

Slice of Life

by Sheila Paulson

"**N**o, Benedek. No. There is no way I will ever believe that the Martians ever came within a million miles of Cascade, Washington." Jonathan MacKensie gave a stomp with his foot. "This is simply another of those weird, bizarre stories you make up just to sell papers. I'll have no part in it."

Edgar Benedek simply looked at Jonathan, his entire demeanor radiating pity. "You know what, Jack, you have got to loosen up. You'd think with the shining example of Doctor M in front of you that you'd want to cut out on the needing bran muffins routine. Kick back and go with the flow once in a while. So what if the Red Planet Menace never cut a swathe through the Pacific Northwest. Something weird's going down out there, and even if it weren't, it would be a heck of a lot better than Georgetown in a heat wave."

He had a point, but it would never do for Jonathan to admit it, at least not so early in the argument. Heat lay over the D.C. area like a huge fuzzy blanket, a soggy one. Humidity warred with temperature in an effort to outdo the 90-plus days, and the Institute's classrooms lacked decent air conditioning. Teaching in short sleeves except on a dig was unprofessional, but Jonathan wasn't the only professor who had resorted to casual wear for the season. The image of rain-washed mountains, cool and blue, rose like a beacon before his eyes. But this was Benedek. Pasting suspicion on his features, Jonathan asked, "What makes anybody claim it was Martians, anyway?"

Benedek chortled. "Well, it could be aliens," he conceded. "Why not, J.J.? Maybe I was yanking your chain."

"Benedek ..."

"Relaxovision, buds. I thought you'd freak if I mentioned little green men."

"So you did it to bug me? Honestly, Benedek, you've developed manipulation to a fine art. I have classes this summer. I can't just pick up and go —"

"To Cascade, Washington, MacKensie." Doctor Juliana Moorhouse breezed into his office, her mouth twisted up in a way reminding Jonathan of bran muffins. He had to struggle to stifle a smile, but it faded immediately.

Suspecting a determination to have her way rather than constipation had produced the expression on her face, Jonathan wailed, "Not you, too, Doctor Moorhouse." If it were any other two people, he'd suspect a conspiracy. Benedek would consider Moorhouse's arrival pure serendipity, but she would likely regard Benedek's presence as a most unwelcome intrusion. Odd how two such contradictory people could venture down wildly divergent paths and arrive at exactly the same place. Repeatedly.

"Oh." She turned to survey the gaudy-shirted man who sat, one hip perched on Jonathan's desk. "Benedek. You've heard of the incident?"

"Was just getting ready to spring it on Jonny."

The department chair heaved a resigned sigh. "How does he always know? It must be the snooper instinct."

"Nah, it's natural talent, plus a super network of spies all over the world." Benedek stood up tall and grinned wickedly at Doctor Moorhouse, who gritted her teeth at the very sight. "You heard about the mind-wiping, then?" he prompted.

"I did. I am acquainted with the first victim. I believe MacKensie has met him, too. Jonathan, you remember Jed Stone?"

Mind-wiping? Jonathan frowned. Four summers ago, back in 1984, he'd been on a dig in a Skokomish site out in Washington State with a collection of eager and not-so-eager students. Since Georgetown's budget stretched only so far, they often made do with volunteer assistants, including Jed Stone, a Seattle insurance agent who made a practice of spending weekends and vacations doing the grunt work and helping to supervise students on various digs. He knew a lot about the native populations of the area, had friends in local tribal councils. He'd been a great help on that dig, and he'd brought along his teenaged stepson, who'd planned to become an anthropologist. The three of them had spent a lot of time together outside the dig, while Jonathan and Blair had discussed anthropology and what courses the boy might need to take when he started at the university. The eager students always stuck in Jonathan's mind. As for Jed Stone, Jonathan remembered him as a good-hearted, ethical, entertaining man who had endeared himself to the students and made the professors' lives far easier.

"I recall him very well. If he says something needs investigating, I believe it. Not that I expect the Martians to have anything to do with it, Benedek."

Moorhouse angled a wary and suspicious glance at Benedek. "It's a tragic thing, MacKensie. The dig was fascinating because it was Kwakiutl — and they're a British Columbia tribe. Doctor Fields, who is conducting the dig, was astonished to find a site so far south, and at first thought the Kwakiutl artifacts were a result of trade, but so far, it's proved fairly consistently Kwakiutl. But it becomes even more interesting. Jed Stone discovered a metallic orb with designs and patterns etched into the surface that didn't match anything in the previous levels."

"A metallic orb in a Kwakiutl site? That's inconsistent." Jonathan grew interested in spite of himself. "Could it have been planted there?"

"Doctor Fields reports no similar artifacts have yet been found anywhere on the site. Fields doesn't know where the orb came from and it matches nothing found in the region before. There has evidently been no obvious earthquake in the immediate vicinity to disturb the strata. It was Stone who picked up the orb once it was recorded and photographed in situ."

"And boom — instant mind-wipe," Benedek chimed in.

Jonathan's muscles tightened. "You can't be serious, Benedek." He considered Jed Stone a friend. This was not good news.

"As usual, Benedek exaggerates," Moorhouse said hastily. She put her hand on Jonathan's forearm, either to soothe or restrain him, he couldn't be sure. "A typical tabloid distortion of the facts. Jed's memory is not gone. It is only the last few years that have faded."

"A head injury —" Jonathan insisted. Maybe he had tripped and fallen.

"No, Jonathan." She caught his gaze. "He picked up the sphere, looked at it, and then he let go and it fell from his hands. I'm told he looked around, totally confused. He thinks it's 1985."

"A stroke?" Jonathan offered. Not a good option, but he couldn't accept that simply touching an artifact could steal away three years of a man's life.

"Not unless the student who picked it up when Jed dropped it had an identical stroke. He blanked out, believed he had just graduated from high school."

"Which student?" Jonathan asked uneasily.

"Montgomery Watson."

Jonathan's face fell. Monty Watson had just completed his junior year, archaeology major, physical anthro minor, the brightest student Jonathan had taught in a good ten years. A likeable boy, he had that gift that would make him go far — if the mysterious orb hadn't put an end to that. And Jed Stone, too. It wasn't right.

Doctor Moorhouse patted his arm. "It's early days, MacKensie. The doctors are working on it."

That offered no real reassurance, and Jonathan didn't take it as such. If the artifact held contamination, it might be something that medical science hadn't yet learned to understand. It might be dangerous even without physical contact. "What about the artifact? If it's causing such reactions —"

Moorhouse nodded. "Doctor Fields forbade anyone else to touch the artifact. They eased it into a lead-lined box and sealed it away until it could be studied properly, X-rayed, tested for contamination."

"Better to avoid the hands-on approach," Benedek suggested.

Moorhouse looked down her nose at him. "How did you become involved in this, Benedek?"

"My contact's a park ranger in the area. He lets me know about all the Bigfoot sightings."

"Benedek, if you dare to claim the items Doctor Fields found are Bigfoot artifacts —" Moorhouse exploded.

Jonathan saw temptation tiptoe across Benedek's face, and he gave him a surreptitious nudge. Unable to resist, Benny took a half step sideways, out of range of Jonathan's elbow, and beamed at the department chair. "Whoa, that is a great idea, Doctor M. What do you bet there's a whole complex, technological Bigfoot society out there in the Pacific Northwest? They're too good at hiding, otherwise. They've got human-detecting radar, and devices like the orb planted all over the place, so if a human sees them, they forget it. Perfect. I can see the headlines now. 'THE BIGFOOT MINDWIPE CONSPIRACY.' Jordy will love me for this one."

Moorhouse threw Jonathan a glance brimming with sympathy and exasperation. While Jonathan shared the exasperation — it took so little to start Benedek on one of his bizarre rants — a part of him resented the sympathy. There were times while trailing Benedek through the weirdness of talking trees and aerobic exorcists that he longed to retreat to the safety of academia and never look at another unexplained phenomenon case again. Yet it wasn't Moorhouse's place to fault Benedek and pity Jonathan for a friendship that, while aggravating, brought considerable excitement and entertainment, not to mention satisfaction, into his life.

"You will keep Georgetown's name out of any such ludicrous articles, Benedek, or we shall discuss the issue with the assistance of our lawyers."

Benedek blew her a kiss. "And I love you, too, Julie baby." He caught Jonathan's eye and winked at him.

At the appellation, Moorhouse's face nearly purpled. "MacKensie, I will rely upon you to restrain him." Her brow lowered. "I hope my trust in you is not misplaced."

"Don't worry, Doctor Moorhouse." Jonathan made fierce shushing motions at Benedek. "If Bigfoot is actually out there, I promise you, I will spend the rest of my days checking out every single unexplained phenomenon you choose to assign me." He hoped she wouldn't realize that he, unfortunately, did that already.

"Very well, MacKensie," she conceded with a burning glare at Benedek. "I will see your classes are covered for the next week. Go out to Cascade. Doctor Fields will meet your plane. I want this matter resolved as soon as possible."

Benedek enlivened the cross-country plane flight to Cascade with theories that grew wilder and wilder. Sometimes, he simply couldn't resist. Nudging Jonny-boy's conventional veneer was one of his favorite pastimes. Once you got past the stuffy, PBS-loving, clam-chowder-eating facade, there was a great guy inside. Provoking the inner Jonathan MacKensie to the forefront could be a real challenge, but Benny had fond memories of Jonathan pretending to be Judge "Ray" Bean, the Hanging Judge, and sneaking into the Fitness Factory to rescue Benny from the body-part harvesters. If Benny pushed hard enough, the wild and crazy side of Jonathan ventured tentatively into the light — and a good time was had by all.

With the possible exception, of course, of Doctor Moorhouse.

"So tell me about this Jed Stone," he asked after a quick flirtation with Marie the flight attendant, a gorgeous blonde he'd choose as his personal favorite to be hijacked with. "A good guy, huh?"

Jonathan glanced after Marie, and Benedek hid a smile when he realized Jonathan was eyeing her legs. Jonny pulled himself to attention immediately — after all, it wouldn't do to admit that a prim-and-proper professor possessed actual functioning hormones — and sobered. Benny felt a surge of regret that he'd had to remind Jonathan of his friend's condition, but they needed to figure this out to save the guy, after all.

