

THE DEMON HUNTERS

By Sheila Paulson

He stood on the platform on the bluff overlooking Lake Michigan, watching the waves sweep in and retreat as they washed away the sand of the eroding beach. Instead of soaring gulls and crests of the gentle waves, he saw the fireball vivid in the gathering darkness as it seared his vision and burned away all hope. Recalling that moment on the dock when his stomach had twisted so violently and despair had churned through him, he closed his eyes on the tranquil daytime view. Shutting it out eased the headache that pounded behind his eyes, but it did nothing else to soothe his troubled spirit. Relaxovision, Benny, he told himself, but he was too keyed up to listen.

The story of the explosion had been all over the news. He'd watched all the local TV reports at the Motel 6 where he had gone to ground, hoping for word of survivors--of one particular survivor. There had been none. A body or two had been hauled out of Lake Michigan, but not the one he worried about. Did that mean there was hope? Was he crazy to allow himself to believe there was a chance? He ought to know better than that. Hope usually sneaked around behind you and bit you in the ass.

There hadn't been the slightest trace of a premonition before the world caved in, either, not that his track record was outstanding in preventing any dark images he'd ever seen. Probably if he'd seen this one coming, he wouldn't have been able to stop it, either.

Nobody had connected the abandoned office building fire with the sinking of the boat, at least not yet. Just as well. Trust Brother Michael and his sidekicks to go over the top with two incendiary devices. They'd been good at overkill. Lucky he hadn't known at the time that there'd been more than one. Even luckier the second one hadn't gone off early....

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Tracking down the weird cult had been easy. Staying ahead of them had been a lot harder. One minute of fatal recognition and he and Jonny were snatched. Throughout their plan to expose the cultists, poor Jack had played along like a real trouper--and fallen victim to the one thug who figured out they were trying to con the con men. With that one alarm, the cultists proved what Benny had suspected from the first, that they were out-and-out crooks who were willing to leave no evidence behind instead of mystical seers who could summon up a demon at the drop of a hat.

The demon had turned out to look so much like a hologram that even Benny couldn't work up enthusiasm for it. Real demons shouldn't blink out as if someone had flipped a switch or pulled a plug. No, it had all been a con instead of a way to fame and glory. The pictures he'd snapped of Old Scaly with his Instamatic probably fell into the same category as the faked UFO shots overconfident idiots mailed off to the Register every day of the week.

Instead, he found himself and Jonathan in an unexpected confrontation that had ended in violence, when their cover was blown. Who'd have thought Jason, who didn't look like he had two brain cells to rub together, would have been the one to recognize Benedek? Benny was too busy cursing himself for that slip-up to hear another thug come up behind him. The displacement of air as he swung the cosh was Benedek's only warning before his head exploded.

He wasn't unconscious very long. They were just starting to bind his wrists behind his back when he swam back to awareness, his head jack-hammering, his mind all too clear. Even as he flexed his wrists carefully to keep the bonds from being secured too tight--not too obvious, Benedek--his focus was on only one thing. Jonathan? He slitted his eyes open and saw his friend sprawled on the floor beside him, already bound and gagged. They must have done him first because he was bigger. So why not just blow them away? Maybe they were afraid someone would hear the shot. There weren't any guns visible. Maybe they just didn't want to explain bullet wounds

when the bodies were found. Don't even think about bodies, Benedek. The police might be able to trace the slugs.

Jonathan was still unconscious when they hauled him away. Benny, groggy and reviving from his own blow, had seen Brother Michael's satisfaction as he stooped to check the knots that bound Benny.

"Five minutes from now, this place will go sky high," the son of a bitch gloated and gestured for his minions. "Stash him in the trunk," he said to Jason, who stooped obediently beside JJ. Brother Michael smirked at Benedek. "We'll head for the yacht. Fifteen minutes from now, he goes overboard. Before then, he'll talk. We'll know the names of everybody you told about us." His smug satisfaction made Benny ache to kick the classically handsome face.

Brother Michael glanced across the room at Max, one of the thugs, who was working on some gadget on the old desk. "But before that, you'll be a cinder. Yes, Mister Benedek, that's an incendiary device. They'll eventually figure out it was an arson fire, but they won't find us. We'll be over the lake and gone by then." He must have been confident Benedek wouldn't make it out of there, or he'd never have admitted a word. If he meant Benedek to be found after the fire, he probably wouldn't want a bullet in him. Benny had been right about that.

"You won't have a chance to yell for help," he added, and slipped a gag into Benny's mouth. Unable to speak, Benedek glared at the cult leader. Pity looks couldn't kill or Mikey would be writhing in torment.

Then Brother Michael made a curt gesture to Jason, and the thug slung a dazed Jonathan over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and hauled him away. Benedek watched until his friend was out of sight.

"The device goes up in five minutes," Michael said. He patted Benedek insultingly on the cheek, dusted off his hands, and rose. "Enjoy your last five minutes of existence, Mister Benedek." He didn't even hurry as he strolled out of the empty office, flipping off the light switch on his way out.

Five minutes. You've got five minutes, Benedek.

It was twilight, but the empty office was on the eastern side of the building, and the shadows gathered thick and fast. As he struggled to free himself in the growing darkness, Benny knew the building was empty; it had that kind of feel. The cult leaders would have rocketed out of there as fast as possible to make sure nobody noticed them and associated them with the coming fire.

The knots around his wrists were tight, but not as tight as they could have been. He didn't think Mikey had noticed he'd flexed them. Not enough give, he was afraid. Benny, Benny, you learned it better than that. You can do it. He worked his hands back and forth, twisting, bending, tugging. Never mind if he peeled off all the skin from his wrists. Bandages were cheap. Skin grew back. Charbroiling was permanent.

Drowning was final.

Hang in there, Jonny, he thought desperately. They're not gonna toss you overboard right away. I'll get to you in plenty of time, if I have to steal a boat to do it. I know small boats. Did a great story once about the maritime lifestyles of the rich and famous.

Each second he struggled with the ropes was one second closer to conflagration, one second less for him to haul ass out of here and race to Jonathan's rescue. They'd been so smug they hadn't even searched him except to pat him down for a gun. He still had the keys to the rental car

in his pocket.

He could imagine the firebomb, the sudden, fierce explosion of heat, the searing air that would fill his lungs in a blistering rush and kill him before the flames even touched him. His skin crawled with uneasy anticipation as he struggled, unwilling to give up, not when Jonathan's life depended on him freeing himself and rushing to the rescue.

Then, finally, he yanked his left hand free, leaving behind a good chunk of skin. Ignoring the blood that ran down his wrist onto his fingers, he made quick work of the knots around his ankles. Gotta hurry, gotta hurry, gotta hurry. He ripped out the gag then descended on the device. Piece of cake. All he had to do was rip out a couple of wires.

Perfect. Now maybe the police could find evidence, fingerprints anyway. None of the jerks had been smart enough to wear gloves. He only hoped the few seconds he'd taken to disable the device wouldn't be the ones he'd have needed to save Jonathan. It seemed to take him forever to get to the door and burst out into deep twilight.

The car was right where he'd left it. They hadn't even slashed the tires. Talk about overconfident. That's gonna be your downfall. You hear me, Mikey? You cut too many corners. You're going down.

He didn't know where the Benton Harbor traffic cops hung out to trap speeders, but he didn't see one of them between the doomed building and Lake Michigan. He thought fleetingly of grabbing the cops and making them stop the boat, but he'd waste impossible minutes finding a police officer and convincing him that the Moonlight Brotherhood was bogus, and by that time, the boat would be gone, out in deep water so they could feed JJ to the fishes. Let the cops chase him if they would. On scene, they might delay the boat, but Benny couldn't take any more time or Jonathan would have no chance at all.

The steering wheel was slippery under his bloodied hands. No time to wrap his wrists, no time for anything but rescuing his friend.

Hurry, hurry, hurry.

There. The marina. The docks. At last! He screeched the car to a halt and abandoned it still running. His Nike'd feet thudded against the boards of the pier as he raced for the right berth. If the boat--arrogantly named Archangel--was already gone, he'd grab the first one he could find that would make speed. He'd go after it, stop it, even if he had to ram it. He'd get Jonathan back. He'd yank him out of there. Jonathan would be fine.

The memory of his unconscious friend, limp against Jason's back, panicked him all over again. Unconscious. If he'd been dead, they'd have left him, wouldn't they, and taken Benny to question in his place? He was alive. He would recover. After all, they'd bopped Benny on the head, too, and here he was, able to break the Benton Harbor land-speed record.

He'd only been here once before, when he and Jonathan had scoped out the yacht. Where was that dock? Not that one. Hadda be the next one. Yes! As he pounded desperately onto the dock, he saw the cult's cabin cruiser chugging out of the marina heading for deep water, its running lights aglow in the gathering darkness.

"Nooooo!"

A guy coiling rope on the deck of a mid-sized cabin cruiser stared at him doubtfully, shrugged, and returned to his task. Nobody else was visible. What did they do in Benton Harbor, roll up the streets when the sun went down?

Hang in there, JJ. I'm coming. He spotted an abandoned speedboat at the end of the pier. Benny didn't care who it belonged to. Let them arrest him afterwards, once Jack was safe. Never mind if the rope guy testified that he'd stolen it. Who cared. He could hot wire a speedboat with the best of them. I'm coming, Jack. Hang in there.

He had just taken the first unsteady step toward it when the inconceivable happened. His gaze unwavering upon the Archangel, he couldn't believe it when a fierce explosion tore the craft apart. The fireball illuminated the night and seared his eyeballs. Even safe on the dock, the resultant shock wave nearly knocked him off his feet. The roar of the explosion drowned out his frantic, disbelieving cry of, "Jonathan!"

The next thing he knew, he was on his knees on the dock, pounding helpless fists against the planks while ripples from the explosion slapped the pilings and spray stung his face and left it wet. Spray. Yeah.

Who the hell was he kidding? He didn't even mop away the tears. Oh, god, Jonathan....

No one could survive a blast like that.

It couldn't have happened. It was impossible.

But the impossible had happened. Jonathan MacKensie was dead.

