

Heart And Soul

By Jane Tesh

"I don't believe this, I just don't believe it!"

Randy sighed and braced herself. A few moments later, Alison Wallace stormed into the dorm room, her eyes murderous.

"Have you seen the mid-term grades?" she demanded, waving a sheet of paper. "Have you seen what this man has done to me? A D! My God! A D! He's out of his mind!"

"Alison," said Randy, trying to hold on to her patience. "There's no need to scream about it. You told me yourself you didn't finish the work."

Alison paced the room, her smooth blonde hair swinging as she raged. "Don't defend him, Randy. I can't stand it. He has no right to give me a D!"

Reminding herself that Alison was both excitable by nature and more than a little spoiled by her wealthy family, Randy managed to bite back a sharp retort, saying instead, "you knew you were supposed to have everything in by the fifteenth. I reminded you--"

Tossing cushions out of her way, Alison flopped onto the couch. "I couldn't get it done by then," she said petulantly.

"Did you ask for an extension?"

"Yes, but he said I'd have to take a cut. Damn it all to hell."

Randy rolled back to avoid the next sofa cushion. "Alison, you know that's the rule," she began, but Alison broke in, her voice heavy with sarcasm.

"That's easy for you to say. He likes you."

"He likes everyone," Randy sprang to her teacher's defense. "And the rules are the same for everyone."

Alison was up again, pounding her fist in her palm. "My father will kill me when he sees this D. Dr. MacKensie is going to be sorry."

Randy tried not to smile, knowing she would only push Alison into further hysterics. She'd heard her friend make dire threats before, and knew Jonathan had nothing to fear from either the angry girl or her father. Fierce predictions to the contrary, Mr. Wallace had never so much as called the school. However, it couldn't hurt to warn Jonathan of the problem. He'd probably suggest that Alison do an extra project to pull up her grade.

"I do not make Ds," Alison continued to grumble. "I'll show him." She glared at Randy. "And don't you dare go running up to report what I said," she warned. "I know about you two."

"Why don't you just calm down and see what can be done?" suggested Randy, ignoring the sarcasm. "There are all kinds of extra--"

"I'm not doing another thing," Alison snapped with a scowl. "Nothing. I worked my rear off in that stupid course and that's that. One way or another he is going to change that grade."

I doubt that, Randy thought, keeping her expression bland.

"Good luck," she said shortly.

Alison paused at the door, and for a moment, Randy thought she might apologize, but the gray eyes were still stormy, the girl's mouth set in a firm line. Without another word, she turned and stalked out. A moment later Randy heard the first in a series of doors slamming along the hall. Then, with a sigh, she went back to her studies. Just as she settled into one of her texts, a calm lilting voice interrupted her concentration.

“What in the world was all that about?”

With a smile, Randy greeted the regal black woman who stood in her doorway. “Just Alison pitching one of her fits,” she explained. “It’ll blow over soon.”

“Is she always like that?”

Randy nodded. “But she’s the only one, Marie. The rest of us are like little mice.”

Marie smiled at the image. “I thought I told you, Randy. I came to America to get away from the jungle. No more animals, please. I have to study.”

“Okay,” Randy grinned. “No mice, no screaming tigers. Alison will calm down and we can all get our work done. And some sleep.”

“I hope so,” said Marie as she left.

Sleep would be nice, thought Jonathan MacKensie, removing his glasses to rub his weary eyes. The clock that hung above his overflowing bookshelves said 10:15, but he was ready for bed. With the evening seminar finished, there were only some papers to grade and a few last minute notes to make, nothing that couldn’t wait till morning.

Then his conscience kicked in. He was here. He was almost through. Why not finish? For once, he might even get ahead.

After cleaning his glasses with his handkerchief, Jonathan replaced them on his nose. The blurred lines of type came into sharp focus and he read on, his pen poised to make any necessary corrections.

When did it get so hot in here? Jonathan loosened his tie and frowned at the radiator. The ancient heating system must be acting up again. He managed to work another fifteen minutes, then pushed the papers away. He was just too hot.

I must be coming down with something, he thought, touching his forehead only to find it to be like touching a stove. Great. Now is a fine time to catch cold. A new semester starting, papers to grade, the report on that last case with Benedek still waiting to be written.

Abruptly, the fever went away. Puzzled, Jonathan sat still, waiting warily for a relapse. You’re not old enough for hot flashes, he told himself sternly. Time to go home. I’m overworked, that’s all.

Just to be sure, he put a hand on the radiator before leaving the office. It was cold. I’m just tired, he decided, locking the door behind him. He turned, then froze, startled by the shadowy figure lurking in the hallway. A familiar voice released him from stasis.

“Yo, Jonny! Thought you’d never get done. The midnight oil company must have a gold card in your name. I’ve been waiting out here for half an hour, at least.”

“My working never stopped you before,” said Jonathan, resigning himself to the cheerful presence of Edgar Benedek.

“Hey, am I the kind of guy who barges in where he’s not wanted?” Benny laughed, pretending surprise. “Besides, I was having an important in-depth discussion with a couple of campus cuties. Would’ve been rude to cut them off. What’s up?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” Jonathan replied as they walked out into the night air. “I thought you were in Chicago this week.”

“Nah. Nothing much going on.”

Despite his friend’s insouciant tone, Jonathan had the suspicion something was wrong.

“I needed a break,” Benny continued. “Thought maybe I’d get to work on the book.”

Jonathan decided not to press the issue; Benny was acting far too casual. “The one on crystal healing?” he inquired.

“Yeah,” Benny replied, flattered that Jonathan had remembered. He took a quick look at his friend’s face, but found no hint of anything more than calm interest. A pity – for a moment he’d thought MacKensie might be able to see through the standard banter. The man had grown frighteningly adept at reading his moods of late, and this one was a winner. He babbled on. “So I’m holed up at my favorite hotel, in between chapters, figured you’d graded enough papers for one day. Let’s go grab a couple of brewskis and see what’s shakin.”

Checking his watch, Jonathan reluctantly turned the offer down. “I’m sorry, Benedek, I really need some sleep.” Acting on the nagging suspicion that Benny needed to talk, he added, “How about tomorrow night? I’ve only three classes tomorrow.”

“Sounds good, partner,” said Benny cheerfully, hoping his relief didn’t show. Not that Jonathan could do a damn thing about this particular problem, but sitting alone was about to drive him crazy. “Hey, why wait till night? We can start at noon. I’ll be by your place at lunchtime. We’ll find a couple of gals, grease up and get in a pile, whaddaya say?”

“I can’t wait,” said Jonathan wryly. “So that’s all you wanted to see me about?”

He could have sworn Benny tensed before he shrugged. “Yeah, sure.”

“You’re not planning to spring some ghastly assignment on me?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Jonathan studied his friend, but the man’s face was blandly innocent. I think for once you may be telling the truth, he thought, but it’s what you’re not telling me that’s puzzling.

“All right,” he said. “Noon it is.”

Benny clapped him on the shoulder. “Catch ya later,” he said before sauntering off across the shadowy campus, slowing as soon as Jonathan was out of sight.

You coward, he rebuked himself. Thought you could handle it, didn’t you? Thought you’d just breeze your way over to your old pal Jon and the problem would just go away. It’s not going away and you know it.

He gave himself a mental shake. I know just the lady to take my mind off things, and if that doesn’t work, I know another one. Hell, I’ll go through my entire black book if I have to.

Despite his bravado, Benny had the sinking feeling that that was not the answer.

Jonathan had no time to speculate on Benny’s motive the next day as he plunged into his round of morning classes, all advanced sections that gave him a deep sense of pleasure in working with a group of students who had gone past the rudimentary stages of most of his sections. Here he could discuss rather than lecture, plan with instead of for them.