"Jed's one of the best," Jonathan admitted, "although I don't really know him very well. We spent six weeks on that Skokomish dig, and Jed was mostly there on the weekends, and then one whole week when he took off from work. He had his teenage stepson with him every weekend. You could tell the boy worshiped the ground he walked on. His daughter came one weekend; she was getting ready to go off to her second year of college. The students on the dig spent the whole weekend trying to persuade her to transfer to Georgetown." He caught himself before he could sink too deeply into reminiscences. "Jed always takes a genuine interest in the people he meets. When he talks to you, he really listens and remembers what you say. He listened to all my theories about the possibility of a bicameral brain —"

"In *Australopithecus* and its quasi-contemporary cavemen, right. Okay, so we know right off the top the guy is warped."

"Honestly, Benedek, you have no appreciation for anthropology, paleontology —"

He waggled his eyebrows. "Or any other 'ology', right, Doctor J? I'm a lost cause, I know. You wanna compare notes on ancient bones? I know all about 'em."

"You know all the sensational tabloid 'facts'," Jonathan disagreed. "It's not the same."

"You never know what stray bits of wild information lurk here." Benny tapped himself on the forehead. It would never do to admit he'd "boned" up on Jonathan's line of work, so he just grinned. "Jed Stone?" he prompted.

"Jed is an insurance salesman. Blair's mother was a genuine hippie. They'd ended their relationship by the time I met Blair, but Jed hadn't ended his paternal relationship with Blair, and Blair seemed

very fond of him. His mother, Naomi, came to visit one weekend to see Blair. She was a total free spirit, and Jed is the type of man who accepts responsibility without hesitation. Quite honestly, I was not surprised their relationship hadn't lasted. Naomi was an intriguing woman — the male students ogled her at every opportunity — but I'm afraid a rather flighty one, who was quite happy to leave all responsibility for her son to Jed, even though he had no real obligation. That he accepted it without hesitation and went out of his way to befriend Blair and include him in his life even after breaking with Blair's mother says a lot for the kind of man he is. He was good with the students, too. One of them was doing drugs, unbeknownst to myself or Doctor Steen. Jed dealt with the situation, arranged for the boy to go into treatment, spent time with him."

"What happened to the kid?" Benedek had a sneaky feeling he knew the answer already.

"He graduated last month. Four point average. He said later that, well ..." Embarrassment flooded his face.

"Give yourself a little credit here, doc. Betcha he said that he'd never have made it without you and Jed, am I right? 'Course I am."

He could tell from Jonathan's very posture that he was right. Jonny wouldn't abandon a kid in trouble. He had probably blamed himself for not noticing the problem in the first place and had worked double time to help the kid.

"How do you know about the 'mind wipe' effect?" Jonathan interjected quickly. He'd learned the fine art of distraction, probably from the need to work with Doctor Moorhouse on a daily basis. It was fun for Benny to drop by and bug the heck out of the lady, but she was Jonathan's boss. He needed to know how to offer distraction. Benny let him pull it off, although he rolled his eyes to let Jonathan know he was busted.

"Max Zywicki — he's the park ranger — called because the dig is near his station and they called him in when your friend had his sudden memory erase."

"I imagine it made a nice change from Bigfoot hunting," Jonathan retorted.

Benny let him get away with that. With a student and an old friend doing the 'who am I?' gig, he was sure to be tense, and nobody had ever claimed Jon-boy loved airplanes.

The plane hit a small air pocket and lurched, and Jonathan's fingers dug into the armrests, but any panic he felt didn't show on his face, only momentary queasiness. No, panic wasn't one of Jack's games. He might do furious, perplexed, outraged, disbelieving. But when he was scared, he stood his ground, and if there was anything he could do about it, he did it. Between him and the 727, he could do nothing but ride it out.

"Are you kidding?" Benny challenged. "Bigfoot hunting has got everything going for it. Fame —"

"Notoriety," Jonathan countered.

"Fortune —"

"From the suckers who buy that kind of popular claptrap."

"Excitement —"

"The 'joy' of risking life and limb in face-to-face encounters with bears."

Good. J.J. was getting into his stride.

"Danger —"

"Proof that he's an idiot," Jonathan snapped.

"So you wanna tell me why you faced down Wyatt at the Whitewoods?" Benny asked.

"Not from any love of danger." But Jonathan's face softened. He caught himself immediately. "If you even remotely imagine there is any comparison between roaming the bear-ridden woods looking for non-existent creatures and helping a friend —"

"Relaxovision, Jack," Benny laughed. "Relaxovision." He didn't need — or want — any more of a declaration. Given the right provocation, Jonathan could go all mushy, and Benny didn't buy into the sentimental routine. Learned that at his pop's knee. Don't let 'em figure out the essential Benedek. Gives you an edge. Not to mention protection ...

He let the thought go. "Max didn't know much, just that they called him in when people started locking up their pasts. He sent for paramedics, and they hauled your buddy Jed and the student off to Cascade General — nearest hospital with the facilities to figure out what the heck was blanking them out."

Jonathan's mouth tightened, then eased. Then tightened again. Who could figure out the twisted regions of the MacKensie psyche. "They haven't diagnosed the condition yet?"

"Max went out of the loop when the ambulance left. At least for that part of it."

Jonny sharpened to attention like a groupie who's just spotted his favorite rock star. "What part is left, Benedek? If you mean to claim he had a furry encounter in the woods —"

Grinning, Benny raised his hands to silence the rant. "No way, Jose. He took charge of the artifacts."

"They're the property of the Georgetown Institute," Jonathan began.

"Wrong. They're the property of the Kwakiutl. And Max is Kwakiutl on his mother's side. He locked them away on the on-site trailer."

"Without touching the orb, I presume?"

"Mama Zywicki didn't raise no fools. He used a pair of tongs. Sent for a couple of scientists from Rainier University to come out and take readings of it. They wanted to take it back to R.U. with them, but he said Fields wouldn't let them. Moorhouse must have coached the prof to wait till you show up. I bet you forgot your ectometer stone."

Jonathan produced an exasperated snort. "Are you claiming the orb is haunted? I thought it was an artifact of the secret Bigfoot technology."

"Could be both, Doctor Skeptic. Could be both."

Jonathan's mouth tightened, but a thoughtful expression filtered into his eyes. He wouldn't buy ghosts or Bigfoot as an explanation. Wasn't his way. "Maybe it's radioactive," he ventured.

"Ri-ight. And it's a known scientific fact that exposure to radiation wipes a person's memory? Not in any physics I ever studied."

"You never studied physics." Yet a faint edge of doubt swirled around the edges of his voice.

"Kid you not. Read every collection of articles on the subject Isaac Asimov ever wrote."

"And I read *The Lord of the Rings*. It doesn't mean I visited Middle Earth."

"That would be a kick. Maybe there's a secret time slip or gateway and the next thing we'd do is come face to face with Frodo."

"With our track record, we'd land in Mordor," Jonathan muttered. The announcement to prepare for landing cut across the rest of his words, and he gathered up his notebooks and snapped the tray table into place. Benny wasn't sure what the notes were for. He hadn't done more than jot a word or two in a lined notebook the whole way across the country.

Doctor Fields met the plane. Benny had expected a guy who looked the way Jonny would look in another 20 or 30 years — bushy grey hair, stooped shoulders, baggy suit with esoteric archaeological gizmos poking mysteriously out of his pockets, while the archaeologist squinted nearsightedly at Jack and Benny over the top of his reading glasses. What he got was hormone inducing to the tenth power. In spite of the knot of hair tacked severely back with what looked like a pair of small knitting needles — self-defense weapons? — and a pair of glasses, Corey Fields had a face that could have adorned any magazine cover, and a shape to match. So much for the baggy-suit theory. She wore khaki shorts that revealed great legs, a form-fitting tank top, and a huge smile for Jonathan that made Benny want to figure out how to dump his buddy so he could cozy up to Corey.

"Down, Benedek," Jonathan said out of the corner of his mouth, then held out his hands to the woman. "Corey."

"I hope your unexplained phenomena experience will help us, Jonathan, although I suspect it's the byproduct of radiation, gas, chemicals or such things." She glanced at Benedek, arched one perfectly shaped eyebrow. "This must be Mr. Tabloid. I have to say he looks relatively presentable." They headed toward baggage pick-up.

Benny started to enjoy himself. "Hey, Ms. Archaeologist, let me return that compliment."

She held up her left hand and waggled her ring finger at him, where a diamond engagement ring sparkled. "Thanks, but too late."

He clapped his hand to his heart. "Crushed. My life is ruined."

"Honestly, Benedek." Jonny gave a snort of laughter, then turned to his colleague. "Corey! This is new, isn't it?"

"Last night." Her eyes lit up like stars. "Max couldn't be here to meet you today. He's working. But you'll meet him while you're here."

Benedek felt his eyebrows creep up his forehead. "Max? As in Zywicki, the Bigfoot King?"

One of her brows lifted and she looked down at Benny as though from a great height. "I'm told he is your friend." She let that thought dangle a second too long. "Pity." Then she chuckled. "Max warned me about you."

He pretended to stagger under her words. "Not a word of it is true." A pause to match hers. "Except the good parts."

"You assume there are good parts?"

Jonathan interrupted just as it was getting interesting. "Corey, how is Jed? Doctor Moorhouse said he lost three years."

The fun trickled out of her face, just like that, and she was all business. "He hasn't remembered a bit of it, Jonathan. The doctors don't know what to make of it. There's not the slightest trace of head trauma and he's in perfect health. If not for the memory loss, they wouldn't have any reason to keep him in the hospital. His son and daughter are with him, but he's in college and she's a musician, and they hadn't been around him in great detail over the past three years to help him fill in the gaps. His boss has stopped by, and some of his friends and co-workers, and of course the students have been there whenever they could to visit him and Monty Watson."

The kid Jonathan was so fond of. Benny sneaked a look at Doctor Jon and saw him flinch at the reminder. Time to get down to business. Jack didn't need to anguish over the problem. He needed to solve it. And who better to help him than the one, the only Edgar Benedek?

"Where's the artifact, babe?" he asked Corey Fields. He knew the endearment would bug her. He counted on it. With luck, it would also bug Jonathan.

It did. Jonathan's eyes lingered on him the way they would linger on a roach, then they narrowed. Benny didn't like that look. It was a sign that Jonathan was reading all sorts of interpretations into his motives.

