchairs and a sofa which occupied one corner of the room.

Benny instead sat at the conference table, watching as she settled herself facing him.

"So, you wish to make a personal plea on your friend's behalf?"

"Huh?" Benny stared at her, unable to believe she was being so frank.

"Perhaps I've misunderstood your request to speak with me. I assumed you wished to add your own recommendation to Dr. MacKensie's grant application," Varina said, sitting back in her chair and crossing one shapely leg over the other. The hem of her dress crept up to mid-thigh, apparently unnoticed by her but Benny didn't miss it. "Of course, Mr. Tannek makes the final decision but he does take into consideration my opinions of the applicant. I am a reasonably good judge of character, and people do seem to open up to me."

"Yeah, I bet they do," Benny said. He leaned forward, all pretense at joking abandoned. "Okay, let's deal, lady. Suppose you and this Mr. Tannek **do** decide to give Jonny his grant to go off and dig up bones and pot shards. What's it gonna cost him?"

"Cost?" she repeated, her puzzlement sounding genuine.

"Yeah, **cost**! What do **you** get out of the deal? Jonny's body? Or just his **soul**?"

Varina's lush lips parted in astonishment.

"Well, nobody's conning my best bud outta his chance to spend the Afterlife topside where he belongs. So I'm here to tell ya, back off. And if old Nick doesn't like it, have him come talk to **me**!" Benny pounded the tabletop with his fist, then leaned back in his chair, watching her and waiting for the other shoe to drop. Inside his pocket, his right hand clenched around the cross as he held Varina's gaze.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," she began. "Why should Nicholas or I want your friend's...soul?"

"Maybe it's your job to recruit souls for the Guy Downstairs," Benny said. "Or did you just get into this racket for the fringe benefits? Like youth and immortality?"

"The Guy Downstairs? Mr. Benedek, are you implying that you think I-- how shall I put this?-- I work for the Devil? Do you realize how that sounds?"

"I've sounded crazier," Benny said with a careless shrug.

"How can I reassure you? I don't collect souls and I'm not in a 'racket', as you put it. The Foundation is a valid organization with only the best intentions. Should Dr. MacKensie be awarded a grant, there is no cost, no one to 'pay off'. Other than a chance to read his reports, I will have no further involvement. I hope to hear good things about Dr. MacKensie and his work."

"Wasn't he to your taste?"

"Excuse me?"

"Did he leave a bitter aftertaste? His blood a little too rich, too heavy on the goodness?"

"Mr. Benedek--"

"'course, I haven't found the holes in him yet, but I'm sure gonna keep trying!"

Varina shook her head and stood up.

Benny scrambled from his chair into the center of the room, his crucifix held at arm's length.

Varina sighed. "Mr. Benedek, please calm down! Neither Nicholas nor I intend your friend any harm whatsoever." She came around the table, as he backed away. "What a pretty cross. May I see it, please?" She held out her hand, and her smile seemed genuine enough. There was a guileless expression in her large ebony eyes and Benny felt a sense of security and warmth stealing over him.

"Oh no you don't! You're not sucking me in the way you did Jack," Benny said, blinking and shaking his head as if to clear it. He backed away from her, waving the crucifix. "I eat garlic, ya know; raw and lots of it-- just ask Jack."

"Then you must be very healthy," Varina said, still staring at his eyes. "I have heard that garlic cleanses and strengthens the blood--"

"But it leaves a nasty aftertaste!" The back of his knees hit the sofa and Benny fell back on it, losing his grip on the crucifix. He watched in horror as the cross fell on the floor between him and Varina. A feeling of sick despair rose up in his throat as she smiled and slowly bent down. He strained against the sofa in the vain hope of finding an escape, and Benny thought his heart would burst from the fear.

But instead of swooping down on her helpless victim, Varina Thanos merely picked up the crucifix and held it out to him, patiently waiting for him to make the next move.

Cautiously, his gaze locked on hers, Benny reached out a trembling hand and accepted the crucifix. "What are you?" he whispered, glancing at the cross in his hand and then back at Varina.

She sat on the sofa next to him and shrugged. "One of God's creatures, just as you are. You have been influenced by Mr. Stoker's piece of fiction, as well as the many movies you have viewed over the years. You are a writer, Mr. Benedek, so you must surely know the power of the

printed word. Repeat something often enough, no matter how outrageous, and people begin to believe it. Is this not so?"

