

Dreaming of Atlantis

By Jane Tesh

"Where to, buddy?"

Edgar Benedek hopped into the yellow cab, having successfully outmaneuvered a harried-looking man in a grey suit and a large woman dragging two small children. "WROS," he replied. "Interview at three on 'Midtown Today.' Be sure to tune in. It's gonna be a blockbuster."

"Oh, yeah?" The driver edged the taxi into an impossibly small space between a garbage truck and another cab. "You some kind of famous or something?"

Benny tossed a copy of one of his books into the front seat. "That's me, Edgar Benedek. Read that, pal, and it'll change your life."

The driver rolled an eye in the book's direction as he ran the first of two red lights. "What is it, some miracle diet?"

"UFOs and You: A Guide for the Eighties," Benny grinned. "The definitive book."

"If you say so," the driver said doubtfully. "Seems to me there's enough trouble with identified flying objects lately. You been reading about Delta Airlines?"

"I got a great theory about that," said Benny cheerfully. "You've heard of gremlins, haven't you?"

The driver was squinting ahead to what appeared to be a ten car pile up. "May be a little traffic jam ahead, mister. What say we go around? Or are you in a hurry?"

"Nahh. It'll give me time to go over my notes." Benny settled back in the seat, frowning slightly at the extra copies of UFOs and You he'd brought along for the radio station staff. Any and all notes he had were in his head. He preferred speaking off the cuff, especially on the radio. And there'd be call-ins from the audience. No problem.

No, that wasn't the problem.

He flipped idly through the book, aware of a growing sense of dissatisfaction. Sure this one was okay, but the next. . .if there ever was a next one. . .

Just shut up, he told himself. So you've hit a slump. So what? Can the self-pity, Benedek. UFOs and You is selling great. What more do you want?

What more did he want? Good question.

Benny yawned and rubbed his eyes. Staying up half the night pondering deep thoughts was not the answer. Yeah, that's right. Mr. Edgar Benedek having deep thoughts. What do you think of that, Dr. MacKensie? And just what's your problem? You still sulking over that little deal I pulled last time we were on a case? That's okay, buds. I got along fine without you before. I can do it again.

He yawned a second time and slumped further down in the seat. No sense wasting a perfectly good nap situation.

"Welcome."

A soft pleasant voice spoke nearby. Benny gazed around with a frown, perplexed. He was standing on the graceful arch of a marble bridge. Before him lay a strange and beautiful tiered city as elegant as a wedding cake. The bridge on which he stood spanned the first and widest of a series of intricate canals ringing the fanciful town, all white stone and shimmering rooftops of gold, silver, and bronze.

"Welcome," repeated the voice.

Benny looked dazedly at the woman standing by his side. Short copper curls held back by a band of gold, she was small and slender, wearing a short white robe that was vaguely Grecian in style. "Hang on a sec, okay?" Benny shook his head, trying to sort things out. "I'm dreaming, right? This has got to be a dream."

The young woman smiled and the smile reflected in her warm brown eyes. "My name is Corinne," she said. "Come. Let me show you the city." She held out a small hand.

"Heck, why not?" he said, taking it in his. "Just call me Benny."

She led him across the bridge, over the sparkling blue water. In the wide canal boats with brightly-colored sails drifted lazily. Symbols of golden suns and silver moons spangled the graceful craft. The people on board lifted their hands in greeting, and Benny waved back, beginning to enjoy himself.

They walked down wide streets of smooth white stone to the marketplace. Here, handsome smiling people in white robes went about their business, calling to each other cheerfully and bargaining with vendors for rolls of brilliant cloth, jewels, glazed pottery, boxes made of carved wood, and baskets woven of green and yellow reeds.

"This is some dream," Benny remarked, marveling at the colors and textures. He rarely dreamed in such detail. Why, he could even smell the spices and feel the warmth of the white stone beneath his feet. "Who's in charge of this extravaganza?" he asked. "Twentieth Century Fox? Paramount?"

Corinne smiled. "I will take you to our ruler."

"The great and powerful Oz, right?" he said with a wry grin. "I've been that route."

He followed Corinne out of the marketplace and on up the street, past a huge temple made of white marble, gold, and another bright metal Benny didn't recognize. A large statue of Neptune riding a sea shell chariot pulled by leaping dolphins adorned the flat roof. Benny paused to touch the warm smooth stone and to admire the details of the statue. His eyes traveled from Neptune's three-pronged spear to the curls of the foam spilling around the chariot. He'd had visions before, and plenty of exotic dreams, but nothing this real, this substantial. There was a scent of lemons and oranges in the air and the salty tang of the sea from the blue canals. Was this some Greek island?

Corinne tugged at his sleeve. "Come," she said. "You are seeking answers, aren't you? You'll find them here."

This enigmatic statement gave Benny pause. "Answers?"

She nodded, her curls bright in the sunlight, a sunlight that seemed to be growing brighter, making him wince. She was fading in the light, the scene around him deteriorating. "I don't know what you mean. Is this a dream, or what? Hey, wait a minute. Don't go yet. I don't even know where I am."

She had faded from sight, but her voice came, a soft whisper: "Atlantis."

"Hey, buddy, we're here."

"Huh?" Benny blinked, seeing the faded seat, broken ashtray, and rough face of the cabdriver.

"I said, we're here. You want another forty winks, it's gonna cost you."

Shaking himself awake, Benny paid the driver and found himself on the sidewalk, wincing in the bright afternoon sunlight, jostled by the hurrying crowd. For a moment, he was jarred by the harsh sounds, the anxious, frowning faces; then reality set in.

A dream, that's all it had been. A dream about Atlantis. A very vivid dream. Well, shake it off, Benedek. You've got an interview to do. Analyze yourself later.

More alert now, Benny made his way adeptly through the crowd to the station door. Atlantis would be mighty peaceful and pleasant in comparison to all this, until the big bang, anyway. Must be a touch of wish-fulfillment on my part. The Bahamas would do just as well.

Shoving his troubled thoughts aside, Benny geared up for his interview. Afterwards, he autographed copies of his book for the DJs and decided to check in with Jordy to see what his editor had up his sleeve.

The offices of the National Register were silent. Unnerved by the unnatural quiet, Benny entered cautiously. No phones rang. No roller skaters. No Moonies. Nothing. The staff members were gathered in one corner.