While Jonathan rearranged his notes, the second section of the day filed in eagerly. This was his largest group, easily filling the lecture hall, and in a few minutes, the air felt thick.

“Could someone open a window, please?” Jonathan asked. “It’s a bit stuffy in here today.”

One of the girls near the back pulled up a window, and the class settled down to work.

“Thank you.” Jonathan gave the class a quick glance. “As I recall, we left off in the middle of a discussion on our next field trip. Margery, I believe you’re in charge?”

The girl nodded and began the discussion. While she spoke, Jonathan glanced up at the window, perplexed. He could see the breeze ruffling notebook pages and the girls’ long hair, but none of the air seemed to be reaching him, and he was very hot. The same burning sensation

he'd had in his office seemed to be overwhelming him with a great wave of heat until the room began to spin. He gripped the lecturn, seeing his students' wide concerned eyes focus on him. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out, and he knew he was going to pass out.

Two of the larger boys sitting on the front row sprang to their feet. "Dr. MacKensie!"

They caught him before he fell, easing him to the floor. He heard the scraping of chairs, the excited babble of voices, shrieks, and a multitude of suggestions.

"Call a doctor, quick!"

"Call Dr. Moorhouse!"

"Move away, you dolts, and give him some air."

"What happened? What's wrong?"

The voices dipped and faded. Jonathan felt someone loosen his tie and felt a hand on his forehead.

"Must be the flu," someone said. "He's got an awful fever. Somebody get some water."

Just as abruptly as it had come, the heat receded. Jonathan blinked, gazing up at the circle of frightened faces.

"I'm all right," he said as the students helped him up. "I just got dizzy. Really, I'm fine."

They hovered about uncertainly.

"You'd better see a doctor."

"You could be really sick."

"Come sit down, Dr. MacKensie. You look real pale."

He thanked them for their assistance and sat down at his desk, still dizzy. One student hurried up with a paper cup full of water; another gathered the notes he'd scattered in his fall.

"I'm all right," Jonathan repeated, embarrassed by all the concern. "Thank you. Why don't we continue this lesson tomorrow? You can do your group work on your own."

They were reluctant to leave him, but he insisted that he was fine. When they had all gone, he pressed his hands to his eyes and breathed deeply several times to calm his jangled nerves. What was wrong? Stress? He found that hard to accept, particularly as things had been fairly quiet recently. A cold? If that was the answer, why didn't it settle in instead of staging these sneak attacks?

When he raised his head, Jonathan was surprised to see Alison Wallace still in the room, watching him fearfully, her books clutched to her chest.

"Alison? Are you all right?"

She nodded. "Y-you frightened me, fainting like that."

He smiled, hoping to relieve her worries. "I certainly didn't mean to. Anyway, it was just a dizzy spell. Nothing to it."

"Are you all right now?" Her voice was unsteady.

"Yes, of course." He cautiously got to his feet, relieved to find that the rush of heat didn't return. "See? I'm fine."

She had been staring at him intently and took a moment to reply. "What?"

"I'm fine."

"Oh," she said. "Oh, yes. I'd better go." At the door she asked timidly, "Have you had any other dizzy spells, Dr. MacKensie?"

Caught off-guard, he replied, "Just one. I must be catching a cold." Touched by her concern, he added, "It's nothing, Alison. Everything is all right."

Despite his assurances, she looked as though she might cry, and Jonathan had no idea how to deal with the situation. Before now, he would've said that Alison didn't particularly like him, what with her low grades and all. But seeing how upset she was over his fainting spell, Jonathan didn't know what to think. Before he could reach any conclusions, she scuttled out the door after giving him one last frightened look.

"MacKensiel!"

Dr. Moorhouse sailed into the room, accompanied by a group of his students, distracting him from Alison's behavior. "What's all this I hear about you being ill?" demanded his superior.

"I'm perfectly all right, Dr. Moorhouse," he replied. "I had a dizzy spell, that's all."

"Go home and get some rest."

"I can't leave now," Jonathan protested. "My next class--"

"Out."

"Dr. Moorhouse--"

"Jonathan, go home."

Defeated, he gave an exasperated sigh. "All right." He gathered his books and papers with exaggerated care and started for the door. "Good day, Dr. Moorhouse."

"Good day, Jonathan." The woman gave him a nod. "And don't worry about your class. I'll cover it."

For the first time, Jonathan realized just how worried she had been by the reports of his illness. "Thank you."

Once at home, though, he stood in the middle of his living room and stared about. Now what? I feel perfectly well, and Benedek's not due for another two hours. He contemplated his options: a committee report to review, a book to read, a chance to listen to some music, uninterrupted for once, and his mood swung back to normal. After starting the CD player, he made himself comfortable and pulled out his book. Might as well make the best of things.

Benny tried whistling a cheerful tune as he strolled up the walk to Jonathan's door, but the tune took a decidedly minor turn. An evening out with the ladies had been fun, but it hadn't silenced the nagging little voice in his mind. Okay, so he hadn't been completely honest. He was in town to work on his book, true, but he also had a hot lead from Hortense, his favorite medium, about the possibility of a phantom in the Washington area, a point he planned to ease into gradually. A nice lunch, a couple of drinks, get Jonathan mellowed out, then casually pull the pin on the paranormal grenade. Jack should be used to this routine by now. Why, last time out, he hardly made a protest. . .

Who was he kidding? There were probably thousands of phantoms in DC. Big deal. The real reason he'd left Chicago was to avoid a story, something he still didn't quite believe. Me, Edgar Benedek, running away. Hah! Why, I'll do anything, take on any challenge for a story.

Except this one.

He paused, his hand raised to knock on the door, reliving that hasty flight, his brief phone call to Jordy. Just didn't want to do it, he'd said. My heart's not in it, ya know?

But his heart was in it. That was the problem. And now the story was haunting him more strongly than ever.

You can do something about that. Write the damned story. Do it. What are you afraid

of?

No, he argued with himself. Forget it. I don't want to think about it any more. Someone else can do it.

But what if they don't? his conscience nagged.

I'm not going to do it! He almost spoke the words aloud and knocked harder than he meant to.

"All right, all right." Jonathan appeared in the doorway, an annoyed look on his face. "I'm almost ready. I just have one more page to finish."

Benny managed to get control of his rebellious thoughts. "Take your time, pal," he said, making himself at home. "No rush. The day is ours." Looking around for some way to let off his excess energy, he seized upon a bone lying on the mantel, thinking it would make an excellent drumstick. "This is new, isn't it? Or should I say old?" Receiving no reply, he turned in time to see Jonathan sinking dizzily onto the couch. "hey, what's the trouble?"

Holding his head, Jonathan groaned, "Oh, God, it's that fever again."

"What fever?" asked Benny, hovering over his friend with a worried look on his face.

"I wish I knew. It comes and goes. The most awful heat – like I'm on fire."

"You want some water?"

Jonathan nodded, tugging at his tie. When Benny returned from the kitchen with the glass of water, he found his friend lying down, eyes closed, very pale and gasping for breath.

"Whoa! Time out!" Benny exclaimed, alarmed. "Here, drink up, Jonny." He raised Jonathan's head and put the glass to his mouth. "What's with the Black Plague routine?"

After swallowing, Jonathan murmured, "So hot."

"Yeah, I wish I had some marshmallows. Hang on." Benny put the glass aside and ran to the kitchen telephone. A few minutes later he was back with a wet towel which he placed across Jonathan's forehead.

"Let's not have any spontaneous combustion, okay? I just did a big article on that. 'Sunbathing Man Bursts Into Flames.' A real hot story." All the while he spoke, Benny tried to figure out what was happening here. Sunstroke? Heat exhaustion? Jonathan never lay out in the sun, claiming all sorts of cancerous consequences; besides, it was April, not your optimum sunbathing month. What, then? Overwork? Couldn't be. Jonathan had a light load to keep himself available for investigative work. Plus he'd been in a fairly good mood lately, thanks to a little brunette named Kathleen. There didn't seem to be any logical explanation for this sudden fever.