He smiled crookedly. "Always worked for me when it came to filling out my taxes... It **was** you in that photo I found from 1906, wasn't it?"

She studied his face, then sighed. "I could deny it, but you would not believe me. If I say yes, what does that prove?"

"That you're immortal," Benny said. "Right?"

"To a degree," she temporized.

"**And** a vampire?!"

"A photo of me from 1906 makes me a vampire? What sort of proof is that? Would it convince Dr. MacKensie?"

"Fang marks wouldn't convince Doubting Jon," Benny snorted, looking at the crucifix he still held. "Why didn't it work?"

Varina followed his gaze and smiled. "If I was an evil Creature of the Night, the Devil's Handmaiden, I should be cowering in terror from God's symbol. Is that not true?"

Benny hefted the crucifix thoughtfully, then pocketed it with a shrug. "That's what I've always heard. It's worked on other vampires I've encountered. You're a puzzle, sweetheart, but I'll solve it. **Something** happened to Jack, and it wasn't Cupid's little arrow."

Varina took Benny's hand, letting her thumb rhythmically stroke the back of it. "You have my word that I have done nothing to harm Jonathan. It's not in my nature." Here she gave an odd little smile, glancing over Benny's shoulder.

Benny turned his head but saw no one. "He's watching us, isn't he?" he demanded, turning back to face the woman who had taken control of Jonathan.

"He? The Devil?"

"Maybe. His name **is** Nick, isn't it? And he's your master."

Varina stared at him for a moment, then threw her head back in laughter. "You have no idea how much he detests **that** notion! Nicholas has always fought the concept of Master and Slave."

"Always? How long is always?"

"Since before I met him. Mr. Benedek, you must believe that we mean no harm to you or Jonathan. I need your trust."

Benny stared into her eyes. Fleeting images crossed his mind as he did so: fragmentary memories of distant times and places, vivid impressions of love, compassion-- and trust... He saw a richly-dressed Nicholas in a dank cell, offering a hand to a grimy, tattered-garbed Varina. There was great tenderness in the way he held her and kissed her throat. The mists shifted and Benny witnessed another time Nicholas held Varina in his arms. There was great sorrow in his eyes as he watched the life fade from hers, and he held her limp body to his breast.

The images swirled faster, blending one into another. Varina chained to a wall while Nicholas fought another man; Varina dressed in flowing red silk and dancing in Nicholas's arms; three figures on horseback, fleeing into the night; Nicholas dressed in chain mail and battling another man in armor, swords flashing.

Varina clad in seductive red silk, holding out her arms to a man who went willingly into her embrace and revelled in the shared passion gave Benny the impression of joy and not of terror and horribly ripped throats.

Benny blinked and looked down, slowly covering her hand with his free one. "Whoa-- that's some trip, Ms Thanos... Haven't got a picture like that since Lobo filled me in on Mowgli's little sister..."

"What?" asked Varina, worried that he was rambling.

Benny looked up into her face. "Maybe you **don't** mean Jonny any harm, but he's falling in love with you. Can't say I blame him... only he doesn't know about you and Nicholas, does he?"

"No," she said after a moment, giving Benny a sad smile. "I shared more than I meant to do, Mr. Benedek. But yes, Nicholas is my life, my reason for being. Dr. MacKensie may have enjoyed our evening together, but he is not falling in love with me and once he returns to Georgetown and his work, he will forget me."

"I don't think so, babe. I know Jonny better than you do, and believe me when I say he's got a bad case of 'happily-ever-after'. He's probably out buying the rings."

Varina pursed her lips and glanced worriedly at the wall behind Benny once more, then pulled her hand free from his. "You must be mistaken, Mr. Benedek."

"Benny," he said absently. "No, 'fraid not. I'm the one-night-stand boy on our team. Jack's... different. He could snap his fingers and have most of Georgetown's coeds and half of the female faculty begging for a chance to try out his sheets. But he doesn't work that way." He glanced at her, then studied the floor. "The last time I saw Jonathan acting like this, he got hurt-- bad. I don't want him to go through it again."

"What do you suggest?" a deep voice inquired from the doorway.

Benny stared at the tall dark-haired man who stood there, recognizing him from his brief psychic link with Varina. "Dunno, Mr. Tannek," he said, strangely calm in the face of such an intimidating presence. He took a deep breath and said reluctantly, "Maybe if you give him the grant and send him off to darkest Africa or wherever, he'll get over it. He's never been wild about the shadow-chasing, anyway; he only did it 'cause Dr. M blackmailed him into it... And he won't have to put up with **me** any longer, which oughta count for something."

