

Say It With Turquoise

By Jane Tesh

Jonathan MacKensie had been admiring the necklace in the small antique shop for weeks.

"A very unusual piece," the shopkeeper told him. "Unique. One doesn't often see this shade of green with silver."

"How much?" Jonathan asked, smoothing one of the oddly-shaped green stones. There were five stones: two small ovals, two larger ovals, and a center stone shaped like a shield, alternating with four ornate silver designs. The color was what had caught his eye, a pearly glow, like snow caught in emeralds.

"Oh, I'd say one fifty," said the shopkeeper.

"One hundred and fifty dollars?"

"Yes, sir."

Jonathan regretfully placed the necklace on the counter. "I'm afraid that's a bit more than I was prepared to pay."

"One forty," the shopkeeper offered.

"No, sorry."

The shopkeeper frowned thoughtfully. He'd had the necklace for some time, and this serious-looking young man with the long hair had been the only one to show an interest in it. To tell the truth, there was something unhealthy about those greenish stones that made the elderly antique dealer uneasy. Never did like those ugly silver things, either.

"Well, sir, what's it worth to you?"

Jonathan paused. Jewelry rarely intrigued him, but he'd been thinking the necklace would make a nice gift for Angela Taylor. Benedek had told him about the young exorcist's efforts on his behalf, and Jonathan, embarrassed because he didn't remember a thing about the incident at the Glenbar Hotel -- except what Benedek had told him, which he decided was highly exaggerated, as usual -- had been wanting to thank Angela in some special way. Besides, she was a very attractive girl.

"I think I could go as high as a hundred," he said. "Or possibly, seventy-five?"

"Sold," said the shopkeeper.

Edgar Benedek whistled cheerfully as he wandered the Georgetown Institute campus. Mighty nice-looking coeds there, long blonde hair. Nice, very nice.

Small and wiry, with a ready grin, Benny was not what most people would call handsome, but his unflinching good humor and high spirits gave him a certain attractive charm. Today he was wearing a relatively modest pink shirt, but the tie was a flaming creation of fuchsia and lime green, which made it easy for Jonathan to spot him among the giggly girls. Jonathan considered moving off in another direction, but Benny saw him.

"Jonathan!" he called gleefully. "Excuse me, ladies. Later, okay? Jonathan, where've you been? I've been waiting all morning."

"Whatever it is, the answer's no," Jonathan said as Benny trotted up.

Benny looked hurt. "Just lunch, pal."

Jonathan gave him a wary glance. "Just lunch."

"Yeah."

"No UFOs, no ghosts, no bizarre unexplained phenomena?"

Benny held up three fingers. "Scout's honor." As Jonathan considered this, Benny grinned, blue eyes twinkling with barely contained mirth. Good old Jonathan, cautious as ever. He noted his friend's plain conservative clothes and ever-present tie. A guy this straight should look like one of those plastic clean-cut Sears catalog models, but Jonathan's features were saved from the ordinary by a distinctive nose, long disheveled gold-brown hair, and expressive dark eyes that gave away his every thought, something Benny always used to his advantage. Right now, Benny knew Jon was thinking, I'm not sure I can trust you, but maybe, just maybe you're telling the truth this time.

"Let me check by my office first."

"Fine by me, Juanito." Benny stuck his hands in his pockets and sauntered alongside, whistling.

"You seem awfully cheerful today," Jonathan remarked.

"I tell ya, Jack, my biorhythms are at an all-time high. Everything's humming. It's like the music of the spheres, ya know? I checked again this morning, and I am on an upswing of monumental proportions."

"That's nice," Jonathan said absently.

"I figure I got two, maybe three days. We can't let this go to waste. You, me, Vicky, Margery, the beach --"

"Oh, no. No, thank you," said Jonathan. "I have several things that need my immediate attention."

"Like what?" Benny asked as they went down the hall.

"Just things." Jonathan opened his office door.

"Cases?" Benny asked hopefully.

"Not precisely, unless you want to investigate a woman who glows in the dark." He indicated a folder on his desk, his mouth quirked in a wry smile.

"Hey, that's nothing," said Benny, perching on a corner of the desk and opening a folder. "I knew a girl once who could make certain parts of her body light up."

Jonathan gave him a dark look.

"Honest! She was great at parties. We'd all sit around and take bets on how many parts she could get goin' at one time."

"Benedek."

"Every now and then she could get 'em to flash on and off."

Irritated, Jonathan snatched the folder out of his hands. "I don't know why I bother with you. And I refuse to get involved with human light bulbs."

"Gee, I dunno, Jonny. It could be an enlightening experience." He patted his pockets. "Got any change? I spent my last ten bribing some old lady to let me into a private pet cemetery."

"I'm not going to ask." Jonathan searched for his wallet. He set his keys and the tissue-wrapped necklace on the desk. "I'm sure I have enough, if you're not too hungry."

"What's this?"

Jonathan tried to reach the package, but Benny, ever-curious, had it in his hand. "It's just a little something I picked up at an antique shop."

"Whoa, good taste, Jon-boy." Benny held up the green and silver necklace. "So who's the lucky lady?"

Jonathan felt his face grow hot. "No one. That is, no one in particular. A friend. An acquaintance."

"You romantic devil, you. This must have set you back, what, ten, twelve bucks?"

Jonathan snatched the necklace back. "Seventy-five."

Benny's eyes widened. "Stop the presses! Scrooge MacKensie shells out seventy-five smackers for an old piece of junk? This must be some baby doll."

"You are absolutely the crudest individual I have ever come across," Jonathan said. "And it isn't junk. What do you know about antique jewelry, anyway?"

"About as much as you."

Jonathan stuffed the necklace back in his pocket. "It's none of your business."

"So you've got a sweetheart. Congratulations. I bet she'll love it." Benny idly flipped through some other folders he found on the desk. "And when it turns her neck green, she'll be color-coordinated. Say this looks good. 'Toy teddy bear comes to life.'"

"No, thank you."

"Or this one. 'Shower of gold fish in Death Valley.'"

"I am not interested." Jonathan packed several stacks of papers into his briefcase.

"Phantom locomotive sighted near Bristol, Tennessee."

"What?" said Jonathan, his interest caught.

Benny grinned. "Just kidding. Boy, you should have seen the way your eyes lit up."

Jonathan stared at him. Would he never see through Benedek's idea of humor. He closed the briefcase with a sharp click. "Were you hoping to 'railroad' me into something?"

Benny signaled his appreciation for the pun by beating a quick drum beat on the desk. "Way to go, Jack."

"Are you ready?"

Benny hopped off the desk. "I'm always ready. Seriously, buds, we ought take one of those cases."

"What, are things slow at the National Register these days? No two-headed babies? No faithless wives pushed into meat grinders?"

"No, but those are great ideas."

They walked out into the bright late morning sunshine, Benny still eyeing the young ladies.

"You don't actually want to investigate a talking teddy bear, do you?" Jonathan asked.

"Nahh, I've been that route. Didn't you see my article, 'Deadly Dolls in Killer Rampage'?"

"Sorry. I missed that one."

"You should see what happens when Barbie and Ken get riled, J.J. It is not a pretty sight."

"Yes, well, I'm sure you gave it the coverage it deserved." He checked his watch. "I have about an hour until my next class."

"I'm up for sushi, pal. Let's go to Wang Ho's Fish Camp."

"Is there something wrong with normal food?"

"Okay, okay, we'll go for the bland."

"After all, I am paying," Jonathan reminded, steering Benny toward one of the calmer coffee shops that bordered the campus. It wasn't crowded, and they were seated right away.

Benny scanned the menu. "So what's my limit?"

"About two dollars."

Benny gave a snort. "I'm surprised you've got that much after dropping a bundle for your Woolworth's trinket." He glanced up and his eyes widened. "Whoa! Now there's something you don't see every day, at least, not in a place like this. Check it out."