Okay, then there must be an illogical explanation. Maybe a paranormal explanation?

Jonathan's breathing grew steadier, but his pulse continued to race wildly. Benny replaced the first cloth with a cooler one. "How're you doing?"

"Okay," Jonathan whispered, trying to keep his eyes open.

"You haven't been doing any shadow chasing without me, have you? Stirring up some evil spirits? Stepping on some ectoplasmic toes?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Jonathan faintly.

"I think you might have riled the Fever God, Jon-boy. Or maybe Kathleen is a witch. You been treating her right?"

"That's absurd."

"No, it isn't, considering your track record." At the sound of the doorbell, he perked up.

“Ah, the cavalry.”

To Benny’s growing confusion, the paramedics could find nothing wrong. The strange fever had faded away. They didn’t think Jonathan needed to go to the hospital.

“Unless you want to,” one said, folding his stethoscope. “Have you seen a doctor lately?”

Benny had to chuckle as Jonathan said wryly, “Yes, fairly often, as a matter of fact. Occupational hazard.”

The paramedic shrugged. “Up to you. Your heartbeat’s normal, blood pressure’s normal. Take it easy today and see how you feel tomorrow.”

As Benny showed the paramedics out, he asked, “You’re sure there’s nothing wrong?”

“Not a thing,” one replied. “However, if you’d like us to take him in.”

“No, no, that’s okay,” said Benny, keeping his voice low. “Thanks.” Pasting a big grin on his face, he returned to the living room. “If you wanted to avoid paying for lunch, Jack, you should’ve said so.”

Jonathan was sitting up, his expression troubled. “I don’t understand this at all. The same thing happened last night and just a couple of hours ago in class. One minute it’s like standing in front of an open furnace; the next, everything’s back to normal.”

Benny shrugged in an elaborate attempt to hide his concern. “Doesn’t sound too serious. Hey, no, wait, don’t get up yet. I’ll order a couple of pizzas.”

Jonathan yielded, sitting back down on the couch while he pondered the sudden flash of fever. Right this moment, he felt fine, if a bit unsettled. Would the strange wave of heat come again? Was this a symptom of something much worse?

He accepted the fresh glass of water Benny put in his hand and drank it slowly. Surely he’d feel better tomorrow.

Alison pushed her way through a crowd of students trying to reach her first class of the day. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Is the door locked?”

“Dr. MacKensie won’t be in today,” one of the boys called back over his shoulder. “He’s sick.”

She felt her insides growing cold. “D-do they have any idea what’s wrong?”

“No. All they said was he’s at home. Must be the flu.”

While the others crowded around to read the note taped to the classroom door, Alison stood like a statue. Their voices flowed by unheeded. Then she exploded into motion, running past surprised faces, past the campus fountain, the trees, running to her car, and then driving off at breakneck speed. She didn’t stop until she was facing the dark smiling man in the deceptively warm brown study.

“It is too late, ma petite,” he said with an eloquent gesture of dismissal. “The spell is cast.”

“You must call it off,” she choked out. “It’s gone on long enough.”

“He is your enemy, no?” The man casually lit a thin black cigar. “You asked me to take care of him.”

“Not like this. Call it off. Stop it now.”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “I think perhaps this is a game with you, little rich girl,” he said, his voice no longer casual. “Do this, do that. I am not at your beck and call and neither are Les Invisibles.”

"Look," said Alison, gripping the edge of his elegant polished desk. "I just wanted him to have a little bad luck, that's all. This has gone far enough." She jerked her pocketbook open. "Do you want more money?" She pulled out her wallet. "Here. Here, take it!"

Bills fluttered down. The man laughed softly, brushing them aside. "I have what I want, petite." He leaned forward, his eyes gleaming like coals. "A man's soul."

Alison backed away. "You're crazy," she stammered. "Who do you think you are, the devil? What do you mean, a soul?"

"You helped me capture it," he said calmly. "It's over there." With a nod he indicated a small pottery jar on the mantel.

"You are crazy," said Alison, frightened, hoping her legs had the strength to carry her out of the room.

The man smiled a thin sinister smile. "The coup n'ame has been cast," he said, then added kindly, "You many go."

"How is he, Benny?"

Hearing the anxiety in Randy's voice, Benny put on his best and breeziest attitude. "Hey, relax, it's just a little fever that's hanging on. He's okay."

"Don't try to con me, Benny," she said. "I heard all about what happened yesterday. Has he been to the doctor?"

"Yeah, I took him over this morning," Benny replied. "The doc says all Jonny needs is some rest."

"All right." Randy sounded doubtful. "It just seems odd to me, that's all."

Real odd, agreed Benny, hanging up the phone. Jonathan seems fine, but then he gets that fever again. He glanced up the hallway toward the bedroom. Jonathan seemed to be sleeping, but Benny couldn't shake the bizarre feeling that something was pulling at his friend, trying to draw him out – but out where? And why?

Still staring at the phone, Randy pondered Jonathan's strange illness. There had been plenty of bumps, bruises, and broken bones since the Paranormal Unit had begun its work, but Jonathan had rarely been sick. Just as she decided to go over and see him for herself, she was distracted by the screech of brakes, followed almost immediately by the slamming of a car door and stumbling footsteps in the hallway.

Curious, Randy wheeled herself into the hallway and almost ran over Alison. Alarmed by the girl's white face, she asked, "What's wrong?" Her worry increased when Alison simply stared at her, so Randy pulled the girl into their room. "What is it?"

Still silent, Alison sat heavily in a chair and stared into space.

"Alison, please tell me. Are you sick? Is it bad news from home?"

Abruptly Alison's silence shattered, and she covered her face with her hands, sobbing. "That man, the one I went to."

"What man? What are you talking about?"

It took a while to calm her trembling friend. Finally Alison managed to explain. "I went to see a man about a voodoo doll," she said unevenly. "Only, that isn't the way they do it, at all. It's . . . it's something much worse."

"What is?" asked Randy, baffled.

Alison's eyes were huge with fear. "I had no idea. I never meant for it to go this far. It was just a joke, a way to let off steam. But when things really started to happen to Dr. MacKensie. . ."

"Alison, please," urged Randy, now certain she was on her way to understanding Jonathan's illness at last. "Calm down and tell me what's going on. Do you know what's wrong with Jonathan?"

The other girl nodded, still trembling.

"Tell me."

"There's nothing you can do." Alison's voice was faint. "He's going to die. The bokor has stolen his soul."

Randy stared, open-mouthed.

In a far-away voice, Alison continued, almost as if reciting a lesson. "I thought I'd have some fun, you know? Stick a few pins in a doll and see if he got a sore toe or a headache. But it's not like that. It's not like that, at all."

"Listen to me," said Randy fiercely, gripping Alison's shoulders and giving her a shake. "He's not going to die. You're going to tell Benny everything you know about this, and I mean everything."

Benny listened with growing concern to Alison's faltering voice over the telephone. Voodoo! This kid was playing with fire. What he knew about voodoo was sketchy at best, and little Miss Wallace was running around putting curses on people? From her near-hysterical words he pieced together what had happened. She'd found a bokor, a voodoo priest specializing in black magic, and had a curse put on Jonathan, a coup n'ame. Now Jonathan was ill, and Alison was babbling something about his soul being in a jar.

"Okay, okay, relaxovision," he told her. "Put Randy back on."

"Benny, she's serious," said Randy worriedly. "Could there be something to this?"

"I'm not taking any chances," he replied. "there is something mysterious about this fever. Only trouble is, my only source of voodoo info, Paul Fontaine, is out of town. He went to Haiti to pick up some supplies."