Nicholas said, "If you have such a problematic relationship with Dr. MacKensie, why are you going to these lengths to intercede for him?"

Benny looked from Nicholas to Varina, then grinned, a little shame-facedly. "I **like** the guy. We've gotten to be a team, whether he wants to admit it or not. Heck, he can't even bring himself to say he's my friend, but that doesn't matter. He's saved my life more than once, you know, and never gave a thought for his own."

Nicholas folded his arms across his chest and looked at his wife. "What have you done, my heart?"

She briefly patted Benny's arm, then rose and went towards Nicholas. "I didn't mean to make matters worse!"

He sighed and smiled, drawing her close to his side. "I know, Varina. But unfortunately we now have **two** complications, instead of only one."

Benny glanced up at him, his expression fearful. Would Tannek decide that the easiest way of eliminating the "complications" would be by killing them both? "Hey, we can deal! You want to keep a low profile-- I can understand that. Let Jack go and I swear the world'll never hear a word from me about any of this!!"

"I would certainly hope not," Nicholas said silkily. "We decided a long time ago to keep our philanthropic activities as nearly anonymous as possible. A headline in the tabloid you work for would threaten that anonymity, Mr. Benedek."

"Yeah, guess it would," the journalist agreed. He was on his feet now, despite his doubts about whether or not they would support him. "I'll be going now..."

"I think not."

Tannek's deep voice froze Benny in his tracks.

"Listen, Big Guy, you got my word I'll keep my mouth shut! You don't even have to give Jack his grant. We'll-- we'll just slip off into the shadows and if Dr. M ever gives us an assignment involving you, I'll get us out of it, I swear!" Benny flinched as Nicholas raised a hand, and he cowered with his eyes squeezed shut.

When no blow or mystic spell hit him, he cautiously peeked open one eye.

Nicholas's hand was cradling Varina's cheek, as they gazed into each other's eyes. Neither seemed particularly concerned with their visitor.

Benny blinked and glanced warily around, looking for another exit from the room. There was none, however, and the vampires were standing before the door. He cleared his throat. "Uh-- why not?"

"Because unlike Varina, I do not trust you, Mr. Benedek. You know too much-- clearly enough to be a danger to us, and I cannot risk such a threat to Varina," Nicholas said, looking over Varina's head at Benny.

"Ah-- hah." Benny swallowed hard.

"I'm sorry I revealed so much to him, but I felt that if he could see we are not like his Hollywood vampires, he would become a protector," Varina explained earnestly to Nicholas.

"Protector? You want a protector? Hey, no problem! I can be the best!"

Nicholas eyed him bemusedly, then glanced at his watch. "It is time for me to meet with Dr. MacKensie. Varina, please accompany me. Mr. Benedek, we will continue this discussion at a latter time. Make yourself comfortable, please. I will send in someone to, ah, keep you company."

"Yeah, sure," Benny said, giving his shoulders a hitch. "Hope they play poker."

Nicholas smiled and Benny felt a chill zigzag down his spine. "I'm sure you'll be-- entertained, Mr. Benedek." He held out his arm to Varina and she accepted, glancing at Benny as Tannek escorted her from the interview room.

"This is another fine mess you've gotten us into, Jack," Benny muttered, flopping onto a chair and propping his sneakered feet on the conference table. Hands behind his head, he leaned back and contemplated the ceiling. At the sound of the door opening, he said, "I draw the line

at Strip Poker unless you're 5-foot-two, eyes of blue and of the female persuasion."

"Then I suppose you'll have to settle for Five Card Stud."

Benny's feet hit the floor at the decidedly baritone voice. He turned his head to look at his 'babysitter'-- and gaped at the sight of the chauffeur, who stood smiling at him. "Rii-hight," he said, returning the grin. "Bring the deck over here, my man! Edgar Benedek, call me Benny-- what's your name?"

"Liam," came the reply. The man stood at least six-and-a-half-feet tall and had hands that looked like they could crush a skull as easily as a beer can. He settled as best he could in the chair across from Benny, looking out of place and uncomfortable. Benny had a flash of chain mail, armour and a broadsword and Liam standing in the midst of a battlefield strewn with bodies.