Jonathan turned to see what had caused such a reaction and was equally startled by the sight of the scantily-clad young woman in what appeared to be leopard skin tights and a lace corset worn under a tight red leather jacket. Her wild mane of hair was orange with green streaks. Multicolored beads bounced and jangled as she moved. Gold flashed from her ears and fingers. Her eyes, surrounded by iridescent greens and blues, met his in a searing gaze that sent his heart to his throat in one leap.

"Ee-yow," Benny said, impressed. "She likes you, Jack."

With difficulty, Jonathan managed to tear his eyes away from the bizarre young lady. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Probably thinks you're an escaped band member. You really oughta comb your hair more often."

"She's probably wishing she had your tie."

"She's coming this way. Whew! Look at those legs!" Jonathan started to tell him to shut up when the young lady stopped at their table, and he quickly changed his scowl to a hesitant smile. Her eyes, he noticed, were electric blue in a face as finely sculptured as a model's.

"Hi," she said.

Puzzled, Jonathan got up. "Hello."

"You're Dr. Jonathan MacKensie, aren't you?" She extended a ring-covered hand. "Professor of anthropology?"

"Yes," Jonathan said, now truly baffled. "Excuse me, but are you one of my students?"

She grinned. "Not me. A friend of mine, Gwen Page, told me to look you up when I was in town. I'm Vendetta, of Vendetta and the Vipers."

"You're a friend of Gwen's," Jonathan said, relieved. "Well, it's a pleasure to meet you, Miss -- uh, Vendetta."

"We're kinda new on the scene, so you probably haven't heard of us, she said, returning Benny's admiring grin. "We're opening for the Scum Bags tomorrow night."

Jonathan was now completely lost, but Benny exclaimed delightedly, "I have all their records! 'Vent Your Spleen.' 'Death By Lust.' Hot stuff! Personally, I prefer the golden oldies, but heavy metal can really get rid of a headache."

Reluctantly, Jonathan introduced him. "This is Edgar Benedek."

"Just call me Benny." He shook her jeweled hand. "Have a seat, Vendetta."

"No, thanks," she said. "I gotta run. Gwen told me what you guys did for her and Tony. That's really fantastic. I'd like to hear all the details sometime. Is this your regular hangout?"

"No," Jonathan said the same time Benny said, "Yes." "We don't actually hang out anywhere," Jonathan went on to explain.

"Well, then, I'll see you around." She gave him another searching look. "Later, huh?"

She moved sinuously through the restaurant, attracting more than a few curious stares. At the door, she turned and waggled a few fingers in their direction. Jonathan cautiously lifted a hand in response, while Benny gave her a jaunty salute.

"That is one hot number, Jonny. Did you see how she looked at you? You are doomed, Jack."

"A friend of Gwen's," Jonathan said. "That's hard to imagine."

"Vendetta and the Vipers. Sounds great, huh? We oughta go see them."

"If you think I'm going to a rock concert, think again," Jonathan said, his attention on the menu. "I don't wish to be prematurely deaf."

"How'd you get so stuffy?" Benny asked. "I mean, were you born this way, or did you take lessons?"

"Just because I happen to prefer a different kind of music --" He stopped. "We've had this discussion." He was still tingling from the impact of meeting that odd young woman. Vendetta! What kind of name was that? He'd never met anyone as vibrant. He felt a compelling curiosity to know more about her. If Benedek got wind of this -- !

"I'm gonna go out on a limb here and have a hot dog and fries," Benny told the waitress. "Live dangerously; that's my motto. Unlike some people." If he'd hoped to get a rise out of Jonathan, he was disappointed. The dark eyes seemed a bit distant. Hmm, wondering about Vendetta, are we? From the looks she gave you, pal, you won't have to wonder long.

Benny left soon after lunch to recheck the status of his biorhythms, so Jonathan was crossing the campus alone when he heard her call out.

"Jonathan!"

Every head swiveled to watch Vendetta saunter across the quad.

Jonathan's pulse jumped. "Vendetta. Hello." He gave his tie a nervous tug. "I didn't expect to see you here -- um, that is, so soon."

"I made the time," she said, smiling.

"Oh. How nice." He was acutely aware of all eyes turned their way. "Well, come on, please, let me give you the tour."

She slid her arm through his. "I guess you're wondering how Gwen and I could be acquainted."

"Oh, well, no, not really," Jonathan said, flustered. "I'm sure Gwen has lots of friends."

The blue gaze was amused. "I played for one of her victory parties. That was before I organized the Vipers, played MOR stuff. Actually, Tony got me started. He told me all about your adventure -- really wild."

"Yes, well, there are still a lot of unanswered questions about that particular case," Jonathan said, "but I was happy to help out."

"It must be absolutely rad to be a psychic investigator. I mean, it's like ghostbusters, right?"

"Not exactly." Jonathan was more concerned at the moment with avoiding Dr. Moorhouse. He didn't think this technicolor vision by his side would be understood or appreciated

by his starchy superior. "This way," he said, ushering Vendetta down a hallway. "I'm afraid I have a class in a few minutes."

"Is this your office?"

"Yes, but --"

"I'll wait." She entered, plopped down in a chair and crossed her long legs. "No problem."

"Oh, but I'd hate for you -- it really isn't necessary --"

"I don't mind," she said. "It's neat. Real cozy."

"But surely you have a million things to do to get ready for your concert."

"Nah," she said. "There's just one thing I want to do." The electric blue gaze was intent. "I want to get to know you better."

He could hear his pulse thundering in his head. Her eyes were full of fireworks and promises. "I --" he began; then, "I shouldn't be too long."

She smiled lazily and fingered one of her many sparkly necklaces. "Fine. I'll be right here."

"Paul, where is my article on shrunken heads? You promised you'd have that to me by today."

Benny's colleague at the National Register apologized. "I don't know, Benny, I'm sorry. Things are really in a mess here."

Benny leaned back in the phone booth. "I need that information. How'm I supposed to finish my story, 'Real Life Shrink Claims Six.?'"

"Don't yell at me. You know how it is around here. We've been short-handed for weeks."

"That doesn't help me today. And I need some info on that killer statue."

"Why don't you try Chenille? She's right there in Washington, and she's got files on practically everything."

"Yeah, okay, thanks." Benny hung up. He didn't look forward to wading through the piles of newspaper clippings at Chenille's, but maybe he'd unearth something useful.

"Whoa, this is worse than before!" he remarked when he let himself in the cramped apartment. "Hiya, kid. I'm looking for shrunken heads. Got any?"

The slim black girl lifted her head from an overflowing filing cabinet. "Help yourself, Benny."

Every available surface in the apartment was covered with newspaper articles and books. Benny dug in, pausing to read things that looked particularly interesting. He was well into a long paragraph about bleeding walls when a picture caught his eye. It was a picture of a necklace with unusual flat green stones and silver designs. He stared, chills prickling his neck.

"Chenille, come here a sec."

She poked her head up again. "What?"

Benny waved the picture. "I've seen this necklace! What's a picture of it doing here?"

Chenille picked her way through the stacks. "Oh, that's the Nigon Necklace. I'm collecting pictures of unlucky jewels for my book on curses."

"Curses? This thing has a curse on it?"

"Well, sure. Albert Alexander killed four people to get it and then fell off a cliff. Before that, the Van Alston family lost two children, their house burned, and Mrs. Van Alston got put away in a loony bin. Before that, the Sultan of Kustan owned it and lost his whole kingdom to Mongol hordes. I'd call that a curse, wouldn't you?"

"And you're absolutely sure it's this necklace?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. See the odd greenish color, sort of like turquoise gone wrong? According to legend, the Sultan killed a woman for this necklace and she came back from the grave, prophesizing death and destruction for all who touched it. You see, this was once a ceremonial necklace for a group of witches, and they didn't take too kindly to having it stolen. The Sultan gave the necklace to his favorite wife, went in the next morning, and found her mysteriously strangled to death. Soon after the Sultan's kingdom was overrun, and any survivors were killed by a strange plague. The necklace has been considered pretty well cursed since then."

Benny had been listening with growing horror. "So what you're saying is this thing has a standard Hope Diamond curse on it?"