"Haiti!" Randy snapped her fingers. "Benny, there's an exchange student from Haiti in my dorm, Marie Celestin. Maybe she can help."

"Any idea where she'd be right about now?"

"In class, but she should be out in about ten minutes."

"Good. Where's her class and what does she look like?"

Deciding any chance was better than no chance, Benny decided to risk leaving Jonathan alone for a short while and headed to the Georgetown campus.

Marie Celestin was a tall, slim black girl with a serious air. She gazed calmly at Benny from velvety brown eyes. He got the impression she didn't believe a word he said.

"Mr. Benedek, this is all nonsense. No one here knows the true vodoun religion. I don't wish to speak of it."

"Look, you've gotta help me," said Benny. At her sharp look, he softened his approach. "Look, you're absolutely right. Nobody knows anything about it. That's why I think something's gone very wrong. We got some people here fooling around with a power they don't understand, and that could cause a lot of trouble."

Shaking her head, Marie said quietly, "I'm sorry. I don't want to become involved." She turned and started to walk across the quad.

Seeing his last hope fading into the sunset, Benny refused to be put off. "Miss Celestin, my friend's real sick, and I think voodoo is the cause."

She paused. "'Voodoo,' as you call it cannot harm anyone here. There must be another cause. What makes you so certain?"

"Does coup n'ame mean anything to you?"

At his words she went very still. "Coup n'ame," she repeated, almost in a whisper. "Are you certain that's what was said?"

For a moment, Benny thought he had convinced her, but just as he opened his mouth, Marie shook her head again.

"Nonsense. It is not possible here."

"Miss Celestin--"

"Mr. Benedek," she said firmly. "I came to the United States to study biology. I came to the Georgetown Institute because of its fine reputation. I wanted to get away from the superstitions of my homeland, to get away from such outlandish beliefs."

"Even if those beliefs are true?" Benny persisted stubbornly.

"The dead walking? Curses and spells? Really, Mr. Benedek, this is the Twentieth Century."

"Miss Celestin, I've seen all those things and more. Some of them could be explained, but a lot couldn't. All I know is someone or something is trying to hurt my friend, and I'm willing to try any method, no matter how outlandish, to help him."

She sighed. "Hospitals, Mr. Benedek. Doctors. Medicines. All these things are freely available in America."

"He may die if you don't help," said Benny. He saw the debate in her eyes and added, "Would you at least come have a look? Then if you can't do anything, I'll leave you alone, promise." She seemed to be wavering and he pressed harder. "Please, Miss Celestin. It won't take long. He lives just a couple of blocks from here. His name's Jonathan MacKensie."

"MacKensie?" she said, surprised. "Dr. MacKensie?"

"Yeah, that's right. Teaches anthropology. Maybe you had one of his classes?"

"I know him," she said in a troubled voice. "That first day, he helped me through registration. I was so confused. But he showed me the campus, answered all my questions. I almost changed my major. . .yes, I'll come with you," she said suddenly.

Jonathan was still asleep, just as Benny had left him, but it was an exhausted deathlike sleep. Marie brushed his hair back to lay her hand on his forehead. Almost immediately she drew her hand back, her eyes alive with worry.

"Not your ordinary fever?" asked Benny.

She carefully replaced her hand, letting it rest on Jonathan's forehead for a long time. He stirred slightly in his sleep. Marie finally withdrew her hand. "You were right, Mr. Benedek," she said unsteadily. "Someone has cast a coup n'ame, a soul spell."

"So what are you saying? Can you help?"

She got to her feet, putting as much distance as she could between herself and the bed. "I have renounced the old ways."

"But, if you can help--"

"I suggest you call a doctor. There's no logical way this could be happening."

"If Jon were awake, he'd agree with you one hundred percent, Miss Celestin," said Benny. "Okay, so it's crazy. You wouldn't believe some of the things we've gone through. Please, you can't walk out and leave him like this."

The young woman took a deep breath, walking to the door, a resolute expression on her face. At the threshold she paused. Benny swore he could hear his heart thudding. She couldn't walk out. She knew exactly what was happening, more than likely what to do about it. She couldn't walk out. She couldn't.

Come on, Jonny. I know that charm of yours works, even when you're unconscious. If the sight of you doesn't get to her, the lady's made of solid stone.

Marie glanced back nervously, struggling with her inner self. It was as if the drum beats of the societe had begun once more in her heart. No! it was all superstition, mindless superstition. It could not be happening in this country, in this quiet neighborhood, in this innocent man who did not even believe in magic.

Fight the evil, said a strong voice within her. You have the power. Use it!

I have renounced the old ways. I no longer serve the loa. It's a fever. He'll recover.

You know that's not true. His small soul has been taken. You must act quickly. You can save him. You must.

She looked at the silent figure on the bed and then at the tense figure of the smaller man, waiting for her answer. She heard her own voice say unsteadily, "I'll try."

He was in a jungle, a dense tropical jungle, thick with vines that snagged his arms, caught at his ankles and held fast. Where was this? Why was it so dark? Why was it so hot?

Jonathan pushed vainly against an unyielding surface, gasping for air, but the air was so thick, it gave little relief. He could hear his heart beating slowly, wearily.

Don't give up! he told himself. But moving took so much effort. How much easier it was to sink back into the darkness.

Marie's expression grew even more solemn as she pulled the object out from under Jonathan's front door.

"A candle," Benny said, surprised, when she handed it to him.

"And here, by the threshold." She pointed to the remains of a crude cross drawn in powder and ashes. She brushed the rest away. "I am certain now." She looked older, her eyes far away. "This bokor is powerful if he seeks to take little souls."

"You gotta explain all this big and little soul business," said Benny.

Marie finished the destruction of the cross and stood, wiping her hands on her skirt. "Those who serve the loa believe there are two parts to the soul. Think of your soul as a shadow, the double shadow your body casts in the late afternoon sun. There is the dark core, the umbra, and the lighter penumbra. This is the 'ti bon ange,' the 'little good angel,' the source of your character, your individuality. The dark core is the 'gros bon ange,' or 'big good angel.' It is shared by all beings as part of the vast cosmic energy."

"So how can somebody steal the little part? Don't you have to believe for this stuff to work?"

"Not necessarily," Marie replied. "This part often leaves the body and is therefore an

easy target for sorcery.”

“Leaves the body?” Benny gave a short laugh. “Now, I’m an old hand at this, Marie, but Jonathan never leaves his body if he can help it.”

She smiled. “It is the ti bon ange that travels during sleep to experience dreams. And the emptiness you feel after a sudden scare?” He nodded. “That is because of the small soul’s temporary flight.” Her smile faded. “A bokor, an evil voudon priest, revels in the capture of such souls. If someone went to the bokor and had enough money, enough hatred. . .that’s all he needed.”

Benny’s expression was grim. “I think it’s about time we had a talk with Miss Alison Wallace.”

Alison sat in Jonathan’s living room, a small forlorn figure, her hands tightly clasped in her lap. “And then I buried the candle like he told me to,” she finished, her eyes downcast.

“Okay, tell me again what this Monsieur DuBay said,” Benny prompted as he paced, trying to think.

“You helped me capture it,” he said, and then he motioned to a jar on the mantel. But that’s insane! How could he have anyone’s soul in a jar?”

“A canari,” Marie said quietly. “A container to house the ti bon ange.”

Benny stopped pacing and exchanged a worried glance with Randy, who sat near Alison. “So all we have to do is get this jar, right?”

Marie tried to repress a shiver. “I-I don’t know. I have never done anything like this. I can only go by what my father told me.”

“Your father?” asked Randy.

“My father is a houngan, a voudon priest,” said Marie. “It was my religion.”

“Was?” Randy gave Benny another anxious look.