At the roar of the explosion people crawled out of the woodwork. Benny heard voices babbling excitedly behind him on the dock. Ghouls, who couldn't stare enough. Benny wanted to yell at them and curse them, but he didn't. He couldn't find the strength. His fists beat automatically against the rough wood, adding a splinter or two to the overall mess. A couple of the more adventurous boaters jumped in their craft and sped off toward the scene.

Benny was sure there would be nothing for them to find.

When he heard the distant sirens, he yanked himself together. What the hell could they do now? They were too late to save Benny's best bud, too late to arrest the slimy bastards who had taken him. Benny didn't even care what had set off the explosion. He just cared that Jonathan....

He eeled his way through the crowd unnoticed, his bloodied, battered appearance less noticeable in the darkness, and returned to his car. Police vehicles screeched to a halt nearby and cops ran out onto the deck. The ponderous beat of a fire engine neared, the siren joining to the cacophony of the night.

Benny waited for it to pass, then he put the car in gear and drove off into the night.

At least Jonathan had not died alone. His captors would join him in Davy Jones's locker.

Jonathan....

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He shook his head to drive away the vivid memories. It didn't do any good. The fireball was etched on the insides of his eyelids, waiting for him the second he closed his eyes. How much sleep had he gotten since then? Not enough.

Sleep wasn't safe. Sleep was far too full of dreams.

Okay, back to the present day. He still had a task to accomplish, and he wouldn't succeed by dwelling on what he had been unable to prevent. He had to elude the remaining cult

leaders--they couldn't have all been on the boat--and bring them down.

The fake ID's he sometimes used on stories had stood Benedek in good stead. If anybody requested proof of his identity, he was Jed Clark, geologist, here to study beach erosion. He had the papers to prove it. What he didn't have was one item to connect him with Edgar Benedek, other than the key to the locker at the bus depot in Benton Harbor where he'd concealed his real ID, and he knew better than to carry that on him. He couldn't be Edgar Benedek again, not until he was sure the surviving members of the Moonlight Brotherhood had given up searching for him, not until he could flee back to New York, and he couldn't do that, not until he knew....

The wind tugged at the bangs he sported to disguise his appearance and flapped the baggy legs of his jeans. As part of his disguise, he had made a negative fashion statement with suspenders, a chambray shirt with a pen holder jammed in the pocket, and the reading glasses he usually risked only when he was positive no one would see him and discover his secret. They settled low on his nose and he peered over the top of them like an absent-minded professor.

Don't go there. No matter what you do, don't go there.

He knew exactly how an absent-minded professor should act. He'd seen the role played out in front of him for nearly a year. The best year of his life....

I said, don't go there.

He raised an automatic hand to shove his hair off his forehead and caught himself before he could complete the gesture. Watch it, Benny. Nobody would recognize Edgar Benedek with the dreary clothes, the stooped shoulders, the glasses, the unfamiliar hairstyle. Even the case that sat at his feet with tools and vials for taking samples added to the disguise. If anybody noticed him, they'd probably think he worked for the park service or as a groundskeeper. A hung-over groundskeeper, probably. At least he wasn't dizzy today. Just as well. He was striving for invisible, and staggering around a public park like a misplaced wino didn't exactly help a guy fade into the background, especially when you added bandaged wrists to the equation. When you were a tabloid reporter out to make a scoop, there were times to be blatant and bizarre, and times to blend into the wallpaper. This was wallpaper time.

He'd put in a few calls to contacts here in Michigan from a pay phone in a public place. There was Kellogg Pratt up in Lansing, psychic extraordinaire. He'd be here soon and then he could see what he could home his vision on once he was on site. Benny was afraid the psychic/disk jockey would only tell him what he already knew, but it wouldn't hurt to try. There could be some fluke, some stretch of beach no one had yet searched, some bobbing piece of debris for Jonathan to cling to.

God, Jonathan, why did you choose this time to come along with me? Why did you have to buy into my manipulation? Why didn't you stall, claim you had papers to grade, classes to teach? Why the hell did you let me scam you into coming with me? Damn you, why did you have to die? He gritted his teeth against the surge of hot anger, nearly hatred, that gushed through him. How could Jonathan have done this to him?

Even worse, how could he have done this to Jonathan?

No, not hatred, at least not directed toward Jonathan. Let's dump the blame where it belongs, on the damned cult. He felt no sympathy for the bodies the rescue teams hauled out of Lake Michigan. It was no more than they deserved.

Now, two days later, they'd retrieved a couple of charred and broken bodies--but not Jonathan's. They had possible identification on them, too. No names had been released to the press, but Benny had done some digging and tracked down answers. Not that creep, Jason, not

yet, although, as Brother Michael's right-hand man, he would have surely been on the boat. Tentative ID on the thug Max, and on Brother Michael himself--Benny had used every contact he possessed to get the names. But no bodies that could have matched Jonathan. Benny knew better than to hope that meant he was alive. No one could have survived the fireball he'd witnessed. He'd have been below decks, tied up. Even if he'd been blown clear, not even the Man from Atlantis could swim with his hands tied behind his back. It wasn't as if they'd have untied him long enough to put him into a life vest. They wanted him dead. Not quite that fast, but they wouldn't have allowed him the freedom of the boat.

Benny hoped it had been instantaneous, that he hadn't suffered.

Behind him in the park, children screamed with laughter as they started a new game. The unexpected sound made him jump, and his fingers closed around the railing so tightly that his knuckles whitened. He felt a splinter slide into the ball of his thumb, and he let go abstractedly to pluck at it.

Damn you, Jonathan MacKensie. You had no right to die on me.

What had they been doing chasing cultists, anyway? Just because the rituals the Moonlight Brotherhood performed reeked of the occult--summoning demons, one frantic witness had claimed--he'd dragged JJ from the safe haven of Georgetown Institute to scope it out. Demons sold papers like crazy, and Jordy had even allowed Benny an expense account for the trip. One more bit of leverage to convince Jonathan to come. "You don't even need to hit Doctor Moorhouse up for expenses this time around. I'm covered." Who'd have thought horned demons would hang out in Benton Harbor, Michigan? Certainly not Jonathan.

"This is ludicrous, Benedek. You know what it is, don't you? Drugs. They drug the cultists and put on a song and dance for them so they think it's demons, and next thing you know, the poor fools have signed over their life savings to Brother Michael."

"Well, yeah, nobody ever said that wasn't part of it, Jack. But two witnesses saw the demon. Eight feet tall and scaly. You might shove somebody into a horns-and-tail costume, but not even Kareem Abdul Jabbar on steroids is that tall."

"Exaggeration," Jonathan scoffed. "Mass hallucinations. Or possibly stilts."

"Stilts? It'll be circus acrobats next." Benny grinned. He liked that explanation, not as a solution to the problem--his witness had claimed the demon moved too fluidly for stilts, not to mention the angles of the legs, like goat's legs with the joints in the wrong place--but because Jonathan was so determined that it not be demons that he was grasping at straws. "Come on, Doctor J, you know it's not stilts. It's not special effects."

"Why not? Perhaps it's holograms."

Benny had liked that idea. Modern special effects had added considerably to the phony medium's repertoire, as he'd displayed to Jonathan at the Pence house with the 'ghost' of Jonathan's father on their first case together. Yeah, that's right, he has Pop issues, so rub the guy's nose in it. I've got a great track record. I'm the guy who uses his friends.

"Benny?"

Don't react to the name. Don't give yourself away. But the first instinctive, protective reaction faded when he recognized the voice. "Kel?" He glanced sideways at the burly, shaggy-haired man who had mounted the platform that overlooked the lake to stand beside him. Even the vibrations in the wooden framework hadn't roused Benny from his dark reverie. Brother Michael could have come right up to him, tipped him over the edge of the bluff and down to the

narrow strip of beach so far below--if he hadn't been in charred pieces on a slab in the morgue. The journalist shivered involuntarily. No guarantee all the baddies had been on the boat. Wake up, Benedek. It won't do Jonny any good for you to splat on the beach.

Kellogg Pratt looked like he had never left the Sixties. Where the heck did a guy find bell-bottoms in the '80s, especially bell bottoms that would fit a guy shaped like a pear? Tie-dye? Yeah, major retro here, and what was with the headband? Half red, half yellow/orange with 'Team Banzai' emblazoned on it. That's right, Kel was a Buckaroo Banzai fanatic.

Right now he was a fanatic who was gazing sadly at Benny, his coffee-brown eyes full of concern and--what the heck was that?--pity? Benny stiffened up automatically and squared his shoulders. "Kel." A wary glance over his shoulder proved no one was within earshot. He didn't think Brother Michael's thugs were lurking in the parking lot with sound surveillance equipment, but he couldn't entirely discount the possibility. Bad enough he'd brought one friend to death. He didn't want to screw up a second time.

Pratt followed his gaze and read it expertly. "If there's surveillance on you, I didn't spot it."

He'd thought of it, though. Psychic D.J. though he was, Kel had come up through the Company, trained in the hard school of espionage. You didn't get a lot of former CIA operatives spinning platters in Lansing, Michigan, but Kel still had contacts in Langley, and the psychic element gave him a real edge.

"Didn't sense it?" Benny asked.

"Not a whiff. I know the feeling. I think you're clear. So what the hell is going on with this cult thing? The papers were pretty vague. Probably in case any of them are still running around loose."

Benny hung his head. "They were supposed to be summoning up demons. I thought I'd sell a ton of papers, get a raise out of Jordy, win myself a Pulitzer, the whole schmear. Running around with an Instamatic catching on film what nobody ever got before." He gave a disgusted snort. "What I got was pure con game. Ripping off suckers for their life savings, brainwashing them into thinking there were demons." He heaved a huge sigh. "For once, Jonny was right on the money with his skeptic number. It was mundane all the way. This Brother Michael guy--I got some leads on him. He sticks around an area for a couple of months, usually two, once six. Sets up his séance game, up pops Scales and Horns and does a Twilight Zone number. Next thing you know, Brother M is raking in their bread. He's got a Cayman Islands bank account under some other name--haven't been able to dig up the name yet. He heads for a new place and uses a new name, does it all over again, maybe just enough different that anybody who's smarter than the average bear won't make the connection."

"This guy's been running the racket a couple of years?" Pratt frowned. "I'll run him down, see what we've got on him, if anything, get one of my spook friends to check police files. How'd he get wise to you?"