Chenille nodded. "The works. And this one doesn't skip around like the Hope Diamond curse. Everybody who owned it had bad luck."

"Where's your phone?"

"Under that stack over there. You know something about this necklace? Better be careful, Benny. Better still, let Irene know. She's good at this sort of thing."

Benny punched in the number for Jonathan's office. "I'm not sure yet, but it looks promising." Leave it to Jonathan to pick up something deadly. The man was a positive genius at attracting the worst kind of paranormal artifacts. He was absurdly relieved to hear Jonathan's irritated voice cut him off in mid sentence.

"Benedek, I haven't got time for this. Save your little dramas for later."

"Stay there, I'll be right over." Benny heard another voice in the background and a soft chuckle. "Both of you." Well, at least Jonathan would stay put.

He couldn't get to the Georgetown Institute fast enough. Pushing his way through crowds of afternoon students, he jogged down the hallway to Jonathan's office and came right in, hoping to catch Jonathan with one of the lovelier grad students, but Jonathan was alone.

Benny made a great show of looking under the chair. "Where is she?"

"I am on my way out," Jonathan said. "You have exactly five seconds to tell me what this is all about."

"Wipe that lipstick off your face before Dr. M puts in a surprise appearance." As Jonathan self-consciously rubbed his cheek with his handkerchief, Benny said, "That necklace you bought. We gotta get it neutralized right away. There's one whopper of a curse on it."

Jonathan stared at him a moment and then began to laugh. "You never give up, do you?"

"I'm not kidding, Jack. You are the proud possessor of the Nigon Necklace, and unless we find a way to get rid of the curse, things are gonna start happening -- really bad things."

Jonathan waved a warning finger. "Oh, no. No. Things are not going to start happening, because I'm not going along with any more of these stories you're always dreaming up for my benefit."

"This is no story, chum. I am serious." Jonathan was already out the door; Benny had to run to catch up with him. "Hey, wait up!"

"Look," Jonathan said, "we went through this when we were in St. Louis. I don't believe

in curses, and I certainly don't believe a necklace picked up at random in an antique shop could have any sort of mysterious powers."

"Fine. You wear it, then."

"I am not going to wear it. I am going to give it to Angela."

Benny whistled suggestively and waggled his eyebrows. "Ooo-hoo, Angela. Could this be Angela Taylor, exorcist extraordinaire? The little rooftop rendezvous?"

Disconcerted, Jonathan walked on. "I don't see why I should discuss this with you."

"Because, J.J., if you give that necklace to Angela, or to anybody, for that matter, you are courtin' disaster."

"Absolute nonsense."

"Give me a chance to prove this thing has a curse on it. Where is it?"

"In my pocket -- and it's going to stay there."

"Hand it over."

"I will not."

Benny caught his arm and made him stop. "Haven't you learned anything these past few months? Isn't that closed mind of yours open just a crack?"

"All right, all right. There have been a few cases -- just a few, mind you -- that couldn't be completely explained scientifically, but jewels with curses, really now!"

"What about the Regent Diamond? The Pigott? The Louis XV necklace? Not to mention the granddaddy of them all, the Hope Diamond?"

"For one thing, they were all diamonds," Jonathan said. "This is some sort of turquoise. And for another, you have to believe in curses for them to work. It's all psychological, like voodoo."

"Funny you should mention that," Benny said.

"What?"

"Voodoo. That's how we're gonna get rid of the curse."

"No, we are not, because there is no curse. The only curse on me is you!" Jonathan strode off, forcing Benny to run after him again.

"Okay, okay, let a tree fall on you. Let your hair fall out -- boy, that'd do it. Or maybe you'll get hit by lightning."

"Maybe a piano will land on my head. You really are something, you know. Do you want the necklace, is that it? Is this some sort of scheme to get your hands on it?"

"What would I do with it? It would clash with my ensemble."

"How do I know you won't give it to one of your oddball friends?"

"Sheesh, who'd want a cursed necklace?"

"Vendetta was --" he couldn't cover his slip fast enough, and Benny leaped on it.

"Vendetta? Was she in your office when I called? Jack, you got 'em crawling out of the woodwork!" He slapped Jonathan on the back. "She's just right for you, chum."

Jonathan glared. "She happens to be a very nice young lady."

"Is this cosmic fate or what? Wow! I guess I'd better be on the lookout for a yuppie librarian in gray tweed."

"Do you have to make such a production out of everything? She's quite an intelligent --"

"You know all the verses to 'Scream, Satan, My Lust Flames the Gates of Hell'?"

"Benedek."

"I'm Gonna Rip You Like a Chainsaw, Baby'?"

"I'm not interested in her music, for heaven's sake."

Benny rolled his eyes. "I guess not! I saw those legs, too, remember?"

Jonathan was rapidly running out of patience. "Why are we having this conversation?"

"Did you show Vendetta the necklace?"

"She seems fond of jewelry, so I thought --"

"Did she touch it? Did she put it on?"

"No, she just said it looked very old and she thought it was pretty. What's your point?"

Benny looked relieved. "I'm real glad she didn't put it on, pal. We're talkin' industrial strength curse here."

Jonathan started to say, "How could you possibly know anything about this necklace?" and got as far as "possibly" when there was a muted thump that shook the ground. "What on earth was that?"

"It's starting, Jack." Benny looked around, expecting to see a hoard of demons or perhaps one really irritated ghost. Instead, they heard sirens. Blue lights flashed, and a cloud of thick gray smoke billowed up into the air. "It's your house, bet you anything."

"No, it's this way." Jonathan started back up the street. He came around the corner and stopped in his tracks. The antique shop was ablaze. "My God!" He would have run forward had Benny not grabbed him.

"It's too late, Jon."

Jonathan stared at the roaring flames, the shattered glass, the blackened objects that had once been ornate lamps, oak dressers, graceful chairs and sparkling bottles. Firemen raced to and fro with heavy hoses, but it was obvious their best efforts were useless.

Jonathan managed to get a policeman's attention. "The shopkeeper, an elderly gentleman --"

"Sorry."

Jonathan saw the blanket-wrapped body being lifted onto a stretcher. He swallowed hard. "Does anyone know what happened?"

"An explosion of some kind near the back of the shop," the policeman said. "I'm going to have to ask you to move on."

"Come on, Jonathan." Benny led his friend away. "Now do you believe me?"

Jonathan kept glancing back at the burning building. "But I don't understand. It was in that shop for weeks."

"Don't you see? By selling the necklace to you, the owner set the curse in motion. And it wouldn't have burned itself up."

"Well, if that's your theory, all I have to do is keep it."

"No, no, it doesn't work that way. As long as you have the thing, you're in danger."

"And if I sell it, I go up in flames. How perfectly reasonable." He took one last look at the ruined shop. "I'm going home."

"At least let me take the necklace," Benny said. "I can get a friend to look at it, make sure it's the right one."

"And I'll never see it again. No, thank you."

"Jonathan --"

"No."

Benny backed off. "Okay, okay. I just hope your insurance is paid up." Seeing that any further discussion was useless, he returned to Chenille's. She was not home, so Benny let himself in and grimly attacked the files. There was bound to be something here that would convince Jonathan, if he could locate it before something happened to his stubborn colleague.

"May I help you?"

"Yeah, you can get out of the --" he stopped, gaping. A very attractive petite young woman smiled at him pleasantly. "Well, yeah, I guess you can. I'm looking for some articles on cursed jewels, and as you can see, Chenille has her own system."

"Oh, I'm helping her reorganize," the young woman said. "Why don't you tell me exactly what you're looking for?"

Benny still had the picture of the necklace, which he handed to her. "Anything on this, the Nigon Necklace." While she looked at the picture, he gave her the once-over. She was small and -- neat, that was the word. He admired her fresh white blouse, soft grey sweater and skirt, the small matching pumps on her feet, the tiny pearl earrings and smooth blonde hair. When she reached into her sweater pocket and brought out a pair of pearl-framed glasses, his heart did an absurd flip-flop.

