

Bustin' Shadows

by Pat Dunn and Diana Lynn Smith

"... **t**his fellow," Jonathan MacKensie indicated, pulling down a chart which displayed Ramapithecus in all his theorized splendor. He looked around at his lecture hall full of students, and took mental note of the ones who showed at least a spark of interest. Most of them seemed bored, or wishing they were anyplace else but the lecture hall of the Georgetown Institute of Science. Jonathan couldn't blame them; the early spring weather was infecting everyone with visions of a glorious summer. Even he was feeling antsy, knowing Doctor Moorhouse was reluctantly allowing him a summer free of chasing her paranormal shadows. He was actually going to Africa on a dig! An ocean away from phantoms, haunted houses, unexplained phenomena — and Edgar Benedek.

Jonathan liked Benny, he really did. But sometimes the tabloid journalist was overly enthusiastic about their assignments. He never listened to reason, never gave serious thought to whatever they were investigating and always went for the bizarre and never the logical, rational explanation. And he never gave a thought to the danger, which meant Jonathan was forever rescuing Benny.

He'd never admit it, of course, but Jonathan rather relished the adventures. He still wasn't a believer in the occult or paranormal, but he had seen a few things which made him stop and think about the possibilities. However, it was time to settle down to the realities of life and get on with his research. His theory about the possibility of a bicameral brain existing in *Australopithecus* and his quasi-contemporary hominids could make his career, give *him* a chance to be the famous Doctor MacKensie of Georgetown instead of his late father, the Nobel Prize-winning Doctor Leonard MacKensie.

"Doctor MacKensie?"

Jonathan jerked his attention back to the moment and smiled at the student. "Yes, Maris?"

The girl was staring open-mouthed at the chart behind him, and her finger was trembling as she pointed. In fact, most of his students were staring in disbelief and some were scrambling from their seats. A couple were trying to hide under their chairs, while others were running for the doors. Puzzled, Jonathan turned around and fell back a step.

Ramapithecus was floating in the air!

"But — but — " Jonathan stammered, backing against the lecture table as the protohominid slowly swirled above his head.

The blank chart, on which the drawing had been, rolled up with a sudden snap, and Jonathan jumped at the noise, then yelped and ducked as the apparition bared its teeth at him and swung a hairy fist at his head.

"Don't panic, class!" Jonathan shouted, clutching the pointer he had been using in front of him like a weapon. "This is an, unusual situation, but we mustn't — " He broke off as the apeman dove at him, and reacted by waving the pointer straight through it. "It's not real, it can't possibly —!"

With a roar, Ramapithecus seized Jonathan's throat in both of its hands and began to squeeze. It felt real enough, Jonathan thought muzzily as his air supply began to be cut off. He heard screaming from his students, then everything went black.

"Doctor MacKensie?" Randy said worriedly.

Jonathan opened his eyes and blinked, then put a hand to his throat. "Randy —? Is it gone? What happened?"

"I don't know," the girl admitted, looking down at him from her wheelchair. "One minute you were talking, and the next thing I knew that — that whatever it was floated off the chart and headed for you. I thought he — it — was going to kill you! Are you okay, Jonathan?"

His throat ached and he wondered if there were bruises from the creature's fingers. "It's not possible," he muttered, his voice raspy.

"Maybe not, but it *did* happen — we all saw it," Randy insisted as he sat up.

"Where did it go? Did it just vanish — go 'poof,' as Benedek would say?" Jonathan wasn't ready to believe, but in the face of hard evidence — his throat was proof enough — he couldn't deny it.

"It — it went out the door, after some of the kids."

Jonathan pushed himself to his feet, patted Randy's shoulder, and then shook his head to clear it. "So Ramapithecus is running loose on the campus — wonderful. Doctor Moorhouse is going to love this." He gazed consideringly at the rolled-up chart, then cautiously approached it and slowly pulled it down.

Blank.

Well, not totally blank, if he was going to be honest. The word "Ramapithecus" was still emblazoned on the white paper, but the spot formerly occupied by an artist's conception of the protohominid was noticeably bare. Squinting, he thought he could make out the faint outlines of the drawing, but it could have been his imagination.

Imagination. He'd once told Benedek that he lacked an imagination, but in truth he just didn't possess one as vivid as the journalist's. Or Doctor Juliana Moorhouse's, for that matter. He certainly couldn't imagine how they were going to deal with a rampaging Ramapithecus.

One finger tentatively touched the blank chart. It felt like normal paper ...

"MacKensie!"

The chart rolled up with a loud snap, and Jonathan whirled around. "Doctor Moorhouse, I —"

"This is fascinating! Positively intriguing," his department head announced gleefully, her eyes seemingly twice as large as normal behind her huge glasses.

"Well, I suppose one could call it that, but terrifying is a better word," Jonathan argued, one hand automatically going to check the knot of his tie. Juliana Moorhouse always made him feel gawky, inadequate and as if he just couldn't measure up to Leonard MacKensie — and never would.

"What could have caused this phenomenon?" Moorhouse continued, ignoring Jonathan's comment, as she often did.

"I have absolutely no idea, Doctor Moorhouse. I pulled the chart down, just as I always have, and the next thing I knew there was utter chaos."

"This chart?"

"Doctor Moorhouse, I — yes," Jonathan said, watching as she pulled it down and studied the blank spot.

"We must have this analyzed at once," she decided in her usual brusque manner. "See to it, MacKensie."

"Yes, Doctor Moorhouse," he sighed, recognizing defeat when he saw it — his defeat and her victory, of course. Would it ever be any different?

"I wonder why this particular fellow? Why not *Australopithecus Afarensis* or *Homo Habilis*? *Homo Neanderthalensis* or *Homo Erectus*?" she asked, pulling down each chart and nearly giving Jonathan heart failure. He hurried along behind her, rolling each chart up before any of the primitive men decided to join their already-roving brother. "You must be the key, MacKensie. Ramapithecus is your particular favorite, the cornerstone of your theory, I believe."

"Me? Now, Doctor Moorhouse —"

"It was your class, your chart, your interest. Yes, you must be the key," she continued to theorize over his objections.

"Even if I knew how to — to do such a thing, I wouldn't!"

"No, you don't lean toward sensationalism ... Benedek," she announced, her mouth puckering as if she'd just tasted something sour. "It's just the sort of sensationalistic, grandstanding stunt he delights in — him and that — that fish-wrapping!"

"You mustn't jump to conclusions, Doctor Moorhouse! You don't know that Benedek is involved in this —"

"Don't I?"