"Whoa, who died?" Benny asked.

"Benny." Jordy motioned him forward. "There's someone trying to buy us out."

"A takeover?" Benny looked interested. "Who'd want the Register?"

"That's what I'd like to know," replied Jordy grimly. He held out a sheet of paper. "What's Parkland Enterprises?"

Benny read the report with growing unease. There'd been rumors of a takeover attempt, but he'd dismissed them, figuring it was media hype. Maybe he'd been a tad hasty, though, as the figures on the paper showed a steady sale of the Register's newspaper syndicate stock to Parkland Enterprises. He gave a low whistle. "Forty-two percent? What's going on here? Looks like we're headin' for the unemployment line!"

"Word's out we'll be turned into a gardening magazine," said Jordy, chewing on the stub of cigar in his mouth. "So we can investigate petunias, or hit the street."

"How'd this happen?" Benny looked bewildered. "I thought Mrs. Crumpler had controlling interest in the Register."

"Looks like someone's gotten to her." Jordy glared at his staff. "Okay, okay, enough moping around. We got a paper to get out." People began to move away, slowly, dispiritedly. "Move it!" The editor turned his gaze on Benny. "Got anything for me?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," Benny replied, still distracted by the deadly calm in the room.

"Come into my office." The two men entered the small room, Jordy waving Benedek ahead. With a sigh, he closed the door, leaning heavily against it. "I've seen this coming for a while, but I never thought the old bat would sell. I'm putting you on this, Benny. Find out who's responsible and beat him at his own game. And not a word to anyone," he warned. "Could be a fox in our little chicken coop."

"You don't believe that, do you?" Admittedly, the cast and crew of the Register were an odd lot, but they were loyal, weren't they? Thinking quickly over the members of the staff, Benny couldn't imagine one who'd sell them out.

"Prove it to me," Jordy challenged. "One way or another, Benny, I wanna know. If you have to kiss Ma Crumpler, do it. We've worked hard to reach this level of sleaze, and I'll be damned if I'll write gardening tips for people too stupid to know how to water their lawns."

Benny grinned. This was the Jordy he knew. "leave it to me, chief."

Jordy gave him a shrewd glance. "I'm sure you can drop your current projects and work on this full time?"

"No problem." Jordy knew as well as he that his latest manuscript was frozen in a complete writer's block.

"You and the professor have some ghost to chase?"

"Not a thing." He hadn't heard from Jonathan since the unicorn scam.

"Good. Go talk to that crazy old broad and find out what she wants. Find out something. Anything."

Benny stopped by his apartment, hoping to find a message from Pamela on his machine. No such luck.

Forget it, he told himself, reaching into his refrigerator for a drink. No, I won't forget it. She's got a temper, that's all. She's still sore 'cause I had to cancel a date to go to a Druid ceremony. But face it, pal, it wasn't just that long dark hair and long slim legs that attracted me in the first place, was it? Wasn't it the fire in her eyes? Pamela was quick and outspoken, reminding him of a girl back in high school who had also been a fierce rival. He liked the high spirits, the competition, but maybe it was growing a little thin these days. Pam had a lot of complaints, a lot of demands, suspiciously like someone who wanted him to change.

Can't change any more. You can't even guess how much I've changed this past year, Pamela. If you're mad, you can just stay mad. I got a meeting with Mrs. Crumpler in an hour, and if you haven't called by then, I think we may have a real problem.

A sudden urge brought Benny to his desk where he set down his drink and stared at the pile of neatly typed pages. It stared back at him. Give me a break, can't ya? Just a little break. A crack in the block. I mean, there are thousands of adoring fans waiting, wondering how they're gonna live till I publish my next opus.

He took the manuscript to the couch and read through the pages, hoping for some spark that would ignite and fire his imagination. Nothing happened. The book stopped in the middle of page fifty-one and would go no further.

With a sigh he dropped the manuscript on the end table and stretched out, arms behind his head. This just isn't my day. Or my week, come to think of it. Things looked a lot better in Atlantis. Maybe I'll dream about it again sometime. . .

"Welcome."

Benny stared at the red-haired girl. "hey, I didn't mean – how'd I--?" He looked around, baffled, at the white and gold city. "This is the same place!"

"I'm glad to see you again, Benny," smiled Corinne. "Come."

"Atlantis, Episode Two," he remarked, following her. "When we last left our intrepid reporter, he was just about as confused as he is now."

At the end of the street was a marble courtyard. Several men dressed in robes of blue, red, and royal purple sat on the scattered benches or strolled among the statuary and flowering trees.

"Our council," Corinne explained. "The man in purple is one of our Ten Kings. I'll introduce you."

The men looked at Benny with polite interest. The king turned out to be a tall, dignified man with curly black hair, a black beard, and small, piercing gray eyes. He wore a necklace of glittering blue stones wound about with more of the shiny metal Benny didn't recognize.

"Our guest," said Corinne with a bow. "His name is Benny, and he comes from the Far Shore."

"Pleasure to meet you, your highness," said Benny. There was something vaguely familiar about the man, but he couldn't make out what it was.

The king nodded. "Welcome to Atlantis. Our city is open to you. Move about as you

wish.”

Benny thanked the man while noticing the worried looks on the faces of several of the councilmen. “I’ll be careful,” he assured them, wondering what proper dress etiquette might be.

“There is no need to be concerned,” said the king. “You are our guest.” He followed Benny’s gaze, and his face hardened. “Ah, I see. You have come at a somewhat awkward time. My councilors and I are in the midst of some . . . discussion. It’s nothing.”

Two of the men looked extraordinarily guilty. “Trouble?” Benny inquired.

“I think not,” the king replied. “I believe I know who my friends are.” His piercing eyes raked the councilors. “And who will stand for me should the occasion arise.” The smile he turned to Benny was genuinely friendly. “Don’t let our petty intrigues spoil your visit. Go with Corinne and explore our island. Find your answers.”

“Yes, sir, thanks very much,” Benny replied. As Corinne took his arm, he glimpsed one man whispering to another behind the king’s back. “Uh, Corinne, I think maybe we oughta hang around.”

“The council must meet now,” she answered. “We’ll come back later.”

The pathway took them out of the city, past hillsides of flowers and gnarled trees. Corinne chose one of the larger trees and sat, patting the ground beside her. “Sit here, Benny.”