“Marie came out of retirement for one last performance,” he explained. “What about this jar, Marie?”

“It is broken at funeral rites,” she whispered, “to free the ti bon ange so that the soul might be whole.”

Despite the chill that shook him, Benny replied with as much cheer as he could. “Well, it’s worth a shot. Randy, you keep an eye on Jonathan. Where does this guy live, Alison? I feel like a little second storey work tonight.”

Expecting a bokor’s den to be a dim, smoke-filled room decorated with bones, chicken feathers, and beads, Benny wasn’t prepared for the stylish interior of Monsieur DuBay’s home. The den was furnished with brown leather chairs and an elegant writing desk. There were bookcases filled with leather-bound volumes. A fine dark landscape in a gold frame hung over an impressive black marble fireplace. No trace of sorcery, evil or otherwise, could be found in the quiet study.

At first glance, he could have mistaken the canari for a small earthenware vase with a lid. The jar sat casually on the mantel as though the bokor, in his supreme confidence, could leave it out anywhere.

Benny willed his hands not to shake as he lifted the jar which looked unnervingly like a funeral urn. Yes, this was the right one. Marie had told him to look for the oddly shaped animal painted on the side, a baka, or evil spirit. Okay, getting in had been a snap. Now, getting out –

A low chuckle sounded behind him. Benny whirled around, clutching the canari to his chest.

"I see you admire my taste in pottery," said the man, a shadowy figure in the dim room. There was the sharp scratch of a match, and light flared, revealing a tall, dark-skinned man with keen bright eyes. He lit his thin black cigar and blew a puff of smoke. "Allow me." With a flick of his wrist, the room lights came up. "I haven't had the pleasure," he said with a little bow. "Monsieur DuBay."

"Edgar Benedek," Benny replied, eying him warily. "Just stopped by to pick up something that belongs to a friend of mine."

"Indeed?" Up went the dark eyebrows. "I think not, Mr. Benedek. That soul belongs to me."

"Not any more," said Benny, inching his way toward the door. The man's eyes started to glow eerily, but he made no move to stop him. Suddenly, Benny dashed from the room and sprinted down the hallway. He took the stairs in a couple of leaps, yanked open the front door, and started down the walk to the street where Marie waited in his car. Breathless and triumphant, he held the jar up so she could see it. At the same time, he heard her cry of warning. He swerved, glancing back over his shoulder.

Monsieur DuBay stood in the doorway, a dark silhouette. A flip of the bokor's hand, and the jar fell from Benny's grasp, shattering on the cement walk.

"No!" Appalled, Benny saw a little flash of white light. Behind him, the bokor began to laugh heartily.

"Now it belongs to no one, eh?"

"Damn it, no!" Benny exclaimed, searching frantically among the shards, although he had no idea what he might hope to find.

Marie had jumped from the car to shout her warning. Now she stood at the end of the walk, facing DuBay. His laughter died in his throat while his eyes narrowed. When he spoke, his voice was full of sarcasm.

"Greetings, mamba."

"You have no right to do this," she said tightly. "This is not the way."

"I serve the loa," he answered, smiling once more.

"You serve yourself," she countered. "This is evil at work."

He chuckled. "And who are you to tell me what is evil, premiere reine? It is too late now. The soul is gone."

"I will restore it," she said, deadly calm.

"Of course," he said mockingly. "Of course, mademoiselle." He bowed. "Good evening." He closed his door.

Benny looked up from the broken pieces of the canari, sick with apprehension. "Can you do it, Marie?"

"Yes," she said, her gaze still on the closed door.

He awkwardly got to his feet. "What did he call you?"

"Mamba.' Voudon priestess. And first queen, 'premiere reine.' I was first queen of the Bizango, my father's societe."

"And this DuBay, was he a member, too?"

"No," she answered, turning her gaze to him. In the half light, he could see a new

determination and a new fear in her eyes. "But I know what kind of man he is. I hoped it would not come to this, Benny. I will have to call upon the loa."

Benny asked the question he dreaded asking. "What's happened to Jonathan? Is he--?" he couldn't bring himself to finish the thought.

"He is safe for the moment," said Marie. "But we must hurry."

It was still a jungle, but a jungle such as he'd never seen or imagined, fluorescent in color, vivid greens, pinks, oranges, and reds. The trees were impossibly high, tangled with brilliant vines and huge striped blossoms. Despite the tropical heat, he could move about freely now, even though he had no idea where he was going. Birds sang lively rhythmic tones, and the jungle itself thrummed with a steady beat that he soon realized was the sound of his heart, stronger now, an integral part of the vast gleaming forest. The weather was extremely hot. He wondered why the breeze swaying the wide leaves didn't touch him.

Where am I?

There was a shadow sliding through the brilliant leaves. Was it an animal? He could only catch glimpses of something black and sleek, but oddly enough, he wasn't frightened, merely puzzled. What was it? What did it want?

Bright pink sand made up the pathway, sand in which his shoes left prints that shimmered like pools of quicksilver. The jungle also shimmered in the heat, wavering before his eyes, dancing to the ever-present rhythm.

After rounding the next bend, Jonathan met the snake.

A huge glittering serpent lay in a clearing of green grass, looking as though it were made of gold and rubies, each scale like an inlaid jewel. Jonathan halted. Even though it was immense, obviously powerful, and terrifyingly real, he felt only a tremor of apprehension.

The snake drew itself up, huge head swaying, golden eyes curious. It spoke in an odd language, deep and rich, but Jonathan understood what it said. "What are you doing here, ti bon ange?"

"I-I don't know," Jonathan replied. "I think I'm lost."

"Lost indeed," said the creature with a chuckle. "You do not belong here, petit blanc. Even if you were truly dead, this is not the place for you."

Jonathan's voice sank to a whisper. "Dead?"

"Someone wishes you dead, that much I know," said the serpent. "Why else would he cast this part of you adrift? Even now, the body that houses you burns."

Jonathan touched his forehead, remembering. "That fever--?"

"It is your enemy at work."

"But I have no enemies," he protested, staring wide-eyed as the serpent changed, the gold and ruby scales becoming a fine jacket for a tall, distinguished looking black man with a royal air.

"Someone has performed the ritual, the dessounin," he declared. "Part of your soul has been sent here."

"P-part?" Jonathan stammered.

"The essence of who you are, your character, your will power is here with you."

This must be a nightmare, thought Jonathan. I remember I had a fever. I must be hallucinating.

"Where exactly is here?" he asked the man, who was returning to his snake form.

"This is only for those who serve the loa," the snake answered. "The spirits of voodoo, Les Invisibles."

Nothing makes sense. Did he say voodoo? Wavering between belief and disbelief, he asked, "How can I go back?"

"You have a powerful spirit guide. Watch for it." With a flash of red and gold, the snake vanished.

Alone once more, Jonathan looked around uneasily. A spirit guide? Could that be the strange dark presence in the jungle? But it looked more like an animal. His mind fastened on that, dredging up information long since learned and nearly forgotten. In Indian folklore, he remembered, there were spirit guides. But this doesn't look remotely like the western plains, not with this tropical growth.

I could think better if I weren't so hot.

"when's he gonna wake up?"

Benny stood at the foot of Jonathan's bed as Marie slowly took objects out of her bag, placing them on the floor. Jonathan lay pale and still under the blanket, scarcely breathing.

"I don't know." Marie met Benny's gaze. "To tell the truth, I'm surprised he's still alive. Extended loss of the small soul can be traumatic. His spirit guide must be very strong."

"Spirit guide?"

"Each person has a guardian. In voodoo, it can be an animal or some spirit of the loa." She held out her hand. "We will search and find the guide. I must know before I--" Her voice quit.