"Well, you have your suspicions, of course, and I must admit it is the sort of thing Benedek would enjoy, but I really don't think even he is capable of something this extraordinary," Jonathan pointed out, defending Benny.

"It had better not be the result of some ridiculously-expensive potion created by that Theo person," Moorhouse warned, frowning at the hapless professor.

Jonathan swallowed and nervously ran a finger under his tie. If she ever found out what the real purpose for the \$2,500 potion was, he was a dead man. It hadn't been his fault that Theo's "love potion" had seriously damaged the furnishings of one of the finest restaurants in St. Louis, after all, and he'd tried to talk Benedek out of sticking the Institute with the bill ... "No, Doctor Moorhouse, I don't believe Theo's involved this time." Although, come to think of it, Benedek would do almost anything to play a prank on Jonathan ... He shook away that unpleasant thought and added, "The — er, apparition — seemed quite solid. It attempted to throttle me. Do you suppose it might harm anyone else?"

"What an alarming idea," she observed, her eyes glinting with an emotion closer to delight than alarm. "Campus security is scouring the area for it now, though I don't know what they'll be able to do against it if they find it. This is positively intriguing ... There are documented cases of spirit manifestations inflicting physical harm upon their victims, but those are generally invisible." She was staring thoughtfully at his neck, and Jonathan wondered if the creature's fingers had left bruises. He reached up and rubbed his throat, wincing a little. "MacKensie," his superior declared, "you're relieved of all classes starting immediately. I want you on this investigation full-time. This is going to put Georgetown's Paranormal Research Unit on the map!"

Jonathan opened his mouth to protest, but before he could raise his voice above a croak, she had swept out of the room as suddenly as she had entered it. He sighed and looked at Randy. "Would you like to help me make a phone call?"

"Sure, Doctor MacKensie, but I already called Benny."

"And here he is!" a cheerful voice announced, as the irrepressible Edgar Benedek sailed into the classroom. "Whoa, Jack, looks like the lecturing business is getting dangerous!" He picked his way around several abandoned textbooks lying on the floor, and came up on the platform beside Jonathan and Randy. "You look a mite peaked, Jonny," he observed, peering at the professor's bruises. "Are you okay?"

"Am I okay? I was nearly strangled to death by — by — well, never mind about that —"

"Hey, that's why I'm here, isn't it? So, where's the roving Ramapithecus?" Benny asked with the enthusiasm that seemed to be his trademark. "Uh-oh, I don't see the ever-loving Doctor M — he didn't throw her over his shoulder and haul her off to his love nest, did he? RAMPAGING RAMAPITHECUS RAVISHES —"

"Benedek!" Jonathan exclaimed in horror, cutting off the journalist's headline announcement. "Doctor Moorhouse is just fine! She's no doubt back in her office, safe and sound."

"Too bad — she could use a little loosening up," Benny suggested with a shrug and wicked grin. "So what's the scoop, Doctor J? Randy was just a little excited when she called, but it sounded like my kinda action. Good thing she caught me before I'd finished packing my bags for home, or you'd be dealing with this one all by your lonesome."

"It all happened so fast," Jonathan said, running a hand through his hair. "One moment I was lecturing on —"

"The whys and wherefores of Ramawhosis," Benny cut in helpfully.

" — the exciting possibilities presented by the discovery of Ramapithecus," Jonathan continued, frowning at Benny. "I pulled down the chart and the next thing I knew I was being strangled by what appeared to be Ramapithecus himself."

"It just stepped right off the chart, Benny! It was incredible!"

Benny grinned at Randy's eagerness.

"The chart was blank after the, the incident," Jonathan admitted. He put a hand to his throat and winced. "And whatever it was, it had unbelievable strength."

"Jonathan, I mean, Doctor MacKensie passed out! And he's got bruises," Randy added helpfully.

"Doctor Moorhouse suspects you, by the way," Jonathan put in, looking at Benny.

"I wasn't even here! What does she think, I got some kinda remote control spell or something?"

"Something like that," Jonathan agreed, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "You didn't, did you?"

"I'm crushed, Jack! To think that you still don't trust me, after everything we've been through together!"

"Oh, well, it isn't that, exactly," Jonathan stammered, watching nervously as Benny pulled down the chart in question and peered at it intently. "Sorry, Benedek. I suppose it's easier to think this is one of your pranks than to believe that it was actually a — uh —"

"Haunting, Jonny? Well, don't you worry your gray cells about this any longer, 'cause I've got the solution!"

"You do?"

"Yep. We'll just call a few buddies of mine down from New York, and see what they can make of this case."

Jonathan was shaking his head. "I don't think Doctor Moorhouse will want to have you bring in another wall-feeler or ventriloquistic medium, Benedek —"

The journalist raised his hand. "These guys are scientists, Jack! They use fancy gizmos and everything. You know, you even remind me of Egon, a little bit, except that he's a believer, of course."

"A believer in what?" Jonathan asked, his brow furrowed.

"Ghosts, of course!" Benny grinned and added, "Poltergeists, demons — minor deities — you name it, they've busted it! They'll be happy to help us out. Now where did I put that number —?" He patted the pockets of his Hawaiian print shirt, giving a cry of triumph when he found a battered little black book.

Randy looked thrilled. "I've always wanted to meet the Ghostbusters," she confided to Jonathan as Benny thumbed through the worn pages.

At the name of the well-known group of paranormal-elimination specialists, Jonathan looked doubtful. "Aren't their fees rather high? Perhaps I should consult with Doctor Moorhouse before —"

Benedek turned a serious gaze on him. "The best costs money, Jack. Maybe I can get Peter to cut us a deal, seeing as how he still owes me one for that time I helped him out in New Orleans."

"Well-I — all right. Call them."

"Grrreat!" Benny headed for Jonathan's office, and the others followed him. "You know, Jon-Boy, this just may be the very story that will make you as famous as ol' Leonard," he continued as he perched on the edge of Jonathan's desk and picked up the phone. "DOCTOR JONATHAN MACKENSIE DISCOVERS ACTUAL — Janine — my own true love! How ya doin', doll face? Grrreat! Listen, I need to talk to Peter and Egon — they're gonna love this! Pete might even be willing to do this one for free, just for the exposure. Hey, we'll pay their expenses, first class all the way. Didn't Jordy make good on that check? Oh, well, maybe I'd better talk to Egon first."

"First class? How many of them are there?" Jonathan squeaked in protest but Benny ignored him, as he usually did whenever Jonathan got on the subject of the expense account.