"We tried to run a scam on him. You know Jonny--well, no, you don't, but he can do gullible like you wouldn't believe. You have to wind him up, get him going, 'cause he doesn't think he can pull it off, but you should see the guy. Once he dressed up in a chicken suit so he could break into a computer." When Pratt's brows soared, he smiled faintly. "Don't ask. He jumped between me and a gun once, tried to make this nutcase think he was Judge Roy Bean, the Law West of the Pecos." He gave a snort of laughter. "Course he said he was Judge Ray Bean but that's just JJ. Anyway, he pulled this number, wanted to contact his dead 'wife'. He can do the grieving thing great. Played it so sensitive, even Brother Michael bought into it. You could spot the dollar signs in his eyes at twenty paces."

Pratt's head bobbed. "Yeah, that's the bottom line for a character like that. They act the part, but it's always a part, always goal-directed, and the goal's profit." He tried to catch Benny's eyes, but Benny leaned his forearms on the railing and stared out over Lake Michigan to avoid Pratt's knowing gaze. No matter how hard he squinted, he couldn't see the far shore. His eyes stung with the effort. "So how did it go wrong?" Pratt asked.

Benny hunched his shoulders. "Should have seen it coming a mile away. God, Kel, I revel in being famous. I was there as Jonny's sympathetic brother-in-law. Supposed to be my sister who'd croaked. We had a whole story about brain cancer, so pathetic it'd gag a horse. Then Brother Michael's crony Jason--hired muscle all the way; I didn't think he had the brains of a turnip--turns to me night before last at the abandoned office building where they held their séances, and drops the axe. 'Didn't I see you on Merv?' God, Kel, I'm famous. Well," he added with reluctant honesty, "notorious. Trying to go undercover when I'd done a round of the talk show circuit just last month and somebody was sure to recognize me! Who am I trying to kid? I set Jonny up, and they bopped us on the head, and now he's d--" He couldn't go on. God, it hurt.

"Every 'case' you've ever gone on had that risk, Benny," Kel said flatly. "You're out there performing a vital service, either debunking or proving the paranormal elements of what's going down. You've stopped a few demented crazoids in your time. Saved lives."

"Yeah, until now." Benny didn't even try to shake himself out of his funk. I couldn't save the one life that matters.

"That's why I'm here, to find out what's happening. You need an agent more than a psychic, and with me, you get both. Come on, Benny, you know you've got friends all over the world who'd go to the wall for you."

Benny found words that hurt. "Friends I use whenever I get the chance? Like Jonathan? Best friend a guy could hope to have, best bud I ever had, and he took the risk for me. He didn't buy into the demon shtick for a second. Not one shred of paranormal about this case. Scam all the way. It looked like a hologram, if you ask me. Pretty lame, really." He risked one quick glance at Pratt. "I was gung ho to find that demon, to get the proof, to make Jon-Jon eat his words, and we were messing with a guy who had hired muscle, who had been ripping off millions and had way too much to lose. Nothing he could do but take us out."

"It doesn't sound like he took either of you out. You're alive, and the boat blew up, supposedly with him on it. Why did he take Jonathan away in the boat and not you?"

"He didn't want us to be found together. He rigged the building to make it look like I'd set a fire in there. He was gonna do the cement overshoes routine for Jonathan, once he got it out of him who we'd told what was going down. But I know how to get out of knots, and I was free and out of there before it could start. There was one incendiary device in the empty office where they'd left me, and I deactivated it. Did a story once about things like that, and this one was so simple a blind monkey could've disarmed it in his sleep. I missed the other one--figured later that Michael wanted to destroy the evidence, if there was any still in the building, as well as me, so he'd planted two in different places. Can't get fingerprints from ashes. Anyway, I was out of there before it went off. Didn't even know it had until I saw it on the news later." He turned his eyes back to the water. "I think Mikey figured Jonathan was more likely to talk than I was. But people might have seen me hanging around the place. He wanted it to look like I had some weird thing going there and screwed up and fried for it. I was meant to take the fall for him." He shuddered. Those desperate moments when he'd struggled with his bonds had felt like a year, every second bringing him closer to conflagration, every second Jonathan getting further and further away, on his way to being turned into fish food.

And I blackmailed him into coming.

He hadn't let himself even conceptualize that thought until now. He'd known, deep in his subconscious, that it would hurt too much.

"Blackmail?" Pratt plucked the word from the ether; he was good at that. "Come on, Benny, I know you. Sure you fast-talk anybody you can use to get a story, but that's different from the games you play with your friends."

"Last time, he didn't come," Benny admitted in a small voice. He couldn't keep secrets from Pratt, who could take one look at a person and read his mind. Maybe that's why he'd chosen the psychic to help him out, because he'd root through the crap and bring Benny's shoddy little secret out in the open.

"First time he ever missed?" Pratt prodded.

Benny threw up exasperated hands. "No, 'course it's not." He heard that and stopped, frowning at Pratt. "But...last time was different."

"Why?" Stupid question. The guy probably already knew. You couldn't keep a secret from Kel; that was what had made him a great spook.

Benny felt his fists knot. "Because it went crazy and I wound up with a concussion. Jonny came and did the mea culpa routine all over me in the hospital. Blamed himself because I'd been hurt--and I let him."

"Ah. So this time you reminded him of it and he came without hesitation, is that it? 'Stick with me, Jon-boy. Wouldn't want me to end up in the hospital again.' Am I right?"

Benny found the water utterly fascinating. Much better to stare out at the waters that rolled over Jonathan's grave than to face the man who stood beside him scouring his soul. Jonathan would never have the chance to rant at him for his stupidity. Not that Benny would have listened ahead of time, anyway. He would have been so sure, so goddamned sure that he was right that he'd have blown off JJ's rant with the ease of long practice, with a few flippant words. "He's dead, Kel," he said. "I've gotta live with that."

"You sent for me to flagellate you for killing your best buddy? Come on, Benny, you were doing a great job of that before I came along. What do you really want from me?"

"Revenge!" The word burst out of him explosively. "I want to take them down." He hadn't even known that was what he meant to say until he said it. Or had he?

"It would seem to me that some of them have already been taken down. Your Brother Michael's body was found yesterday afternoon."

"How do you know? That wasn't on the news."

He could hear the faint smile in Pratt's voice as he spoke gently. "I don't have to rely on the news, Benny. I have ways of finding out. You know that. It's why you sent for me. The psychic gig, that was secondary."

Revenge? Punishing somebody else for Benny's guilt?

"You didn't kill him, Benny. They did."

He flinched. "He wouldn't have even been within five states of Michigan if not for me."

"Benny." Pratt turned him so that they faced each other. "You can't say that. He made the

choice, not you. He chose not to risk you. He valued you enough for that. It was the two of you, together, that made Brother Michael panic and decide to close up shop. Both of you. But he was here because he wanted to make sure you were safe."

Benny didn't want to hear it, not when Jack was dead. He said fiercely, "I want to take them down."

"How many 'thems' are there, Benny? Brother Michael, a few henchmen, who were probably all on the boat. All that's left are the suckers he recruited. Maybe one last guy to close up shop, but as soon as you called, I put somebody on that. It won't be in the papers, not yet, not till we're sure we have them all."

Benny glared at him. "Thanks a lot. There's nothing left for me to do."

"Yes, there is, Benny. Yes, there is. You're going to write it. No splashy National Register headlines this time. A straight story. An exposé. You send it to the wire services. You've got the inside scoop. How many people lost their life savings, pathetic people who only wanted to belong? If you only reach a few people and stop them from falling for the next persuasive con man who comes down the path, then you've got your revenge."

It didn't feel like revenge. It didn't seem worth Jonathan's life, but Benny could see that Jonathan would have believed it a worthy solution. Noble guy, Jonathan. A kind of Don Quixote, out tilting at windmills, for justice, for 'the right thing'. Not for glory, that wasn't JJ, but because it was right. There had been times when Benny, in his secret soul, had stopped and wondered how a guy like that could turn out to be his best bud.

And it had killed him.

Benny heaved a shuddering sigh. "It's not right," he insisted.

"No, it's not right. But you can do something about it. Besides, from the look of you, you ought to be in bed. What'd they do? Drug you? Knock you on the head?"

"I'm okay."

Pratt frowned. "No, you're not. But you're up to writing your exposé. That's what you have to do."

Take up the banner, ride into battle for Jonathan's cause? Yeah, he could do that. Already, he could see how his article would be. No splashy headlines, just the honest, dramatic truth.

But there was something else he had to do first.

"I want to find him, Kel. I want to be able to lay him to rest."

Somewhere in the distance, a loon cried. For a long time, he lay dreaming, listening, while the lonely, evocative sound floated on the air. He didn't think about it. There was no coherence in his thoughts, nothing but a weary drifting awareness, muted aches and pains, and a distant loon.

Gradually, he became aware of the fact that he lay on what felt like a bed. It wasn't a very comfortable bed, too lumpy, but it was a bed, and there were covers over him. Not his own bed. He knew its familiar contours, and this bed was narrower, shorter. His feet were right down at the edge of it. That was wrong....

Slight perplexity cut through the wail of the loon. Where was he?

"Ssh, don't try to move."

He didn't know the voice, didn't recognize it at all. It was male and young, that much he could tell. The age of his students, maybe.

Students?

He frowned. It hurt to frown. Students? A vague memory of a classroom drifted through his mind and right out again. Professor? MacKensie, that was who he was. Jonathan MacKensie. Progress. He knew who he was. He didn't know where he was or why, though. From the explosion of pain behind his eyeballs, he didn't want to open them to find out.

He was hurt, but this didn't feel like a hospital. There was a musty, mothball-y odor to the place as if it had been closed away for a long time. Remote. You didn't get loons in Georgetown. Where was he? Why was he here? In his confusion, he wasn't alarmed that he didn't know, only mildly curious.

"Who...?" he ventured. Pushing that one word out exhausted him.

"No one who matters." A clear tenor voice. A voice that might be able to soar in song. A resonant voice. The voice of a stranger. Jonathan tried to open his eyes, but someone had hung weights on them.

Then a recollection penetrated that sharpened his thinking to dreadful clarity.

"Benedek!"