Quickly taking her hand, Benny said, "Marie, if it's going to be too much for you--"

"No, no," she interrupted. "I've promised to help. We mustn't let Monsieur DuBay win." She held on tightly. "Close your eyes and wait. The guides will show themselves."

Guides? Benny wanted to speak, but forced himself to remain still while Marie murmured some words he didn't understand. Mist formed and then, abruptly, a shape. A lean gray wolf with eyes of flame appeared. To his surprise, Marie chuckled.

"That's you."

"That's me?" he repeated, amazed. "Holy Toledo, I'm a werewolf!"

Marie laughed. "No. Every man has a guardian, the spirit that defines him. Yours is the wolf. A good choice, I think: cunning, quick, and as you see, inquisitive."

The wolf shape faded. "Where's Jonathan's? Is his here, too?"

There was a long moment of silence; then Marie answered simply, "Yes."

Cold green eyes pierced the mist. The sleek black form of a panther emerged, silent as death.

"Hidden depths, Jack. I've always said so," Benny murmured, astounded. The huge cat glanced his way warily, its eyes like green lasers.

Marie felt a wave of relief wash over her. "No wonder Jonathan can fight this evil spell."

The panther turned and bounded away. Benny let his breath out shakily. "I'm watching my step from now on," he remarked. The mist faded. Marie smiled at him. "Does this mean Jon's gonna pull through?"

"He has an exceptionally strong spirit guide," she replied. "I think this will work."

"There's still one little problem here." Benny hesitated to speak it aloud, but plunged on anyway. "Jon's a confirmed skeptic, a real hard case. If he's where you say he is, he's not believing a bit of it. Probably thinks it's all a dream."

"He must believe," she said. "Your soul is fragile. I can't risk losing another." Tears flowed down her cheeks. "I may lose this one."

"Hey, hang in there." Benny tightened his grip on her hand encouragingly. "You're doing great! That spirit guide stuff was fantastic." He put his arm around her shoulders. "You can do it, Marie. All you gotta do is give it your best shot."

Freeing her hand, she wiped her eyes. "I wanted to leave all this behind me. I wanted to forget, but I can't. There is something here." She touched her heart. "Within. I can't deny it."

"If you have this power, you should use it," said Benny; then realized what he'd said. He'd had the power to do something, too, and he'd run away. Where do you get off preaching about doing one's duty, buddy-boy?

He spoke slowly, carefully choosing his words. "Look, I know what you mean. You may not believe me, but it's true. You see, I've got this story to write, but I'm too close to it. Just getting near it tears me up, but if I do it, a lot of people might be helped. I might even save some lives."

She stared at him intently. "Then you must write this story, Benny, just as I must call upon the loa, not only for Jonathan, but for my own peace of mind."

More confident now, Marie got to her feet and drew a curious design on the floor with gray ashes. "This is the veve," she explained. "The symbol of the spirit I wish to invoke." Her eyes were calm. "You must not be alarmed. When I am possessed – mounted by the loa – I will seem as another person, another creature. This being will not hurt you. Les Invisibles need us, as we need them." Her voice faltered, but then she continued. "Tell it what you want."

"And that's all I can do?"

Her dark eyes were sympathetic. "I know you want to do more, Benny, but yes, this is all you can do. I'm sorry, but I can't involve another innocent soul in this. There are too many unknowns. Just ask the spirit to help you." She finished her drawing. "Does Jonathan have any liquor in the house?"

"Should be a bottle of Scotch downstairs," said Benny. "I'll get it."

When he returned, Marie sat within the ashy design, as calm and impassive as an ebony statue. He could hear a subtle rhythm, like muffled drumbeats shuddering beneath his skin, pulsing faster and faster. Where did the sound come from? What was she doing?

You must not be alarmed. I will seem as another person, another creature.

Abruptly, Marie's head snapped back, her eyes rolled up in her head. Not certain what to expect, Benny stiffened, all senses alert. The young woman's body convulsed violently. For a few terrible moments, he was afraid the seizure would be fatal. Then her head drooped and slowly raised. Her eyes, when she gazed at him, were filled with rainbows.

He gaped, astounded. In place of Marie's calm dark gaze there were sparkling bands of color. As he watched, her aspect became radiant, colors emanating in a rainbow aura.

"What to say? "Marie?" he whispered cautiously.

The rainbow eyes were curious; the voice, muted thunder. "I am Ayida Wedo," she said. "What is your business with me?"

"I-I need your help," said Benny carefully, still in awe. He sat before her, careful not to disturb the design of ashes. "I need to find a soul, the small soul of my friend Jonathan. It's been

stolen and is wandering out there somewhere.”

The eyes turned toward the bed. “This man?”

“Yes.” Benny watched the woman’s emotionless face, hoping for some clue as to how to proceed.

“I have seen him,” she said.

“Great!” Benny’s spirits soared. “Can you get him back?”

The remarkable eyes fastened on him once more. “What will you give me?” she asked, her tone suddenly dark and ominous.

Benny choked, his spirits drooping. Marie had said nothing about this. Was he supposed to bargain? Okay, he’d give it a shot. “What would you like?” He recovered his poise quickly. “Just name it.”

She cocked her head, as if she hadn’t considered being given a choice. Benny held his breath, wondering what this creature could possibly want. Blood? His first born child? His own soul?

Suddenly, Ayida Wedo laughed, a full earthy sound, and reached for the bottle. “The price is a drink.”

Benny released his breath in a sigh of relief. “I could use one, too,” he admitted. “If you’ve no objection.”

She inclined her head graciously, indicating he was to drink.

“You said you’ve seen Jonathan,” Benny said, taking the bottle. “Is he all right? This half of him’s having a rough time.”

I wish you could see this, Jack. Me and a voodoo goddess tossing back your best scotch.

“He is well,” she replied, taking another swig. “But he does not belong there. Time is short. His body will not live long without the ti bon ange. I will find him.”

Benny thanked her

“And what else may I do for you, petit?”

“Saving Jonathan’s more than enough,” he hastened to assure her.

She smiled, her rainbow eyes dazzling. “Anything for a believer,” she said. “Take heart. I will restore your friend.”

The rainbows faded, and Marie sagged back, breathing heavily. Worried, Benny propped her head in his lap, calling her name. When at last her eyes opened, they were dark and weary.

“Way to go, Marie!” Benny grinned. “We made contact. She’ll get him back, no problem.”

“She?” Marie whispered.

“A spirit with rainbow eyes. Ayida something.”

“Ayida Wedo?” her voice was even more faint.

“Right, that’s her.”

Marie remained silent for so long, Benny felt a chill. “That’s okay, isn’t it?” he asked apprehensively. “She seemed real friendly. We even hoisted a few.” His fears leaped as tears slid down the girl’s cheeks. “Marie, what’s wrong? Was she kidding me?” He helped her sit up. “Say something.”

Marie leaned against his shoulder, still exhausted. “It’s all right, Benny,” she said with a faint smile.

“Who is she? Is she friendly?”

“Her image is the rainbow,” Marie explained. “She is the mate of Damballah, the serpent. They are powerful, Benny, very powerful. When I was a young member of the societe, I was often mounted by Ayida Wedo. I drew her symbol, but I thought. . .” She paused, emotion clogging her throat. “I thought this couldn’t happen any more.”

Benny tried to be comforting. “Hey, I know you don’t like doing this, but she said she’d get Jonathan back. After this, you’ll never have to do it again. I’m real sorry, Marie.”

“You don’t understand,” she whispered, and he saw that what he’d mistaken for sorrow was a strange sort of joy. Her face glowed. “I never realized how much I missed her presence. Being with her – being her – is like flying. All emotions are magnified. There is such life, such glorious freedom. She came to me. She hasn’t forgotten.” Marie sat straight now, her strength returning. “With Ayida’s help and his spirit guide, Jonathan will find his way back to us. There is no doubt. Nothing can prevent it.”