"Spengs, old buddy! Have I got a wild one for you, boy-o! Hear me out, E-man. How does this grab you? PREHISTORIC MAN GOES TO COLLEGE. No, I'm not referring to Jordy Kerner! I'm here at the Georgetown Institute of Science with my pal, Jonathan MacKensie. Doctor Jonathan MacKensie, son of the late-great Leonard MacKensie — yeah, that's the one. Right, the Paranormal Research Unit."

Jonathan moaned and covered his face with one hand as he sank down into his recliner.

"We've got a problem here that I think calls for the Ghostbusters, how soon can you guys get here? Better bring every trick you've got, pal, this is bigger than Gozer, I'm telling ya. Jack teaches anthropology, well — just as a side thing — and anyway, today he was attacked by Ramapithecus! Hey, I've got Jonny right here — he can fill in the details."

With obvious reluctance Jonathan accepted the receiver that Benny extended to him. "Hello? Yes ... no, not a fossil. It came off the wall-chart, actually ... No, it wasn't transparent, it was extremely solid ... Well, all of it ... Yes, it was certainly free-floating ... It tried to choke me to death, Doctor Spengler. I believe that indicates it poses a certain threat, don't you? Yes, there

were witnesses ... Very well." He handed it back to Benny. "He wants you and Peter to discuss fees. Don't make too many promises, Benedek."

"I was hoping Egon would be so excited about it he'd talk to Peter about the fees," Benny muttered as he took the receiver. "Doctor V, how's it shakin'? Leg heal up okay? Grreat! Listen, my pal here has a real emergency that calls for the best Ghostbusters in the business. Hey, you're not the only ones I know, just the best and Georgetown Institute only uses the best. Yeah, Georgetown Institute of Science in Washington D of C. This is really big, Pete, I'm telling ya. Just ask Egon about Ramapithecus. Ramapithecus — don't you keep up with the latest in anthropology? Well, Jack was attacked by one! Yeah, I'll hold while you talk to the big guy — but just remember New Orleans."

Benny fell silent and Jonathan opened his mouth, but Benny held up a hand to silence him. The journalist strained his ears, hoping to catch any snatch of the conversation on the other end of the line but Peter had put him on hold. "Rats," he said, looking at Jonathan and shrugging his shoulders. "Whatever happened to just covering the phone with your hand? How's a guy supposed to hear anything when he's on hold?"

"I believe that's the whole idea," Jonathan commented dryly.

"You're no — yo, Pete! What's the decision? Grreat! Hustle your buns down here as fast as you can. First class all the way, boy-o. Drive down? Nah, we'll rent you a car — that much stuff, huh? We'll pay for the extra luggage." This statement made Jonathan moan and bury his face in his hands. "Slimer? Better leave him in New York — I don't think ol' GI — or Jack — is ready for Slimer."

"Slimer?" Jonathan mouthed silently but Benny ignored him.

"By the time you get to the airport your tickets will be waiting," Benny promised, grinning at the professor. "Yes, Peter, they'll be paid for in advance, credit cards are wonderful, aren't they? Rental car, too, I swear. Big enough for your equipment — got it. Check ya later!"

"Benedek!"

"Take a chill pill, buds," Benny cajoled, holding up his hands to forestall Jonathan's protests. "The best doesn't come cheap, but you don't want to mess around with second rate Ghostbusters, pal."

"Ghostbusters," muttered Jonathan. "I can't believe that Doctor Egon Spengler is affiliated with them ... He seemed so intelligent when I met him at that Paranormal Conference you and Doctor Moorhouse dragged me off to last spring." That had been their second attempt to attend the gathering of parapsychologists, the first having been interrupted by their charter plane's crash near the White Wood asylum.

"Have you met the other Ghostbusters, Doctor MacKensie?" Randy inquired.

He shook his head. "Not in person, no. I've read some of the papers published by Doctor Venkman and Doctor Stantz, however. And of course Benedek knows them all intimately." Jonathan gave Benny a quizzical look and added, "At least, it certainly sounds as if he does."

"Pete and I go waaay back, Jon-Jon," the journalist claimed, the telephone receiver pressed between his shoulder and neck as he flipped through the phone book for the airline's number. "The others are great guys, too. You'll like them."

"I'm looking forward to it," Jonathan said, only half-sarcastically. He had to admit to a certain curiosity about his unreal experience, and a secret satisfaction that the students had also witnessed the ... phenomenon. Perhaps Doctor Moorhouse was right, and this really was the breakthrough the Georgetown PRU needed.

Not that he wanted the PRU to succeed, of course. He'd never get the grant for his real research if the paranormal research became successful — he'd be stuck doing Doctor Moorhouse's "intriguing" and "bizarre" projects for the rest of his life. On the other hand, if he could take such a ridiculous premise and make it successful, it would look impressive on his resumé. Moorhouse really wanted for him to prove the existence of paranormal phenomena, but proof positive either way was the goal set down by the Board. Hard, scientific facts supported by indisputable evidence which proved there were no such things as ghosts, vampires, goblins, little green men from Mars, that was Jonathan's goal.

Although ... he was becoming less cynical about "bizarre occurrences" after things he'd seen lately. He still hadn't come up with an explanation for the damaged concrete caused by the "flaming spear from nowhere" having been repaired so quickly, and without a trace of the damage. Even his first case, the so-called haunted house in Fartham, still had some loose ends he couldn't satisfy.

He touched his neck and winced — he certainly hadn't imagined that.

"Okay, Smilin' Jack, arrangements are underway and the Ghostbusters should be here in a couple of hours. Let's make tracks," Benny urged cheerfully, finally hanging up the phone.

"Tracks? To where?" Jonathan asked, obediently trailing after his partner.

"Ramapithecus hunting, of course," Benny informed him, pulling a compact camera from his sock. "We're hot on the trail of a monster!"

"Benedek, you can't be — Benny!"

"Well, Egon, I hope we haven't just been suckered in by another of Benedek's wild schemes," Peter Venkman said, a frown wrinkling his forehead as he hung up the phone. "Don't we have enough to keep us busy here in the Big Apple without running down to D.C.?"

"I wouldn't have been so insistent, if I hadn't spoken with Doctor MacKensie," Egon replied seriously, his red-framed glasses sliding down the bridge of his nose. "He sounded quite sincere, and I don't believe he would condone one of Benedek's schemes, much less participate in one."

Peter reached over and shoved the forever-slipping glasses back up to the bridge of Egon's nose, and then leaned back in his desk chair. "Just because a guy has a PhD doesn't make him a saint, big guy. Hey, I've got *two* of 'em myself —"

"I have a great deal of respect for Jonathan MacKensie as well as for his father, Doctor Leonard MacKensie," Egon shot back a bit huffily. "Doctor MacKensie is a serious academician, a professor of anthropology at one of the finest scientific universities and quite brilliant in his field."