"You were the chauffeur who picked us up at the airport," Benny said as Liam shuffled the cards. The man merely nodded in response, so Benny tried again. "That Varina is sure a sweet cupcake. Must be hard to work for her, huh? Driving her around, watching her be with other guys... Pretty good fringe benefits?"

Liam paused in his dealing of the cards and looked at Benny. "She is my lady," he said cryptically, studying the cards in his hand.

"Quite a lady, I'd say," Benny said, picking up his own cards. "Jonny seems to think so, at any rate."

"And you do not agree?"

"I don't think she's the lady for Jack."

"I agree."

"You do?" Benny peered over his cards, surprised by the man's calm response.

"She belongs to the Mas-- Mr. Tannek."

"Hm." Benny considered. "So, how's the salary for working here?"

"I have no complaints."

"They treat you right when it comes to pension and health plans? Hey-- bet they've got great dental coverage!"

Liam studied him bemusedly. Benny grinned and discarded a deuce of spades. "Could be fun, working here. I'll have to think it over."

Liam raised an eyebrow and dealt Benny another card.

§§§§§

"Dr. MacKensie."

At the sound of Nicholas Tannek's voice, Jonathan turned his head, then leaped up from his chair at the sight of Varina entering the office before Tannek.

"What a delightful surprise," Jonathan grinned, gaze on Varina. "I didn't know you would be present for this interview," he continued, coming forward and taking her hand.

"Mr. Tannek thought it might be best, under the circumstances," she said, gently disengaging her hand from his and moving to sit in one of the chairs that faced Nicholas's desk.

"Circumstances?"

Nicholas gestured at the other chair as he seated himself behind the desk. "You have not been entirely truthful about your recent activities," he began, leaning back in his chair and watching Jonathan.

"My recent activities? I don't understand--"

"Your work with the Paranormal Research Unit was not mentioned, either in your resume or during our interview," Nicholas pointed out.

Jonathan's nervous gaze slid from Tannek to Varina and back again. "Oh, well, that-- that has no connection with my **real** work," he said, one hand going up to touch the knot of his tie. "It's been-- interesting, and eye-opening... my mind is more open to the existence of things outside the accepted norm but it isn't really my field of study."

"One condition that I would insist upon, should we decide to approve your grant request, is that you will cease any and all such investigations, and sever your contact with Edgar Benedek." Nicholas watched with narrowed eyes as his words slowly sank in.

"But-- I, I don't understand why you're making this request," Jonathan stammered. His gaze slid to Varina, who met his eyes for a moment, and then looked down. Jonathan returned his attention to Nicholas. "Surely the paranormal research has **no** connection whatsoever with my anthropological or archeological studies--" he chuckled nervously. "I'm not planning to go searching for the ruins of Atlantis or anything like that, I assure you..."

"Why not?" Varina inquired.

He blinked in surprise. "Well, I believe that Jacques Cousteau has made a creditable case for the legend having its roots in the catastrophic destruction of Minoan civilization on Crete. Surely you must be familiar with his findings, Miss Thanos--"

"Oh, yes," she said, glancing at Nicholas. "Of course, quite familiar."

"That is neither here nor there, Dr. MacKensie," Nicholas said sternly. "The condition stands, and if you cannot meet it, then we cannot do business together. It is not a request. I advise you to consider carefully before responding."

Jonathan looked rather like a steer who had just been poleaxed. He closed his mouth, opened it again, then paused before saying slowly, "I can resign my position with the Georgetown Paranormal Unit, certainly. But-- am I to understand that you're telling me that I'm to have **no** contact with Benedek whatsoever?"

"Socially, as well as professionally," Nicholas confirmed.

Jonathan's expression darkened. "I don't quite see why the Foundation is taking steps to tell me who I may have as friends, Mr. Tannek."

"The Foundation is not required to answer to you for its actions, however harsh they may seem to you, Dr. MacKensie."

Jonathan studied the other man, then glanced at Varina. She fidgeted under his look, and he found himself remembering Benedek's extraordinary claims about her. **Could** she be some sort of immortal creature? he wondered.

"I should like to sleep on this before giving you my decision," he said at last.

"And discuss it with Benedek? I think not," Nicholas said, shaking his head.

"What have you got against Benedek? I admit that sometimes he can be a bit of a slug, and he has some rather-- bizarre-- friends but underneath it all he has a good heart," Jonathan protested.