A hand against his chest made sure he didn't try to sit up. He lacked the strength to resist it. All he could do was remember, remember far too much. The cultists, the realization he and Benedek had been found out, the sight of a groggy Benedek sagging to the floor before a blow to Jonathan's head rendered him unconscious, too. Following a dazed, confused interval later, Jonathan felt himself dragged out of the trunk of a car into thick twilight scented with the tang of water and noisy with the cries of birds and the creak of boats at their moorings. Jason was there, gloating that Benedek was toast, that the abandoned office building should be going up in flames right on schedule.

"I don't believe you."

"You'll believe it, right before we toss you overboard. We've got the weights on board already. You'll go down so deep no one will ever find you. Your sneaky little pal is roasting right now. We tied him up so he couldn't get away. He's a goner." Jason had smirked complacently at Jonathan's shock.

"You're lying." He had to keep insisting on that, because he remembered Benedek stagger as they knocked him down. He didn't want to remember. Benedek was too smart for Brother Michael's thugs. He had to be alive.

Jason passed Jonathan to another of the hired thugs. When he stepped aside to speak to Brother Michael, Jonathan glanced around. No trace of Benedek. He couldn't really be bound and gagged in the office building, could he?

It had burned, they said as they boarded the yacht. A firebomb. No hope. They'd laughed about it.

Not Benny. He was too smart for that. He'd have broken free. Jonathan tried desperately to insist on it, to convince himself there was hope. Benedek had broken free.

But then where was he? Where was Benedek? Why was a stranger soothing him? Was he still a prisoner? Had he fallen overboard and been rescued?

Benedek, where are you? Are you alive? I was going to make sure you didn't get hurt this time. How could you do this to me?

He struggled to raise his eyelids and was rewarded with a fuzzy image of the man who held him down. Young, he didn't look a day over twenty, but his eyes, a deep azure blue, were ageless. Jonathan could see no malice in their untroubled gaze, no threat, no anger or suspicion, just a mild, impassive stare.

"Who are you?"

"That doesn't matter."

"Did you save my life?" Jonathan closed his eyes again. It took too much energy to keep them open.

"I took you from the boat. They didn't sense the gas leak."

"Gas leak?" he echoed doubtfully.

"The boat is gone. It exploded."

"And we went overboard?" Jonathan could make no sense out of this. Thoughts of Benny had mostly cleared his mind--cleared it terribly--but he wasn't at peak alertness. He was too passive, too numbed, to function properly. Was he still a prisoner?

The stranger hesitated. Tall and elegant-looking in spite of his apparent youth, he had an aquiline face and proud cheekbones. His hair was as tawny as a lion's pelt, very thick, and several inches longer than Jonathan's. Something about the arch of the elegant brows and the curve of the mouth suggested sophistication and asceticism, certainly maturity beyond his evident years. He looked rather like a statue of Michelangelo's unexpectedly come to life. The flesh could have been marble only moments before....

You're delusional, MacKensie.

"We left the boat," the stranger replied. He smoothed down the front of his white shirt as if Jonathan's gaze had wrinkled it. "The others I did not bring. They had tried to use me, and that cannot be. They intended harm to you, who only wished to stop them. Therefore, I brought you away from them."

Jonathan taught students his rescuer's age, and he'd never heard one of them produce sentences like that. The formality suggested a more elegant age, although his English held no discernable accent. No, that wasn't right. Jonathan struggled to clarify his thinking. His rescuer spoke with an accent identical to Jonathan's own, as if he had assumed it when he heard Jonathan speak. No, that couldn't be. He had spoken first, before Jonathan was fully conscious.

"Benedek?" he ventured tentatively. "Did the building.... Where is Benedek?"

The stranger said simply, "I do not know." Jonathan could not read concern or curiosity into the calm indifference on his face.

"Can you find out? Is there a telephone here?"

For the first instant, he saw hesitation in the stranger's eyes, as if he had never before heard of telephones, and so out of time and place did he seem that Jonathan wondered for an insane moment if he really hadn't. Then the man nodded. "There is one, yes, but it is not connected. No dial tone."

Jonathan glanced past him to the room in which he lay. It had a curiously unfinished quality as if it had never been insulated, and the furniture resembled the chairs and tables one would find on a summer patio rather than in a normal house. The walls behind the stranger sported an assortment of pictures of boats and lakes, interspersed with a pair of crossed oars, a lifesaver, a rack that held goggles and flippers. A beach cottage? Perhaps it was too early in the year for the owners to be on site. With no real basis Jonathan suspected his savior had brought him to the first vacant house he had found, and hadn't bothered with such mundane barriers as locks.

"Do you have a car?" He had no hope of that.

"No."

"Food? Supplies?"

"I will bring what you need."

I need Benedek alive. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Benedek?" the stranger asked.

Jonathan's eyes flew open. Had his rescuer read his mind? No, he had mentioned Benedek earlier, hadn't he? "I have to find out where Benedek is. You don't know him. He's...clever. If anyone could escape, he could. He probably knows all Houdini's routines."

"Houdini?" No comprehension at all in the blue gaze. Did this man lack any concept of contemporary culture? Had he dropped down from outer space?

"I have to find out about Benedek. Is there a television? A radio?"

"A radio," the stranger agreed and fetched it. It proved to be a battery-operated transistor, and the batteries were dead, corroded from long abandonment. Useless.

Jonathan fought the urge to fling it across the room. Benedek couldn't be dead. It was impossible. Yet they'd left him bound and probably gagged, unconscious, in a condemned building they planned to burn to the ground. What hope could Jonathan have that he'd survived? Only that deep core of certainty that the entire universe would have shifted if Benedek had died? How real could such a feeling be? Was it only a futile attempt at denial?

I came to protect you, Benedek, because I didn't come along last time. You might have been better off without me. What good did I do you?

His head ached, but his heart ached worse. Impossible to imagine Benedek dead. There had been times when he had wished for...not to be rid of Benedek because the man had brought such color into a black-and-white life, but to keep the life he had with Benedek in it apart from academia. Never mind that if Benedek was away too long, Jonathan found himself imagining new paranormal cases to examine, new oddities to pursue. Benedek irked and irritated him, but he also challenged him, amused him. He was witty and irreverent, and he was never dull. In the year they had worked together, Jonathan had come to value him both as a colleague and a friend. He'd thought he'd lost Benedek once before, that time at the Fitness Factory when Benny had

supposedly died of a heart attack and was buried alive. Jonathan had risked his own life to save him, and he would do it again, but this time, there was nothing he could do. If Benedek had been in that place when it burned....

He shut his eyes quickly, but he still felt the sting of tears.

The stranger's hand closed on his shoulder, and he felt a strange tranquility at the touch. "I will learn the truth of your friend's fate," he said. "For I see that Benedek is indeed a friend."

Jonathan stared at the images of Benedek that played themselves out on the inside of his eyelids. "My best friend," he admitted, and wondered if he had ever spoken those words before and meant them as strongly as he did right now. He could never say it to Benedek; Benny was uncomfortable with displays of emotion. But Jonathan felt a sudden annoyance with himself because he hadn't insisted on saying it before it was too late.

I'm sorry, Benedek, he thought miserably. I'm so sorry.

The stranger stepped away and returned a moment later with a glass of water. "Drink," he said, and slid an arm under Jonathan's shoulders. "No, let me do the work."

Jonathan wasn't sure he could sit up on his own. Even the gentle disturbance made him dizzy and his stomach lurched unpleasantly at the slightest movement. The stranger set aside the glass and put his hand on Jonathan's forehead, and the worst of the dizziness eased. He was able to drink, and the cool water soothed his troubled stomach.

His troubled spirit required stronger medicine.

He'd believed Benedek was dying at Hooperville, heard the doctor say, "We're losing him," as they used the paddles on him. He'd gone to Benedek's funeral, the time he'd been buried alive. Each time, he'd gotten Benedek back, alive and as delightfully irritating as ever. Did that mean there was hope this time, too? Did Benedek, catlike, possess nine lives? Did even speculating about it arouse false hope? If he let himself hope, would it hurt even more when they found Benedek's body?

"Hope is always worth the effort," said the stranger softly as he set the glass aside and lowered Jonathan to the lumpy pillow. "Remember that, my friend."

Jonathan stared at him in disbelief. Could the young man read his mind? He'd wondered earlier; now the speculation returned. Or were his thoughts simply so obvious that they shone out on his face?

"Please," he begged. "Will you find out for me?"

"I will do so. Stay in bed. You are not yet strong enough to be up."

Jonathan knew that was true, but his weakness tore at him. There was nothing he could do to retrieve Benedek's body, no way to go after the surviving cultists. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut in new frustration. "Thank you for all you've done," he said. "If I didn't thank you before, it's because I can't think clearly."

"I understand." The stranger patted Jonathan's shoulder, and warmth radiated outward from the touch. Jonathan looked down at the hand and discovered that he was wearing unfamiliar pajamas. The stranger's? But the warmth that flowed through him at the gentle grip eased the worry in his mind and soothed him enough that he felt himself drifting toward sleep.

Don't be dead, Benedek, he thought as the darkness caught up with him.

All the reassurance of the stranger's touch couldn't stave away the nightmares.

The van was state of the art. Surveillance equipment filled the back, and tinted windows concealed the equipment from the chance passer-by who might take a peek. It possessed a security system set to go off like an air raid siren if anybody tried to break into the car.

"What do you think?" Pratt asked with a quick grin.

"Not too shabby, 007. You sure you're retired?"

"Once in the Company, always in the Company," Pratt returned. He grinned. "Yeah, I'm retired. You think we need spies in Lansing, Michigan? I just got tired, Benny. But I can't let it all go." His grin broadened. "So I've got a little detective business on the side. Mostly corporate. None of the divorce game for me. Who better to deal with industrial espionage and blue collar crime than yours truly?" He struck a heroic pose, then he gestured Benedek into the van. "Come on, before somebody gets a look."

Benny scrambled in. "Where are we going?"

Pratt's bushy eyebrows arched. "I'll give you points for a concussion, Benny. We're gonna scope out the remains of their headquarters, and then we're gonna head for Brother Michael's rented place. You know where it is, don't you?"