"Brilliant, huh? Then what is he doing hanging around with a con-man tabloid journalist?"

Egon raised an eyebrow. "One might just as well ask why I associate with you, Peter."

"Yeah? Why do you?"

"Because we're friends," the physicist answered. "Most of the time, anyway."

"Oh, yeah." Peter looked as if he'd forgotten that detail. "So you really believe this hokey story about some prehistoric man coming to life? And what can we do about it, anyway?"

"Doctor MacKensie said it tried to strangle him so we obviously cannot allow such a danger to run free," Egon explained, pointing out the obvious that Peter had forgotten. "We must discover how — and why — this creature has come into existence, and it must be captured."

"Why does it have to be us? Can't this MacKensie handle it?" Peter whined. "It sounds dangerous, Egon."

"Yes, it does. MacKensie is an anthropologist, Peter, not an expert in the paranormal, despite his involvement with the Paranormal Research Unit. It's not his primary field, and I have the distinct impression it's not even an interest of his."

"Then why —"

"Doctor Juliana Moorhouse."

"Oh," Peter said significantly. "Got it. She could give my dad lessons in manipulation." He paused and shuddered, then continued, "I remember her all too well. If MacKensie is in her clutches, he doesn't stand a chance."

"Now, Peter, just because she didn't fall for the Venkman charm doesn't —"

"She made me study! One class, Egon, that's all I had with her, and I'll never forget Ironfist Moorhouse. Ray was lucky she was only filling in for that one term and he didn't have to take her class."

"I doubt that Ray would have had your problem with Doctor Moorhouse," Egon observed mildly. "He wasn't in a power struggle with the professors, and Ray was more than willing to study."

"Study what?" Ray Stantz inquired as he paused by the half-partition that separated Peter's "office" from the rest of Ghostbuster Central. His jumpsuit was splattered with drops of greenish slime, and he carried a smoking ghost-trap, indicating that he and Winston Zeddemore had just returned from a successful bust.

"Peter was just recalling our college days," Egon offered, when the psychologist muttered something and looked sulky. "I assume the dockside poltergeist case went well?"

"Class Two, like you guessed, Egon," Ray announced, holding up the trap like a trophy. "Pretty routine. Almost *too* routine, in fact ... Sometimes I wish —"

"Don't start *that* again," Peter interrupted. The last time Ray had expressed a longing for more challenge and excitement, they'd gotten it, in spades. "Anyway, it looks as if we'll be spending the weekend out-of-town."

Winston joined them in time to overhear this last comment. "Not Jersey again, I hope."

"Almost as good. Try Washington, D.C."

The veteran raised an eyebrow. "Better not be the White House calling about Lincoln's ghost — we don't bust the good guys."

"Nah, it's just some professor at Georgetown Institute complaining that King Kong or something tried to kill him." Peter enjoyed the interested glances from the newcomers, then added darkly, "And if Edgar Benedek is lying about this one, I'll kill *him!*"

"Peter." Egon's quelling glance silenced the psychologist, and he gave Ray and Winston a brief outline of his discussion with Jonathan MacKensie, concluding with, "I believe this case could have some fascinating possibilities."

"Sure sounds like it," Ray enthused. "This is gonna be great!" He headed for the basement, calling over his shoulder, "As soon as I stow this ghost, I'll get started on the packing!"

Peter sighed, Winston chuckled, and Egon looked self-satisfied.

"You knew that would happen, didn't you?" Peter accused the physicist. "All you have to do is get Ray on your side —"

"As you frequently do," Egon pointed out.

"Well, that's different," Peter dismissed with a shrug. "Guess I'd better go pack my bag. Ought to be a few interesting women on campus."

"Pete never changes, does he?" Winston asked, shaking his head.

"About some things, no," Egon agreed, watching as Peter hurried up the stairs to the bunkroom. "But I am aware of several ways in which Peter has changed since I first met him, and most for the better, I think."

"You mean like his attitude about Christmas?"

"For one, yes. And despite his preening and bragging, he isn't nearly as egotistical and self-serving as he once was. I believe Ray is responsible for those changes," Egon said thoughtfully.

"From what I've seen, I'd say the influence works three ways, Egon," Winston told him.

"Or four," Egon added softly, looking at the newest addition to the team. Winston had only been a part of their group since Gozer's attack on New York City, but in many ways it seemed as if he'd always been a part of them. He had filled the Winston-sized niche, making them complete and bringing his own unique skills to the Ghostbusters. A practical head being one of the most important, since the two dreamers often forgot the more mundane aspects of life when they were wrapped up in an exciting project, and Peter preferred to ignore them as long as possible. It was often Winston who saw to it that chores were done and groceries purchased, and Winston who played mother hen. Peter saw to the paperwork and finances, leaving Ray and Egon free to be the dreamers and to pursue flights of fancy.

"So what is this Ramawhatzzis, anyway?" Winston asked as they followed in Peter's wake.

"Ramapithecus was once thought to belong to the pongid rather than the hominid line but recent reevaluation indicates Ramapithecus appears to be the first recognizable member of the purely human branch," Egon explained in his lecturing mode. "This is, of course, only speculation at this point due to a lack of definitive evidence."

"Uh-huh," Winston said dubiously, looking askance at the blond man. Egon seemed to know more than any one human being ought to, on an infinite variety of subjects. "Which sounds like a scientific way of saying this thing may or may not exist, right?"

"An insufficient number of fossil remains have been found at this point to fully document Ramapithecus," Egon admitted. "Nevertheless, many anthropologists, including Doctor MacKensie, believe that it may be a so-called 'Missing Link' between apes and humans."

"That's great, but monkey-men just don't crawl off of wall-charts and attack professors," Winston pointed out.

"Not as a general rule, no."

Winston shrugged. "I'm hitting the shower before Ray gets up here." He shook one slime-covered arm, sending little splatters of slime which Egon dodged with lightning reflexes. "Sure hope this Ramawhatzzis doesn't slime," the black man muttered as he headed for the bathroom.

Rubbing his chin consideringly with one hand, Egon went to his lab to select what equipment might be useful.

"Well, it can't have just vanished," Benny complained, snapping off his tiny tape recorder and shoving it in his breast pocket.

"Why not? It *did* just appear," Jonathan pointed out, hoping that the creature was truly gone.

"Listen, pal, we've followed its tail all the way across campus," the journalist argued. "The thing left a trail a mile wide, and everyone we've run into has seen it. And then 'poof' — no more monster."