Fields cut in as they reached the baggage pick-up area. The carrousel hadn't started moving yet, so they joined the other waiting passengers. "It's still at the site. Max locked it away so no one can get at it. Max has been stopping by every chance he gets, and we'll head out there as soon as we've stopped at the hospital. I've moved the students away from the area in case there are other similar dangerous artifacts. I don't know what Moorhouse thinks you can do, Jonathan, but I must say this counts as one of your unexplained phenomena. I certainly never saw anything like this in a Kwakiutl site. Of course the location of this site is unusual, too, but I don't know if that has anything to do with the artifact. I've done studies on it — without touching it, of course. We'll need to do more, a chemical analysis, for instance. The hospital wants it, but I've been reluctant to move it, for two reasons."

"Because you don't want to risk hospital staff contamination?" Jonathan asked.

"And because you found it in a burial site and it might resent being hauled away and strike back?" Benny threw in.

"We don't know that it's a burial site, Benedek," Fields objected. "But it is better to study it in situ. While I don't believe the Kwakiutl could have made it, it's possible they acquired it from elsewhere and put value on it as a totem. As you know, or perhaps you don't, the Kwakiutl are known for their totem poles."

"I thought a totem was supposed to be a living thing. Animals or plants or stuff like that. I never saw any totem poles with mystical orbs on them," Benny threw in. He saw Jonathan's surprise, and grinned. "Come on, J.J. We're talking mystical links between man and nature. My readers eat up stuff like that."

"Well, I don't imagine the Kwakiutl ever worshiped stones that steal people's memories," Jonathan objected. He did not look happy. "Totemism isn't the same as magic, although I imagine you'd like it to be for the sake of one of your ... stories."

The carrousel started up and a squat black bag shot out of the entrance and started its way around the loop. A few seconds later, the rest of the luggage began to appear, and they put the discussion on hold. But Benny concentrated on the thought of totemism as he watched for his duffel bag, and wondered what the artifact would have represented to the tribe that had owned it. And if it wasn't a Kwakiutl artifact, then what was it doing buried among the rest of their cast-offs? Even if they were known to have traded with other tribes and with European settlers, Fields or Jonny would know if any of those other tribes had possessed weird orbs, and they didn't seem to think so. The idea of a techno-Bigfoot civilization appealed more and more.

"We'll stop by the hospital first," Corey decided when they had their bags. "After you've seen Jed and Monty, we'll go out and examine the artifact."

"And that means hands off, Jack," Benny told his friend. "I don't want you forgetting what you're doing and grabbing it — and then forgetting even more. This is no time to play absent-minded professor."

"Would I do that, Benedek?" Jonathan asked.

"Every single time."

"Jonathan MacKensie. I thought you had to be around here somewhere."

Jonathan flinched at the shadows of panic that lingered in Jed Stone's eyes. The big man sat up in bed, unconnected to any IVs or monitoring equipment. He would have looked in perfect health if not for the new lines on his forehead and the tightness of his mouth.

"Jed, how are you?" He crossed the room and shook hands with the patient, only dimly aware in that first moment of the young man and the blonde woman who had jumped to their feet at his arrival. Corey Fields, who had escorted him and Benedek to the room, stopped just inside the door.

Behind Jonathan, Benedek gave a sudden astonished gasp and muttered, "I've died and gone to heaven. You're *the* Whitney Stone — from the Eddie Plummer band."

The name Eddie Plummer rang faint bells in Jonathan's head. He glanced over his shoulder to see Benedek hovering worshipfully in front of Jed's daughter Whitney. "I saw your concert in Madison Square Garden last month. Gave you a great write-up. You're going all the way to the top."

Concert? That was it. Plummer was the new up-and-coming phenomenon in pop music. Or was it rock music? Jonathan could never remember which was which. Give him classical music every time. He thought he'd heard Plummer sing once, and had been pleasantly astonished to realize the man had a fine voice and the heart of a musician, but it wasn't the type of music Jonathan preferred, so he'd paid little attention. He'd had no idea that Jed's daughter was part of Plummer's band.

Whitney had been planted firmly at her father's side, with her stepbrother Blair Sandburg beside her, looking not much taller than he had at 15 but with longer hair. It dawned on Jonathan that he must have a couple of years of college behind him — hadn't he started young? — and Whitney would have graduated. How had she hooked up with an up-and-coming musical phenomenon? Hadn't she been a singer herself? He could vaguely recall a couple of campfires at the dig, where she had led sing-alongs. A beautiful voice.

She murmured excuses to Benedek, and she and Blair came to meet Jonathan. "I'm glad you're here, Jonathan. One more person Dad remembers. This is soo weird. He doesn't remember that I sing with Eddie."

"Are you and Eddie ...?"

"A couple? No, we're in a band together." Jonathan couldn't tell if that flash in her eyes meant she wished they were a couple or whether she simply thought the question irrelevant in the face of her father's unexplained condition. But then she smiled. "We're on our way to the top."

"She's great," Blair put in. At 19, he just seemed more Blair than before, even if he weren't much taller. "You should hear them. They've cut an album. Whit'll give you a copy — even though it's not that stuffy classical stuff you like."

"It might be better than that native drum stuff you like," Jonathan countered. Easy to slip back into the friendly relationship with the student. "Are you still working on those theories of yours about heightened senses?"

Blair's hair bobbed at his eager nod. "It's great. Whitney says Eddie has enhanced hearing. Perfect pitch, too, like Whitney. I hope I get a chance to study him one day. What's even greater, she says he's found a way to tone it down, so sound doesn't overwhelm him. It's like there are dials — you know, like on a radio — and he can adjust the sound in his head. I never thought of that, but it made me think how tough sensory overload must have been for those ancient Sentinels I read about."

"Burton's tribal guardians?"

All that summer, Jonathan had listened to the enthusiastic ravings of the teenaged Blair, and as a result, he'd tracked down some of the writings of Sir Richard Burton, the 19th century explorer. He had found little available on the subject, and Jonathan doubted Blair would ever encounter a Sentinel walking the modern world. But there might be people with a heightened sense or two, like Eddie Plummer.

Blair nodded again. "It's incredible, man." Then he caught himself and lowered his voice. "You came about Jed. He can't believe I'm not still 15, Prof. They don't know what's wrong with him. Whitney's worried sick."

She nodded. "He hasn't remembered a thing from those three years, Jonathan. Not a thing."

"But I remember everything before it," Jed put in. He shook his head. "Well, everything I'd normally remember. We all forget unimportant details, and things fade into the past. But for me it's as if it were 1985. My boss came to see me, and he reminded me of contracts and sales and various day-to-day events, but it might have happened to someone else. Those three years of my life were stolen from me. I don't know if I'll ever get them back."

Benedek abandoned his groupie-dom — easy to do with Whitney so caught up in her father — and charged up to the side of the bed. "Jed Stone, I'm Edgar Benedek, *National Register*."

Jed's face wearied. "No reporters, please."

"He's my, uh, partner," Jonathan said hastily. "Doctor Moorhouse assigned me the task of studying unexplained phenomena for the department, and Benedek and I work together. As you may remember —" That was a stupid way to put it. "— I tend to be a skeptic when it comes to unexplained phenomena."

"Even my Sentinels," Blair threw in. Jonathan gave him high marks for the teasing note he managed.

"I seem to remember that," Jed said with ponderous humor, and cuffed Blair affectionately on the arm. Blair smiled at him, but Jonathan could see the worry he felt in his very posture.

"Benedek is the opposite of a skeptic," Jonathan explained. "We met on my first case, and we work well together."

Benedek gave him a nudge with his elbow. "Knew you'd appreciate me one day, J.J."

Jonathan ignored that. "I must admit Benedek has a wide repertoire of paranormal information. If anything was ever written on the subject, he knows about it. Of course he'll exaggerate it out of proportion and believe things no sane man would consider, but he also never gives up. He'll be a help." What surprised Jonathan was that he knew the words were true. After nearly three years of working with Edgar Benedek, he had come to accept that a few of the weird phenomena they'd encountered were real. Not all of them, not even most of them, but some. Benedek might go off half-cocked, as he had with his technological Bigfoot theories, but he didn't give up. Sometimes even his wild leaps of logic prompted Jonathan to consider more rational answers that worked out. Together, they had achieved more solutions than either would have managed separately.

Jed Stone might have lost three years but he hadn't lost one shred of common sense or understanding. His eyes lingered on Jonathan a considering moment, then shifted to Benedek, then back again. "Ah," he said. "In that case, Mr. Benedek, welcome to the club. I hope I won't see myself on the front page of the *Register* with a weird headline."

"I'll dream up a nice sensible one that Jack would approve," Benny said with a grin. "So here's the \$64,000 question. Anybody given a thought to what would happen if you picked up the artifact a second time?"

Everyone in the room stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Lose three more years?" Whitney cried. "You can't be serious."

"Or get them back," Benedek defended himself.

"You can't take the chance." Yet Blair Sandburg's eyes widened with speculation. "What do you think it is, Mr. Benedek? An unlikely totemic representation? Cursed by a shaman?"

"Cursed by a shaman? I like the way you think, kiddo."

"This is ridiculous," Whitney snapped. "We can't experiment on my father. There has to be another answer. They need to run more tests on the artifact. It isn't just Dad, either, it's that poor student."

Jed put his hand on her arm. "Calm down, Whit. I'm not hurt. My memory might come back at any moment, and I still remember what's important." He smiled at her to make his point, and her face softened. "I'm willing to risk a repeat of the process if that is what it takes."

Jonathan shook his head. "No, Jed. Not yet. We need to understand what happened. I don't feel anyone could countenance such a risky procedure. Benedek, you know we can't take the chance."

"How about if I grab the rock?" Benedek offered. His face scrunched up as he concentrated. "Three years. I met you three years ago, Jon-boy. All the fun and excitement, wiped out." For an instant, Jonathan saw a flash of regret in his eyes.

"No one is grabbing the rock," Jonathan said fiercely. "I think we need hazmat team or someone from the Disease Prevention center in Atlanta to examine it."

"You think it's a memory wiping virus?" Benedek persisted. He whirled to face Jed. "I know you can't remember touching the rock, but what's the first thing you *do* remember?"

Jed gave him an approving nod. "Trust a reporter to go to the root of the situation. I remember that moment very clearly. A wave of dizziness went through me. I don't recall the start of it, but I remember feeling very woozy and I thought, 'Whoa, Jed, you stood up waaay too fast.' There was something in my hand, but I dropped it, and I remember thinking that I hoped I hadn't broken whatever it was." His brows came together. "I had a weird sense that someone had just thanked me for something, but I didn't know what. I looked around and I didn't remember where I was or how I had gotten there, but I knew it was a dig, just from the layout of the site. The people around me were all strangers."