“You got it, Cory.” He sat cross-legged. “I plan to make the most of this dream.” From their vantage point, he could see the city’s tallest buildings glittering in the sunlight. “Now, let me get this straight,” he continued. “This is Atlantis, right?” She nodded. “When I was here before, you said I’d find some answers here, and just a few minutes ago, the king said the same thing. What do you guys mean by that? Answers to what?”

“To everything,” she replied, picking the flowers that grew near her feet.

“Everything? Like, are there really UFOs, and is Hitler still alive?”

She laughed. “Answers for yourself, Benny.”

“Oh, I get it,” he said. “This is gonna be full of deep hidden meanings and symbols.”

“If you say so.” Corinne wound the flowers into a chain. “It’s not really that involved.”

“But,” he looked around the green countryside. “Why Atlantis? I know I’ve got a pretty wild imagination, but what does it mean?”

Corinne smiled as she slipped the flower chain over his head. “A mystery.”

He gently tugged one of her coppery curls. “And who are you supposed to be?” he asked, smiling back.

She placed a hand over one of his. “A friend.”

Benny caught her hand and pulled her closer for a kiss. A shrill ringing sound made him jump. “I thought you were supposed to hear bells and fireworks,” he said as Corinne began to fade. “Hey, wait! Corinne! Don’t go!”

The ringing continued. Wide awake now, Benny groaned. He glared at the telephone. He’d forgotten to reset the answering machine.

“You’re on. What’s up?”

“Benny.” A cool female voice came over the line. “It’s Pamela.”

Whoa, talk about your dreams coming true! “Hello, Pamela,” he said, wishing she could see his smile. “Am I forgiven? Have you decided you can’t live without me?”

"We need to talk. Why don't you meet me at Saffron's tonight?"

"Sure thing," he said, pleased by the turn of events. "I'll talk all you like."

Pamela still sounded distant. "I'm sure you will. Is eight all right, or do you have some skulking to do?"

"I'll put my nightly skulk on hold," he promised. "Eight it is."

"Fine," she replied. "And Benny, don't be late."

"Me?" he exclaimed, but Pamela hung up without another word.

Despite that, Benny found an extra spring in his step. That's what the dream meant. He and Pam would work things out. Great! Atlantis, you and I are gonna get along fine. You can come back any time. Maybe I should try Jonathan and see if I'm on a roll.

Benny wasn't surprised to hear his friend's annoyed voice on the other end of the line. "Benedek, I am finally going to Arizona, and I do not want any interference."

"Arizona?" asked Benny. "What's in Arizona?"

There was a patient sigh. "The petroglyphs. I was going out to view them last month when you interrupted me with that absurd vampire dating service nonsense."

"Oh, yeah." Benny remembered now. "Well, can't it wait?"

"It most certainly cannot wait," Jonathan snapped testily. "Professor Monroe has discovered a new Anasazi site, and I needed to be there weeks ago. Those wretched pothunters will carry off everything they can get their hands on."

"So what's so special about these glyphs? They aren't gonna walk off, are they?"

"Professor Monroe believes they may be part of a solar calendar. I'm taking some of my students to help him out, and we are leaving on Thursday," he added firmly.

"Then you can come up tomorrow," said Benny. "I've been having some mighty peculiar dreams lately."

"I'm not interesting in hearing about your dreams, for heaven's sake! Your real life is bizarre enough."

"But these are all about Atlantis, Jon, and I've never had any dreams so real! Just a few minutes ago--"

"Benedek," Jonathan broke in. "Spare me. I have a departmental meeting in ten minutes and three student conferences after that. I am extraordinarily busy."

"You'd be amazed, Jack. The details in these things. And each time, I take up right where I left off the time before."

"Like a comic book. I understand completely."

"But it's Atlantis!" Benny tried to get through to his friend. "And there's this girl--"

Again Jonathan broke in. "Benedek, we've been to Atlantis, remember? You were absolutely certain about it, and the place turned out to be a fancy health spa, complete with marble columns and women in short white robes."

Benny laughed. "Oh, yeah, that's right. Had you going there for a moment, too, as I recall. But this is different, Jack. This is the real thing."

"The word real does not exist in your vocabulary. I've got to go."

"Ah, come on," Benny cajoled. "Are you still sore about that unicorn thing?" The sudden silence at the other end of the line gave him his answer. "Jon?"

"That was a ridiculous stunt," said Jonathan, his voice tightly controlled.

Provoked by Jonathan's tone, Benny replied, "It didn't hurt anyone, and we exposed that fraud of a circus manager."

"You could've gotten us both killed."

"But I didn't."

"Just when I think you might be able to approach matters with a little reason," Jonathan began, then gave up. "Some day you're going to go too far," he finished darkly.

"It's better than goin' nowhere," Benny retorted.

"There's no need to discuss this any more," said Jonathan coldly. "I'm late. Good-by."

"Yeah, fine. Who needs you?" Benny smacked the phone down. Damn! Just my luck to catch him in one of his righteous moods. Okay, so my methods aren't always of the highest order. Don't results count for anything? So I made my own unicorn, so what? So we had to do a little late night investigating to make the switch and ran into a few unsavory characters. We got away. We caught that creep, too. I paid everyone back, paid for the damages. Well, GI paid, but still.

I never know what's gonna set you off these days, MacKensie. Go on to Arizona and stare at some rocks. I've got more important things to do.

Benny had met Ida Crumpler only once before and to his way of thinking, she gave new meaning and dimension to the word crotchety. He knew she'd bought the Register to spite her husband, a respected businessman who didn't approve of slap-dash journalism. In fact, Mr. Crumpler had left Mrs. Crumpler not long after she purchased the paper. Small and pinched, the woman reminded Benny of what Dr. Moorhouse might have become if she had had too much money and not enough fiber.

"Just doesn't have the snap it used to," she complained, waving the latest edition in his face. "Look at this: 'Grandfather Has Triplets by Twelve-Year Old Wife.' Tame, very tame! Where's the blood, sonny? Where's the gore? 'Grandfather Eats Triplets.' Now, that's a story."

"I agree, Mrs. Crumpler," said Benny, backing off a bit. "You know your stuff, no lie."

"Of course I do," she grumbled. "I cut my teeth on it. The National Register's gone soft, young man, soft!"