"So we don't need your expensive paranormal eliminators —"

"Wrong-o, pal — we need 'em now more than ever. We've got to be ready for ol' Rama when he shows up again — and he *will*, trust me. He didn't just pop off that chart to shake your hand, Jack, and we've gotta find out what he's up to before he does it."

"What do you suggest, Benedek? Try to interview it for *The National Register*?"

The reporter shrugged and slanted Jonathan a hurt look that made him regret his flippant words. "Maybe for once I'm interested in something else besides a great story, Jack. Maybe this time I'm after it 'cause it tried to off a friend of mine."

"Benny, I'm sorry — I didn't mean ..."

"It doesn't matter. C'mon, let's go grab some dinner someplace and go over these witness reports." He'd filled up one mini-cassette with interviews with students and faculty who had seen the creature.

"All right." Jonathan turned back the way they'd come, and added quietly, by way of apology, "My treat, Benedek."

"Grreat!" Benny enthused, all trace of hurt feelings vanishing. "I've got a hankering for lobster!"

"Lobster?" Jonathan squeaked, his voice going up an octave as only Benny could evoke. "I was thinking more of hamburgers —!"

"You've got to learn to expand your horizons, J.J.," Benny encouraged, draping a companionable arm around Jonathan's shoulders for a moment. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Probably in the same place as my mind," the professor retorted and Benny just gave the evil chuckle which Jonathan would always associate with the journalist.

"At least this time you won't have to worry about Theo's exploding powder destroying the restaurant," Benny said, failing to reassure Jonathan.

"I'm sure you'll manage somehow to liven up things."

"Lively? You want lively? Wait until Pete Venkman gets here!"

Jonathan paused, staring at Benny. "But —"

"We've had some wild times, let me tell you, pal. Pete is the original party animal," Benny announced with his ever-present cheerfulness.

"But — they're coming to deal with our — our phenomenon, not party!"

"Hey, there's always time for a party!" Benny proclaimed, clapping Jonathan on the shoulder. "Now let's go review this baby," he added, patting his pocket bulging with the tape recorder. "The guys oughta be here pretty soon, so we need to have our story ready. Egon is even more of a pain than you are when it comes to solid facts and documentation."

Jonathan nodded slowly, mollified. Despite the *Ghostbusters'* flash and dazzle reputations, they were scientists, and would be qualified to aid in this investigation. "That does sound like the best plan. Let's try the Surf and Turf, I think I could use a steak, after everything I've been through today."

"You're on, Jon-Jon!"

"This is the perfect vehicle?" Peter Venkman exploded as the Ghostbusters stood by the rental car. He dropped his suitcase on the pavement, next to his proton pack. "This is what Benedek does! He makes promises and never follows through —!"

"Maybe he didn't realize we'd need a full-size vehicle," Egon speculated, looking at the compact car.

"Yeah, Peter, don't get mad at him yet," Ray said, juggling his proton pack and his suitcase.

"We'll never get all this stuff in there, let alone fit all of us in," Winston complained, shaking his head as he looked at the pile of equipment they'd brought along. "I'm gonna go talk to the clerk."

"Probably got us rooms at the local fleabag, too," Peter grumbled, kicking his suitcase which was leaning against his proton pack. "No doubt expects the four of us to squeeze into one room."

"Now, Peter —"

"I knew we shouldn't have come," Peter continued to rant, pacing the pavement. "Why do we have to run halfway across the country —"

"Washington, D.C. from New York City isn't halfway across the country, Peter," Egon corrected, pushing his glasses up on his nose.

"Yeah, Peter, it's just a couple of hours really," Ray said with his ever-present optimism. "I mean, it's not like we've gone to Washington state."

"This is a city, not the countryside so you shouldn't have any complaints about civilization," Egon observed mildly, used to Peter's tantrums.

"This may be a city, but it's not New York."

Ray and Egon exchanged glances and sighs. Peter was not going to be talked out of this temper tantrum. "Perhaps we should have left you at home with Slimer," Egon suggested, giving Peter a stern look.

"It's cool, guys," Winston called, running across the parking lot from the rental office. "Our car is one aisle over."

"Gee, Peter, I wonder how we made that mistake?" Ray asked, all innocence as he picked up as much of their gear as he could.

"Yeah, Pete, who led us to this section?" Winston put in, grunting as Peter threw a duffel bag at him.

"Okay, okay, so I got a little confused," Peter snapped, "helping" Egon with some of the luggage by loading down the physicist with as much as he could hold. "No big deal."

"Really? You were certainly making it into one," Egon observed, following Winston to the correct vehicle.

"Wow, this is great!" Ray exclaimed, looking at the minivan. "See, Peter? Benny didn't let us down."

"Yet," Peter muttered, reluctant to give up his bad mood and his certainty that they'd been suckered. "He's just like my dad ..."

"Ah." Egon looked over the top of his glasses at Winston and nodded. This one comment explained a lot about Peter's attitude. His conman father had been a disappointment to Peter all his life, never being around when Peter needed him, and neglecting holidays. He was the reason Peter had fought so hard against Christmas.

"What 'ah', Egon?" Peter asked suspiciously, pausing in loading the minivan.

"What scheme did Benny involve your father in?"

"Huh?"

"Well, for you to be so anti-Benedek, he must have involved your innocent father in some scheme or other in which your father came out on the short end of the deal," Egon theorized reasonably.

"Well-I, actually it was his dad," Peter admitted reluctantly.

"I see. So you're blaming Benny for something his father did. I suppose that makes a warped sort of sense," Egon commented, handing Peter his suitcase to put in the van.

"Gee, Pete, it's not Benny's fault his dad is the way he is," Ray protested with his wide-eyed innocence. "It's not right to blame a guy for something he can't control."

"True, Raymond, a man cannot control the actions of his father," Egon observed. "Can he, Peter?"

Peter threw Egon's duffel bag into the back of the van with more force than was necessary.

"Maybe not, but he can take responsibility for his own actions and the results thereof," he finally retorted, turning to glare at his friends, his hands on his hips.

"So there is more to the situation with Benedek than merely his father," Egon surmised, handing Peter a proton pack.

"Yeah, a lot more. Are we gonna just stand around here and gossip or are we here to work?" he challenged before placing the pack in the van.

"Work, of course," Ray said, taking pity on Peter. "Do we know where to find Doctor MacKensie?"

"Let's try his office at the university," Egon suggested. "He is expecting us, and with the possibility of the creature still running loose on the campus, no doubt he's there."