Jonathan shivered. That would be a scary feeling. He would hate it. "Someone thanked you?" he prompted.

Corey Fields, who had stood near the door during the entire meeting and offered no conversation, said abruptly, "I don't remember anyone thanking you, Mr. Stone."

He glanced over at her. "Doctor Fields? You were there when I became aware. I didn't know who you were, but you said I'd worked with you for five weeks."

"Maybe somebody had thanked you three years ago, at the cut-off point," Blair offered.

His stepfather shook his head. "No. It isn't like that. I'm not vivid on the three-years-ago routine. I know I worked a little on a dig that summer, and I remember bits of it, but the way anyone would remember something that long ago. I'm not suddenly sharp and clear on every detail of three years ago. I just — it seemed it was 1985. It's strange. Not only are the past three

years gone, but the time before that is no more clear to me than it would be to any of you, if you were suddenly asked to remember it. Pick a day in 1985 and try to recall it? No one could."

Jonathan repressed an involuntary shudder. Somehow, that made what had happened to Jed Stone even worse. It was as if he had been cast adrift. He hesitated. "What about now? You aren't forgetting more as time passes?"

Whitney threw him a reproachful glare for suggesting it, but Blair's eyes widened with interest. Jed shook his head. "No, I'm not losing more memory, son. Everything seems clear as crystal to me."

Jonathan suspected he lay awake at night, not only trying to remember his lost three years but to imprint each new moment on his consciousness for fear of having it snatched away, too.

Benedek opened his mouth and Jonathan hoped it wouldn't be to say something blindingly insensitive. But all he said was, "We ought to drive out and take a look at the memory-stealing rock."

That made Blair stare. "You think it did it on purpose?" he asked. "That it wasn't a natural phenomenon?"

"Have you seen it?" Benny countered.

"Just from a distance. Doctor Fields had it locked up," the boy admitted. "Nobody's looked at it since then except the scientific team from Rainier."

"Well, yes, they have," Corey offered. "Hospital staff ran tests on it this morning. They came out to the dig. They wanted to bring it back here, but I wasn't sure it would be safe and I thought I ought to leave it on site until Jonathan arrived or we found more information. I didn't even like exposing the testers to it, but they had to check. They couldn't find anything to suggest contamination or radiation, even assuming those things would make two people lose three years of memory."

"I was right. It's Bigfoot technology," Benedek put in.

"Why didn't they bring it to the hospital?" Jonathan asked hastily.

Corey winced. "They planned to. Doctor Moorhouse even authorized it, although I advised against moving it. But when it came right down to it, we didn't do it. Until we learned more, we chose to leave it where it was."

Benedek went into bird-dog mode. "So are you suggesting it didn't want to be moved?"

Everybody stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "You think it's a conscious device?" Blair persisted. "It took the memories on purpose and it wants to stay out there in the woods? That's ... weird, man."

"Maybe it has an affinity to the site," Corey ventured. "That was what I felt, that it belonged there." Abruptly she shook her head. "No, that's not quite right. I was uncomfortable, but I felt it was there for a reason. Only I can't imagine what the reason would be."

"Whoa, you have a mind-link with it!" Benedek rocked on his heels. He turned to Jed. "I know you probably can't remember picking it up, but when you dropped it, did you feel anything like that?"

The older man's brow scrunched up. "The first awareness I had was a sensation of ... of emptiness. Not lonely emptiness, but a hollow kind as if something was gone. I saw I was at a dig site, but it didn't look familiar. That was alarming. That was when I realized that my memories were fuzzy. It wasn't that I couldn't clearly remember every detail of the day three years ago when the memory chopped off, but I had a vague sense that it was July of 1985. I couldn't remember anything after

that, and when Whitney got here, I was stunned that she was so mature. I didn't know about the band, and everybody has informed me that the band is making great strides. They only got going this past winter."

Whitney shot a worried glance at Jonathan. "Eddie would have come if he could, but we have so much going on it was even hard for me to get away. Not that I wouldn't come when Dad was in trouble, and Eddie and Jackson understood that. They'll come out if I need them to."

"I'll understand if you have to go back," Jed reassured her. "But when Blair showed up, looking all grown up, and then you arrived so poised and elegant, I knew something was seriously wrong."

"It's not conventional amnesia?" Jonathan persisted. He wanted badly to believe that the artifact had caused a kind of electric shock that had affected the memory. Usually memory loss involved a period around the time of the accident. It never happened the way television portrayed it, total amnesia that conveniently ended with a second blow to the head. Surely the doctors would have considered the various possibilities. Odd that both Jed and Monty would forget the same amount of time. That made this event fall dead center into the realm of unexplained phenomena.

Jed shook his head. "No, the doctor has tested me in every way imaginable, and young Monty, too. We've both lost three years, and there is no evidence of brain damage. They've brought in specialists, neurologists, psychiatrists, whatever 'ist' you can imagine, they've brought them. And they all stand around and stroke their chins like Doctor Freud and mutter 'hmmm' and go away again, not one bit the wiser."

"And they can't even tell if it will come back," Whitney snapped. "It doesn't make any sense. The artifact gives off a very low-grade energy, they say, but not enough to affect anyone. Not even as much as it takes to light up a LED display on a wristwatch."

"Bigfoot technology," Benedek insisted.

"You sound like young Max, Corey's fiancé," Jed said. "I'm told he likes Bigfoot, too."

"It's only a game with him," Corey said with a smile. Then she shook her head. "Jonathan, Doctor Moorhouse sent you out here to check it out, but I don't see how you could make any more sense of it than the specialists can."

Frankly, Jonathan couldn't imagine how he could, either. Yet he knew they had to try. For all he knew, the artifact was haunted. Nonsense, but what answer was left? When you eliminated everything possible, whatever remained, however unlikely ... Hadn't Sherlock Holmes made such a claim? Benedek thrived on that philosophy, quite willing to assign utterly bizarre motivations for the peculiar events on their particular cases. Sentient plants, telekinesis, whatever. Jonathan didn't believe for one nanosecond that Bigfoot possessed technology — or even that Bigfoot existed. The fact of such an unlikely artifact in a Kwakiutl site indicated cultural contamination to him, cross-trading with another tribe, perhaps. But surely Corey Fields was skilled enough at her job to be able to identify the artifacts of another Northwest tribe.

"I think we should go out to the site," he said. "I don't know if I'll recognize the artifact, any more than you did. I'm a physical anthropologist, after all, a bone specialist. I know enough about archaeology to realize that the orb is out of place, but you're an archaeologist and this area is your specialty. If you don't recognize it, I probably won't, either."

Benedek buffed his shirtfront. "But, hey, I might."

The two scientists stared at him. He produced a huge grin. "Come on, Jonny, for all you know it's Martians after all."

"Martians?" Blair echoed doubtfully. He might believe in heightened senses in ancient man, but he didn't seem prepared to make the leap to alien artifacts, and Jonathan didn't blame him.

"So, little green guys from Alpha Centauri," Benedek said with a grin. "Or occult artifacts. If it has to do with things that go bump in the night, I'm your man."

"I don't believe the Kwakiutl were involved in the paranormal," Corey protested. "At least not in this way. They did believe in magic; they attributed Wolf and Raven with magical powers. But that's a lot different from whatever the artifact does."

"How do you know this one camp wasn't their shaman's place where he used to contact the spirits and that's why it's remote from other known Kwakiutl sites?" Benny challenged. "Maybe they worshiped Bigfoot."

"I should have known Bigfoot would figure into this somehow," Jonathan said with a grimace. "Why don't we go out to the site so Benedek can give us the benefit of his 'knowledge'."

"At last, an audience that can appreciate me," Benny said with an exaggerated grin.

The dig site was parked on the side of a slope in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains, high on a ridge that gave a distant view of Puget Sound, glittering in the afternoon sun. Blair Sandburg knew he was lucky to have been allowed along, and that Jonathan and Doctor Fields had only permitted it as Jed's representative. Poor old Jed. Jed Stone was the closest Blair had ever had to a real father, and he'd spent most of the year Jed and Naomi had been together with his fingers crossed that this one time Naomi wouldn't end the relationship by detaching with love, the way she always did. But finger crossing had never worked, and it hadn't then, either. Blair was just glad that Jed had made himself available to Blair after that, for weekend visits, or even the whole summer last year when Jed had signed himself up for a dig in the Yucatan and had obtained permission to bring Blair along to Chichen Itza. He'd heard Jed speaking to the head of the dig, saying, "Yeah, my kid, Blair. Okay, stepson, but he's a great kid, gonna be an anthropologist. Started college at 16. He's smart as a whip." After that, Blair had thrown himself into the dig with his whole heart, determined to prove Jed right.

Now Jed lay in a hospital bed, three years of his life ripped away. Blair would have come along even if he'd needed to coax his battered old Ford into running long enough to reach the site. But Jonathan MacKensie, whom Blair remembered as one of the good guys, had looked at Blair, seen the need in his eyes, and had nodded at him to come along while Whitney waited with her father. Blair didn't know what he could do to help. He had three years of college behind him, but he was no expert in the Kwakiutl. That didn't mean there weren't folks around who were. The modern tribe was fairly absorbed into mainstream culture, but that didn't mean he might not learn something from tribal elders. He'd tried. Yesterday, he'd put in a phone call to a James Littlefoot, referred to the old man by one of his professors. He'd described the artifact and met up with blank surprise. Unless Littlefoot'd stonewalled him, the old man hadn't recognize the artifact. When he'd told Corey Fields this morning what he'd done, she'd looked at him with respect for thinking of it and explained that she'd already researched the possibility with a couple of experts in the field, who didn't recognize the artifact, either. "But it was an excellent thought. If the artifact was rare and little known, it's possible your source might have been the only one to know."

Blair had ducked his head at the praise. What he'd done had only been common sense. He wasn't ready to give up — he'd never give up on Jed. But he didn't know what to do next. This paranormal investigation Professor MacKensie was now involved in seemed an unlikely possibility, and Blair

wasn't sure what he thought of the reporter, Benedek. Bigfoot technology? Man, that was just too weird.

Doctor Fields and Max Zywicki had locked up the orb in the trailer on site. Max wasn't there when they arrived, so Doctor Fields unlocked the trailer and let them in. She opened the filing cabinet and removed a metal box, then set it on the table to unlock. They all crowded around.