"Okay, I'll go along with you halfway on that one," he said. "We could do better, always room for improvement. But to sell us out--"

"Parkland Enterprises made me a splendid offer," she sniffed.

"Maybe." Benny glanced around the expensively furnished apartment. What did she need the money for? As far as he could see, every inche was covered with fancy carpet, antique furniture, and gaudy paintings.

She gave a snort. "I'll bet. You go back and tell Kerner I said it's time for a change. If he's not going to keep up the high standards of the Register, then Parkland can make something else out of it."

"You'll be putting a lot of people out of work," Benny protested. "Myself included."

Mrs. Crumpler was not impressed. "Out of the whole bunch you're the one who's going to land on his feet. Good day."

With this curt dismissal, Benny had to leave. He tried once more at the door and got it slammed in his face.

Ornery old witch, he grumbled. Okay, so maybe I'll be fine, but what about Jordy? What about Wick and the rest? The Globe Standard's not gonna welcome them with open arms. And

maybe I won't come out of this one on top. For all I know, I could be stuck with this writer's block permanently.

Next, Benny checked out Parkland Enterprises and found it to be a legitimate industry with a penchant for snapping up smaller newspaper syndicates, a real shark. If Mrs. Crumpler was intent on selling, there really wasn't anything to be done. The Register didn't have the funds available to make a better offer. The Pac Man defense was out; they couldn't possibly swallow up parkland before Parkland made its move.

Even though he knew Jordy would want to hear about his visit with Mrs. C, Benny didn't have the heart to break it to him just yet. Instead, he dropped in at one of his favorite bars, ordered a drink, and took it with him to one of the back booths to ponder. The bar was dark and cool, and oddly enough, there was a smell of lemons and oranges, of salty air. . .

The scene was slightly different, but Benny knew he was in Atlantis on one of the other green hillsides that overlooked the city. This one was dotted with broken columns and chunks of smooth white stone. A young man stood with his back to Benny, studying a long scroll. When Benny spoke, he gave a startled yelp, turned, and tripped over one of the larger stones.

For one wild moment, Benny thought Jonathan had joined him in this dream. The young man had long hair and certainly had the same nose, but he wasn't MacKensie. Surprised by the sharp pang of disappointment he felt, Benny recovered quickly.

"Sorry about that, pal. Didn't mean to scare you."

The man scrambled to his feet, brushing off his robe while eying Benny apprehensively. "Who are you?" he asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't worry. I'm harmless." Benny grinned. "Just passin' through in a dream."

His new companion looked skeptical. "You're dreaming?"

"Yeah. I sorta come and go. Like a shadow." Benny's grin expanded. Something in this guy's dark eyes, the tilt of his head. Say, Jonny, your dad ever talk to you about your ancestors?

The man backed off a step. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I'm gathering some information."

"No kidding? So am I." He offered his hand. "My name's Edgar Benedek, but most folks call me Benny. I won't bite, honest."

Cautiously, the man shook his hand. "My name is Martin," he replied.

"So what kinda info you after, Marty?"

Wincing slightly at the nickname, Martin replied, "I'm preparing an ode for the dedication of the temple of Poseidon."

"The big building with Neptune on top? An ode, huh? Sounds real exciting. What've you got so far?"

Martin held the scroll close to his chest. "It's not finished yet," he said hesitantly. "That's why I'm here. I was hoping for inspiration."

Benny looked around. "Here? It's all fallen down. Looks like a graveyard. . ." he trailed off.

"Something wrong?" Martin asked, concerned.

"Nothing," said Benny, shaking his head with a slight laugh. "This is just like—never mind. This is all a dream anyway."

Martin rolled up the scroll. "What makes you think you're dreaming?"

"That's the only thing I'm sure of lately."

"I have studied this philosophy," Martin said brightly. "Perhaps your other life is the dream."

Benny indicated his clothes. "You wanna explain this? How come I'm not in a bathrobe like everyone else? How come I can understand you?"

"I don't know," Martin admitted. He glanced uneasily back toward the city. "I really should be going. My mentor wanted this finished this afternoon, and I'm woefully behind." He swallowed hard. "She's going to be quite angry."

"Well, here, let me have a look," Benny offered. "I'm a writer. Maybe I can help."

"I don't think--" Martin hesitated as Benny tugged the scroll from his fingers. "You shouldn't--"

"Okay, let's see." Benny scanned the long poem. "Pretty impressive, chum. What's the problem?"

Martin reluctantly pointed out several lines near the bottom. "There. I can't seem to find a proper ending."

Benny shut his eyes. "Give me a minute." After a few moments, he opened his eyes again, saying excitedly, "Got it! Write this down: 'Poseidon, great and powerful ruler of the sea, thy boundless might protect us as thou hast protected all life within thy teeming waves.' How's that?"

The young man gazed at Benny admiringly. "Why, that's very good!" he pronounced, hurriedly scribbling down the words.

Benny shrugged. "It's nothing."

"Nothing to you, perhaps, but it means a great deal to me," said Martin, relieved. "Now she won't be angry, and I can get back to my own poetry. My song cycle has been lying neglected for months." He looked up with a warm smile. "Thank you, Benny."

Trying to cover his discomfort at the sight of that eerily familiar smile, Benny replied, "Sheesh, kid. You'd think I'd saved your life. It's nothing. Forget it."

"Come meet my mentor," Martin invited. "She'll be interested in your theories about dreams."

"Yeah, I'm sure she will." Benny hesitated, then continued. "Okay, why not?"

With another smile, Martin started down the hill only to fade into nothingness.

Aw, nuts, Benny thought as the rest of the dream faded around him. Then again, maybe I'm better off. Can't say for sure that I'm ready to meet the Atlantean version of Juliana Moorhouse.

He yawned and blinked in the dim light of the bar. Good grief, did I go to sleep here? He stared at his drink only to find the glass half full. Dozed off sitting up? Whoa, I'm losin' my grip, 'cause I can't be that tired. He turned his mind back to his dream. So, what is Atlantis trying to tell me? There are some mighty strange parallels in these dreams. And where was Corinne this trip? Hope I haven't lost her.

Yow! What time is it? He studied his watch. I can just make it. No problem. Hang on, Pam. Benny's on his way.