She settled the glasses on her little nose. "Well, we have something on this. Could you wait just one minute, please?"

Forever, he thought; then, startled, "Oh, yeah, sure. Are you helping Chenille finally start one of those books of hers?"

She smiled, and he noticed how the smile reflected in her warm brown eyes. "I'm just helping part-time. I work at the east branch of the Georgetown library in the reference department. I won't be but a moment."

Benny leaned on the file cabinet, shaking his head in wonderment. What was it he'd said to Jonathan? A yuppie librarian in gray tweed. Right on, biorhythms!

She came back with her arms full of folders. "Here you are, Mister Benedek."

"Thanks a lot. Just call me Benny, miss --?"

"Stevens. Gladys Stevens."

Gladys. He felt his mouth trembling as he tried not to laugh. This was too much!

"Actually," she said, as if sensing his reaction, "my middle name is Bonita, and most people call me Bunny."

Benny and Bunny. He cracked. "I'm sorry," he said, laughing. "I don't mean to be rude, honest. I -- that's very cute -- I mean, it's a long story. No offense, please."

"That's quite all right," she said. "You see, I know your real name, Edgar."

"Got me," Benny said, feigning a shot to the heart.

"I've read Europe on Five Ghosts a Day. It's fascinating."

Benny didn't think he could blush, but he felt as if he'd been dunked in scalding water. "Hey, that's nothing. You should read my latest: UFOs and You: A Guide For the Eighties."

"I really don't believe in ghosts," she admitted. "Frankly, I don't believe in anything like

spirits or monsters or UFOs, but it does make interesting reading.”

Benny grinned. “Who knows? We may make a believer out of you yet.” He found himself uncharacteristically hesitant. She was so calm, those big brown eyes lifted admiringly. “Look, um, Bunny. Are you busy? Could you sorta help me on this?”

“I’d be happy to,” she said. “Are you working on a special case?”

“Just a little research.”

Within the hour, he knew he was lost. Bunny was an excellent, attentive listener, a careful researcher, and had a delightful hint of mischief behind those serious brown eyes. She nodded her head thoughtfully as he explained about the necklace, and she painstakingly looked through Chenille’s files for any scrap of information that might be useful.

“Of course,” she said, taking off her glasses to gaze at him, “it would be helpful if we had the necklace here. It might not be the Nigon Necklace. That explosion at the antique shop may have been an accident.”

“I’m going to do my best to get it away from Jonathan,” Benny said. “He shouldn’t be anywhere near it, not with his track record.” And he wouldn’t believe I’ve been sitting still for over an hour, digging into these dusty old files with a librarian, no matter how cute she is. “Thanks a lot, Bunny. You’ve been a big help.”

“It’s very interesting work,” she said.

It had been a long time since anyone had affected him so strongly. “Hey, would you like to go grab a bite to eat? We don’t have to work all night.”

“That would be very nice, thank you,” she said with her winning smile.

Benedek, old son, you are in deep trouble, he told himself. Well, who cares? Take the plunge. It’s cosmic fate at work. Has to be.

Well, Jonathan thought as he walked into his office the next morning, I have survived the night. If that ridiculous Benedek thinks he can scare me with stories of curses, he is fair and far off. There’s nothing wrong with this necklace.

He took it out of his pocket and watched the play of light on the green stones. It felt warm in his hand, the stones smooth under his fingers. Benedek was an idiot. How could an inanimate object cause anyone trouble?

“Good morning.”

He looked up, startled. “Vendetta.”

She sauntered in, blue eyes twinkling. She was wearing a sparkly see-through blouse and tight blue pants. Her hair was held back by torn black lace ribbons, and a variety of necklaces with stars, moons, and crosses dangled to her waist. “Hiya, babe. Busy?”

“Oh, no. No, come in.”

“Just stopped by to leave you a ticket and a backstage pass. You will come, won’t you?”

“You know, it’s really not my kind of music,” Jonathan began.

She came closer. “I don’t mind. I just want you there. You can do that for me, can’t you?” She gave him a bright blue sidelong glance.

“Yes, I suppose I can.”

She played with his lapel. “Oh, and I’ve been thinking about that green necklace you showed me yesterday. I think I’d like to have it, after all.”

Jonathan hesitated. “About that necklace.” She glanced at him questioningly. Jonathan

gave a nervous laugh. "Benedek seems to think there's a curse on it."

"Far out! What kind of curse?"

"I don't know. It's all nonsense. But, I'd -- well, I'd feel awkward giving it to you. If something went wrong --"

"I thought you told me you didn't believe in this stuff of Benedek's."

"I don't. Not really. But why take a chance?" He had dropped the necklace on his desk where it lay half-hidden by papers. He moved toward her maneuvering so she couldn't see it. "In the past few months, some very odd things have happened to me, things I can't explain, so I'm not ready to rule out a curse entirely."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "Oh, Jonny, I don't care about any old curses. I just want the necklace 'cause it's pretty. It'll look great with my silver tank top. Please?"

"Well, I --" he began, to be stopped by the firm pressure of her lips on his.

"MacKensie!" came a sudden sharp voice full of outrage.

They fell apart, Vendetta in surprise, Jonathan with a guilty look on his face. Dr. Julianna Moorhouse stood in the doorway, disapproval etched in every line.

"What is this?"

Jonathan untangled himself from one of Vendetta's long chains that had caught on his tie. "Dr. Moorhouse, this is Vendetta. Vendetta, Dr. Moorhouse, head of the department and my immediate superior."

Vendetta was unfazed. "Hi."

Dr. Moorhouse's eyebrows had been climbing steadily. "Young lady, I sincerely hope you are not a student at this institution."

"Vendetta is a musician, and she just stopped by to say hello before her rehearsal, which is where she's going now." Jonathan hurried Vendetta to the door. "Thanks so much."

Vendetta chuckled at his obvious discomfort. "Any time, babe. Don't forget what you promised me." She tapped him lightly on the chin with a jeweled finger. "I'll be looking for you."

Jonathan closed the door, leaned on it a moment to summon his courage, and then turned, smiling heartily. "Now then, Dr. Moorhouse, what can I do for you?"

Her glare had enough fire to fry him on the spot. "Honestly, MacKensie, if you can't keep your little flings private! This is a university, not a bordello."

"I know that, Dr. Moorhouse, she was just --"

"I don't want to hear what she was just! Where is your report on the mermaid sighting?"

Puzzled, Jonathan said, "I left it with Liz."

"She doesn't have it, and neither do I."

"I'm positive I put it on her desk. There was nothing to it, anyway, a complete wash-out. Benedek will back me up on this one."

Dr. Moorhouse fixed him with a steely gaze. "If you think I'm taking Benedek's word on anything, you are sadly mistaken. Rewrite it."

"But --"

"And I have a new assignment for you."

Jonathan reluctantly took the folder she presented. "I'm afraid to ask."

"It shouldn't be too difficult. Just a slight bit of devil worship here in town. Expenses

should be at a minimum,” she added pointedly.

“Devil worship. Wonderful.”

“Benedek should prove invaluable on this case.”

“I haven’t seen Benedek today,” Jonathan said.

She brightened. “Dare we be so lucky? Perhaps he’s been carried off by UFOs at last.”

Jonathan paused. There had been a time not long ago when he’d thought that might be true. “I’m sure he’ll turn up.”

“Like the proverbial bad penny. Do this on your own, then. Or get Miss Halloween to help you. She could scare the devil himself.” She frowned. “Well? Don’t stand there staring. Don’t you have an eight o’clock class?”

“Yes, on my way.” Jonathan snatched up his notes.

He found it difficult to concentrate on his lecture while colorful thoughts of Vendetta danced in his mind. She really was one of the most exciting young women he’d ever met. There was something so delightfully wild and spontaneous about her, so free. He’d go to her concert; why not?

When he returned to his office, he was annoyed to find Benny in his chair with his feet up on the desk.

“Do you lead a charmed life, or what?” Benny greeted. “I expected to find a pile of beige ashes or maybe just a scorch mark.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Jonathan said.