The orb looked bronze. Had the Kwakiutl ever worked bronze? Blair didn't know enough about them to remember, but he did know the fact that it was bronze had surprised both Doctor Fields and Jed, as well as the older students on the dig, so they probably hadn't. Almost completely round, the artifact had patterns etched on its otherwise smooth surface. Blair had only seen it from a distance before, but now he leaned closer, his hands clasped behind his back to prevent temptation.

"Aha!" Benedek crowed. "I knew it."

"Benedek, if you are still insisting this is a Bigfoot artifact ..."

"Bigfoot nothing," Benny exulted. "This is a globe."

Jonathan stared at his partner. "A globe? Benedek, look at it. The patterns bear no resemblance to the continents. The indigenous population at the time this was buried would have no concept of the positioning of the continents ..." His voice trailed off. "Are you suggesting they took a wild guess? That they understood the Earth was round? That this was their concept of geography?"

Benedek rocked on his toes. "Wrong. Stretch your mind a little, Doctor Jack. I said it was a globe. I didn't say it was a globe of the *Earth*."

Jonathan gave a disgusted snort. "So we're back to the Martians?"

The reporter shook his head sententiously. "Jonathan, think. Does this look like Mars to you? Oh wait, it can't. No canals."

"There are no canals on Mars, Benedek. That's been proven for many years." He shook his head. "I know. This is an extraterrestrial globe. I've got it! Bigfoot is an alien. How could I have failed to realize that?"

Instead of being crushed at the scorn in MacKensie's face, Benedek grinned. "You're coming on with those theories, buds. Bigfoot is an alien? Yep, I saw him on the UFO, sitting right next to Elvis."

Jonathan made an annoyed sound. "I'm serious, Benedek. I don't understand what this is, but I very much doubt it is an extraterrestrial globe."

"Then what is it? It snatches away people's memories. Just a weirdly designed circle, out of place in the dig, that grabs three years of a person's life."

Jonathan dug in his toes. "I don't know what it is or why it does that. But I refuse to believe it is an alien artifact."

"What, then?" Doctor Fields jumped in. "You can hardly postulate an unknown technological tribe in the Pacific Northwest on the basis of one artifact. There are no other similar artifacts upon which to base such a theory. Believe me, Jonathan, this is my specialty. I know this part of the world. I know what variances I can expect on a dig. Artifacts from different tribes here and there I might expect, from trade or raids. But artifacts that match no known tribe — that's really why I asked Doctor Moorhouse to send for you."

Blair watched Jonathan. He was frowning, resistant. Maybe he didn't like being a paranormal expert. A few years back he'd proven skeptical of Blair's Sentinel research. Blair hadn't known if

it was because Jonathan considered Blair's ideas off the wall or because he had been a kid then. Jonathan had listened seriously and he hadn't humored him. He'd challenged him, the way he might challenge one of his bright students, to make him think, to introduce logic into the situation, and Blair had enjoyed their discussions. Jonathan hadn't automatically scorned Blair's ideas, even if he didn't believe them himself. He'd encouraged Blair to expand his research, to look to the future when he might find subjects to test. He hadn't treated Blair like a kid, and at fifteen, that had meant a lot.

But Jonathan's face tightened. "Corey, you know I don't believe the wild theories. There has to be a rational answer, one that doesn't involve Bigfoot or the Martians."

"So, if a theory doesn't match your compartmentalized little brain, it's absolutely wrong?" Benny demanded. "What about Cora? You can't tell me she hadn't been pregnant for 40 years. You believed that. What about my mind link with the wolves? Come on, J.J. — just because you don't want to believe something doesn't mean it's wrong."

Blair and Corey stared at the two men in utter disbelief. A woman pregnant for 40 years? Never happen.

Jonathan held his ground. "No, and just because you do doesn't mean it's right."

"Stalemate," Benedek replied, but he was grinning. Maybe he enjoyed their disagreements. "Come on, Jonny Skeptic. If it's not a alien globe, what is it?"

"It's an artifact of unknown origin with odd properties, and that's all we can assume for the moment. Jumping into wild theories because they're more fun than painstaking research won't give us answers."

"Jonathan is right," Doctor Fields agreed. "We haven't had a chance to run conclusive tests on the artifact. The hospital people tested it for known contaminants and they found none."

"Bingo." Benedek grinned. "Just to remind everybody but there aren't any contaminants known that can mind-wipe people. It's an alien plot to take over the Earth."

That was too much even for Blair. "By burying an artifact in the ground and randomly taking away memories of anyone who picks it up?"

"Maybe there are others, planted here and there." Benedek must have thought that was lame. "Come on, don't close your minds. This is nothing we've seen on Earth before. It's gotta be the little green man brigade."

The ground under Blair's feet vibrated suddenly, a faint, subliminal motion. He frowned, wondering if something had bumped up against the trailer, even, for one wild second, if Benedek was right about aliens and they were coming to retrieve the "globe." Then he realized what he was feeling. "Earthquake!"

The tremor came at them in a series of waves, just like at the beach. There was no time to lunge for the door. They grabbed at each other for balance, Jonathan supporting Doctor Fields. Benedek caught Blair's arm and tried to thrust him toward the doorway.

The table holding the box swayed to and fro, and Jonathan reached out to steady it, just as it tipped sideways. The box slid toward him and he yanked his hand away.

"Jonathan!" Benedek yelled and lunged at him. Too late. The artifact flew out of the box right at Jonathan's face. He threw up a hand to fend it off and it hit him in the upper arm before it bounced away and rolled into a corner. Abruptly, the tremors stilled and the only motion in the trailer was the crash of the metal box and the table as they hit the floor.

"Everybody all right?" Doctor Fields asked doubtfully as she straightened the tallest totem pole. "Blair?"

He nodded quickly, but he couldn't help looking at Jonathan.

"Jon-Jon?" Benedek edged up to his friend and gazed at his face. "Come on, Jack, tell me it didn't get you."

Jonathan stared at him and blinked doubtfully. "What didn't get me? Do I know you?" He looked at Benedek with no shred of recognition.

Pain flashed on Benedek's face, but he covered it up so quickly that Blair might have imagined it. "Name's Benedek," he said in a tight voice. "Edgar Benedek, but you can call me Benny; Edgar's for the press. This is an archaeological dig. You know Doctor Fields, don't you?"

Blair blinked at how calm and soothing his voice had become.

Jonathan glanced doubtfully at Doctor Fields. "Corey?" He hesitated. "You've ... changed your hair."

She gulped, eyes wide and pitying. "It's more convenient on a dig."

Jonathan's eyes moved around the trailer. "I don't recognize this place." He saw Blair, and squinted at him. "Blair Sandburg? You look — older."

"I thought you'd known him three years," Blair said doubtfully to Benny.

"Nearly. It'll be three years this fall. You think it's losing power, taking less time?"

"You mean the more it's used the less it will take?"

"Maybe because he didn't hold it in his hand. It touched him only briefly." Benedek grimaced. "Maybe that makes a difference."

Jonathan frowned and rubbed his temples. "I haven't known him three years. I never saw him before. What's losing power? What's going on, Corey?" He gazed at them in disbelief. "I can't remember what should be happening. Someone please explain."

Benedek held up his hand. "I'll tell him. Jonathan, they found an unknown artifact here. It's shaped like a globe with unknown patterns on it. Anyone who touches it loses a few years of memory. We think it's the Martians or Bigfoot who's to blame." He held his breath.

"That's ludicrous, Benedek. The Martians? Where are we?" He gestured around the trailer at a few obvious artifacts, a couple of totem poles prominent. "I'd theorize from Corey's presence that we are somewhere in the Pacific Northwest. Blair plans to attend Rainier University."

At the first sentence, Benny brightened, only to have his hope fade as Jonathan went on. He must have hoped for an automatic response, proof that the memories were still in there, just blocked. Blair had hoped for that himself. But what they'd gotten was simply Jonathan's natural reaction to what he would consider a ludicrous claim.

"That's right," Benedek said. "Looks like we've got the opposite of body snatchers here. Mind snatchers. Come on, Jack, sit down."

"Jonathan. Or Jon, if you must." He scrunched his forehead into wrinkles. "Something is very wrong here. You're implying I've developed amnesia as a result of touching an artifact?" He squinted at Benedek. "I think I've seen you before. Who are you? You're not with the Institute?"

"I'm with *The National Register*." Benedek's voice was gentle and patient.

Jonathan blinked. "What's that?"

"It's a tabloid newspaper," Doctor Fields told him.

"Surely a little amnesia doesn't rate coverage in a supermarket rag." Jonathan shook his head. "Which of you thanked me?"

They all stared. "Jed said something like that," Doctor Fields remembered. "That someone had thanked him."

"Whoa. Psychic messages from the rock." Benedek took a step toward it and reined himself in with an effort. He looked like the kind of man who'd take the risk for himself in a second. But something held him back. Concern for Jonathan? Memories too special to risk? If Jonathan got his memory back, Benedek might chance the experience for himself.

"Psychic messages," Doctor Fields scoffed. "Jonathan, sit down. You've just undergone a traumatic experience."

"I ..." He hesitated, but when Benedek rolled over a desk chair, he sat in it cautiously, with a wary, suspicious look at the reporter. "I don't know you. Why are you here?"

"He's your friend, Jonathan." Doctor Fields' voice was soft. "You can't remember, but it's true." Maybe she'd seen the same quickly masked concern in Benny's eyes that Blair had.

"I'm a college professor. Why would I want friendship with someone who writes for a scandal sheet?"

"Ouch! Wounded to the quick." Benedek slapped a hand against his chest, his face twisted up in an exaggerated parody of hurt. "Maybe for my wit, my charm, my brilliance."

When Jonathan drew back from the declaration, Benedek flinched, then he slapped on a too-bright grin. "Come on, Jack. The Jonathan MacKensie I know doesn't play to the stereotypes. Besides, you like the way I bug Doctor Moorhouse."

That made Jonathan's eyes narrow. "You know Doctor Moorhouse? Does she know about this? I want to talk to her."

"Maybe we should call her." Doctor Fields frowned. "The earthquake seems to have been a mild one — at least here. I wonder if the phone line is still intact." She went over to the desk in the corner and picked up the phone. After a minute, her face cleared. "I've got a dial tone." She punched in numbers quickly. "Doctor Moorhouse, please."

Jonathan abandoned the chair and went to join her. She glanced up at him and away again immediately. "Doctor Moorhouse, it's Corey Fields. Jonathan is here at the site. We've had a minor earthquake — no, no one was hurt. But the artifact fell out of its box and hit Jonathan. He's in the same condition as Jed Stone and Monty Watson. What? Okay, here." She held out the phone. "Jonathan, it's Doctor Moorhouse."