"Okay guys, let's go," Winston called, getting behind the wheel and buckling up. He unfolded the map the rental car agency had provided and spread it over the steering wheel. "What's the name of this place again?"

"The Georgetown Institute of Science," Egon supplied, snapping on his own seat belt.

"Got it," Winston announced after a couple of minutes. After folding the map to display the necessary section, he handed it to Egon and switched on the ignition. "Too bad we don't have Ecto — her siren would clear traffic out of the way."

"We're not in that big of a hurry," Peter answered from the back of the van, placing his hands behind his head and leaning back. "Maybe we ought to stop at a Burger Barn or something."

"We did leave before dinner," Ray pointed out hopefully. "And they only served peanuts on the shuttle."

"Yeah, but they were honey-roasted," Peter quipped.

"I could go for a burger," Winston admitted. "Egon?"

"Gentlemen, there is a paranormal creature running loose on a college campus, wreaking havoc," the physicist reminded them. "I believe that is more important than our stomachs."

"Guy's gotta be at his peak," Peter argued. "I chase monsters better on a full stomach."

Ray, always the peacemaker, said, "Let's stop at a restaurant first, and call Doctor MacKensie from there, Egon."

"Very well," the physicist sighed, unable to object to such a reasonable plan. "But let's make it a quick meal, gentlemen."

"Is there any other kind for us?" Winston muttered as he pulled out of the parking lot and joined the stream of traffic leaving the airport.

Jonathan picked up the telephone on his desk as it rang, glancing as he did so at Benny, who was lounging in the recliner with a sheaf of notes spread across his lap. "Hello? Yes, this is Doctor MacKensie ... No, it hasn't been sighted again, Doctor Spengler. Yes, Benedek and I are waiting for you. My office is number 301 in the Physical Sciences Building. Oh, take your time, please. Yes, all right." He hung up and reported to Benny, "The Ghostbusters are in town. They're going to get a little dinner before coming over to the campus."

The journalist gave a little start and opened his eyes. "That's great, Jack."

"Hmph." Jonathan returned to the papers spread before him, an amused smile tugging at his lips.

Benny glanced at the darkness beyond the window, then checked his wristwatch. "Quarter after eight. Guess we're the only ones left in the building, huh, Jonny?"

"I imagine so. Have you reached any conclusions about these reports yet, Benedek?"

A loud crash prevented Benny from answering, and both men exchanged startled glances. Each stood up and turned toward the office doorway, listening for additional clues to the intruder's location. "Perhaps it's one of the cleaning crew," Jonathan whispered.

"We'd better go check it out, pard," Benny whispered back.

"But it could be a burglar! I'll call security —"

"Noisiest burglar I've ever heard," the reporter interrupted. "Might be Rama, back for a return engagement. Maybe you'd better stay here, after all ..."

"Benedek!" Jonathan called in warning as the reporter eased open the office door and peered warily into the corridor. He followed the headstrong journalist, joining him in time to see the hovering figure of Ramapithecus raise its fist and smash another of the overhead lights out, then turn a fierce gaze on them.

"Gotcha!" Benny crowed, snapping a photograph of the apparition.

It roared as his camera's flash went off, and dove straight for him. Jonathan pulled his friend back into the office and slammed the door shut against the creature's attack. The door shivered against their backs, and the two men exchanged panicked looks.

Then, abruptly, the roars of the apeman ceased and there were no more blows to the door.

"Is it gone?" Jonathan mouthed.

Benny raised an eyebrow and eased the door open a crack. The corridor was deserted, save for the shards of glass on the floor. The door to Jonathan's office bore scratch marks as well.

"I feel ill," Jonathan said. "This — this is not possible, Benedek! It's not rational, or — or normal ..."

"It's paranormal, Jack." Benny ran his fingers down one of the grooves on the doorjamb. "But why you, I wonder? Why is it focused on you?"

"Why not? Lately I seem to be a magnet for all sorts of bizarreness," Jonathan complained, giving Benny a pointed look which the journalist ignored. Benny was busy taking photos of the damage.

"Ya know, maybe it's a female Rama," Benny suggested, turning around to snap a picture of a protesting Jonathan with his mouth open. "You do have a way with the ladies, Don Juan."

"It is not a female," Jonathan denied firmly, then paused and looked uncertain.

Benny grinned and chuckled, taking another snapshot of the professor. "Maybe Rama swings both ways."

"Benedek!"

"Okay, okay, keep your buttoned-down shirt on, pal. We have to consider all the angles, you know. Spengler is gonna look at all the possibilities — he's a real stickler for the 'scientific'."

"That's why he spends his life chasing ghosts," Jonathan muttered.

"Ah, but he does it scientifically," Benny countered with a wide grin.

"What's that?" Jonathan squeaked, gripping Benny's arm and pulling him back into the office.

"I dunno. Let's check it out."

"No! Benedek — Benedek! Come back here," Jonathan demanded, his voice full of panic as the journalist flung the door open and bounded out into the corridor. "Benedek!" Jonathan cast a frantic glance around his office, hoping to find something he could use as a weapon. Benny's shout made him freeze, and he forgot all about caution as he ran down the corridor to Benny's aid.

"Whoa! Get a load of this, Jon-Boy! He ripped the door right off the hinges!" Benny exclaimed as Jonathan skidded to a halt, crashing against the journalist's slight figure. "With a little practice on that slide you could give Johnny Bench a run for his money."

"I'm so pleased. Good lord!"

"Yeah, impressive, huh? For a nonexistent figment of your imagination, he's pretty strong." Benny bent over the remains of the door, glass crunching under his Nikes. "Jack."

"What?"

"Blood."

Jonathan blinked, then squatted down to inspect the piece of glass Benny held up. "Still wet."

"It must be from ol' Rama," Benny observed, meeting Jonathan's troubled gaze.

"Impossible," Jonathan grumbled. "It's not real!"

"Try telling *him* that, pal. There's a trail."

"A trail? Oh, no! We're waiting for the Ghostbusters," Jonathan said, reading the enthusiasm in Benny's bright blue eyes. "They are the professionals, after all. This — this goes beyond anything we've encountered."

"Jack, there's an injured monster on the loose," Benny objected, standing up. "He's gonna be even more of a danger — injured and mad."

Jonathan rubbed his forehead, then nodded. "All those students ..."

"Bingo, J.J. Let's go."

"But —, what if we find it?"

"I guess we lead him back here and hope the guys are here by then," Benny said with a shrug. "Sure hope they didn't stop for a full-course meal."

The Ghostbusters slowed as they approached the entrance to the Physical Sciences building. The double glass doors had been shattered, and hung half-off their hinges.