When he reached the small Oriental restaurant, Benny found Pamela standing in the foyer, his face taut with anger, one foot tapping impatiently on the red and gold carpet. Benny caught his breath, put on his best grin, and prepared to bluff his way out, but he quickly realized that Pamela was not having any of it.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "is this how you treat our relationship, a relationship, I might add, that is floundering badly?"

“So I was late,” he countered, still grinning. “What’s twenty minutes?”

“What twenty minutes, Benny? Try forty-five minutes.”

“But who’s counting, right?”

“You are so inconsiderate,” Pamela continued. “You could have called.”

“From a taxi?” Benny felt his own patience starting to fray. “You know what traffic’s like in this city.”

“You’re always late. Always! I can’t stand it!”

“You’re making too much of this, Pam.” Benny made one more effort to coax her out of her mood. “Come on. I don’t want to fight. Look, I’m sorry, okay? I apologize. Now can we forget it?” From the expression on her face he knew this to be a losing proposition. Pam was going to milk this situation for all it was worth, and he resented the fact. He resented being treated like a wayward child. He resented the time he’d spent on what was obviously an incompatible relationship. “Okay, fine,” he said abruptly. “I’m always late. I just remembered that I’m late for another appointment. See you later, sweetheart. Much later.”

“Benny!” she called after him as he stormed out the door.

Why do I do this? He asked himself, striding down the street, hands jammed in his pockets. Why do I tie myself to these impossible women? Why can’t I find someone reasonable, somebody kind and sweet like—he kept himself from finishing that thought. There would never be another girl like Lisa, never. Was he punishing himself by dating shrews like Pam? Going too far in the opposite direction so he wouldn’t have to think of—well, that was over. No more Pamela and her outrageous demands. Good riddance.

Still, there was a sense of loss as he entered his silent apartment. Pam had been good company, a great dancer, someone to talk to. . .

“Benny.”

“Corinne,” he said, amazed. This time he couldn’t be dreaming. Hadn’t he just walked into his apartment? Walked through the door? But instead of standing in his living room, he found himself in Atlantis.

“Come quickly,” she said, catching his hand. “There’s trouble.”

A crowd had gathered around the marble courtyard. The people parted to let Corinne and Benny pass through. “What’s going on?” he asked curiously.

“Deception,” said Corinne worriedly. “Two of the king’s councilors have plotted against him. If he cannot prove himself worthy of the adversaries, he will be killed.”

“Isn’t anyone going to do anything about it?” Benny looked around at the ring of frightened faces.

“We are but common people,” Corinne replied. “We have little to say in the matters of kings. But you--” She paused, a hopeful light in her brown eyes. “You are an outsider and of noble birth. You may be able to help.”

“Me?” Benny frowned in surprise. “Cory, I’m just a reporter. And I’m dreaming, remember?”

“There is strength in you,” she said earnestly. “Strength and purpose.”

Benny was about to argue when the king appeared, followed by members of his court. The two men Benny had spotted whispering behind the king’s back entered from the opposite side of the courtyard, and the crowd grew silent.

Time for a showdown, he thought.

“We have found nobles who will swear allegiance to our rule,” said the taller of the two

men. "We demand you give up the throne."

The king gazed at his challengers scornfully. "Who are these men? Let them show themselves."

A group of men in red robes left the shelter of the crowd and stood by the councilors. The rest of the people groaned.

"What's up?" Benny whispered, concerned.

"They are powerful men from the other side of the island," Corinne said in dismay. "I don't know how this could have happened."

The king didn't seem troubled, but stood tall and proud. "And who speaks for me?" he asked.

"I do." Benny decided to throw in his lot with the king. "Edgar Benedek of the Far Shore, of the fair city of New York, beyond the bounding waves."

A ripple of interest passed through the crowd, while the king gave Benny a long approving stare. Several of the other councilors came to stand by the king.

"And I," said a new voice.

Benny turned to see a man in white robes and a necklace of silver jewels. "I bring the greetings of your brother, seventh of the Ten Kings. He sends his allegiance as well as that of his nobles. His troops await your command."

"Talk about your last minute rescues," Benny murmured to Corinne.

"Then I restate my claim as king of this city," declared the king, "and command your troops to disperse and capture these rebels."

At this, the crowd cheered, and the councilors who had dared oppose the king fled.

"That's it? I mean, that's all that happens?" Benny felt confused.

"You helped to save our city," Corinne said, beaming with pride.

"Hey, all I did was speak up," he said, warmed by her praise. "The big guy in white clinched the deal."

"Such loyalty will be well-rewarded," said the king, taking Benny's hand in a firm grip, but when Benny returned the gesture, his hand slipped through.

"Uh-oh," Benny groaned as Atlantis faded once more. "Hang on a second. Come on! I mean, things were just getting good!"

Somehow Benny wasn't surprised to find himself seated on his couch. I'm not sure I've got a real life any more. One dream after another. What happens when I go to bed tonight? Full-fledged mini-series? He reached a decision.

Enough's enough. I need professional help. I'm calling Amber.

"Benny, sweetheart, how nice to hear from you," said Amber Devane after he'd managed to dial her number and identify himself to the woman. "Loved your last book. When's the new one coming out?"

"It's sorta in drydock right now," Benny hedged, leaning back and imagining the young woman fluffing her golden hair as she talked. "I'm in need of a little advice, and since you're the best. . ."

She chuckled. "Flatterer. Since I'm the only dream analyst you know. Tell me about it, Benny."

The woman's pleasantly relaxed voice released some of the tension Benny had been feeling. "I'm living in Atlantis these days," he began.

Amber listened as he related the recent series of dreams, occasionally asking a question or murmuring sympathetically. "All right," she said once he'd finished. "You realize you're under quite a bit of anxiety about your unfinished work and your job situation."

"You got all that?" he asked, startled as always by her insight.

"I wouldn't worry, Benny," Amber continued. "When you resolve these problems in your life, the dreams will diminish in power."

"They seem awfully real," he sighed.

Amber laughed. "You always have had a remarkably colorful imagination. Atlantis! That's quite a stretch, Benny, or is your namesake, Edgar Cayce, working on you from another astral plane?"

"That's right. He thought he found Atlantis, didn't he?" Benny laughed briefly, then asked, "So you think this dream business is all anxiety?"