“I got a hot lead on the necklace, Jack, so let me borrow it for a while.”

“It is a thank-you present for Angela Taylor. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“You can get her something else, pal.”

“Look, what is this? First Vendetta and now you. I’m beginning to think the damn things does have secret powers.”

Benny put his feet down. “Vendetta wants the necklace?”

“She’s been practically crawling all over me to get it.”

“Whoa, not bad, Jon-boy. The one thing Vendetta needs is more jewelry, that’s for sure. How’s she gonna face the other members of the band?”

Jonathan had been searching his pockets and now looked anxiously on the desk. “All right, where is it?” he demanded, lifting papers and books.

“Where’s what?”

Jonathan’s eyes flashed. “Don’t play dumb with me! I left it right here. Is nothing scared? Can’t you be left alone for a minute?” He straightened, hand outstretched. “The necklace, Benedek. Hand it over.”

“Whoa, hold on here,” Benny said. “I don’t have the necklace.”

Jonathan felt a cold fury growing in him that was impossible to control. “You’ve been after it ever since you saw it. You may not have it! It is mine!” He wanted to grab the man and shake him. He made a move toward Benny, but Benny, sensing an unusual flare of temper, was up and out of the chair.

“Take a chill pill, Jack. You’ll pop something.”

“The only thing I’m going to pop is your head,” Jonathan said, stalking him in a way that was unnerving. “Why can’t you leave things alone? Why do you always have to meddle? What

did you do, have one of your bizarre friends teleport it out of the office?"

Benny was beginning to get angry himself. "Jonathan, you are way out of line here. I didn't take that necklace. I don't steal things. What's with you, anyway?" He kept maneuvering to keep the larger pieces of furniture between himself and Jonathan, whose eyes seemed glazed with unreasonable anger.

"I have had enough of you and your stupid tricks. If you don't give me back that necklace, I'm going to kill you!"

"What is wrong with you?" Benny was now truly worried. Jonathan had the advantage of height and weight. If he really attacked -- what was he thinking? Jonathan? Attacking? "Jonathan, it's the curse!" One sudden move, and Jonathan had him backed into a corner. The man's eyes were livid, his face a mask of rage. "Jonathan! I don't have the necklace, honest! Cut it out!" Jonathan's hands were on his throat when a sharp voice said,

"What in heaven's name is going on in here? Can't you two quarrel someplace else?"

Over Jonathan's shoulder, Benny could see Dr. Moorhouse in the doorway. To his relief, he saw the necklace in her hand.

"Look, Jonathan, there's the necklace."

Jonathan swerved, and Benny scooted under his arm. He watched, amazed, as the anger drained out of Jonathan's face and the maniacal light in his eyes faded. Jonathan stood, dazed, his mouth half open.

Dr. Moorhouse put the necklace on his desk. "I borrowed this for a moment to examine the designs. I hope you don't mind. It's very old. Not Egyptian, as I first thought." She glanced from Benny to Jonathan as if sensing the tension in the air. "Did I interrupt a serious discussion?" Her tone was sarcastic.

Benny was first to recover. "Just a friendly little disagreement, Dr. M. I say potato, and Jon said potahto. It's that accent of his he puts on to impress the girls. It's no big deal. We're gonna call the whole thing off."

"Yes," Jonathan said. "Benedek's right. Sorry to have disturbed you."

She shook her head over this foolishness. "Very well. Since you're here, Benedek, you might as well make yourself useful. I'm sure you know all the hellish places in town where devil worshippers might meet."

"Sure thing. I believe the bimonthly covered dish supper is next Tuesday."

Jonathan moved slowly to his desk and sat down, his eyes on the necklace. Dr. Moorhouse gave him one more curious glance and departed.

Benny watched Jonathan, alert for any sign of returning anger. His friend was pale and looked as though he might have run a considerable distance. "You okay?"

"Benedek." His voice was uneven. "What I said --"

"It was the curse, Jack. Don't sweat it."

Jonathan sank back in the chair. "I've never been so angry." He put a hand to his chest where his heart was still pounding. "I'm surprised I didn't have a stroke."

"Hey, me, too." Benny propped himself on the desk. "You see what I mean? We gotta get rid of this thing." He indicated the necklace, winking innocently on the desk.

"You don't honestly believe --" Jonathan began; then, "No, it was you. You provoked me. I've lost my temper before. Nothing unusual about that."

"Sure," Benny said. "Tell it to Dr. Jekyll, bud. You were out of control. Steam was comin' out your eyeballs. If Dr. M hadn't come in when she did, you would've mashed me like a

grape.”

“That’s nonsense. I wouldn’t -- I couldn’t --”

“Ordinarily, no, but under the spell of the deadly necklace with its power to cloud men’s minds, you would’ve and could’ve and almost did.”

Jonathan pushed himself out of the chair. “I was annoyed to find it missing and rightly so. I paid a lot of money for it.”

Benny shrugged. “Fine. Have it your way. I just hope your next victim gets away.” He rubbed his neck. “You got a surprisingly strong grip for an anthropologist.”

Jonathan paused, glancing uneasily at the necklace. “That bad, was it?”

“You know it, Jack. Why else are you standing there like somebody who just took a good punch to the head?”

Jonathan put a hand to his aching forehead. “I do feel a little strange. Oh, God, I’m not possessed again, am I?”

“This is something new and different.” Benny took a pencil and gingerly poked the necklace. “This little trinket’s gonna cost you unless you let me help.”

“No,” Jonathan said firmly. “I absolutely refuse to have anything to do with any more of your weird friends.”

“Irene isn’t weird, pal. She’s just a little -- theatrical.”

“No, no, no.”

“Benny! Come in, come in, my little love blossom! Mercy me, who is this handsome boy? Come in, come in!”

“Irene, this is Dr. Jonathan MackKensie. Jon, meet Mama Irene, the Tarot Queen,” Benny introduced, grinning broadly.

Jonathan murmured a polite greeting, trying not to stare. Mama Irene was quite possibly the fattest woman he’d ever seen. Her round face with its multitude of chins beamed at him pleasantly, her tiny black eyes gleaming like shiny chips of glass stuck in dough. She was encased in magenta and gold and wore a matching turban with a huge ruby in the center. Over her satiny dress was an incongruously frilly white apron.

Seeing Jonathan’s puzzled expression, she laughed and untied the apron. “I was just finishing some cookies. Three of Cups. Bountiful outcome in perfection. Come in, come in.”

The living room looked perfectly normal except for a flat board on the floor surrounded by fat cushions.

“Sit, sit. I’ve just got to get the last batch out of the oven. How was the last reading I gave you, Benny?”

“Right on the button,” he assured her, plopping down on a cushion. “Two of Rods. Sense of wonder and enchantment. The World: reward, completion, cosmic consciousness!”

“I’m so glad.” She waddled into the kitchen. “Make yourselves at home. I’ll be right back.”

Jonathan lowered himself carefully to another cushion and looked at the array of brightly colored cards on the board. “I’m not sure I understand. Two of Rods?”

“Rods, Pentacles, Cups, and Swords, J.J.,” Benny explained. “It’s like aces, spades, hearts, and diamonds, get it? Only these little beauties Know All.”

“A fortune teller is going to remove the curse? I thought you had your heart set on

voodoo.”

“Everybody’s out of town, Jack. They’re all at the Zombie Festival.”

“Of course. How foolish of me.”

“First, Mama Irene’s going to give us a reading, so we’ll know exactly what we’re up against, and then we’ll talk curse removal.”

“No, first you gentlemen are going to sample these,” Irene said as she waddled back in with a tray.

Jonathan took one of the oddly-shaped cookies. “Thank you.”

Benny helped himself to a handful. “Hey, these turned out great!”

Irene smiled. “Just perfect. What would you like to drink? Benny, I have some of that lemonade left from last time.”

“Great. Bring it on.”

“Jonathan? Lemonade? Tea?”

“Some tea would be fine if it’s not too much trouble,” he said.

She assured him it was no bother. When she’d gone, Jonathan turned to Benny. “Exactly what sort of cookie is this?”