Jonathan took the phone. "Doctor Moorhouse, I don't understand what's happening here. They tell me I've lost nearly three years." He fell silent, listening to her. "Yes, not quite three years. Do I — " His mouth tightened. "Yes, he's here. I don't understand ..." He listened, then he turned to Benedek with a frown. Blair could hear Doctor Moorhouse's voice going on and on but he was too far away to make out her words. "I see," Jonathan said meaningfully when she finished. Blair felt uneasy.

Jonathan gave the phone back to Doctor Fields. "Benedek, Doctor Moorhouse informs me that you are a tabloid reporter who writes books on paranormal phenomena, and that you have tried to capitalize on the Institute for several years. This is Georgetown Institute site. I don't think we need you here right now."

"You're yanking my chain," Benedek said doubtfully. His face tightened. "Don't give in to the Dragon Lady, Jack."

"My name is Jonathan."

"Doctor Formality. Gotcha. Come on, J.J. Think. You know you can't remember. Just because Doctor M and I don't exactly cozy up doesn't mean it's universal. What about the Unexplained Phenomena department? We've gotta chase some shadows, Jack."

"I haven't the remotest idea what you're talking about."

Doctor Fields put down the phone. It looked like she had hung up on Doctor Moorhouse. The little Blair knew about the Georgetown department chair convinced him she'd be out for blood. On the other hand, when Jonathan's memory returned, he might be out for her blood, too.

Doctor Fields grabbed Jonathan's arm. "Jonathan, listen to me. Doctor Moorhouse and Benedek are like chalk and cheese, but don't believe whatever she just told you. Edgar Benedek is your closest friend. You might not remember now, but I guarantee you it's true."

"Just look at him," Jonathan wailed, waving his hand at the vivid and clashing colors in Benedek's shirt. "He calls me all those names. I can't understand it."

"We're here to figure out the memory stealing gizmo, buds," Benny offered helpfully. Maybe Jonathan didn't notice the way his hands clenched tight enough to whiten his knuckles, but Blair did. Blair had a lot of casual friends, but few people who had ever gotten close to him. Jed Stone was one of them, a father figure for a kid who never knew who his own father was. Jed did remember him; his cut-off date was after he'd met Blair. But if Jed hadn't, Blair suspected he'd feel just like Benedek did now. It didn't really show on Benedek's face, but his muscles had all tensed, and his eyes were full of shadows.

"What memory-stealing gizmo?" Jonathan demanded. Doctor Fields opened her mouth to answer, but Blair poked her arm to keep her from speaking. She looked surprised, then she nodded and shut up. He hoped he wouldn't get in trouble for poking a professor, but she didn't seem to mind.

"The device Doctor Moorhouse sent us out here to investigate," Benny answered. He'd missed the entire byplay, so focused was he on Jonathan. Benny's talking probably wouldn't help him remember. Talking hadn't helped Jed. But Jed had responded automatically to Corey a few times and that had given Whitney hope each time. She was convinced that Jed's memories weren't gone, just blocked. If that was true, Jonathan might start reacting automatically to Benedek. Blair hoped so.

"Sent us? But you don't work for the Institute."

"No way, Jack. But I work with you. We're the greatest team since Burns and Allen."

Jonathan's forehead puckered. "Gracie Allen?" He said in tones that managed to sound both doubtful and scathing at the same time. He frowned. "That's odd. There was something about Gracie Allen ..."

Benedek's face lit up. "Hortense," he cried triumphantly. "When she was trying to channel Grace at the Hooperville hospital."

"Channeling? You can't be serious."

"It'd surprise you just how serious I can be. Come on, Jonny. You can kick this thing. I never met a more stubborn man. Holding onto skepticism in the face of all-out proof." He whipped a vivid blue rock out of his pocket and waved it at Jonathan. Blair wasn't sure what it was supposed to do, but it didn't do anything except lie there bluey in Benny's hand. He heaved a sigh. "Well, you're not

haunted anyway. Not possessed. Believe me you've done the possessed number — in quadrasonic stereo — at the Glenbar hotel."

"I don't think so." Jonathan eyed the rock warily. "If this is where you brain me with the rock so that I'll get my memory back, let me tell you, Mr. Benedek, it doesn't work that way."

Benedek tucked the rock away in his pocket. "You don't remember ectometer stones, either." He sighed extravagantly.

"Painted stones? That's pathetic. I don't know what you're trying to prove here, Mr. Benedek, but my supposed memory loss had better not appear on the cover of *The National Enquirer*."

"*Register*," Benny corrected automatically. "I'm not trying to prove anything, Jonathan. I'm trying to help you get your memory back. It's July 1988. We've been a team — your typical Hope and Crosby, Starsky and Hutch, Damon and Pythias — for nearly three years."

Jonathan arched an eyebrow at the Damon and Pythias, then he cast a beseeching look at Doctor Fields. She nodded. "It's true, Jonathan. I don't know what Doctor Moorhouse said to you on the phone, but she doesn't like Benny. He rubs her the wrong way, which is odd when you think of it, because both of them are advocates of the paranormal. They know a lot of the same source books. But they react to each other like oil and water. And he evidently provokes her for all he's worth."

"What can I say? Pushing Julie's buttons is one of my joys in life."

Jonathan's mouth quirked faintly, but he smoothed it away into a tight line. "This is ... so much to take in. I don't doubt what you say, Corey. It simply seems so unlikely. What did he mean about coming out here to investigate a device?"

"We work together, Jack," Benny pressed on. "We're the Paranormal Investigation Unit at Georgetown. You're the head of the department — under protest half the time until you get into a case, then you enjoy the heck out of it in spite of yourself."

"But I don't believe in the paranormal."

"No shit, Sherlock. I do. Don't you get it, Jon-boy? We balance. We make a great team."

"But how on Earth would I come to be in charge of such a team? It's inconceivable."

Doctor Fields started to explain, but this time Benny stopped her. "Here you go, Jack. The Dragon Lady is into the paranormal. She wanted to pull off some serious research, the way they used to do at Duke University. She recruited you. Okay, I'll say it. She manipulated you into it. You scratch her back, she scratches yours. She told you if you wanted your grant to study the possibility of a bicameral brain in Australopithecus and its quasi-contemporary cave guys, you needed to work on chasing shadows for a few months. Being the Department chair went to her head and now, almost three years later, you're still tracking down vampires and curses and things that go bump —" he nudged Doctor Fields with his hip, "— in the night."

At the mention of what Blair remembered as his pet subject, Jonathan nodded, but he frowned. "For three years, you've kept me away from my own research?"

Benedek smiled ingratiatingly. "Come on, Jack, we have to chase some shadows. I've gotta drag you away from all that stuffy paperwork and let the wild-and-crazy inner Jonny pop out."

Doctor Fields bobbed her head in agreement. "It's true, Jonathan. All of it. I never met Benedek before today, but I've known you for five years. I think you're a better man for knowing him. Better rounded, somehow. He's your best friend, Jonathan. I know you can't remember him, but imagine how you would feel if your best friend suddenly forgot you completely."

Benedek winced and covered it up immediately. "We're here to solve a weird one, Jack," he said brightly. "There's this crazy artifact, like a globe of another planet. When somebody touches it, instant mind-wipe."

"I can't imagine such an artifact being found in a native site. Where is it?"

"Over there in the corner," Blair said and pointed. "Whatever you do, man, don't touch it."

Jonathan stalked over to the corner, but Benedek was before him, wiggling his way in front of Jonathan in an attempt to block the bigger man with his own body. "No, Jonathan. Don't touch it. You keep regressing, we're gonna need to bottle-feed you and start changing diapers."

Jonathan jerked back and glared at him. "Do you never stop?"

"Can't. It's the rules."

Jonathan craned his neck to see over Benny's shoulder. "That little round thing? It looks bronze. They shouldn't have bronze artifacts here. From the look of this place and the sheer number of artifacts —" He waved his hand at the small totem pole braced in the corner and a stack of obsidian figures, "— I'd think possibly Kwakiutl Indians. They may have worked copper but I don't believe they worked bronze."

"We're excavating a fairly late site. They did trade," Corey reminded them. "They were a powerful tribe, and wealthy, until the coming of the white man. It wasn't just the inevitable diseases like smallpox that got to them. For a time their culture was banned and their potlatches were forbidden. So we have encountered artifacts at this site that they must have traded, a few European artifacts, items from other tribes. I'd expect that. What I wouldn't have expected is something like that orb — it matches no known culture, at least none I'm familiar with. And what it does — well, if there were artifacts that could rob a man of three years of memory —"

"The CIA would hush it up," Benny replied. "I'm surprised we haven't had the trenchcoat brigade at the door to confiscate it."

"Maybe they're working with Bigfoot," Blair said involuntarily. He didn't buy into the Bigfoot theory for a second, but he wouldn't put anything past the FBI. Probably the result of his mother's long-standing aversion to "pigs," but he wasn't sure he'd trust covert agencies not to want to grab the orb and run.

Benedek beamed at him. "You're a quick study, kid," he said approvingly. "Look, I'm not up on all the Kwakiutl rites and rituals and magical mumbo jumbo, but I'm willing to bet my next Pulitzer Prize this little gadget isn't one of theirs."

"You have a Pulitzer Prize?" Jonathan's disbelief was practically insulting.

Benedek gave a deliberate wince. "When I get one, Jack, it'll probably be because of something we uncovered — working together. It'll come." He buffed the front of his shirt with his fingernails. "Never doubt it."

"What I do believe is that the little device is not Kwakiutl," Jonathan agreed. "I'm a bone man, so I'm not as current on native artifacts as you are, Corey. If you don't recognize it, either ..."

"That doesn't prove anything, Jonathan. I've been specializing for the past few years. Someone in Egyptology, for instance, wouldn't recognize every Kwakiutl artifact, any more than I'd know all Babylonian relics. But in all my studies — and I've been researching like crazy since Jed and Marty were affected — I haven't found anything that exactly matched the orb."

"So we have to solve the mystery," Benedek proclaimed. "Come on, Jack, this is right up your alley. Scientific. Maybe your Ramalama-ding-dong guys didn't have bronze artifacts, but —"

"Ramapithecus," Jonathan corrected automatically. "And no, they didn't. Bronze, of course, was worked millennia before the Kwakiutl's civilization formed, but I don't think they would have had the ability to produce this."