"I object very much to his profession and his passion for the paranormal," Nicholas said after a moment. "Such an association would reflect poorly on the Foundation, perhaps even lend an air of respectability to his work. We wish to support and further interest in the arts and sciences but in a positive manner."

Jonathan stared at Tannek, horrified to hear Juliana Moorhouse's words coming from his mouth. "But--"

"Jonathan, please consider what this mean," Varina said softly, leaning over to rest her hand on his arm. "Mr. Benedek has already voiced some ludicrous suppositions about me. Were he to write such a thing in his paper, someone would believe him and I would be in danger. Perhaps you might even start to wonder and believe him if you continue an association with him. And how would that reflect on the validity of your own work? Is his friendship worth the price?"

Jonathan stared at her, then shook his head. "I don't think the **grant** is worth the price. Dr. Moorhouse shares Mr. Tannek's opinion of Benedek and, while she would prefer I end my association with him, she does not issue such a dictate and expect it to be followed. I believe Benny may be right-- better the Devil I know than the Devil I don't."

"And what about me?" Varina asked, dark eyes large and pleading. "He presents a danger to me, Jonathan."

Jonathan met her eyes and found himself drawn into her gaze. The image crossed his mind of Varina being chased and ending up with a stake pounded through her heart.

"But that's absurd!" he exclaimed, impulsively grasping her hand. "You're not a-- a monster!"

"Some people will believe whatever they read," she told him. "And someone may wish to take steps--"

"I'll protect you."

"How?!" Nicholas asked sharply.

Jonathan looked at him as if startled by the reminder of his presence. "I'll persuade Benedek not to write such lies," he said.

Turning back to Varina, he continued, "And I'll stay close to you, if you'll let me..."

It was fortunate for Jonathan that he didn't notice the darkening look on Nicholas's face at that moment.

"Jonathan..." she began.

"I **love** you, Varina," he blurted.

Nicholas eyed the pair, then said dryly, "I'm glad you've been enjoying your work, Ms Thanos." He stood up, catching her gaze. "I'm stepping out for a few minutes. Please have your personal affairs taken care of by the time I return."

"Yes, sir," Varina said, as he left. She looked worriedly at Jonathan. "I'm very flattered, but-- you must understand that it wouldn't look right for us to-- especially if the Foundation were to fund your--"

Jonathan laughed. "**That's** not going to happen, so you won't have to worry about how it'll look..." He sobered and looked puzzled. "Varina-- you're not involved with anyone else right now--?"

She hesitated, catching her bottom lip between her teeth.

"You couldn't be, not after last night," Jonathan continued. "I mean, you wouldn't have-- we wouldn't have-- if you were."

"Jonathan, you must understand that I'm not like other women--"

"I should say not!"

"It is possible, even necessary, for me to be with other men despite the fact my heart is committed elsewhere," she said, trying to be delicate about the matter.

"Does Tannek force you to-- is he your..." Jonathan stumbled over the word. "You don't have to work for him! Come back to Georgetown with me--"

"That's not possible," she said, looking down at the hand that still grasped hers. "My situation is not what you think. No one forces me to do anything, and I stay with Nicholas out of love. I enjoyed our time together yesterday, and I shall always carry a fond memory of you in my heart. But yesterday is all we can ever have, Jonathan. I envy the woman who will someday win your heart and devotion, for I know you are capable of a deep and abiding love. You will cherish and protect her, as Nicholas does me."

"Cherish! What does he know about **that**?! I would not allow the woman I love to do-- to prostitute herself!"

Varina sighed and stood up, leading Jonathan by the hand to the sofa near the office door. "I have miscalculated the depth of your passion, I fear," she said, sitting down and pulling him down beside her. "It is because he loves me so much that he 'allows' me to share life as I do. My existence depends upon it." She studied his disbelieving expression, and sighed.

"Share life?"

One slim hand caressed his cheek and jaw. "You must forget me, Jonathan MacKensie," she said, her tone oddly compelling. Her thumb stroked his jaw and she held his gaze.

"Forget you? Impossible--"

"Forget, Jonathan," she persisted, sliding closer so her thigh pressed against his. Cupping his face in her hands, she forced him to stare deep into her eyes.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured.

"No, Jonathan, do not think of me in that way. If you must have a memory, only remember that I was your escort for a day. Do not remember the night."

"I-- I don't want to forget," Jonathan mumbled, unable to look away from her gaze.