"And standard wish fulfillment. You don't have a lot of symbolism here," Amber elaborated. "Everything you've told me is straightforward condensation and displacement. Several ideas are combining into one image: Atlantis, a peaceful, beautiful land, no problems, at least, not for you. A mystery, a discovery. And the displacement comes when you shift feeling from one idea or person to another. For instance, Martin is a stand-in for your friend Jonathan, who is usually with you on your paranormal cases. It seems to be very clear."

"Maybe too clear," Benny said, half to himself.

Amber caught his words. "Do you have a theory of your own? What do you think is happening?"

"I think Atlantis is trying to tell me something, something important," he admitted after a moment. "Problem is, I don't hang around long enough to figure it out. I've had premonitions before."

"Yes, I remember," said Amber softly. "Do this, Benny. Write down everything you recall about these dreams. And do the same with any more dreams you might have. Then come by my office tomorrow. Will that be soon enough?"

"Sure thing. Thanks."

"Sleep well," she replied.

Benny replaced the receiver. Amber hadn't said it, but the words hung in the air.

Pleasant dreams.

"Sorry, Jordy, Old Lady Crumpler won't budge." Benny hated to break the bad news so early in the morning, but Jordy seemed to know what he was going to say.

"Didn't think so. We're gonna have to think of something else, Benny." Kerner gave him a suspicious look. "Big night?"

Benny rubbed his face wearily. He'd slept like a rock. "Been having a lot of weird dreams lately. Last night I helped save a whole city."

"Too bad it wasn't a newspaper," said Jordy glumly.

"Wasn't me, actually. Some guy in white came bargin' in at the last—whoa!" Benny smacked his forehead. "That's it! That's what the dream was trying to tell me!"

"You wanna let me in on your big idea?" asked Jordy, looking hopeful despite himself.

"That's what we need," Benny explained excitedly. "A white knight! Someone who'll buy us up first. It's an old anti-takeover ploy. When T. Boone Pickens was trying to buy Gulf, Gulf sold itself to Chevron under friendlier terms. Chevron came to the rescue." He grabbed the phone. Thank you, Atlantis! Thank you, court intrigue!

"Who are you calling, Benny? Somehow I doubt Chevron's gonna be interested in the Register."

Benny's grin was blindingly bright. "Not Chevron. I'm calling in an old pal of Mrs. Crumpler."

"Welcome, Benny, welcome! You're just in time for the celebration."

"Great," he said, orienting himself. He'd stopped off at his apartment and almost immediately found himself back in Atlantis. "I'm in the mood to party. What's the occasion?"

"The dedication of the temple," Corinne answered. "There will be parades and feasts and dancing."

"Lead on," Benny grinned in anticipation.

He hadn't thought it possible, but the city looked even more lovely this time, sparkling in the sun like a cluster of precious stones. Banners of red and blue flew from the rooftops and the masts of all the ships in the harbor. People were dressed in their finest clothes and jewels. Women wore flowers in their hair and tossed more blossoms from the balconies to the crowds below. Benny caught one of the large white flowers and tucked it behind Corinne's ear. She laughed and gave him a quick kiss.

As they approached the temple, Benny could see the remaining loyal councilors, the king, and other dignitaries congregated on the steps. The man in white was there, and Benny gave him a thumb's up sign before the ceremonies began. After a few lofty speeches and greetings, Martin stepped forward to read his ode. Benny was pleased when the poem received a hearty round of applause from the crowd. He was even more pleased when the king presented Martin with a gold ring.

"Way ta go, kid," Benny congratulated.

"Thank you," Martin replied, blushing with pride. "I'm very glad you could be here, Benny. You must meet my mentor, Gloria."

Martin led Benny toward a tall woman with a stern expression that was icily familiar. "You did very well, Martin," she said. "And who is this?"

"My very good friend, Benny," Martin replied, beaming.

"Benny," she repeated, giving him the eye from her commanding height. "I understand you assisted Martin in the composition of his ode."

You didn't have to tell her that, kid, Benny thought, but seeing the young man's smile, recognized an all-too-familiar honesty. From the expression on Gloria's face, Benny realized she thought well of this, too, so Benny admitted he'd helped just a little.

"You have a definite talent," the woman said. "Perhaps you will consider studying at our institution of higher learning."

"I appreciate the offer, ma'am, but my time here seems to be a bit on the erratic side."

"Your next visit, then." She smiled. "Martin also tells me that you believe you are dreaming."

"Yes, ma'am, one hundred percent."

"And we are, therefore, products of your imagination, which must be considerable," she

continued dryly.

“Not exactly.” Benny tried to explain. “You see, I know people very like you in my waking life.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Like me?”

Her expression was so like Dr. Moorhouse’s at that moment, Benny’s grin widened. “Like you wouldn’t believe.”

“And like me?” Martin asked curiously.

“Close enough to be brothers, buds.”

“And me?” asked Corinne softly.

Benny looked at her sweet face, her copper curls and warm brown eyes. Her features didn’t match with anyone else’s, but her kind nature and charming friendship made him feel he’d known her all his life. “Especially you.”

A loud rumbling made him look up, expecting to see thunderclouds. Instead, the ground rolled slightly under his feet. Benny made a surprised exclamation, but the Atlanteans paid no attention to the tremor.

“Didn’t you feel that?” he asked.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Corinne hastened to reassure him. “That happens from time to time.”

“Yeah, but don’t you know--?” he stopped, aware of their puzzled faces. No, they didn’t know. How could they? Suddenly, he wanted to grab them and pull them to the safety of his real world. This was crazy. They weren’t real. This was all a dream.

There was another rumble, and Benny caught Corinne’s arm to keep her from falling. “Look, I think I oughta tell you,” he said anxiously. “Maybe you could get up to higher ground. There must be some way--” To his dismay, just at that moment, Corinne began to fade. “Cory! No, wait! I’ve got to tell you!”

He was back on the couch in his apartment. Thunder rumbled softly in the distance. Damn! Atlantis was on its last legs, and there was no way he could save his new friends.

Get ahold of yourself! They don’t exist! This has to be something else. Think!

Running his hands nervously through his hair, Benny’s thoughts continued their mad whirl. I thought with my plan to save the Register everything was settled. That should’ve been the meaning of the celebration, shouldn’t it? What more could there be? Am I in for some major upheaval? Is New York gonna be hit by a meteor?