"What we've said all along," Benny agreed. "Okay, you might have lost some years but you didn't lose any smarts. Here's what we're gonna do. You said someone thanked you. Jed Stone said the same thing. Which implies that the gizmo created that effect."

"Oh, come on, Benedek," Jonathan protested. "How could an orb thank me? You're implying it's full of circuits and that it functions as a radio signal? Nonsense."

"The hospital people didn't find anything like that," Corey objected. "They did say it held a kind of energy, but they felt it was inherent, more like a static electricity charge, than any deliberate technology they could recognize. There were no seams, no openings. The outer casing is solid. They believed it was solid all through."

"They were testing it for contamination, though," Blair offered. "They weren't exactly checking it for alien technology."

"Not you, too," Jonathan objected. "I thought you were more interested in the sensory abilities of primitive man than you were in little green men from up there." He waved his hand at the roof of the trailer, and nearly whacked the tallest totem pole. He turned and stared at the raven beak that was nearly eye-to-eye with him, and took a step away from it. Benedek insinuated himself between Jonathan and the artifact.

"Come on, Jonathan. Sit down. Let's figure this out."

He sounded so sympathetic that Jonathan actually let himself be led. The shrill of the telephone made them all jump. Corey grabbed it. "Georgetown site." She listened a moment. "Yes, Doctor Moorhouse. He's right here."

Jonathan felt as if he had fallen down the rabbit hole into the land of Oz. Nothing made sense to him, including the bizarre and garishly dressed man who claimed to be his dear friend and who surely didn't seem the type that Jonathan would befriend. Doctor Moorhouse had been scathing enough about him, yet her words had bothered Jonathan, as if he'd sensed a lack of fairness in the denunciation. As if it felt wrong. Because he didn't understand, because he was confused and alarmed by the inexplicable loss of memory, he had let Doctor Moorhouse's strong personality override his doubts. His insistence that Benedek leave had shocked the other man, shocked him deeply — and hurt him, too. That made Jonathan suspect that Corey's claim that Benedek was his close friend might well be true. If so, he had certainly been unfair to Benedek. Nearly three years of friendship, no matter how improbable, demanded better from him than rejection.

He took the phone Corey held out. Odd how she and Blair Sandburg had aged a bit. Proof that he'd lost his memory, even if what he did remember had the vagueness that implied a number of years had passed. "MacKensie here," he said into the mouthpiece.

"Jonathan, is Benedek still there?"

He glanced at the hovering reporter, still between Jonathan and the orb in the corner. "Yes, he's here."

"Good." She didn't sound like she considered it good. "Let him listen to what I have to say."

Jonathan beckoned Benedek closer. "Doctor Moorhouse has something to say to both of us." He tilted the receiver so they could both hear, and Benedek leaned in to listen. "Go ahead, Doctor Moorhouse."

"MacKensie, my earlier reaction was unfair. While I deplore Benedek's affiliation with the Institute, I had no right to imply that you shared my, er, aversion for the man. You don't. While I have been inclined to question your judgment, I must admit that the two of you do make a valuable contribution to the Unexplained Phenomena Department. He balances your skepticism, and you balance his bizarre willingness to make leaps of vast illogic. I have seen the proof of his friendship for you, on more occasions than I care to relate. While he may well capitalize on his affiliation with the Institute, I believe —" she sounded like she was speaking through gritted teeth " — that much of the progress we have made in our research is owed to Mr. Benedek."

"I knew she loved me," Benedek said, loudly enough for it to carry.

"I heard that, Benedek. There is a vast distance between grudging tolerance and, er, love. I am only saying this because to do else would be unfair and unethical of me. Jonathan, disregard what I said earlier."

"I was already reaching that conclusion, Doctor Moorhouse," Jonathan admitted. "Because, as impossible as this seems, I do not feel uncomfortable in his presence."

"Course not, J.J. No one with good taste would." He gave Jonathan a quick nudge with his elbow. "Doctor M, the orb is sending out signals. It pulled a 'thanks for the memories' number with Jack, and the same with Jed Stone. Probably with the student, too, but we haven't had a chance to check. We're gonna play with Jonny's brain a bit and see if we can figure out what he was being thanked for."

"I'd prefer that you didn't play with my brain, Benedek, thank you very much."

Moorhouse jumped in. "MacKensie, you can't remember the past three years. As long as there is reasonable scientific control on your tests, I authorize them."

Jonathan turned his head to study Benedek at close range. At once, the shorter man composed his face, but the worry that lurked in his blue eyes didn't go away. I trust you, Jonathan thought, and felt his brow pucker with the realization. I can't remember you, but the part of me that trusts obviously does.

"He won't hurt me," he said to Doctor Moorhouse. "I know that. I'm not sure how I know, but I do."

Just for a second, delight flared on Benedek's face. He tamed it instantly. Jonathan had a feeling he would now say something utterly outrageous as a distraction. He did. "Hey, Doctor M," he said into the phone, "I always knew you cared. Don't worry. I won't do anything to Jonathan that will have him dancing on the tabletop with a lampshade on his head. But maybe a little dose of prestochango, major hypnosis, will do the trick."

"Benedek, I absolutely forbid you to attempt hypnosis," she snapped.

In spite of the chill that shivered through Jonathan at the very idea of hypnosis, he couldn't help a faint smile that he'd guessed what Benedek would do. Memory — gone. Feelings and instinct — securely in place. It wasn't enough, but it was a start.

"Don't worry, I'm an expert," Benedek boasted. "I trained at the knee of the Great Strazinsky, magician extraordinaire."

"Somehow," said Doctor Moorhouse, just before she ended the conversation, "that does not reassure me."

When Jonathan hung up the phone, Benedek grinned broadly. "The lady does protest too much, methinks."

"Shakespeare, Benedek? I'm impressed."

Corey and Blair stared at him. "Do you remember?" Blair prodded.

"No. Not yet. What makes you think I might?"

"The way you talked to him just now," Blair explained. He hesitated. "That sounded the way a friend would tease a friend." Corey nodded.

Benedek leaned in closer. "Come on, Doctor J. Any flashes of memory?"

"Not memory," he admitted thoughtfully. "Instinct, I think." He felt bad about the disappointment that showed so briefly in Benedek's face. "I'm trying. I don't like the idea of hypnotism, and I don't understand what a stage magician would know about the subject, but I want to remember."

"Then we'll see if we can figure out this thank you gig. Makes it sound like the orb snatched your memories on purpose, that it wasn't just a byproduct of touching it. You and the other two are in good health, no other symptoms. So what we have to figure out is why somebody would want three years of a guy's memories."

"This isn't more of your Bigfoot theories, is it? Or, what was the other one? The Martians?"

"You remember that?"

Jonathan hated to shoot down the burgeoning hope in his voice. "You mentioned it a few minutes ago. And Blair mentioned Bigfoot, too. I hardly think the Sasquatch have developed technology."

"It'd make a great story, though, wouldn't it?" Benedek shrugged it away. "I like the alien theory better."

"So, because the Kwakiutl were into trading, they traded with space aliens as well as European settlers and other local tribes? Why not? It makes tremendous sense to me."

Benedek winced at the scorn in his voice. "So what's your theory, Jack? The Kwakiutl were more advanced than anybody knew about? Worked a little bronze on the side, created artifacts that stole memories and gave telepathic thanks?"

"Telepathic?" Corey echoed.

"Well, I don't know about you, babe, but I didn't hear anybody thanking Jonny for ripping off his memories. Did you, kid?"

Blair shook his head. "I didn't hear anything. Not now and not when Jed and Monty were affected, either."

"That's right, you've been here for the whole show, both of you." Benedek squinted at the student and the professor. "Okay. Neither of you heard any thanks, no round of applause, no weird sounds that might have sounded like 'thank you' to somebody holding the orb?"

They shook their heads in perfect unison. "I just saw Jed's face turn blank, and then he let go of the orb and stood there looking weird," Blair admitted. "Oh, man, I was sure he was having a stroke."

"I didn't realize the orb was the cause of his reaction until Monty picked it up and reacted the same way," Corey said. "After that, I didn't let anyone else touch it."

"Nobody's going to touch it now, not till we figure this out." Benedek gestured them back and waved Jonathan back to his chair. The fact that he went willingly convinced him his instincts and everyone else's claims were true. Benedek was his friend. Jonathan owed him his trust.

"What do you mean to do?" he asked.

"I want to get a handle on the thank-you game. Close your eyes and concentrate."

Jonathan obeyed. He strained after memory, but the first thing he recalled clearly was the touch of the artifact against his arm. Wasn't there a sudden whooshing in his brain, as if there had been a vacuum cleaner-type suction? He couldn't go earlier than that.

"Okay, now I want you to think about the thank you that you mentioned. You said someone thanked you. Concentrate on that. Focus on it." Benedek's voice became soothing and soporific. Not conventional hypnosis, just the power of suggestion. It was so easy to trust those comforting tones. "Someone thanked you. Did he speak in English?"

Jonathan let himself drift on the relaxing tide of Benedek's voice. He could almost hear the thanks that came to him. Almost. Not quite.

Because he hadn't heard it, not aloud. It had been within his mind. Telepathy? Nonsense. He didn't want to believe in telepathy. Surely there were no such things as telepathic rocks. But Benny coaxed him to think, to remember. He couldn't get past the wall that shut out his memories of the past three years, but the voice in his head sharpened.

Your knowledge will help to defend your planet against the enemy. Thank you. The words had not been in a language, so much as they had been in concepts, directly within his brain.

Your planet? Had Benedek been right about aliens? Unbelievable, but the words came to him clearly. The voice had spoken to him as it took his memories, his knowledge. Why would a benevolent alien steal from him? How would that make him different from the "enemy" he spoke of?

"Think, Jonathan." Benny spoke with a soft intensity. "Remember. Someone thanked you. Did he tell you what he was thanking you for?" His hand rested on Jonathan's shoulder, a comforting touch that reassured him even as he struggled against disbelief. "Let your mind drift. It will come to you."

He tried hard to relax, to let himself drift. There had been more, so quick, so abrupt, that in the overwhelming sense of loss that had permeated him, it had drifted away. He let himself float, let the strange words flow over him.

To reclaim what is yours, again grasp the device.

Had he really "heard" that? What did it mean? Aliens? Enemies? Did the speaker in his mind use his three years to study the planet? Why? Who was the enemy? The one who stole his mind? The one the voice spoke of?

To reclaim what is yours ...