Benny had been by there twice yesterday in a rental car, a different one than the one he and Jonathan had used. The place looked deserted. The birds had flown the coop. He nodded. Nodding was bad. He wondered if his face was as green as it felt.

"You ought to be in bed," Pratt said softly.

"No." That was final; it wasn't open to negotiation. "If any of them are left, I have to know. I have to stop them. I have to keep looking. Jonathan still might...." He let that trail off. He had a forlorn hope that somewhere, out on the lake, Jonathan was clinging desperately to a piece of debris and the Coast Guard, or whoever it was that handled the Great Lakes, would come upon him any second now. He'd give them bonus points for a great rescue, let them star in his article....

Pratt kindly let that slide by unchallenged. He was an ex-CIA spook, not the miracle squad. Instead, he gestured to a cot. "Stretch out there while we head for Brother Michael's place. We'll go there first. Not sure the police have pinned it down yet. If any of them didn't go on the boat, they might be finishing up moving the evidence. House was rented under the name Ferguson."

"Jonny and I figured that already. It's not Brother Michael's real name, though. Okay, Kel. Go for it." He'd just lie here for a minute or two. Build up his strength for battles with the cultists.

Two seconds later, he was out like a light.

Jonathan roused slowly. He didn't know how much time had passed, but the angle of the sunlight had shifted; it must be nearly noon. He lay unmoving, listening for the loon, but it had stilled. Nearer birds cried, but none so evocative as that mournful cry he'd heard earlier.

"Hello?"

The stranger didn't appear, and Benny didn't miraculously show up, either. Well, he hadn't

expected that. The fire would have done its work unless some strange fluke....

Jonathan opened reluctant eyes, but this time the light didn't hurt them quite as much. He was healing. That didn't mean he felt like getting up yet. If Benny had appeared in the doorway, Jonathan would have been out of the bed like a rocket, but Benedek was dead.

Jonathan eased himself up on his elbows. The room danced for a moment, then stilled. Progress. He pushed himself up slowly until he was leaning back against the headboard of the bed. Savagely, his head pounded, but it eased slightly when he closed his eyes. The urge to lose his dinner was strong, but he fought it, swallowing hard. "You're all right," he told himself. "You're fine. You have too much to do to be sick."

Mind over matter was a wonderful thing. Jonathan felt the urge recede slightly until it was manageable. He wasn't quite ready to stand up--that marathon task would wait a little while longer. But he couldn't just lie here, not when Benedek--

The victims of the cult must be utterly disoriented. Did they know their leader was dead? Did they realize they had been scammed? Would they need deprogramming? Benedek had compiled a list of the members of the cult. Had it been on him? Jonathan couldn't remember. No, they'd called in all the names to Randi back at Georgetown. His student assistant would look them up on the computer. "I'll do some megabyting for you, Jonathan," she'd promised. Brother Michael and his thugs hadn't known about the Georgetown connection. All those names.... Doctor Moorhouse could use them. The police would listen to her. Jonathan gazed longingly at the unconnected phone. If only he could put in a call to her, he could start the wheels of justice rolling. God, what a cliché. Why couldn't he think properly?

There was another factor to consider. The stranger hadn't introduced himself. Maybe he was one of Brother Michael's men. Jonathan had not seen him at the one cult séance they had witnessed. The phony demon had arrived right on cue, tall and scaly. Jonathan had gaped at it in disbelief. It had to be a hologram. Pretty obvious really when it looked around the room and then vanished as abruptly as the switching off of a light. A hologram would work like that, wouldn't it?

Benedek, of course, had stubbornly claimed that it was real, even though Jonathan suspected he didn't buy into it, either. It didn't make him rush to sign up for the cult. Benny might have the ability to believe in things that any rational man would scoff at, but he was no fool. He had seen what a racket Brother Michael ran. By then they had the scoop on the man's previous scams.

"It's a trick, Benedek," he had murmured out of the corner of his mouth.

"Relaxovision, Doctor Skeptical. I know it's a scam. But that doesn't mean they might not have a deal with the devil."

"Benedek, if you for one second imagine I would believe that was the devil, then...."

Benedek gripped his wrist to silence him as one of the thugs drifted in their direction. When the man moved on, he flashed a confident grin. "Shakespeare said it, Jack. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy." He arched his brows. "Come on, JJ, you know it could be real."

"And I could be an elf," Jonathan said doubtfully. "But the odds are about ten million to one against it."

"Had your ears bobbed, did you?" Benny's eyes twinkled. "Bottom line, I don't know how they did it, if they have a deal with a minor demon, or if they have top of the line tech support, but it's convincing enough for the suckers. That's one thing we can check out later, if they got a rigged

room like at the burned-out building. There ought to be some evidence of it, even after the fire. No wonder the suckers eat it up."

Jonathan could understand that. If he really were a grieving widower desperate to contact his late wife's spirit he'd probably have been far more gullible, although he doubted he would automatically believe in giant, scaled demons popping in and out. Of course he was a scientist, a rational man. Despite nearly a year's exposure to Edgar Benedek and the wilder side of the paranormal, almost everything they'd encountered had a rational explanation, a scientific explanation. The parts that couldn't be easily explained weren't necessarily paranormal, either, although Benedek and Doctor Moorhouse, in their separate ways, would embrace the mystical each time that happened.

Just this once, he wished he'd told Benedek that he believed.

"I'm sorry, Benedek," he said aloud. Never mind that Benedek had always enjoyed his disbelief, maybe even felt a little pity-the-poor-fool tolerance toward Jonathan's skepticism. It would have been good to know that, this one last time, Benny believed he'd seen the light.

Once the demon had popped in and out, Brother Michael had held the audience in the palm of his hand. When the session ended, they bunched around him, loud in their admiration, eager to sign over major dollars. Jonathan, as part of his cover, had crowded in, too, Benedek supportively at his side.

God, I'm going to miss that.

It wasn't until the mob of suckers had cleared away and the office was empty of all but the two of them and the cult leaders that Jason had sprung his recognition on Benedek. "Didn't I see you on Merv?" was a line Benedek usually thrived on. He adored his mild celebrity and would sign autographs with delight, using the time to plug his latest book or weirdest theory. He even had groupies. Too bad Jason had to be one of them.

When Max, another thug, came up behind Benedek and whacked him over the head, Jonathan tried to stop him, but he was a beat too slow. So concerned with getting to the fallen Benedek, he didn't even notice who slipped up behind him and sent him crashing down into confused shadows.

We were too complacent, he thought bitterly as he leaned against the headboard of his uncomfortable bed. We took it too lightly. There was too much money at stake.

He drew a shuddering breath. Wallowing in might-have-beens wouldn't bring Benedek back to life. Nothing would. Jonathan closed his eyes tightly but that didn't stop the sting of tears. "I'm sorry, Benedek," he said softly. "I hope you know how much I valued you."

Benny didn't pop in and reassure him, even though a superstitious corner of his mind half-suspected he would appear in transparent, ectoplasmic form. No one came, not even the lonely loon out on the lake. Instead, Jonathan sat miserably with his head pounding, and tried very hard not to think at all.

That called to mind other needs. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes and looked around for a bathroom. The cabin was spartan, but an open door to his left provided him with a flash of porcelain. It might have been as far away as Rumania.

Jonathan chewed on his bottom lip. Not good. Not good. Slowly and carefully he collected himself and eased around until he was sitting on the edge of the bed, feet on the floor. His legs felt as steady as blades of grass, and his stomach muttered direly. Five steps. That was all it was, five bloody steps.

He curled his hand around the bedpost and forced himself upright. With a swirl and a sashay, the room danced around him. He stood perfectly still, his knuckles white against the post, until it stabilized. You have a concussion, Jonathan, he thought.

Is that a major scientific discovery?

He made the trip in one-step increments, each time pausing to collect his balance and will his stomach to behave. Step, lurch, pause, step, lurch, pause, while the walls loomed close and retreated, and bile rose in his throat. When he finally achieved the bathroom door, he was so grateful for something to hold onto that he embraced the door jamb like a lover. Two more uncertain steps brought him to his destination and he fumbled with the unfamiliar pyjamas long enough to relieve himself. Then he stood there shaking while the toilet flushed. At least there was water, but he'd known that. His rescuer had brought him a glass.

He staggered one step sideways to the sink and ran the taps. Bending down to splash water on his face was a major mistake. It upset his already-precarious equilibrium and made the room whirl drunkenly before his eyes. He barely had time to turn back to the toilet before he lost the contents of his stomach in a series of painful heaves that sent spikes of agony stabbing into his skull.

When the spasms finally eased, he knelt on the floor leaning against the toilet bowl like an undergraduate after a fraternity party. Even though his head ached worse than before, his stomach had settled. Just as well. If he were sick again, he would bring up his stomach lining, because there was nothing else left.

Without getting up, he edged to the sink, ran water, and rinsed out his mouth, a difficult proposition for a man sitting on the floor. He should probably drink some water, but the thought of introducing even something as innocuous as water to his stomach was a nightmarish concept. So instead, he sat there, letting the water run over his hand and periodically attempting a slight sip. At first, he didn't think they'd stay down, but they did.

The stranger found him there. One minute, Jonathan was alone, leaning miserably against the sink pedestal, the next, there was a hand on his shoulder and a gentle voice said, "Come back to bed." The other hand leaned past him and flushed the toilet.

"Who are you?" Jonathan asked. Even though he ached so badly, his thinking had clarified. He needed answers.

The stranger must have realized that. He smiled. Jonathan looked up and up at him--he was very tall--and saw understanding in the distant, beautiful face. "My name is Miran."

"Myron?" Jonathan frowned. He didn't look like a Myron. He looked like he ought to be called something like Asphodel. Or Cosimo. Or something remote and distant from modern society.

"As you say." A touch of humor altered the ascetic lips. "Come, I will help you back to bed."

Jonathan leaned on him all the way. It was an endless journey that made him perspire with effort, but when he was lying flat once more with the covers over him, he felt better. Shaky, but better. He gazed up at Miran. "Did you find Benedek?" he asked.

"No. I went to your motel, and someone else has your room now. I asked the clerk, but he said your friend had checked out."

A surge of incredible hope flared through Jonathan. "Checked out? He's alive?" Then he realized what it must mean. The thugs had cleaned up after them, to cover their tracks. "Was it actually Benedek?"