"I know. But you **must**. At least that part of our time together."

"Forget?" he repeated plaintively.

"Yes, Jonathan. Forget..." She stroked his jaw and throat, then grasped his hand and turned it over. Gently pushing back his cuff, she brought his hand up to her lips and kissed the heel of his palm.

Jonathan closed his eyes and shuddered at the sudden thrill of ecstasy that raced through him. How could she honestly believe that he would ever forget her, forget the night of passion they'd shared; forget her hands and lips touching him everywhere...

§§§§§

"Tell ya what I'm gonna do, buds. I'm gonna give you a chance to win back your watch," Benny said with expansive gestures as Nicholas entered the room.

"I'm afraid you'll have to postpone that opportunity for a few minutes, Liam," Nicholas said. "I wish to speak with Benedek."

Benny looked at him quickly, then grinned. "That's terrific, 'cause I'd like to talk to you too, Mr. Tannek. Y'know, Liam here has been filling me in on a few things about you and the missus..."

Nicholas sent a sharp look at his servant, who shrugged. "Has he, indeed?"

"Yeah, he's been a real fountain of information," Benny said, rapidly shuffling the cards with the dexterity of a professional. "Ya know, I always thought of Creatures of the Night as blood-thirsty, throat-ripping monsters out to rule the world, not save it. Neither one of you quite fit that image."

"Thank you," Nicholas said dryly, folding his arms across his chest.

"You don't run around in a white tie and tails, speak in a Hungarian accent-- where **are** you from, anyway?-- you don't have fetid breath, red eyes or hairy palms," Benny continued, fanning out the cards, flipping them back and forth and then gathering them up.

Nicholas exchanged amused glances with Liam, then approached the table and reached down, halting Benny's cardplay. He selected a card and looked at it, then tossed it down in front of the journalist. "Ace of Spaces, Mr. Benedek? What do your superstitions tell you about that card's meaning?"

Benny stared at it, then met Nicholas's calm gaze. "It's just a card."

Nicholas smiled and dropped into a chair next to Benedek. "My first home was Macedonia. Are you disappointed-- that I don't fit your image of a 'typical' vampire?"

Benny picked up the Ace of Spades and looked at it thoughtfully before stuffing it back in the deck. "Who am I to say someone has to be typical? Just ask Dr. M-- she'll tell ya I'm different."

"I'm sure she would."

"Having a little problem with Jonny? I kinda thought ya might." Benny went on, shuffling the deck and dealing cards to Liam, Nicholas and then himself.

"Did you?" Nicholas slowly picked up the cards but did not look at them.

"Yeah, Jack can be pretty hard-headed when it comes to the ladies." Benny casually picked up his own cards. "Especially one like Varina."

"Indeed. Varina is attempting to discourage your friend of his-- infatuation. I expect her to succeed. Which leaves us with the question: what shall we do with **you**?"

"Me? What makes you think you gotta do anything with me? She dumps Jack and he goes back to D.C. but how can you be **sure** he won't suddenly remember her? Maybe he sees a woman who looks like her, she's wearing a red dynamite dress and **pow!** Jonny's hormones kick in and he starts looking for his lost lady. You need someone to keep an eye on him. Who better than his best buds? His partner? Who spends more time with him than yours truly? I can handle him for you and you don't even have to give us a second thought. Hey, we get an assignment that could lead to you and I can head it off, warn ya."

"An interesting proposal," Nicholas said after a few moments. "But you are an adept poker player, Mr. Benedek. How do I know you're not bluffing, gambling to win your life?"

Benny took a deep breath. "Okay, I'll level with ya... No offense, but your story isn't the sort of thing my readers are gonna want to read. They like the traditional vampire-stuff."

"And we are not-- traditional?" Nicholas studied the cards he held. "Would that not be even more of a reason for you to write about us, however?"

"Not in **my** paper." Benny managed his flash and dazzle grin. "I turn **that** in and Jordy would explode into a thousand ugly little pieces. My readers want sensational horrific adventures, not sweet little stories of good guy vampires saving the world. Who'd believe it? I'd get thrown out of the Stephen King Fan Club."

"We couldn't have that, could we?" Nicholas commented dryly. "It **is** entirely possible that you were quite mistaken in your conclusions about us, it is not?" He stared into Benny's eyes, his challenge evident.