His hand went to the phone, poised to dial Amber’s number, then he drew it back. Nope. He was going to take care of this on his own. Figure it out here and now.

Benny went to his bedroom and lay down. Okay, Benedek, give it your best shot. I’m tired of all these previews. Let’s get to the main feature and run it straight through to the credits.

For a moment he thought he was trying too hard, then abruptly, there was an ear-splitting crack of thunder, and the scene shifted.

He was in the water, gasping as the green waves broke over his head. There were terrible rumbling sounds and the screams of horrified people. Benny struggled to keep his head above the swirling water, staring in astonishment as the white buildings toppled and fell crashing into the sea. Bridges cracked. Whole sections of the white street were sucked beneath the waves. The brightly-colored boats he had seen on his last visit danced crazily in the rushing whirlpools.

"Benny!"

He spotted Martin clinging to a splintered mast. Benny ducked under the water and swam to join his friend. "Hang on, Marty." He grasped the man's hands. "I've got you."

"Can't swim," Martin gasped.

"Yeah, that makes sense," said Benny, slinging his wet hair out of his eyes. "Live all your life on an island and you can't swim. Hang on!"

They clung to the mast. All around them, huge whirlpools engulfed the remains of the city. More screams and muffled cries could be heard over the raging water and continuing thundering tremors that shook the few pieces of land still intact.

Martin's face was white. "You've been a good friend to me, Benny," he said weakly.

"Don't go talking in the past tense, kid," Benny warned. "You're gonna make it." Even as he spoke, he wondered what could be done. All dry land had been destroyed. There was nowhere to go. The ships had been crushed by the waves, shattered. Had anyone survived the destruction of Atlantis?

"I can't hold on much longer," Martin whispered. "M-my head. . ." his eyes closed.

"Marty!" Benny cried, grasping the man's hands as tightly as he could. "No! Don't let go!" He could feel the strength ebbing from Martin's fingers. "Marty!" He couldn't hold on. Martin slipped from his grasp, and the swirling waters closed over his head.

Benny kicked free of the mast and plunged beneath the waves, searching frantically. Nothing. He rose to the surface, gasping for air, only to find the water more turbulent, great swirls of foam and debris crashing around him. He went under again, flailing out desperately, hoping by some wild chance to snag Martin's clothing or his arm. Unsuccessful, his lungs were almost bursting when he came up a second time. He found himself closer to the center of a whirlpool, an angry black circle of rapidly churning water.

Oh, God. Now's the time to wake up. Wake up! Please!

"Please!"

His shout woke him. Benny sat bolt upright in bed, breathing hard. The sheets were wrapped tightly around him, and he kicked them away as if they were the deadly swirling waves. He pushed back his sweaty hair and took several deep breaths. That was awful. Awful. Martin, his best buddy in the world, drowned. Dead and gone.

Benny swung his legs over and sat on the edge of the bed, head in his hands. Sure, it had all seemed so real, but he was here. He wasn't in poor drowned Atlantis. The dream had been trying to tell him something, and it wasn't just a warning to keep out of the deep end of the pool.

Okay, think. The dream had been right about Pamela. Because of Atlantis, he'd lost her, but there hadn't been anything really lost. Through the dreams he'd been able to save the Register, his job, and possibly his future. So what had this last dream meant? Martin. He'd tried so hard to save him, too.

Realization almost knocked him off the bed. When was Jonathan leaving for Arizona?

After a quick glance at his bedroom clock, Benny grabbed the phone. There was no answer at Jonathan's house. Fumbling with nervousness, he tried another number.

"Liz. it's me. Has Jonathan left on his trip?"

"Benny!" she said sleepily. "Do you know what time it is?"

He brushed her irritation aside. "Look, it's important. Has he gone yet?"

"He left yesterday," she replied with a yawn.

"Where'd he go? What city?"

Responding to his urgent tone of voice, Liz replied, "Just a minute." There was a pause, and Benny heard the rattling of papers. "A little place called Sandstone Ridge. It's not far from the San Carlos River."

Benny's heart took a nosedive. "A river? He's near a river?"

"The carvings are accessible only by boat," she explained. "Benny? Are you there? Hello?"

Throughout his frantic travel preparations, one scene played over and over in Benny's mind: Martin sinking below the waves.

Atlantis, you can't do this to me! It has to be a warning, nothing more. Okay, so we don't always agree. All right, we never agree. Maybe I'd like a little admiration, a little gratitude, but you don't have to do this. I get your point.

He arrived at Sandstone Ridge late at night, but Jonathan could not be found at the hotel. The desk clerk explained that the group from Georgetown Institute had decided to camp by the river in order to continue their exploration at first light. A logical enough decision considering that the river was a two-hour drive from town.

"If you'd care for a room, sir, we have some available."

"No, thanks," said Benny, "But I'd appreciate it if you could tell me where I could locate a car."

The clerk frowned doubtfully. "You might want to wait until morning. Looks like we're in for some rain."

"A car," Benny replied. "Right away."

As he drove toward the San Carlos River, Benny could hear the rumblings of thunder. Great. You're not being obvious at all. The tightening of his stomach warned him that this was more than coincidence. Don't think about it. So it rains a little.

By the time Benny found the remote campsite, morning had arrived. After bringing the car to a halt, Benny looked around and spotted a group of students huddled under one tent as the rain beat down steadily. A quick glance confirmed that Jonathan was not among them.

"Yo, what's happening?" he called out with as much cheer as he could muster.

The students looked up eagerly at his approach; now their faces fell. "Are you with the rescue squad?" one boy asked hopefully.

"No," Benny replied, cold with sudden fear. "What's happened?"

"Raft number two's not back yet," the student explained. "It went out early, real early, before daybreak, and then all this rain came, and the river's rising fast."

"They should've been back hours ago," added another of the students. "We're really worried. Tom went for help, and when you drove up, we thought maybe. . ." her voice trailed off anxiously.

Benny glanced at the river, which was swift and muddy. "Who's in raft two?"

"Our guide, Mr. Ferguson, Sylvia and Connie, Professor Monroe and Jonathan – I mean, Dr. MacKensie," she replied.

"Is there another raft?"

"We thought of that," said the boy, "but the current's too strong."