Benny had his mouth full. He chewed and swallowed. “They’re nuclear cookies.”

Jonathan had taken a tentative bite. He froze. “What?”

“Nuclear cookies.”

“You mean they’re radioactive?”

“Nahh. Peanut butter.” Benny held one up. “This is how a cookie might look after World War III.”

Examining the cookie from all sides, Jonathan agreed. “You may have a point there.”

Irene returned with their drinks. “Please eat them up. There are plenty more.”

“They’re very good,” Jonathan said. He was alarmed as Irene prepared to sit, but she landed safely, the cushion sighing gustily beneath her.

Benny leaned forward. “Okay, Irene, it’s like I told you on the phone. “We need to know all we can about the forces surrounding this necklace. Put it on the table, Jon.” Jonathan did so while Irene picked up the cards. “Irene’s the best,” Benny said. “She uses the ancient Celtic method of divination.”

Irene studied Jonathan carefully. “The Knight of Swords,” she decided. She searched the deck until she found a card depicting a serious dark-eyed man in armor. “Perfect.”

“That’s your Significator,” Benny said.

Oh, Jonathan mouthed, lost. He watched as Irene’s plump hands shuffled the remaining cards three times. Then she cut the deck into three piles and placed them face downward to her left. She chose the far left stack. As she laid out ten cards in a pattern, she intoned in a deep voice.

“This covers him, this crosses him, this crowns him. This is beneath him, this is behind him, this is before him.”

Six cards now formed a cross shape around the Significator card. Irene placed the four remaining cards in a line to the right side of the cross and flexed her fat little fingers.

“Now we’re ready. This first card covering the Significator reflects the general atmosphere of the question.” She turned it over. “Temperance reversed. Hmm. That means

conflicting interests in business or personal life. Unfortunate combinations.”

Jonathan gave Benny a dark glance. “You can say that again.”

“Second card: forces opposing you. Six of Pentacles reversed. Someone with a greedy desire for wealth. This is also a card of illusion and envy.”

“What did I tell you, Jack? Something mysterious and greedy!”

“Someone, she said, not something.”

Irene turned over the third card, which showed a pleasant-faced woman with long dark hair. She was holding a flowering staff. “This crowns him: hopes for the future. The Queen of Rods. A warm, honorable woman, devoted to her family and loyal to her friends. Success.”

Jonathan felt this was getting uncomfortably personal. “That’s what everyone hopes for, isn’t it?”

“Sounds like Vendetta to me, chum,” Benny said and received a scowl.

“Fourth card: foundation of the matter. Ah,” she said, pleased. “The Emperor. A strong card, Jonathan, one of authority. One who is master of his emotions with an active intelligence able to realize ideas.”

Despite his skepticism, Jonathan was flattered. He caught Benny’s look of glee and quickly changed his expression.

“Fifth card: what is behind you. This is the influence passing away.” She turned it over. “Ace of Pentacles. Contentment and bliss.”

“That’s passing away?” Jonathan asked.

“Sixth card: what is before you, the influence in the near future. Eight of Rods reversed. Dear me. Guilt, internal disputes, conflict.”

Benny rubbed his hands together. “Now we’re getting somewhere!”

Irene turned the next card. “This seventh card represents the attitude of the subject toward the matter.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Jonathan said. “Sheer disbelief.”

“Four of Cups,” Irene said. “A sense of boredom and dissatisfaction with the environment and possibly with the self. A longing for change.” She raised concerned eyes. “Action must be taken, but the seeker is hesitant.”

“Action? What sort of action?” Benny asked.

Jonathan shifted his position uneasily. A longing for change? A sense of boredom? Surely this was mere coincidence. How could pieces of colored paper know anything?

“Let me complete the reading,” Irene said. “Eighth card: the environment. Seven of Rods reversed. Anxiety and confusion. Ninth card: hopes and fears of the subject in this matter. Hmm. Four of Pentacles reversed. Material ambitions thwarted, possible loss of possessions.”

Jonathan nodded. “I’ll go along with that. Everyone’s been after this necklace.”

“Tenth and last card: outcome.” Irene turned over the card and gave a little gasp.

Benny leaned in for a closer look. “Uh-ho.”

“What is it?” Jonathan asked. The card showed a strange tall building in flames being struck by lightning.

“The Tower,” Benny said in a hushed voice.

Irene sat back. “Unforeseen catastrophe.”

Benny whistled, impressed. "This is just about the worst card in the deck! Are we on the right track, or what?"

"Worst card? What do you mean, worst card?" Jonathan asked.

Irene peered at the cards, her wide brow deeply furrowed. "There is a pattern here. Conflict and anxiety surround this necklace. There will be great danger and illusion. But your cards, Jonathan, are very strong." She pointed to the Emperor and the Four of Cups. "Action must be taken, but the seeker is hesitant. When the time comes, you must not be hesitant and master your emotions."

Benny slapped Jonathan on the back. "No problem. Jonny here prides himself on his control. What else do you see?"

"I wish I could tell you more about the forces opposing you, Benny. It's all very shadowy."

"Ooo, shadows, that's what we're after. Do you need to give me a reading, too?"

She shook her head. "Jonathan owns the necklace. He'll be the one to decide."

Jonathan sighed. "Why is it always up to me? I don't even believe in this! I never have."

Irene's expression was stern. "The answer is in the cards." Her plump finger stabbed the table. "You must be prepared to take action against the conflict ahead."

"Yes, but this Tower card is unforeseen catastrophe. Unforeseen. How am I supposed to take action against that?"

"The same way you always do," Benny said. "You panic, and then you leap right in."

Jonathan scooped up the necklace and got to his feet. "You're no help."

"Hey, don't you want to leave the necklace here? Irene can neutralize it, can't you, Irene?"

She gathered up her cards. "I don't think so, Benny. I've never seen anything quite like those stones."

"It's zombie turquoise, right?"

"Zombie turquoise," Jonathan said. "You're unbelievable."

Irene was calm. "Everything will be resolved in the conflict ahead."

"Conflict will have to wait," Jonathan said. "I've got plans for this evening. Nice to have met you, Irene." He shook her hand. "The cookies were delicious." With an impatient gesture, he indicated the door. "Benedek."

Benny gave Irene's plump cheek a kiss. "Thanks a lot, Irene. We'll be on the lookout. Don't mind Jonathan. He's just a little stubborn. It's useful now and then, but hard on his loved ones. See ya."

She waved both hands. "Oh, wait, before you go. Help me up."

Benny took one hand and Jonathan took the other. With a considerable amount of heaving, they hauled her to her feet. Irene thanked them, laughing.

"I'd be there the rest of the day!"

Benny stooped down. "Here's a card you missed."

"Nine of Rods reversed," she said, frowning. "Distress, obstacles, adversity." She pressed Benny's hand. "Looks like a bad number for you, Benny. Be careful."

Driving back to the Georgetown campus, Benny asked, "These plans for the evening wouldn't include a little rock concert, would they?"

“What if they do?”

“Just tryin’ to help out, pal. Take my advice and get a pair of earplugs. You’re not into heavy vibrations -- and don’t give Vendetta that necklace.”

Jonathan glared. “If I hear one more word about this necklace --”

“Leave it with me and your problem’s solved.”

“If you would leave, my problem would be solved. I’ve been walking around with it for days, and aside from a perfectly understandable flash of temper, nothing has happened.”

“It’s savin’ up for the big one, Jack.”

Jonathan had had enough. “You can let me out right here.”

Benny found an empty parking space at the far end of the campus and pulled over. When Jonathan got out, he said, “Okay, okay. Maybe for some unknown reason, the curse isn’t working on you that much. But be careful, huh?”

Before Jonathan could answer, a voice called, “Benny!”

“Who’s this?” Jonathan asked as the petite blonde came up. “Another one of your fortune tellers?”

Benny hoped his face wasn’t as red as it felt. “One of my researchers. Miss Stevens, hello.”

“They said I might find you somewhere around the campus,” Bunny said. “I found some more information on the necklace that might be helpful.”