"Yea-yeah," the journalist said. "I think I probably **was**, now that you mention it."

"Good," Nicholas said, laying his cards down face-up. "Please return Liam's watch, and allow him to escort you from the building. Dr. MacKensie will be leaving soon, and I do not want him to see you here."

Benny slid the watch across the table and the silent Liam accepted it. As Nicholas left the room, Benny glanced at the cards he'd spread down and he whistled. "Royal Flush, Ace High. In Hearts, no less."

"Mr. Tannek is very skilled in games of chance," Liam said, standing up. "Shall we go?"

"Lucky in love, too, I'll bet," Benny muttered as he followed Liam.

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"Mr. Tannek, I've given this a great deal of thought and I've come to the conclusion that I cannot accept a grant from the Gryphon Foundation. At least, not at this time," Jonathan said when Nicholas returned to the office. "When it comes down to it, I can't leave Georgetown. I would be quite willing to give up the paranormal research, at least for a time, and

I would take a sabbatical for my studies, but in the end I would return to Georgetown. It's in my blood."

"Thank you for your honesty, Dr. MacKensie. There is no need to explain further," Nicholas said, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I quite understand the pull of one's heritage, the call of one's blood."

"I'm certain that you will find a way to do your study," Varina said, sitting sedately in the chair next to Jonathan's. "Perhaps your own university will fund you."

"Dr. Moorhouse has promised to assist me in that endeavor."

Nicholas stood up and offered Jonathan his hand. "I regret we could not come to more agreeable terms. Our driver will return you to your hotel, and will be at your disposal for the remainder of your time here."

"Remainder?" Jonathan repeated, standing up and shaking hands.

"Of course. We did agree to be your hosts for four days, did we not?"

"Well, yes, but our business is completed," Jonathan pointed out.

"Then you are free to enjoy yourself," Varina said, standing up and offering Jonathan her hand. "If you have any questions, or need assistance you must feel free to call my office. I'm afraid I won't be available, but my assistant can take care of you."

"Well, thank you both," Jonathan said lamely, wondering at the vague feeling that he'd missed something. Realizing he still held Varina's hand, he dropped it and bumped into his chair as he turned for the door.

When the door closed behind him, Nicholas looked at Varina and held out his hand. Varina placed her fingers in his palm and his own fingers folded over hers. "Have we done the right thing?" he asked, pulling her into his embrace.

Varina wrapped her arms around his waist and snuggled her cheek against his chest. "There was nothing else we could have done, beloved. It was what Jonathan wanted. In the end he would have regretted giving up his life at Georgetown and his friendship with Benedek. I don't think he knew how important they were to him, especially Benedek."

"Well, we'll just have to find someone else to receive his grant instead," Nicholas said. He paused, then added, "I think you should begin including a forgetfulness suggestion as a standard part of your assignments, my heart."

She looked up at him, then smiled. "Why, Nicholas, I believe you're jealous!"

"I am not--"

"Not even a **tiny** bit?" she pouted.

"Hmph! Well, perhaps so," he admitted, kissing her on the lips.

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Benny glanced up and shut off the TV set as Jonathan entered the hotel suite. "Jack? Everything go okay?"

Jonathan halted at the sight of his friend, then came forward, loosening his tie. "Yes, it was fine. I-- uh, well-- I've turned down

their offer, I'm afraid." He dropped into an armchair. "Benedek-- I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention any of this to Dr. Moorhouse."

"Sure, buds," Benny said, giving him a long look. "Hey, whaddya say we take in some of that nightlife? Maybe grab some authentic Chinese food down in Chinatown? I'll call Sylvie and see if she's got a friend for you!"

"Yes, all right," Jonathan said absently. He rubbed idly at an itch on his hand, and frowned at the small cut he found on his inner wrist, then dismissed it as unimportant. "This friend of yours-- what's she like?" he asked, suddenly suspicious. "She's not a lady wrestler, truck driver, roller derby queen, or snake charmer, is she?"

"Nah, Sylvie's pretty dull compared to some girls," Benny said with a dismissive gesture. "Not to worry, pal. You just leave the details to me and you'll have a night out that you'll never forget!"

"That's what I'm afraid of," Jonathan muttered as Benny picked up the phone and began dialing.

"Yo, Sylvie! It's me, Benny! Jack's treating us to a night out, money no object!"

"Hey!" Jonathan squealed in protest, but Benny just grinned. Life was back to normal.