“Sounds like this calls for a celebration.” Benny reached for the bottle.

“Oh, no, I hate that stuff.” Marie waved him off. Getting to her feet, she stood by the bed and took Jonathan’s hand. “I hope she hurries. His fever is so high.”

Benny snapped his fingers, remembering his last trip to Jonathan’s attic. “I know where there’s a fan. Maybe that’ll help.”

He located the fan and had just finished wedging it in the bedroom window when the phone rang. When he heard Randy’s anxious voice, his hopeful spirits sank.

“Benny? Alison just fainted. She’s got a bad fever, just like Jonathan.”

“Oh, brother,” he sighed. “Hang in there, kid. I’ll see what Marie says.”

But Marie was dumfounded.

“What’s the scoop? I thought you said everything was in the bag.”

Marie’s voice was faint. “If Ayida has agreed to find one soul, then only one soul can return.”

Benny’s heart felt like a lump of lead in his chest. He knew exactly what would happen. Oh, God, Jonny, this isn’t the time to be noble. That little idiot put you there in the first place. If you happen to bump into her out there in the cosmos, just say excuse me and keep walking.

“But we specifically asked her about Jonathan,” he managed to say. “Alison wasn’t part of this deal.”

“What has happened to Alison may change things, Benny. I don’t know. The spirits can be unpredictable.”

Benny’s thoughts raced. “Okay, tell me this. What does Jonathan look like, wherever he is? Is he some little blob of light, or a twinkly star, a ghost? What?”

“He is as he appears to us,” she replied, puzzled. “But there, he is awake, walking around, confused, I’m sure, but alert.”

“What about the rainbow spirit? Does she have a form of any kind?”

“She can assume many forms.”

“But she’s female, right?”

“Yes.”

Benny allowed himself the tiniest of hopes. “No problem then.”

The rhythm was louder now, and there was a jarring under his feet, cracks in the pink sand.

"This way," called a voice. "This way."

Ahead in the jungle was what looked like a woman wreathed in rainbow colors. The vision kept changing, so it was impossible to tell if she was real or just an illusion. Snake, hawk, sunburst, river – everything was blurring into puddles of swirling brilliant color.

"This way."

Which way? Something sleek and black leaped from the swaying melting trees, landing gracefully in the wavering path. With a shock of recognition, Jonathan gazed into the jewel-like green eyes as the shape turned its head to give him a brief enigmatic glance; then the creature bounded away, its footprints pools of silver.

"This way. This way, Jonathan."

The calm voice spoke with a sense of urgency. He followed the footprints, feeling more confident. The air seemed to be cooling as he walked, the air fresher, the way it smelled after a rainstorm, which explained the rainbow. As for the woman. . .

She came toward him, swaying rhythmically to the beat of his heart, slim and dark, breathtakingly beautiful. Her eyes were filled with all the colors of the jungle.

"Come," she said.

Her hand was cool.

"He's waking," said Marie, and Benny leaned forward. "She must have found him."

The woman's face changed. She turned, sensing another presence in her domain, and her hand slipped from Jonathan's.

"No," Marie gasped, seeing Jonathan sink back into fever.

"What happened?" asked Benny.

Shaking her head, Marie sighed. "I don't understand. He was almost here."

"I know," said Benny grimly. "Alison."

The coolness must have been part of the mirage, like the woman. Jonathan walked on until a small wavering shape made him pause. Wait. He knew that shape!

"Alison," he said, amazed. What was she doing in his dream?

The girl stared at him. "Dr. MacKensie?" She remained motionless a moment longer, still staring around in disbelief, and then she threw herself into his arms, sobbing. "Oh, God, I never meant for this to happen! It was just a joke! I had no idea--"

"Now, now, calm down," he said, patting her on the back. "You're dreaming. Or I am. There's nothing to worry about."

She raised her tear-stained eyes to meet his. "You don't understand," she gulped. "This isn't a dream. We're in serious trouble."

"Trouble?" Jonathan frowned.

Alison looked around in dismay, taking in the kaleidoscope jungle. "Oh, lord, where are

we?" she asked nervously, turning back to study him with unnerving intensity. "Are you all right? You ought to sit down."

Tugging at his sleeve, Alison made Jonathan sit on a log. "This is all my fault," she continued. "I didn't do the work. I deserved that D. Now it's too late." She plopped down beside him, new tears springing to her eyes.

Jonathan put his arm around her shoulders. Strange sort of dream, he thought. She certainly feels solid. "Alison, don't worry so much. We'll find a way to help your grade."

She pulled away, eyes flashing. "I don't mean that!" she said fiercely. "I don't care about that lousy grade. I've got to find some way to get you back. That's all that matters."

"Get me back?"

Alison could have screamed in frustration. "Dr. MacKensie," she said as calmly as she could manage. "I had a voodoo priest put a spell on you. He captured part of your soul. That's why you got so sick. That's why you're stuck here, wherever here is." Her calm deserting her, she gestured wildly. "Don't you see? Don't you understand? This isn't a dream. This is probably voodoo hell."

Jonathan listened to the girl's increasingly impassioned speech with rising apprehension. Part of my soul? Voodoo? That's what the snake said. Certain images came back in a rush: Alison's wide fearful eyes in the classroom; the paramedics shrugging, unable to find anything wrong; the terrible heat sapping his strength. Is it possible? Is Alison the cause of all this?

After brushing the last of her tears out of her eyes, Alison continued her explanation. "I went to the bokor to ask him to please stop. I must have made him angry, because now I'm here, too."

"You can't be here," Jonathan began, then stopped, unable to form any more coherent words.

Alison gripped his arm with a hand that felt all too real. "Dr. MacKensie, you have to believe me. I know you and Mr. Benedek investigate strange things in your spare time. He's back at your house, trying to help you. Please, you've got to believe me!"

The anxiety in Alison's face moved Jonathan to pat the hand that still gripped his arm while his mind grappled with the implications of her words. Until she arrived, this had been a spectacular dream, filled with alien sounds and colors, but. . .

You never dream in such vivid color, not even when you're ill. If what Alison says is true, then she's trapped as well, and you have to get her out. He grappled with a rising sense of panic. There's no time for hysterics. Something is happening here, and if Benedek is involved, however slightly, then there is a very good chance that everything is real.

Alison watched the play of emotions cross Jonathan's face, the doubt slowly being replaced by belief and determination. But all around them the jungle was crackling and swaying in an alarming manner. "Dr. MacKensie?"

He got to his feet, taking her hand. "Come on."

"Do you know the way out?" she asked.

"No, but there is something here--" He couldn't put the feeling into words, but he knew the sleek, green-eyed animal could lead them to safety, if only he could see it. There! Just ahead, poised and waiting, its eyes reflecting the mounting colors all around him.

The jungle was burning! Strange flames of pink, yellow, and gold leaped into the air. Jonathan ran, pulling Alison with him, his eyes locked on the darting black shape and brief flashes of rainbow colors. The world was collapsing, falling in on itself, but the black animal bounded gracefully, pausing every now and then with a backward glance.

They came to an abrupt halt at the edge of a wide glittering crystalline river. The black

creature leaped effortlessly to the other side where a rainbow figure waiting, beckoning.

“Only one,” came her clear voice. “Only one.”

The mad dash through the jungle had sapped most of Jonathan’s failing strength. “Can you swim?” he panted, trying to lead Alison to the water.

She dug in her heels, shaking her head vigorously. “I’m not going.”

“Of course you are,” he said, startled by her objection.

“No way.” Alison pulled free. “If anyone’s expendable, it’s me. You’re going back.”