“Great!” Benny got out of the car and hesitated. He had grave doubts about introducing Bunny to Jonathan. Women seemed fatally attracted to his friends, and Bunny was exactly Jon’s type, or so Benny thought. He was very surprised when, beyond polite interest, Jonathan didn’t seem overly intrigued by Bunny, and wonder of wonders, she didn’t seem to fall under the MacKensie spell.

She likes me, he thought, ridiculously pleased. “So what’ve you got, Bunny?”

She handed him several typed pages. “I’m sure you’re familiar with the usual powers of certain gems?”

“Sure. Whoa, look at this! One of the major turquoise deposits is in Iran! That fits in with the Sultan story. Yo! Another’s in Tibet!”

Trying to stem the tide of excitement that was likely to become intense, Jonathan asked the young woman, “Exactly what do you mean by ‘usual powers’?”

She showed him the list. “A garnet means constancy; emeralds, success in love; opals, hope; topaz, fidelity.”

Jonathan put on his glasses to have a look. “And here, it says turquoise stands for prosperity. Now what’s wrong with that?”

“That’s for ordinary turquoise, pal, not the zombie variety you’ve got in your pocket.”

Jonathan appealed to the little blonde. “Miss Stevens, please tell him how ridiculous this is.”

“If I might have a look at the necklace?” she asked.

Jonathan reluctantly pulled it out, but kept it in his hand.

“A very unusual color,” she said.

“Is it the Nigon Necklace?” Benny asked.

“It’s hard to tell. If we took it back to --”

Jonathan crammed it back into his pocket. "It's not going anywhere."

"Listen to this!" Benny read one of the pages aloud. "'The coven of nine met every full moon for the ceremony of the stones. The leader would wear the sacred necklace and drink from the silver goblet a potion of magic dust mixed with secret elixir. In this fashion, the coven renewed itself. If anyone outside the coven took the necklace, the coven's curse would fall upon him.'"

Jonathan was unimpressed. "I've heard this kind of story before."

"Wait, wait. There's more."

"I thought a coven had thirteen."

"Most of them, yes, but these witches were different. Listen: 'Fearful of discovery, the coven began to meet once every hundred years.' Wow!"

"Benedek, I find this all quite riveting, but what's your point?"

"During loud tumultuous times, the coven resurfaces. The stones are worshipped and powers renewed. Nine is the number of their power.' This is great! Don't you get it? The card I picked up was the Nine of Rods reversed. It's all making sense now!"

"This is utterly absurd," Jonathan said. "If nine is such a special number, why doesn't the necklace have nine stones?"

Benny's face fell. "Doesn't it?"

"It's got five."

"And four silver pieces," Benny said.

Benny was up again. "That makes nine! Jon-boy, this is definitely the Nigon Necklace, and sooner or later, those witches will be after it."

Jonathan smiled wryly. "Of course. Will you excuse me? I have a normal life to lead. A pleasure to meet you, Miss Stevens."

As he walked away, Benny called, "Don't forget your earplugs!"

"Earplugs?" Benny said.

"Jon's on his way to a rock and roll concert tonight," Benny explained. "We'd better go along, too, if we want to get that necklace away from him."

"Doesn't he believe any of this?"

"Nope. Not a word." He grinned. "You don't, either, not really. Admit it."

Her cheeks turned a becoming pink. "Well, it is a little far-fetched. Witches and sacred stones." She glanced back at Jonathan's retreating form. "We really need to examine that necklace more closely."

"Don't worry," Benny said. "I'll think of something."

Her brown eyes were all admiration. "I'm sure you will. Why don't I meet you after the concert? That way, I can finish my research."

"Great," he said, while his more reasonable side said, slow down, you idiot. You weren't going to get involved, remember?

This is it, he argued with himself. This is for real. As soon as I settle this necklace business, I'm going into full-time courting. I'm crazy about this girl.

Benny looked at her watch. "You may not be able to get a ticket, Benny. I think the concert's sold out."

"No problem," he said. "I'll see you at Chenille's afterwards, and I'll have that necklace."

She stood on tiptoe to give him a shy kiss. "Good luck."

Benny was certain he heard bells and explosions. This is it. This is for real. This is the future Mrs. Edgar Benedek.

The box office was closed with a large "Sold Out" sign plastered across the front. Benny waded back through the crowds of disgruntled Scum Bag fans, not too concerned. After all, what could happen to Jonathan among fifteen thousand screaming teenagers? Gee, all sorts of things, but an attack by turquoise-crazed witched wasn't one of them.

He sighed and leaned against one of the huge brightly-colored posters, trying to map out his campaign. Maybe I could disguise myself as a Viper. He gave the poster a closer look. Nah. Wouldn't work. They were all quite visibly female, all nine of them.

Nine?

Benny counted again. Vendetta, two guitarists, two bass players, a drummer, one woman on keyboards, and two backup singers. Nine! Oh, God, Jonny, you're in it again.

Jonathan didn't see how this could be called music, but he'd said he would come, so here he was. Thanks to Benny's warning, he'd worn earplugs; even so, the noise level made his whole body thrum, his heart jarring with each beat.

Vendetta looked magnificent in the gold lights and smoke, tossing her multicolored hair, stomping and strutting in red spike heels.

Scream, Satan's daughters, scream!

The auditorium echoed as thousands of voices screamed along. Jonathan glanced nervously at the ecstatic young faces, glazed eyes and half-open mouths. Having no point of reference, he wasn't certain if this was the standard reaction of rock show crowds, but it made him uncomfortable. It was as if they were under a spell --

Oh, no, he told himself firmly. That's Benedek's department. This is just a perfectly normal rock concert -- if that wasn't a contradiction in terms.

Lights whirled and flashed. Guitars whined and shrieked. Vendetta vanished in an explosion of red smoke. Quite a good trick, Jonathan thought. The applause was deafening, but she and the Vipers didn't come back for an encore. The crowd began to chant for the Scum Bags.

Jonathan removed his earplugs, still hearing a faint buzz, and worked his way around to the backstage area. He showed his pass and was admitted to the Vipers' dressing room.

"Jonathan, you came!" Vendetta threw herself into his arms. She felt sleek and satiny, her makeup running in colorful rivulets down her sweaty cheeks. "Wasn't it wild? Wasn't it fabulous? Didn't you just love it?" Fortunately, he wasn't required to make a reply. "Roxanne, Megan, I want you to meet Jonathan. Alice, Sophy, this is the guy I was telling you about. Jonathan, that's Fredrica, Betty, B.J., and over there's Tinsel."

Jonathan nodded to each one, murmuring a greeting. The Vipers were in various stages of undress, peeling off sweat-soaked velvet jackets and leotards, pinning up their untidy corkscrew curls, and taking deep pulls from the cigarettes scattered around the lighted mirrors.

"I'll, um, just wait outside."

"Oh, no problem, babe," Vendetta said. "We're not fussy. Take a seat. It'll only be a minute."

Jonathan reached behind him for the doorknob. "It's no bother."

“Silly!” Vendetta pulled him to a chair. “I’ve got big plans for us this evening,” she said in a low voice. “Wanna guess?”

There was a knock on the door and a man poked in his head. “Hey, Vendetta, there’s a guy here from Rolling Stone. Shall I send him in?”

“Yeah, sure. We got a few minutes.”

Benny strolled in, his expression betraying none of his anxiety. Jonathan was okay, but there was a definite aura of menace in the room. The young woman -- or whatever they were -- regarded his partner with unhealthy intensity.

Jonathan was incredulous. “Benedek, what are you doing here?”

“I didn’t know you worked for Rolling Stone,” Vendetta said.

Benny said, “I don’t. I work for the National Register, and though we’re all keen on rock and roll over there, we’re even more interested in good old witchcraft.”

“Oh, really?” she said and the Vipers laughed.

“Will you get out?” Jonathan said.

Benny gave him a superior look. “Count ‘em, J.J. Nine. N-I-N-E.”