Benny hesitated at the river bank. He was exhausted from his trip, the drive, and anxiety. Below him, the water rushed along. He knew he couldn't row the flimsy rubber raft upstream. As he stood there, frustrated, a shout rose from the students.

"There they are!"

Bouncing along in the rough water came raft number two. Benny could see the frightened faces of the two female students and the elderly professor. In front, the guide was doing his best to steer the raft toward camp, and in the back, clinging tightly to the raft's wet sides, sat Jonathan.

They're gonna make it! Benny thought joyfully, but just then the raft hit a submerged log. The kids cried out in alarm as the raft's passengers tumbled into the water. There was a mad dash to the bank and a scramble for ropes and anything that could be used as a lifesaver. One of the female students managed to struggle close enough for her classmates to grab her hands and pull her up the bank. Ferguson had the other girl by the arm, swimming steadily for the shore.

Benny spotted Jonathan and Professor Monroe further out in the swift water. The elderly man had panicked, fighting off Jonathan's attempts to catch his life jacket, but at last Jonathan snagged the belt and tried to pull the professor along with him.

Uneasily Benny remembered that Jonathan's swimming ability was minimal at best and without hesitation he flung himself into the water, swimming furiously toward his friend.

I refuse to let this happen again!

He broke the surface to see Ferguson in the water close enough to reach Professor Monroe, but Jonathan was nowhere to be seen. No! Benny looked around frantically. Jonathan had on a life jacket. He couldn't just disappear. He'd been right here with the professor.

"Over there!" shouted Ferguson through a mouthful of water. He had a firm grip on the professor and was swimming back to shore.

For a moment, the water obscured Benny's view. Then he saw Jonathan clinging to a branch that had snagged on a jagged rock. "Hang on, Jon," he spluttered, reaching his friend in a flurry of quick strokes. "Just hang on, pal. I'll pull you to shore. And don't you dare let go," he added fiercely.

"What are you doing here?" asked Jonathan, astounded, gasping for breath.

"Just hang on," Benny repeated, grabbing the other end of the branch. He swam determinedly for the shore, glancing back often to assure himself that Jonathan was still there. When his feet scraped bottom, and he was able to stand, he grabbed Jonathan's arm and helped him scramble up the river bank.

Both men collapsed onto the grass. "You okay?" Benny gasped.

"I'm all right," Jonathan said as his breathing slowed to near normal. "I'm fine, Benedek, really. You can let go now."

Benny realized he still had a death grip on Jonathan's arm and forced himself to let go, flexing his fingers to relax them. "Just didn't want you slippin' down the bank," he said lightly. "You're inclined to – get it? Inclined?"

Jonathan was staring at him. "I don't believe it," he managed at last. "Benedek, what in the world are you doing here?"

"Rescuing you, as usual." Benny grinned in relief.

"Yes, but how did you know—you couldn't have possibly foreseen--" Jonathan stopped and tried again. "Out of the blue, here you are."

Clapping his friend on the shoulder, Benny laughed. "Direct from Atlantis, J.J. Dreams R Us." Then he sat back, laughing delightedly at the expression on MacKensie's face.

"Where the hell have you been?" Jordy demanded, glowering as Benny sauntered into the National Register office.

"Oh, nowhere special, just here and there." Benny smiled, satisfied by the normal clatter and uproar that filled the room. "So, did our white knight come through?"

A grin spread across Jordy's wide features. "You knew he would, Benny. Bought us out from under Parkland Enterprises. Gonna keep the same staff, everything. You done good, kid." He offered his hand. "Saved the day. I suppose you'll be wanting some sort of reward, like maybe a big assignment to get your rear outta trouble?"

Benny shook hands, filled with an odd sense of déjà vu. Funny, he'd never before noticed how piercing Jordy's eyes could appear. "Nothing to it," he said, shrugging off the feeling.

"He's coming by today to have a look around. You mind hanging out long enough to say hello?"

"No problem," Benny replied.

Jordy chuckled. "Hell of an idea, having Crumpler come to the rescue. He's been wanting to get back at his wife for years. I hope she turned yellow. I hope she splits a gut." His eyes glowed. "Woman Splits A Gut," he murmured. "Human Slug Turns Inside Out."

Leaving Jordy to his fantasies, Benny pulled up a chair to an empty desk. He needed to call Amber and apologize for not stopping by. She'd told him to write down his dreams; better get started. Could still be some helpful information there.

As he worked, Benny felt a curious sense of relief. Maybe he should write a book about Atlantis. Tie all the dreams into a coherent story. The block split slowly down the middle as words began to form and flood; he couldn't even begin to write fast enough. Yes, this was going to work! He'd take his existing manuscript and rework the section on dreams, using his Atlantean dreams as a basis for the research.

Probably should check all the latest dope on Atlantis, reread Cayce and Taylor Caldwell, too. This was great. After all, he had first hand information about the place, about the people. . . Corinne. . .

He paused. Corinne. He hadn't seen her in the destruction of her world. No need to have seen her. She was gone, too. A pleasant dream. A pleasant memory. Must've been a symbol for, well, someone I cared about once, someone reasonable and kind. Nice to know I can still call up a few of the old feelings, even if only in a dream.

"Okay, everyone, quiet!" Jordy's bellow interrupted Benny's thoughts. "Hey! Quiet! I want you to meet our new boss, Mr. Jason Crumpler. Make him feel at home, gang. He's letting all of you stay, which is more than I would've done."

Amid the laughter and greetings, Benny got up to shake hands with Crumpler. They'd met, of course, when Benny approached him with the idea of outbidding Parkland and thus cutting Mrs. Crumpler out of the picture. He was a big bluff man with a sense of humor not unlike Benny's.

"Mr. Benedek," he said cheerfully. "Ida's mad as a wet hen."

"Great news," laughed Benny. "Couldn't happen to a nicer person."

"Oh, and this is my niece," added Crumpler. "Had to bring her along with me. She's a big fan of yours."

"Oh, yeah? Nice to m--" Benny stopped, his mouth open. The young woman by Crumpler's side was small and slim with copper curls and eyes of a warm brown.

"Cornelia Harrison," Crumpler introduced.

She smiled up at Benny pleasantly. "I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Benedek," she said in a voice he knew all too well.

"Benny," he managed to say, his voice dry, his heart soaring.

"Benny," she repeated as he took her hand in his. "Most people call me Cory."