"The clerk didn't know. 'Just a guy who turned in the key and paid for the last night,'" Miran mimicked the desk clerk's attitude and tone. "He would not have cared had a demon with horns and a tail had paid." Amusement lit the blue eyes.

"A demon?" Wary disquiet flowed over Jonathan. He hadn't mentioned the cult. He was positive he had said nothing to Miran about the 'demon' they had seen at the séance. Unless he had muttered in his delirium, how could Miran have known? Jonathan found such a coincidence unlikely and disquieting. Only the firm belief that the cultists who had threatened to dump him in the middle of Lake Michigan and who had tied Benedek in an abandoned office building with a time-triggered incendiary device would never use him kindly convinced him that Miran was not part of the cult. Unless, of course, he was a cultist who had seen the light....

"I know of the Moonlight Brotherhood," Miran admitted. "I...attended several of their meetings. I saw you and Benedek there. You did not believe."

"In demons materializing? Of course not. It's simply a tool to manipulate the gullible into shelling out money." He hesitated. "Benedek believed--or he wanted to. For all his willingness to suspend disbelief, he's not one of the suckers." He heard himself speak in the present tense, but he could not bear to correct himself. He added hastily, "He can spot a con job at forty paces," and remembered Benedek once making that claim. Benedek, you spotted this one. Why did we take such a stupid risk?

"Perhaps it was not as you assumed," Miran said gently.

"Obviously Brother Michael and his minions were dishonest," Jonathan pointed out stiffly.

"No one would question that. The police are even now tying up the loose threads, checking reports from other states. I believe they are acting on information that your Benedek lodged."

"What?" Could Miran mean that Benny was alive?

"I heard one of the officers say that the information came in the form of an anonymous tip, but who else would have had that information? Perhaps Benedek sent it to them in the mail?" He arched a doubtful eyebrow in a gesture reminiscent of Mister Spock.

Jonathan wouldn't put it past Benedek to manage something like that, or to make a phone call to one of his multitude of weird contacts. If it helped to bring down the cult, so much the better. But it didn't necessarily mean Benedek was alive. He could have done it before that fateful encounter.

"Did you go to the office building?" he asked reluctantly. He didn't want confirmation of Benedek's death.

Miran's elegant features darkened. "It is not fully destroyed, but there was much damage. I was unable to learn if your friend's body had been retrieved. There was no mention, and I brought you a newspaper which I will show you presently. The building was reported deserted and unoccupied."

"Unoccupied?" Jonathan gaped at him. "But--but does that mean he got out, or that they simply didn't yet find his body?" The news poleaxed him, and he lay shivering beneath the thin blanket. What could it mean? Was Benedek alive? Had they brought him to the boat with him, the claim that he would be abandoned in the burned building just a story? "You have to find out for me." He heard the desperation in his voice, and added more softly, "Please."

Miran studied him thoughtfully. "Have you a picture of your friend?"

"I...I had one in my wallet." He looked around, confused. Had the cultists stolen it? Where were his clothes? Miran only hesitated a moment, then he opened a drawer. He pulled out Jonathan's clothing, neatly folded, with no trace of clinging damp--so they hadn't been in the water--and passed it over.

Jonathan reached into his trousers' pocket and withdrew his wallet. He carried a picture in it of him and Benedek together. He smiled faintly when he saw it. The photo had been taken at Benedek's resurrection party after the body-snatcher case. Relief and several drinks too many had loosened them up, and they stood, arms around each other's shoulders, grinning like idiots. Kilkowski had taken it so he would have a memento of the men who had rescued him and the others from being cut up for an illegal organ-donor scheme, and he'd sent copies to Jonathan and Benedek. Jonathan had trimmed the edges of his and carried it in his wallet. He rather suspected Benny had framed his. He'd had a glimpse of a small frame across the room the last time he'd visited Benny's New York apartment, but Benny, who tended to panic at the first hint of sentiment, had tossed his jacket carelessly in that direction and it had landed on top of the picture. Jonathan hadn't challenged him. The knowledge that Benedek had taken the trouble to frame it had told him all he wanted to know.

His thumb traced over the photo. Benedek, it's time for another resurrection party. Then he passed the snap to Miran. "Please, find out what you can," he begged, then his frustration and grief made him explode, "If only it hadn't been for nothing. The cult leaders aren't in jail; they're dead in an accident, and Benedek couldn't even prove his demon theory. It was all special effects, and the equipment was probably destroyed with the building. All for nothing. Benedek died for nothing!" His voice caught, and he struggled against the urge to howl like a baby.

"You think that?" Miran's face softened. "No, Jonathan. It was never for nothing. There are those who believe that my kind would not value the doing of good, but they make assumptions, just as the one you are making now."

"Your...kind?" Jonathan said doubtfully.

Miran didn't answer with words. Instead he bowed his head--and when he lifted it, his body shifted and his face twisted. Horns sprouted on his forehead and scales ran across the ascetic features, blurring the beauty but failing to obliterate it. He grew, shooting up to within a foot of the cabin's ceiling, and hovered over Jonathan, the snapshot suddenly very small in his hand.

"For nothing?" His voice deepened and took on resonance. "Not for nothing. They bound me, but now I am free. You may not care for that, but I am not an evil demon. I am not a demon at all, although your kind would believe it of me. Now, I will go away and learn what I can of Benedek."

He shrank down to his original size but only, Jonathan realized, to fit through the door. It closed softly behind him.

"I must be delirious," Jonathan murmured, hands pressed to his temples in a futile attempt to massage away the ache. "Delirious."

But he would accept a giant scaled being, this once, if only it would mean that Benedek was alive.

* * * * *

"This the place?" Pratt asked.

"You know it is." Benedek leaned forward in the seat to survey the tree-lined road that led to Lake Michigan. Branches met overhead, creating a patterned tunnel effect. Some houses were

small and close together, obviously weekend cottages, but others were bigger, estates set back from the street amid the trees. Pratt parked his surveillance van in front of a pair of gates that hung ajar against their stone pillars. The time Benny and Jonathan had scoped it out, the gates had been closed and there had been a guy in an anonymous Ford sitting across the street, guarding the place, but they'd been open yesterday when Benny had risked a drive-by. No anonymous cars today. The only person in sight was a man on the other side of the street in plaid shorts and a baggy tee shirt, mowing his lawn. He lifted his head disinterestedly when Pratt pulled to a stop, then returned to his mowing.

Pratt climbed into the back of the van and cranked up his surveillance equipment. Benny edged in after him. "What have you got?"

"Give me a minute to tune it." The ex-operative twisted dials and punched buttons, adjusting direction and range. Benny hovered anxiously, wishing he could prod his friend into working faster. But Pratt knew his job. After a minute, he slid on a pair of headphones. "Let me check this out."

Benny chewed on the inside of his cheek to keep from blurting out a string of questions. You couldn't push Pratt too far. It seemed like a week before the psychic turned to him. "No voices," he said. "No conversations. But someone is in there, moving around a bit. I can hear the odd footstep."

Jonathan? Benedek tensed. Had they brought Jonathan here and left him tied up while they escaped on the boat? Not very likely because a live Jonathan would spill the beans. Unless they meant to send someone to finish up and move him later.... But why?

"You don't know who?" he asked.

Pratt closed his eyes to focus on his inner vision. "No," he said at last. "It's a stranger to me. Male, I can tell that much, but I can't sense more than that."

"It could be Jack," Benedek said. He regretted the forlorn claim as soon as he spoke it.

Pratt opened his eyes and looked at Benedek sympathetically. "It's possible, I suppose, but, Benny, it's not that likely, is it?"

"Nah. Not likely at all." The words hurt.

"Want to go in?"

Benedek already had his hand on the door, the camera Pratt had given him tucked in the pocket of his chambray shirt. "Come on," he said impatiently, and started up the driveway without looking back to see if Pratt were coming with him. After a second, he heard the other man's footsteps.

No one challenged them all the way to the house, an ugly monstrosity of no particular charm or period. The colonial pillars jarred with the Tudor half timbers of the upper half, and the tile of the lower half was in a particularly bilious shade of green. Pratt groaned.

"Yeah, not exactly a candidate for the cover of House Beautiful, is it?" Benedek surveyed the windows through narrowed eyes. No trace of movement. No vehicles parked in the circle of driveway in front of the door. It looked quiet. It looked abandoned.

But then, why did the hair rise on the back of Benedek's neck at the sight of it?

Had they brought Jonathan here?

"We have to search the house," he said.

Pratt bounded up the brick steps and turned the knob. "Locked."

"Like that would keep you out!"

"Breaking and entering, Benny?"

"If there's one chance in ten thousand Jonathan is in there, you bet. If you won't do it, I will. I can pick a lock with the best of 'em."

Pratt sighed, then he pulled out a professional lock-pick kit from his pocket and made short work of the door. With a flourish, he stood aside for Benedek to precede him inside. The gesture didn't disguise the hand that reached inside the jacket he'd just pulled on for the weapon in the shoulder holster.

Benedek had been in the entry hall once before, when Jonathan had 'joined' the cult. The conglomeration of unmatched furniture was still there, probably rented with the house. Nothing about the place reminded Benny of its temporary occupants.

But it didn't feel empty.

"Somebody's here," he said out of the corner of his mouth, then he took a deep breath in preparation for yelling Jonathan's name.

Pratt clapped a hand over his mouth. "Don't," he warned. He gestured with the 9 mm. Beretta. Benny wondered idly how many more weapons were concealed by the bell bottoms and baggy tie-dyed shirt. "Leave this to me."

"But if Jonathan's here..." he mumbled around the hand.

Kel let him go. "If he's here, he might not be alone."

Benedek cursed himself mentally. He was so focused on Jonathan that he hadn't even thought of that. You're slipping, Edgar, he told himself. Pull yourself together. They hadn't found Jonathan's body. That didn't mean he was alive, but he could be. The search and rescue teams hadn't found Jason's body either. Bad sign. A very bad sign.

"Put the gun down--now."

Benny's skin crawled. He knew that voice and had hoped it forever silenced. Jason. It figured. Warily he turned. Jason, all right, big as life and ten times as ugly. He held a .357 Magnum in his hand and it was aimed right at Benny's head. With a shiver, Benny realized the hired gun's hand was as steady as a rock, and the man's eyes were hard and soulless. He wouldn't hesitate to blow Benny and Pratt away.