Jonathan erupted from the chair so quickly none of the others even realized he meant to move. He went past Benedek on the strength of his extra inches, even though Benny let out an alarmed yell and tugged on his arm with all his strength.

Not even Benedek's urge to protect Jonathan was as strong as his own need to remember. He leaped past Blair, who stared at him with eyes as round as Frisbees, put out a hand to block Corey, then dove for the orb. They grabbed him and tried to stop him, but his grasping hand closed around the patterned metal.

"Jonathan, no!" Benedek yelled and tried to knock it from his grip.

"I'm supposed to hold it," Jonathan insisted. "Let go."

And then it hit him, a swirl of memory, circling him, twisting tight around him, enveloping him, slamming into him with the force of an express train. He staggered and would have fallen if the three of them hadn't been holding him up. He could hear Benedek yelling his name, hear the stark panic in his friend's voice, and he knew he had to reassure him, but the knowledge that beat through him was so strong and vital that he could only reel under the impact as the last three years of his life came back to him.

Dear God, he'd tried to send Benedek away, not with the usual teasing camaraderie that went with their friendship, but with a stern refusal to look past the surface appearance to the good man beneath. He had believed Doctor Moorhouse even when an inner voice had protested her condemning words. Of course he'd come around to the truth before Doctor Moorhouse had called back to make right what she'd done wrong. But still...

Still holding the artifact he straightened up and found a pair of intense blue eyes focused on his face. "Jonny?" Benedek asked hopefully.

Jonathan hesitated, then the right word came to him. "Relaxovision," he said with a smile. "I remember. I remember it all. Benedek, I am sorry."

"No problem-o, buds. You straightened up pretty good there by the end." Benny waggled his eyebrows at him outrageously. "Guess it didn't take away your good taste."

"But I wouldn't have even known I was supposed to pick it up again if you hadn't coached me through it." He displayed the artifact. "It did talk to me, Benedek. It sent me a message, that it wasn't taking my memories permanently, that it was borrowing them."

"Borrowing them?" Blair edged closer. "Why?"

"To make sure the planet was safe from a mysterious enemy." He heard how ridiculous his answer sounded. Corey frowned. Skepticism radiated off her in waves, but Blair hung in there, intrigued.

Not as intrigued as Benny. "The planet? Bingo. I knew it was the Martians. I told you that in the very beginning."

The orb in Jonathan's hand purred faintly, vibrating against his palm, and he jerked and stared at it in alarm. He didn't want to lose his memory all over again.

Before he could fling it away, a beam of light shot out of one end of it that expanded into a conic projection six feet tall at its highest. In the middle of it, an elderly man stood looking at him. He was not quite solid; Jonathan could make out the outline of a totem pole through his stomach. But his features were clearly defined.

"Hologram," Benedek cried in delight. "Yo, Mr. Alien. You leave my buds alone."

The man's head turned to Benedek. "Ah, Mr. Benedek. I recognize you. You were vivid in your friend's memories."

Jonathan felt heat run across his face. Benedek didn't need to hear that. It would embarrass him — and he wasn't above capitalizing on it.

Benny didn't even try. "You put my friend through a rough time, and a couple of other people, too. You better have a good reason for it. Who are you, anyway, and where are you from?"

"Where I am from does not concern you. Only know that my world and many others are in jeopardy from a great threat. I planted the memory orbs on worlds I believed unaffected."

"Memory orbs?" Blair asked. "What are they for?"

The old man studied him. "Your people are much like my own, it seems. This may even be the first world, from which the enemy stole humans to populate others. If so, I am glad I left memory orbs here. None have operated there for perhaps a hundred of your years. Those memories were from people more primitive than you. Your age of technology has begun. This is good. It will help you to fight the enemy."

"You mean there are space invaders out there who might decide to paint a bulls-eye on Earth?" Benedek's eyes lit up, not at the thought of invasion but probably at the headlines he would write about it.

"Dominate and enslave the people of Earth, as they have done to my world. From what I have seen of your life, Jonathan MacKensie, you have faced many unlikely adventures, but none resemble the threat I know so well. Nor do the other two, whose memories I have recorded. You must take the memory orb to them to restore their memories, as I would not steal them permanently."

"But who are you, anyway?" Benedek demanded. "And what are we supposed to do about you?"

"I am a great inventor. I create many devices to help defeat the enemy. I will not speak its name here, on a world that does not know the threat. My name is Machello. That is all you need to know. I would spare your world. These orbs report to me, three of your years out of a lifespan, time enough for me to determine if the threat has come upon you. I see from what I have observed that you do not know this threat. This is good."

"You mean there are other orbs on the Earth?" Benedek persisted.

"I have planted them on many worlds. They do no harm. I have learned that most choose not to mention their experience, or else they find excuses for it. The enemy will not search them out."

"So what happens if I write it all up for my newspaper?" Benny asked.

"We once had such 'newspapers.' or rather, similar means of information dissemination, on my world. Some will believe, others will scoff. Many others will read with amusement, but none will change their lives. You know this to be true."

"But you're talking to us," Jonathan cried. "If you took someone else's memory, someone highly placed in the government, or someone with the authority to take action ..."

"What could they do?" Machello asked. "They do not know the threat. It has not found this world, and it may not in your lifetime or the lifetimes of your children. That is my wish. Had I found proof the enemy had discovered you, I would have recruited allies to assist you. Until such time, may it never come, there is nothing to do but learn and grow as a species."

He turned to study Jonathan. "I see from your memories that your friend is a good man. He will not jeopardize the safety of your world. His article may be amusing and dramatic, but it will not alert the enemy. It is not my place to interfere any more than I do in seeking the enemy."

"You can't expect us to be glad of what you did," Jonathan snapped. "Losing one's memory isn't a pleasant experience."

"Neither is undergoing torture by the enemy for trying to stop them. Which would you prefer?"

Horrorified, Jonathan stared at the old man. "They tortured you?"

"Because I fought them. They did far more, which I will not tell you. The loss is still too great. But rest easy. Your world is free. It is growing, learning. Maybe one day soon, your people might have to fight my enemy. I believe, when the time comes, you will resist them bravely and strongly."

Until then, know the orb will not work on anyone it has already touched. What you do with it is your choice. I am too far away to take it back."

"You mean we could give it to the President?" Jonathan asked.

"You could. Or you could throw it in your Pacific Ocean. If it is meant to be used, it will be. For now, only know that it will return the memories of the other two as soon as it is taken to them. And I will answer no further questions."

The light faded from the device leaving it null and inactive in Jonathan's hand.

The four of the stared at each other in awe and disbelief.

Then Blair gave Jonathan a nudge. "Come on. Whitney's freaking back at the hospital. We've got to take the orb to Jed right away."

Jonathan tucked the orb into his pocket. "We'll do that first," he agreed, and he fell into step with Benedek so naturally that it was as if his memory had never been gone.

Yet the presence at his side of the man who alternately irritated, amused, and delighted him proved what the memory loss had shown him, how much he valued Edgar Benedek. He would fight to keep his memories now. But he wouldn't say so. Benedek didn't respond well to such declarations.

Instead he offered Benny a smile as they left the trailer and headed for the car. Bad enough that one of Benedek's impossible theories had been correct. Aliens? Space invaders?

Oh no, thought Jonathan. I'll never live this down.

"Thank you, Jonathan." Whitney Stone flung her arms around Jonathan and kissed him on the cheek. Over the top of her blonde head, he saw Benedek turning green with envy. She let Jonathan go and went back to her father, who embraced her fervently, then gestured his stepson in for a hug. Monty Watson, once again restored, couldn't tear his eyes off the singer.

"I can't believe I got to meet Whitney Stone."

She turned and winked at him. "I'll see that Eddie sends you an autographed poster of the band if you'd like it."

"If I'd *like* it ..." He glowed with delight.

Jonathan couldn't help smiling. Everything was back the way it belonged, all memories restored.

Back the way it belonged?

Not really.

He could feel the weight of the artifact in his pocket, where he'd returned it after Jed and Monty's memories had been restored. "What do we do with the device?" he asked.

Machello hadn't popped out after the volunteer and the student recovered. Probably he hadn't thought he needed to since Jonathan knew the whole story. Before Jonathan could stop him, Blair had explained it to his stepfather in words so hasty they tripped over themselves. Jed Stone didn't doubt what Blair told him, just the implications. Jonathan was glad he'd waited until the doctors who had examined the two had left. They had insisted on keeping Jed and Monty overnight for observation. Jonathan was glad no one had told the doctors he'd been through the same experience. He didn't want to find himself in a hospital bed when he felt perfectly well.

"We tell the world about it," Blair insisted.

"And then the world goes nuts," his father objected. "Do you want to create mass panic?"

"But if there are nasty guys out there, we need to do something about it?"

"Do what, though?" Whitney asked. "Tell the President, assuming he'd meet with us? What about other countries? Benny can write an article for his paper, but people won't believe it. That Machello you mentioned — he didn't give much information, just a lot of generalities. For all we know, he could be insane, convinced it's his job to defend the Earth and all those other planets. Even if there is a threat out there and we start preparing right this minute, who knows if those bad aliens will ever come in this direction?"

"I think we should put the artifact in the museum at Georgetown," Jonathan suggested. "We can keep it secure. If we need to contact Machello, we can get it out and use it. Maybe he can come here with a space army if we're in trouble. I think that was why he sent it here, not to alarm us and make us run around in panic, but to alert him by periodically checking someone's memories and studying them for evidence of alien trouble." It felt ludicrous to even suggest such a thing, but he believed what had happened to him was real. It didn't make Benedek's other 697 weird theories true, just this one. "If there are other artifacts here, people may find them from time to time. We might not even be advanced enough to tempt the aliens Machello hated so much. I don't think there's anything we can do right now."

"How about we set up a system," Benny suggested, "that every ten years the artifact be tested. Maybe every five. That way, somebody at the Institute can report if there are problems." He grinned at Jonathan's surprise. "What, you don't think I can come up with common sense answers? You thought I'd summon up a dozen of my 'weird' friends to send messages off to Alpha Centauri."

"You have friends who send messages to Alpha Centauri?" Blair asked skeptically.

"I have friends who can do anything," Benny said with perfect certainty. He glanced over at Jonathan and caught his eye, and Jonathan couldn't help smiling to realize he was included in that particular group. He might be the most conventional member of the Benedek brigade, but half an hour of amnesia had convinced him that being a member was worth its weight in gold.

"It's amazing, Benedek," he said in reply, "but so do I."

Would even Doctor Moorhouse believe this one?



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