“Alison, don’t be ridiculous,” argued Jonathan, catching his breath. The heat of the approaching flames was almost unbearable, and the increasingly rhythm overwhelming. The ground shuddered like a huge bass drum. In the eerie light, Alison’s young face as as hard as stone. “This place is on fire! Go!” Again he tried to force her forward, managing to pull her a few steps closer to the bank. “Damn it, I won’t leave you here!”

“That’s my choice,” she said, prying herself loose once more. Trees crashed behind them in a shower of sparks and ash. A wall of pink flame rose like a tidal wave, surging forward to the rhythm of the unseen drums.

“Alison.” With his last strength, Jonathan grasped Alison by her shoulders. “You must go! I won’t let you do this—it’s insane!”

“I want you to remember this,” she replied, smiling grimly. “This is probably the only time in my life I’ll ever do anything unselfish.” She pulled free of his weakening grip and pushed him into the river.

“Alison, no,” he gasped, reaching out vainly for her, but he was so terribly tired, he couldn’t even lift his head. The crystal river was not so much wet, but rather gave the impression of dark enveloping coolness. After the heat that had been consuming him, Jonathan sank into the depths gratefully, allowing himself to be carried along without a fight. Then, after a time, he felt a cool breeze on his face and the light touch of a hand.

He opened his eyes to see a tall young black woman regarding him with a calm grave expression. An aura of colors shimmered around her.

“Do you feel better?” she asked in a lilting accented voice.

Still entranced by her halo of rainbow color, he merely nodded.

“You have traveled a long way and returned safely.” Her voice soothed him back toward the cool darkness. “Rest now.”

The next time he woke, the woman had gone, and Benny grinned at him cheerfully. “How ya doin’, Jonny? Getting enough air?”

A quick glance around showed Jonathan that he was in his bedroom. A fan chugged away in one of the windows, pulling in fresh air. He nodded, confused. The breeze was thankfully cool. And the steady rhythm of the fan was oddly familiar. So everything had been a dream – hadn’t it?

“Here. Drink this.”

Looking askance at the earthenware cup Benny held in his hand, Jonathan asked. “What is it?”

“You don’t wanna know.”

Jonathan took a cautious sip of the hot bitter liquid. “Tastes like tea.”

“Whatever makes you happy, pal. Drink up.”

“Very bad tea,” Jonathan amended with a grimace.

“Don’t look at me,” said Benny. “That’s something Marie cooked up. A little soul food,” he added cryptically.

Sighing, Jonathan asked, “Do I want to hear this?”

Perched on the edge of the bed, Benny looked rumped and unshaven, but his grin was as bright as ever. “Try it this way, buds. Tell me what you think happened.”

Jonathan set the cup aside. “Apparently, I had a very bad cold,” he said, wondering how long he’d been ill.

“Nope. Guess again.”

Eyeing his friend warily, Jonathan asked, “Does Theo have anything to do with this?”

“Strike two.”

“Benedek. I am not in the mood to play games.”

Benny raised his hands in mock surrender. “Okay, okay, you’ll never guess anyway, so I’ll tell you.” He leaned forward and said in a stage whisper. “Part of your soul was stolen,”

What?” Echoes of the snake’s deep tones sounded in Jonathan’s memory.

Part of your soul has come here.

Waking up in his own room, he’d almost managed to convince himself that recent events had indeed been a fever dream, but then, how did Benedek know? He couldn’t have had the same dream.

“Yup.” Benny was enjoying himself. “The old voodoo spell – only I’m under strict orders to call it the voodoo religion. I’ve learned a lot in the past few days, pal.”

Jonathan started to say, “Days?” when a calm voice from the doorway said, “You should let Jonathan rest, Benny.”

I know that voice!

The dark young woman smiling at him was as serene as royalty. “I envy you your journey, Jonathan,” she said. “The serpent spoke to you?”

The serpent. . .still unable to find words, he stared at her in wonder, amazed she could know. Who was she? Why was her voice so familiar?

“And your spirit guide,” she continued. “It led you?”

He nodded, able to find a few words at last. “A black shape – a cat, I think.”

“A panther,” she replied. “Great strength and uncommon grace.”

He gazed into her eyes, thinking he saw – impossible – the vibrant, many-colored jungle of his dreams. “Who are you?” he whispered. “How do you know all of this?”

“My name is Marie Celestin,” she answered with a smile. “I am a priestess of the voodoo religion. She sat down in the chair Benny pulled out for her.

“She’s the real thing, Jack,” he said, pleased to see how proudly Marie had made this admission.

“You were under a soul spell, a coup n’ame,” Marie explained. “But now you are well.”

“She really went to bat for you, pal,” said Benny. “Believe me, you were going down for the third time.”

Jonathan was still staring into Marie’s dark eyes. “It was you. You were there. You took my hand.”

"That was Ayida Wedo," she said. "A spirit of the loa. I called on her for help, and she brought you back."

Brought me back – "Oh, my God! Alison!" Jonathan tried to get out of bed. "She's still there! She pushed me into the water – the woman said only one--"

Benny grabbed his arm, assisting Marie as she gently but firmly pushed Jonathan back onto the pillows. "She is safe," she assured him. "Believe me, all is well. The loa were impressed by her sacrifice and returned her small soul."

"You're sure?" Jonathan asked anxiously. "You're absolutely sure?"

"Yes, of course. She will be here later today to see you." Marie's smile grew impish. "Les Invisibles do not care for skeptics. They want only true believers, which is why I could not send Benny to fetch you."

Jonathan relaxed, still somewhat confused. "So everything Alison told me was true. Everything the serpent said. . ." The visions returned, bright and clear: the princely man in his robe of red and gold, the striped flowers swaying overhead, the graceful form of a woman, dressed in all the colors of the world.

"It is hard for you to believe," Marie smiled sympathetically. "I understand. Even I did not want to believe. But it is true. Think of it as another level, another rhythm of life, that came sometimes be reached and touched. Like a dream, if that will make it easier to accept."

Jonathan took her slim hand in his. "No, you were there. I remember. Thank you for helping me."

"You must thank Benny," she said. "He convinced me to try. And now there is one more things I must do."

Benny knew what she meant. "I'll come with you."

For a moment, he thought she would refuse, but she finally nodded. "Very well."

Benny gazed around Monsieur DuBay's dark study, his apprehension at full blast, even thought there wasn't a trace of the sorcerer. No furniture, no books, no paintings. Only Marie's voice echoing in the empty hallway.

"He's gone, Benny."

"You're sure of that? I mean, he's not just hiding out?"

She stepped into the room, her footsteps echoing hollowly. "He has lost two souls. He won't try again."

Her calm words made him less uneasy. "But where is he? Is he off somewhere plotting revenge?"

"I don't think so," she replied. "But if anything should happen, you know you may call upon me at any time. I didn't realize how much of myself I was trying to ignore. My true self. My heart." She looked at him with her thoughtful gaze. "I want you to promise me something."

"I know," he smiled, aware of a curious lightness in his own heart. "I'll do it."

"Good. Jonathan will be fine, you have my word." She kissed his cheek gently. "And so will you."

Benny entered his hotel room and glanced at the typewriter waiting silently. He'd left Jonathan in good health and good spirits, discussing the possibility of a research project for extra credit with Alison and Randy. No problems there. All loose ends neatly knotted. All that was left was the story, the story he'd run from in a panic, the story he'd tried so hard to ignore.

The story of a family, a mother and son, abandoned by the father and left to fend for themselves in an unfriendly city. Never mind that the mother was Hispanic, her child part black. He saw in them his own mother's strained, stunned face, his own bewildered eyes.

Write it. If it tears your heart, it may tear the hearts of others. Might stop someone from leaving, from making the same tragic mistakes. Confront the pain. Marie was strong enough to search her soul for the answers. Jonathan is safe, whole again. Now it's your turn.

He sat before the typewriter, slipped in a clean sheet of paper, and began to write.