"Senior prank?" Peter quipped, even as he unshipped his thrower.

"Gee, I hope we're not too late," Ray worried, exchanging glances with Winston.

"This looks extraordinarily bad," Egon commented, pulling a PKE meter from his jumpsuit's pocket. The device began to blink and beep, and its antennae rose from a folded position until they were horizontal. "Hm. Only residual readings. But this damage was caused by a paranormal source."

"You see, Peter? Benny was telling the truth after all," Ray said, hardly able to conceal his delight at the prospect of an unusual bust.

"We'd better see if we can find him and the professor," Peter said, boots crunching glass shards underfoot as he walked toward the lobby elevator.

A check of MacKensie's office revealed more damage, but no trace of the anthropologist or Benedek. Peter ran his fingers along the deep scratches in the office door and Egon scanned it with the PKE meter.

"More residual readings," Egon announced, looking up from the meter. "I suggest we return to the lobby."

"Whatever you say, big guy," Peter agreed with a shrug, still holding his thrower. He felt safer, more in control somehow, so long as he was armed and ready.

The four returned to the lobby and engaged in a more thorough search for clues.

"Egon!"

The physicist turned from his inspection of the shattered doors, instantly alerted by the alarm in Stantz's voice. "What is it, Ray?"

Ray held out a shard of glass, and Egon bent over his hand to examine it.

"What is it?" Peter demanded, coming up beside Egon to see what Ray had found.

"Blood," Ray whispered, his voice filled with concern.

"Blood?" Peter squeaked, backing up a step.

"Hmm. It's giving off very strong PKE readings," Egon observed, aiming the meter at the shard. "I would theorize it was left behind by the creature we're here to contain."

"It? Ghosts don't bleed, Egon!"

"Quite true, Peter. Most unusual." Egon pushed his glasses back in place, and looked at the horrified psychologist.

"There's more," Winston added, pointing to the floor. "Looks like it left a trail."

"And no doubt Doctor MacKensie and Benedek have followed it," Egon said, aiming his PKE meter at the blood trail and starting off.

"Hold it, big guy! Where are you going?" Peter grabbed Egon by the arm, halting the tall blond.

"After the others, of course."

"Of course," Peter repeated dryly. "Of course you're just going after some creature that may have killed people!"

"Well, we have to find it and stop it before it does any more harm," Ray pointed out, quite prepared to follow Egon.

"Ray —"

"Heads up, guys," Winston called, spying a figure coming across the darkened campus. They all turned, throwers at the ready.

"It's me! Don't shoot!"

Peter lowered his thrower. "It's just Benedek."

"But where's Doctor MacKensie?" Ray wondered as Benny staggered up to them.

"It's — it's got Jack! I couldn't stop it ... figured I'd better come for help," the journalist gasped, sagging to his knees as Winston and Ray reached out to catch him by the arms.

"Show us the way, Benny," Peter requested, his tone gentle and devoid of any suspicion. "Or are you up to it? Maybe you'd better stay here —"

Benedek shook his head and turned back the way he'd come, leading them across the campus, past the fountain in the quadrangle and toward the trees marking the borders of the campus property. "It's my fault," he explained as they hurried along. "I got it mad when I took its picture, and it went on a rampage. Jack wanted to wait for you guys, but I told him we had to stop it before it hurt anybody ... We found it in the greenbelt ..." He slowed, pointing. "In there. Jonny saw it sneaking up on me and knocked me down, so it grabbed him instead."

"Anything on the PKE, Egon?"

"No, Peter —" the physicist began, pausing as the device beeped rapidly. "It's a Class eight — directly ahead!"

"Fan out, guys," Winston ordered, as he and Peter advanced into the woods.

"Stay back, Benny," Ray urged, as he and Egon followed their comrades, throwers at the ready.

Benedek obeyed, frustrated, but aware that he couldn't rush forward to Jonathan's rescue now without getting in the Ghostbusters' way. He took a deep breath and shouted, "Jack!"

There was no reply, and Benny sank to the ground, his head in his hands. "It's my fault he got you, Jack," he said softly. A fresh wave of resolve swept over him, and he raised his head. "I'll save ya, buds," he promised, scrambling to his feet and running across the campus as fast as his Nikes would take him.

Jonathan moaned and clutched his temples, unable to remember the last time someone had played "The Anvil Chorus" in his head. Surely not since the party which had followed the awarding of his PhD, although lately he'd had some beauties, thanks to Benedek.

Benedek.

Jonathan sat up straight and looked around. "Benedek?" he called softly. "Benny?" he tried a little louder, panic welling.

There was no sign of the journalist. In fact, there was no sign of anyone, Jonathan realized as he shaded his eyes with one hand to look across the Savannah.

Savannah?

Jonathan blinked and looked across the landscape again. It definitely resembled the African Savannah, and the dry hot air felt like Africa.

"I am not going to panic," he muttered to himself, flopping back and draping his forearm over his eyes. "This is just a bad dream, no doubt induced by — by that pizza Benny ordered. I begged for plain cheese, but he loaded it down with bizarre things. That's it, it's just the pizza."

But the hot breeze stirring against his cheek felt real, and he'd long ago lost the ability for vivid dreams. It was time to admit he was no longer on the campus of the Georgetown Institute of Science. Somehow he'd been transported to the African Savannah ... and he was alone.

"Benedek will show up in a minute; he always does," Jonathan murmured in a feeble attempt to reassure himself. "This has to be some twisted idea of a joke that he cooked up — probably slipped me one of Theo's potions and it's induced this hallucination. It'll wear off any minute and I'll wake up. Please let it be one of Benedek's jokes."

He knew it really wasn't one of Benny's pranks, but it was the only hope he had to cling to for the moment.

"Yo, Egon! Will this help?" Benny shouted, racing up to the blond Ghostbuster and waving a long roll of paper. "Can you get any clues from this?"

"I don't know, Benny," Egon answered solemnly, turning his attention to the shorter man. "It depends on what it is."

"It's the chart," Benny informed him, starting to unroll it. "You know, the one Rama's picture was on before he decided to crash Jack's party."

"The chart?" Ray echoed, coming over to join them.

"Yeah, the one Jonny was using in his lecture," Benny affirmed, snapping it out.

"There is a high PKE residue," Egon announced, aiming the PKE meter at the chart.

"But what caused it?" Ray wanted to know, studying the meter as he peered over Egon's arm.

"I haven't a clue, yet —" Egon replied, slowly turning in a circle while his gaze was fastened on the meter.

"It looks like a perfectly ordinary hunk of paper," Ray observed, fingering the chart Benny still held.