Pratt studied him. His own Beretta wasn't pointing anywhere near the right direction. He'd been an agent. He'd know he couldn't get a shot off before Jason fired. He caught Benny's eye and flashed him a warning.

"Where's Jonathan?" Benny exploded. "What have you done with him?"

"You son of a bitch, you rigged the goddamn boat. You know where he is, you killed him yourself."

Benedek saw the rage in Jason's eyes, the furious, unprofessional rage and, under it, a

savage grief as deep as Benedek's own. "You killed my brother," Jason exploded and his knuckles whitened on the gun. The finger curled around the trigger tightened. "Now I'll take great pleasure in killing you. I don't know how you got out of the office, but it was all for nothing. I'm sending you to your friend."

"We never rigged the boat," Benny blurted out, too stunned at Jason's revelation to keep quiet. Jason and Michael were brothers? They didn't look alike. "We didn't even know about the boat, at least only where it was berthed. We'd only seen it from a distance."

"Put down the gun." Jason sounded like an automaton. He would blow Benny away without hesitation.

"Michael was your brother?" Benedek asked, just to keep the guy talking, to give Kel a chance.

"You killed him, you bastard. The other one went down with him. He's goddamn fish bait and I'm glad. They're nibbling his face right now, gobbling down his eyes."

Benny let out a furious, resentful yell and jumped for the guy. No thought behind it, simply instinct. He heard the gun go off and something searing hot brushed his arm. Was that an echo? Two echoes? Jason jerked twice in rapid succession like a hitch in a film that gave an instant repeat, then he folded in upon himself and dropped to the floor, astonished hands pressed against the two blossoms of red on his chest.

"Police, freeze!" yelled a voice in almost perfect synchronization with the shots.

Kel put down his Beretta without hesitation and raised his hands. Astonished, Benedek sat down on the floor. He felt strangely light-headed.

The lawnmower guy led the way, a badge clipped to his tee shirt, a police .38 in his hand, and behind him were what looked like half the cops of Benton Harbor.

"Search the house," Lawnmower ordered, and a number of the police officers set off to do just that.

"Look for Jonathan," Benedek called after them. "They might have brought him here."

"My name's Keller," Lawnmower introduced himself. "I'm in charge of the operation. Just sit there and wait for the paramedics, Mr. Benedek. And you--Pratt, isn't it? I assume you have a license for that Beretta?"

"Yes, I do, officer." He produced a small folder from his pocket and offered it to Keller. "I had to shoot. He was going to kill Benny." He knelt at Benedek's side. "Let me see your arm."

"Arm?" Benny echoed blankly. That was right, his arm felt hot and odd. He stared down at it in astonishment. There was blood on the chambray shirt. Well, that was okay. He hated chambray.

"How is he?" Keller asked. Benny liked 'Lawnmower' better as a name.

"He's the luckiest S.O.B. I ever met. There's barely a wound at all. The slightest of grazes. He was moving and that character didn't have a chance to compensate." He nodded at Jason, who looked most definitely dead. His eyes were open and blank. A couple of cops were checking him out.

"You realize, Mr. Benedek," Lawnmower--Keller--said, "that you showed up and walked right into our stake-out. We knew Jason Harkness was still alive and we'd tracked him here. We had the

place staked out to see if any of the others were at liberty and might show up. And you walked right in. No way to stop you without alerting him, but we moved in immediately."

Benny batted futilely at Pratt's hands as the agent bound a cloth around his flesh wound. "What about Jonathan?" he demanded. "Is he here?"

"We'll search. We do know that they haven't recovered your friend's body from the boat. We're grateful to you for the letter you sent blowing the whistle on the operation. I will tell you, we knew most of it already. We verified your credibility. Doctor Juliana Moorhouse at the Georgetown Institute vouched for you, as did Jordan Kerner, your editor."

"Doctor M vouched for me?" Benny's mouth dropped open in sheer disbelief. He'd never let her live it down.

Or rather, he'd never let her live it down, if Jonathan were alive. If he were really dead, it would hardly matter. Jason had been lying. He had to be.

The paramedics had arrived before the search of the house was completed. Benedek let them take care of his arm, mostly because Pratt and Keller wouldn't permit him to join the search, and they had him outnumbered two to one. The wound was so slight it scarcely needed more than a couple of band-aids.

"But bear in mind even a flesh wound can have complications, Mister Benedek," the head paramedic told him. "Shock and infection are two possible complications, and you have the concussion to worry about. That's healing. But you should have accepted treatment for the head injury."

"They killed my best bud," Benny said. The rest of it was so irrelevant that he didn't see the point of worrying about it. What did any of this matter?

The paramedic patted him on the shoulder. "I'm very sorry," he said. "We'd like you to come to the hospital with us now."

Benny shook his head fiercely. "No way. I have to find out about Jack."

"Go with them, Benny," Pratt urged. "There's nothing you can do here. Jonathan wouldn't want you to deny yourself proper care."

"Jonathan's dead," Benny snarled at him. "Leave me alone."

Pratt sighed. "I'll look after him," he told the paramedic. "I'll bring him in if there are any delayed symptoms. My word on it."

The searchers returned and went over to Keller, who listened to them, his face unreadable. When they had finished their report, he dispatched them in an undertone, then came over to squat on his heels in front of Benedek.

"Didn't find him, did they?" Benny had to say it before Keller could speak.

"No, I'm sorry. I realize it doesn't look good, but--"

Benny couldn't take any more. He pushed himself to his feet and started for the door. When Pratt fell in behind him, he said, "Not now, Kel," and quickened his pace. The shooting had made him slightly lightheaded, but that didn't matter. He edged past the cop guarding the door and walked down the driveway to the tree-lined street, and there he ran out of momentum.

Jonathan was dead. There was no hope left. He didn't know what to do.

"Benedek?"

The voice was that of a stranger, a tall, slender man with tawny hair and very blue eyes. Benny had never seen him before, but there was a vague air of familiarity about him as if he resembled an ancient statue in a museum. Weird. He looked about twenty, except for his eyes, and they looked about a hundred and twenty. Nobody so young should have such ageless eyes.

"Who are you?" No time for smart remarks, no energy for them either. Was this one of the cult who had managed to get away?

The man beamed at him, a truly beautiful smile. He held out something small and Benny grabbed it. It was a snapshot, of him and Jonathan when both of them had been happy, when Jonathan had been alive. Look at them, beaming like lottery winners. Benny's heart ached harder than his arm did. "Where did you get this?"

"If you come with me, I will show you."

Understanding kicked Benedek in the gut. The guy had found Jonathan's body. That was it. Maybe he was a morgue assistant, or maybe some loner who lived along the shore. He didn't feel like one of Brother Michael's gang. Something about him suggested he represented everything the Moonlight Brotherhood didn't. Premonition, Benedek?

But at least he'd be able to take Jonathan's body home, arrange for a decent burial next to Saint Leonard the Nobel Prize winner. Jonathan would like that.

"Show me," he said tiredly.

"It is not far." He turned and headed for the lake.

"We're walking?" Benedek blurted. "That's just plain nuts."

"The lake is here. Come." He made a right turn at a small park set on a bluff above the lake, a lot like the park where he'd met Pratt a few hours earlier, and headed along the road. Lake Michigan was visible through the trees. Here, the houses were further apart, not like the estate Brother Michael had used; that wasn't actually on the lake but merely on the road to it. These were old cottages, some of them maybe fifty or seventy-five years old. The road sloped down lower toward the lake, but remained above the surface of the water.

"Did he wash ashore on your beach?" Benedek asked.

The young man glanced at him. "No," he said simply. "Come."

"I ought to warn you, if you're one of Brother Michael's crowd, I know karate." And forty-seven other Japanese words.

"You will have to introduce me one day."

Benny threw him a reproachful glance. This was no time for smartass remarks. No time at all. He was going to see his friend's body, after it had been in the lake. At least he could identify Jonathan and see that everything was done properly. I'm sorry, Jon-boy. I would have saved you if I could.

"Here," said the young man and led him down a sloping driveway to a small cabin set practically on the shore.

Benedek steeled himself for the ordeal to come.

"In here." Jonathan heard Miran's voice outside the door. Who was he bringing in? He hadn't been gone any time at all. The police? The Moonlight Brotherhood? Jonathan braced himself against the headboard and looked around for a weapon.

"You've got him in the house?"

Dear God, it was Benedek's voice! Benedek, alive, and sounding desperately shocked. There was a dreary unhappiness in his tone, and Jonathan realized with blinding revelation that as he had anguished so much over the loss of Benedek, Benny had done the same for him. Benny didn't wave his feelings like a flag, but that didn't mean he didn't have them. Even now, he didn't sound like he expected to find a living, breathing Jonathan.

Elation warred with worry in Jonathan's soul. Trembling with anticipation, he pushed himself to his feet, unwilling for the reunion to take place while he was lying flat on his back. The room didn't spin, but it shivered around the edges until he got his balance.

"Of course, in the house. Should I leave him lying on the beach?"

Benny said, very low, "Yeah, you called that. Okay, I'm ready." He stepped into the room, his shoulders braced, his head held up high. Misery caused his features to sag, but he had his teeth clenched. His hair was combed oddly, forward, and he was dressed like a workman. There was a smear of blood on his left sleeve, and a glimpse of a small, white dressing over the wound that had caused it, but he was Benedek, and he was alive. Thank you, God.

"Benedek!"

At Jonathan's shout, Benedek's eyes lifted and he stiffened like an archaeologist discovering a lost pharaoh's tomb. "J-jonathan?" he faltered, and all color drained from his face.

"You didn't tell him I was alive?" Jonathan flung at Miran, then he ignored the...entity. "Benedek, I'm alive. It's all right."

Benny staggered over to him, not even bothering to favor the injured arm. "Jack?" he blurted. "Jon-Jon? JJ?" His good hand came up and he touched Jonathan's chest.

"Benedek, thank God you're alive."