“I can see that! What I can’t see is this number fixation of yours.” He turned to the group. “Please excuse him. He was just leaving.” He took Benny’s arm. “Out!”

Vendetta laughed again. “Oh, it’s no trouble. You see, he’s right.”

“Right?” Jonathan repeated.

Her blue eyes glittered. “I think it’s about time you gave me the necklace, Jonathan.”

The edges of the room faded into shadows. The eight Vipers were suddenly taller, bonier, their features shifting, small pinpoints of red light where their eyes had been. Vendetta’s smile widened, revealing small sharp teeth. Her blue gaze was mocking. From the auditorium came the muffled rhythmic thump of music like an immense heart beat.

Trying to shake the dumfounded MacKensie back to reality, Benny joked, “Hey, you sure know how to pick ‘em, pal. Bewitching, wasn’t she? Well, you’re still new to the game. Can’t blame you for having one put over --” his banter trailed off as Vendetta shimmered. She became smaller, lighter. The frenzied mop of orange and green hair melted into a smooth cap of gold. The blue eyes faded into brown.

No.

No.

“Bunny,” he said, shocked.

Forces opposing you: Six of Pentacles reversed, a card of illusion.

“How clever of you, Benny,” she said sweetly.

He was stunned, his dreams crashing around him. He was dimly aware of Jonathan making choking noises of disbelief, of the creature smiling pleasantly, alternating her appearance as it suited her. Every time he saw that little face with its warm brown eyes, he felt as if someone had kicked him in the stomach. No! It wasn’t fair! He couldn’t have been so foolish. He had been in l -- he stopped before making this admission, even to himself.

Jon-boy, I don’t know if I can handle this.

Jonathan’s thoughts were reeling. This was impossible. Exotic Vendetta and shy Miss Stevens -- the same person? This was crazy. And Benedek was standing like a stone. Where was the conman’s spiel, the dealing, the wisecracks? He cast a look in his friend’s direction and was appalled by the man’s expression. He hadn’t realized the depth of feeling Benny had for the

young lady -- for what he thought was a young lady.

"Benedek," he said urgently, forgetting his own distress. "Benedek, don't go soft on me now! You're the expert. What's going on? What do we do?"

His plea brought Benny out of his stupor. He blinked and took a few steadying breaths. "No problem, Jack," he said in a voice he didn't recognize. "She'll tell us."

The creature perversely kept her Bunny persona. "I want the necklace."

"I haven't got it."

Bunny's mouth snarled, a gesture that sent a shock wave of repulsion through Benny. He staggered back, colliding with Jonathan, who managed to stay upright.

"Don't be foolish," she said. "Give it to me."

"Hang tough, Jonny. If she could, she would've taken it by now."

The thing that was Benny gave him an approving smile. "A slight technicality." She shimmered into Vendetta. "I thought this might entice you, Jonathan, but how gallant you are! Concerned there may be a curse, you keep the necklace yourself. And you, Benny." Once more she was the small blonde. "I was certain that together we could convince Jonathan to give us the necklace. Oh, well, it was fun while it lasted, wasn't it?"

When Benny didn't answer with a ready quip, Jonathan said, "Come on, Benedek! She was too subdued for you and you know it."

"Why keep it?" the creature said. "It is cursed. It will bring you nothing but sorrow." Her voice became soft and mellow. "Give it to me."

Jonathan's head felt heavy; his eyelids drooped.

Benny gave him a sharp kick in the shin. "Jonathan!"

"Ow! Damn it, Benedek!"

"Stay alert! I can't -- I'm havin' a little problem here."

Jonathan saw the effort it was taking the man to face Benny in her present state. "Sorry."

The creature was Vendetta now, seductive and alluring. "Jonathan, all you have to do is give me the necklace. You and Benny can walk out of here, free and happy, untroubled by the curse."

Jonathan took a deep breath. "Whoever you are, I am not going to give you the necklace."

She drew back with a hiss, her skin peeling away from her face to reveal a ghastly grinning skull. "Then you will die."

Unforeseen catastrophe. The words flashed into Jonathan's mind. Conflict, anxiety. Action must be taken.

Nine grinning skulls surrounded him. Nine pairs of bony hands reached out.

Master your emotions. Realize ideas.

He reached into his pocket and brought out the necklace. In the dim light, the strange green stones gleamed eerily. The coven made odd cries of delight. He heard Benny say, "Jonathan," in a peculiar tone of voice.

He looked around the tightening circle, seeing nine grotesque faces. Action must be taken. This was some sort of insane joke, a trick, like the smoke effect on stage. Benedek was no help, still coming to grips with Bunny's strange behavior.

It is up to me, just as Irene said. Realize ideas --

"All right," he said in an unsteady voice as a bony claw grasped his shoulder. "Nine's the big number, is it? Suppose we change that?" With a quick motion, he broke the necklace. "Will six and three work as well?"

The screams that followed made him wish he still had his earplugs in. He had time for one more tug on the necklace before he was knocked to the ground. He saw Benny rolling over in the sudden rush of air that filled the room, saw a whirlwind of bones and red smoke. He huddled in a tight ball, trying to protect his head and eyes from the stinging gusts. The screams seemed to go on forever.

"Benedek!" he called, unable to see his friend.

"Nice move, Jack!" came the cheerful muffled reply. "Just ride out the storm!"

"What's happening?" he shouted, but if Benny answered, he didn't hear. Something hard struck his shoulder. Glass crashed and chairs went flying. Over all the noise, he could still hear the frustrated shrieks of the Vipers. Then there was an explosion near his head, and the world went up in flames.

I knew this was going to happen, he thought, just before he blacked out. Up in flames.

"Jonathan? Jon? Wake up." Someone patted his cheek. "Come on, pal. We've been de-cursed."

He blinked and cautiously opened his eyes. "Benedek?"

"The one and only. Some light show, huh?"

Jonathan sat up. They were in what was left of Vendetta's dressing room. It was in shambles and reeked of smoke. "What happened? Where's Vendetta and those skull things?"

"Back to the witches' graveyard. Come on, we'd better split." He pulled Jonathan up. "I don't want to be blamed for this."

Jonathan looked around. "The necklace." Pieces of the necklace were scattered and burnt, the green stones a dull gray.

Benny nudged a piece with his toe. "Nice goin'," he said. "You killed it."

"I suppose we ought to look into this devil worship thing," Jonathan said reluctantly. He sat back in his chair, resting his chin on his steepled fingers. "Dr. Moorhouse expects results."

Benny had abandoned his customary perch on the desk for the window where he gazed abstractedly at the students on the lawn. "Huh? Oh, yeah, yeah. That. I guess so."

Jonathan's eyes traveled to the copy of the National Register that lay on his desk. "Vipers Vanish!" the headline blared. Well, at least Benny had gotten a story out of the bizarre incident. As far as he was concerned, Vendetta and her vipers had put on one hell of a show and had skipped town. Just as well.

Benny was thinking of another headline: Blonde Steals Heart. Of course, Gladys Bonita "Bunny" Stevens had vanished as mysteriously as Vendetta and the Vipers. Chenille didn't think much about it. She'd hired assistants before and they rarely stayed long. Well, the necklace was destroyed, the curse broken. Some good came out of this. Time to bounce back.

"Women," he said, earning a curious look from Jonathan. "I don't even know why I liked her. She wasn't my type at all. She was serious and conservative and didn't believe in --" he stared at his friend, light dawning. "She was just like you."

Jonathan had been thinking that Vendetta had all the qualities that normally drove him

crazy: wild clothes, careless behavior, a bizarre lifestyle. "I found some rather interesting similarities in Vendetta and yourself," he replied cautiously.

There was a long moment of reflective silence.

Benny headed for the door. "I don't think I wanna get into this. I'm gone."

"For once, you may be right."

"Catch ya later, Jack." In a moment, he poked his head back in the door. "I've got a great idea. Send Angela some flowers, okay? My biorhythms and I will be eternally grateful."

Note: With the exception of the Tower, all cards used by Mama Irene are from an actual reading on the question of the Nigon Necklace.