For a breathless instant they held that pose, and then Benny said, "Jonathan," in a strangely reverent voice as if he were praying, and he grabbed MacKensie by the shoulders. When the touch of solid, living Jonathan beneath his fingers proved his eyes correct, he halfway fell against Jonathan, wrapped his arms around him and clung with all his strength. Jonathan gathered him in and held him tightly. Dear God, Benedek was actually crying. Jonathan was horrified for his friend's sake because he knew how much Benny would hate that. But his own eyes burned and he realized all these confused hours of believing he had lost his best friend had taken their toll on him as well. He held on and allowed his eyes to overflow, and waited, relieved, comforted, secure, protective, for Benedek to round up his control. Benedek was alive, and the world was once more revolving in its proper orbit. He patted Benedek's shoulder, knowing that Benny would soon pull himself together and refuse one further shred of comfort and reassurance. Jonathan wondered which of his annoying quips he'd trot out to mask his breakdown, and knew it didn't matter. He would relish whatever Benny said.

It took Benedek longer than Jonathan had expected, but after a few minutes of just

standing there, Benny's breath caught, and gradually stabilized. Jonathan felt Benny's face burrow into his shoulder and knew with no need of explanations that his chagrined friend was trying to eradicate any trace of tears. Jonathan would have liked to do the same. It wasn't the way they interacted. But when Benedek drew back and risked one quick, wary glance at Jonathan, he let the evidence of his breakdown stand and made no attempt to conceal it.

Realization flashed in Benedek's reddened eyes and he swallowed very hard. He raised a hand to brush away Jonathan's tears, then he yanked it back as if it had been scorched, and exploded, "You bastard! You couldn't let me know you weren't fish food?"

"You couldn't let me know you weren't charbroiled?" Jonathan countered gently. His voice faltered on the last word.

Benedek gulped. For a second, he whirled and presented Jonathan with a telling view of quivering shoulders, but when he turned back, he'd yanked himself into control. "You look like hell," he exploded. "Maybe the paramedics are still at the house. Let's get you to them."

"We're here, Benny." A heavy-set stranger with shaggy hair and hippie garb appeared in the doorway beside Miran. He looked like someone who would know Benedek. "We saw you take off, and half the Benton Harbor PD followed you. I figured we might need the EMT's." He came into the room, towing a couple of paramedics behind him. "Jonathan MacKensie," he said, running knowing eyes over Jonathan. "My name's Kellogg Pratt. I am glad as hell to see you. My friend Benny here has been tearing himself up over you for a couple of days. Looks like the pair of you has incredible survival skills."

"I'll take 'em when I can get 'em," Benedek said. "Jonny, I want to hear the entire story. Were you on that boat?" He brandished Jonathan's snapshot. "When I saw this, I didn't even think. It wasn't wet. You were never in the water. Were you on the boat?"

"Yes, but...." His voice trailed off. "I don't know how I got off."

"Small boat?" Benedek's friend Pratt hazarded.

Jonathan sneaked a doubtful glance at Miran, who looked completely human. Had any of that been real? He saw trust in Miran's eyes, and said, "I don't remember." It had the added benefit of being true.

The paramedics converged on him, and Benedek helped him sit down on the bed so he could be examined. He then fussed around gathering Jonathan's clothes and fending off the police officers, including some guy in plaid shorts and a tee shirt who must have been undercover. Too much stimuli. Jonathan's head throbbed unkindly, but he didn't care. He focused his eyes on Benedek and let the rest of the excitement flow around him. As long as Benedek was alive, Jonathan knew he would be just fine.

* * * * *

"What's wrong, Benedek?"

The hospital room was quiet. Jonathan rather thought it was the middle of the night. He'd been admitted to be monitored for his concussion, and the minute he'd agreed, Benedek had said something in an undertone to the paramedics and as a result, they were now sharing a room at the hospital. There'd been a lot of catching up to do, comparing adventures, and Benny had explained how he had escaped the fire. Two incendiary devices? It made sense that Brother Michael would have a back-up. Detective Keller, who had hung around to ask questions, nodded in satisfaction when he heard that Benedek had disarmed the device that had been found in an undamaged portion of the office.

"I didn't know there were two," Benedek admitted. "Gotta admit, I only wanted to make tracks out of there and go after Jack. When I got to the dock and saw the boat pulling out, I was cursing myself because I'd taken two seconds to yank the wire. I could see the boat's lights as it pulled away." He gnawed his bottom lip. "I saw it blow."

Jonathan hadn't realized Benedek had witnessed the explosion until then. No wonder he'd been so tightly wound. "I'm sorry, Benedek."

"Not as sorry as I was." He called himself together immediately. "But I didn't see another boat. So spill, JJ. How'd you get off the boat? Or weren't you on it?"

"I vaguely remember going on board," Jonathan admitted. "But the next thing I knew, I was in the cabin and Myron was taking care of me."

"Who's this Myron dude?" Benny prompted. "Come to think of it, where is this Myron dude? Did he take off? Are you sure he was even real?"

"Of course he was real, Benedek. We all saw him."

"Yes, then," Keller replied. "I spoke to him myself at the house. But later, when the ambulance arrived, he was gone, and there's been no sign of him since. The cabin is owned by a Jacob Hillman from Grand Rapids and he claims to know no one named Myron. He couldn't have been a repentant cultist?"

Jonathan hesitated. "He didn't say." That was true. He could imagine Keller's reaction if Jonathan told them what he had seen and heard at the beach house. At this point, the police were sympathetic. If he insisted 'Myron' was a bizarre, demonesque entity, he would lose all credibility. Even knowing they were paranormal investigators, Jonathan's professional reputation had been checked, and Benedek had even gloatingly informed Jonathan that Doctor Moorhouse had spoken for him. Jonathan was positive Benny would rub it in for the next six months until Moorhouse utterly regretted her words, assuming she didn't already.

Now, in the night, with the police gone and Benedek's hippie buddy returned to Lansing, Jonathan had realized his friend was wide awake and restless. "Benedek?" he prodded.

There was a silence, then Benny's voice came out of the darkness. "I thought you were dead, okay?"

"I thought you were."

"I conned you into coming. Blackmailed you into it. And you were dead."

Oh, Benedek.... "As it happens, I wasn't. Benedek, you always blackmail me into coming. And I always come--because I want to. Don't you understand that? I want to come."

"You don't sound like it." And when had Jonathan heard so much doubt in his usually confident friend's voice?

"Benedek, you know it's a game we play--because we both enjoy it. I do love anthropology and sometimes your timing...sucks." He smiled faintly in the darkness. "But there's a part of me that relishes chasing shadows with you. I don't know that I could ever go tamely back to a life of nothing but anthropology, after werewolves and killer trees and UFO's and even being possessed. Parts of it I hated, but there's a thrill to it, and you know it. What happened here was not your fault, and if you say it is, I'll deny it." That wasn't something he'd ever really admitted before, not even to himself, but he knew it was true, and confessing it freed up a part of himself that had been too-long locked away in safe, stuffy academia.

"Yeah, you don't get to play Don Quixote in the Ivy Halls," Benny replied, but his voice was shaky. "I did con you into coming," he said.

"True." Jonathan couldn't help smiling. "And you did it very well. But I would have come even if you hadn't." He drew a deep breath. "How do you think I felt last time, when I didn't come and you were hurt?"

"That's why I pulled the con. I used you, Jack."

"And I let you. It's all right, Benedek. We're both alive. We saw how bad it could get. But let me tell you, this is enough. No more dying on me. I went to your funeral once, and I don't want to do it ever for real."

"I never want to go to yours," Benny replied, his voice grave. In the concealing darkness, he didn't hesitate to let it all hang out. "But let me tell you, Jack, this is gonna be a real winner for the talk shows. I'll clean up. Good for at least one full round--"

"Aha."

"Aha? What do you mean, aha?" Now Benny sounded wary, suspicious.

Jonathan grinned. "I was waiting for that."

"Are you saying I'm predictable?"

Jonathan laughed. "Let's just say I'm beginning to detect a pattern."

"Oh, yeah? So what am I going to say next, Doctor Omniscient?"

"You're going to ask me how I got off the boat," Jonathan said with perfect certainty.

A slightly frustrated silence was eventually broken by Benedek. "All right, show-off, how did you get off the boat?"

"A demon made me do it."

"Say what?"

"Come on, Benedek, surely you recognized 'Myron'. Didn't you think you'd seen him before?"

There was a silence full of the sound of the cogs whirling in Benedek's brain. "Bingo!" he cried triumphantly. "The guy was the one they used for their hologram. Special-effected into a demon."

Jonathan laughed out loud. "Benedek, Benedek, when did you ever turn so conventional? Don't you know a genuine flesh-and-blood demon when you see him?"

"No way! You're feeding me a line," Benedek said doubtfully. "Jonathan MacKensie playing the paranormal card? Where's your science? Where's your logical explanation, Jack?"

"I saw him shapeshift. He was a demon, Benedek. Except, of course, he said he wasn't one, just that humans tended to call him that. I've been thinking about it. I don't want to believe it. I want to think I was hallucinating, that I was delirious, that it was the concussion at work. And I can almost believe it. Except...."

"Except, then how did you get off the boat?" Benedek asked. He was silent a moment, then he said softly, "Thanks, Jonathan."

Jonathan understood immediately. He could have maintained his silence and his skepticism, but he had opted for honesty, for what Benedek wanted and needed to hear. "He showed me himself when I was bemoaning the fact that it had all been for nothing. I said it wasn't fair that you had died when it was just a criminal scam, with nothing of the paranormal about it. He let me see his true form then."

"And you let me see it now?" Benedek's voice was soft, awed, and very fond. Jonathan had never heard quite that combination of emotions from him before.

"Yes," said Jonathan simply.

There was another pause, a quiet, comfortable one, then Benedek gave a great groan. "My camera. Where's my camera? Did they take it? I've got some great shots on that roll. Actual demon footage. I'm gonna win the Pulitzer on this one, JJ. Where's that call button? I've gotta get out of here, track down my camera. I'm gonna be famous. Jordy is gonna give me a raise. Fame, fortune, glory... Jonathan? What are you laughing at? Come on, Jack, if you don't stop laughing, I'm going to have to put you on the front page of the Register. Jack MacKensie, demon hunter. Yeah, that'll sell papers. Perfect."

Jonathan felt his smile stretch across his face a mile wide.