"Yes, it is," Egon agreed. "Someone put a spell on it."

"A spell? Uh-oh," Benny said, rolling up the chart.

"But who would put a spell on something Doctor MacKensie would be using? And why?"

"Perhaps Benny can answer that question, Raymond."

"Me?"

"Has Doctor MacKensie angered any demons or sorcerers?"

"Jon-Boy? Nah, everybody likes the Crown Prince of Charm," Benny quipped with a wave of the chart.

"Hmm. Didn't you say Doctor MacKensie pushed you out of the way and then he disappeared?" Egon asked, giving Benny his scrutinizing stare.

"Egon, are you saying that *Benny* was the target?"

"It's only a theory, Ray."

"But probably spot-on, Doctor E. You'll find my name on quite a few hit lists," Benny admitted, shrugging his shoulders. "Guess someone has done their homework and knew J.J. would call me in at the first sign of weird. We've got to find a way to haul Jonny back to the land of academia. Maybe we can work a deal, exchange me for the professor."

"That would only be possible if we could identify the antagonist."

Benny took a deep breath and puffed out his cheeks as he considered. Before he could answer, Winston came running up, proton rifle in hand.

"Did Pete come back this way?"

"No, we haven't seen him," Ray said, turning to look at Zeddemore. "He was with you —"

"Was is the key word, homeboy," Winston pointed out, trying to catch his breath. "We split up, and I heard a yell but I couldn't find Peter."

"I've got a bad feeling about this, gentleman."

"Maybe Pete found a dimensional doorway or something really great," Benny suggested with a trace of his normal enthusiasm.

"Or maybe whatever snatched Doctor MacKensie has captured Peter."

"I hate it when you think of things like that, Egon," Winston complained.

"We must return to the location where you last saw Peter, and see if we can discover a trail," Egon outlined, frowning at the PKE meter. "I'm getting a faint reading in that direction." He pointed to his right, and Winston nodded.

"That's where we were, m' man."

"Egon, what's wrong?" Ray asked, noticing the way the physicist's frown deepened.

"It would appear that now we're dealing with a Class nine, to judge from these residual readings."

"Wow! A Class nine?"

"I thought you said it was a Class eight," Winston said, frowning at Egon.

"It was, but now the reading is higher. Most unusual."

"It changed? How is that possible?" Ray wanted to know.

"I don't know." Egon sounded disgusted with himself for failing to have the information. "We could be dealing with more than one entity."

"More than one? You mean Jack could be in the clutches of a ghost gang?"

"And what about Peter? Is he with Doctor MacKensie?" Ray worried.

"I don't have the answers, gentlemen," Egon snapped, the sharpness of his tone directed more at himself than at his companions. The physicist was clearly frustrated by his inability to supply the requested information.

"And standing around here jawing isn't going to help us find Peter," Winston added grimly, hefting his proton rifle.

"Well, let's retrace Pete's steps," Benny advised, sticking the rolled up chart in his back pocket, one end rising a few inches above his head.

"I'll recalibrate the PKE meter for Peter's biorhythms," Egon offered, making some adjustments on the meter. Frowning, he stared at the tiny monitor and made another adjustment, finally shaking the meter.

"What's wrong, Egon?" Ray asked, standing next to the physicist and peering at the PKE meter. Sucking in a deep breath, Ray looked up to meet Winston's and Benny's curious gazes. "It — it isn't registering Peter at all," he said slowly, a starkness in his brown eyes.

"Maybe he's just out of range," Winston suggested hopefully.

"Or maybe the demons or whatever the heck they are are masking his life signs," Benny added, trying to bolster their spirits.

"Perhaps," Egon agreed reluctantly, still fiddling with the meter. "Show us where you last saw Peter, Winston."

The attractive black man nodded and motioned for them to follow him. "Right about here we decided to split up," he said, pointing with his thrower. "Pete went that way ..."

"Then so do we," Egon intoned, his jaw set.

"Ya know, if he isn't registering on the doo-hickey, maybe he did go through a dimensional doorway," Benny said cheerfully, bumping into the tall blond when Egon abruptly halted. "Whoa, give a hand signal or something —" Benny broke off, realizing the three Ghostbusters were staring at the ground. "What gives?"

"It's — it's Peter's proton pack," Ray whispered, kneeling down beside the pack. "He wouldn't abandon his pack, Egon. Not while we're on a bust, anyway."

"It's still got a full charge," Winston added, squatting across from Ray to inspect the pack.

"Gentlemen, we have a problem," Egon announced solemnly.

"Couldn't have said it better, m'man," Winston agreed, standing up.

Ray pulled a PKE meter from his own pocket and scanned the area. "Very high readings, Egon. Whatever we're after was here, and probably has Peter."

"Let's just hope he's still in one piece," Winston said grimly, picking up the pack.

"I'll carry it," Benny offered, holding out his hands.

The three Ghostbusters exchanged looks. "That isn't a good idea, Mr. Benedek. We've been trained to handle the nuclear accelerator," Egon began.

"Hey, I'm not gonna use it," Benny protested with an innocent grin. "But you guys are already loaded down and I'm not. It just makes sense to let me play pack mule — right?"

Egon's own blue eyes narrowed as he studied Benny's apparently guileless ones. "This isn't a game — lives are at stake —"

"Yeah, and one of 'em belongs to my pal."

After considering for a moment, Egon nodded and motioned for Winston to help Benny put on the pack. "Don't make me regret this decision, Mr. Benedek."

Benny paused in buckling the waist strap and he met Egon's gaze. The underlying threat in the physicist's tone spoke volumes, and Benny nodded. "Cross my heart, Big E."

"Big E?" Ray mouthed silently at Winston who raised his eyebrows in response.

"Ray, I shall keep this meter attuned for Peter's biorhythms," Egon informed him, ignoring Benny's moniker in the same way that Jonathan had learned to do. "We will use yours —"

"Egon! There — there does seem to be a doorway or something!" Ray exclaimed excitedly, waving the beeping meter around. "Extremely high readings!" He pointed the meter at what appeared to be empty space, and Egon aimed his own meter.

"Gentlemen, Peter is on the other side."

"Then why are we standing around here?" Winston demanded, stepping forward and disappearing.

"This is grrreat!" Benny declared, following.

Ray and Egon looked at each other, and then moved in synchronization, vanishing as they entered the invisible doorway.

Peter landed with a noisy thud, sprawling as the breath was knocked from his lungs. His vision swam and bells rang in his ears.

"You're not Benedek!"

The announcement made Peter wince, and he struggled to sit up. A pair of human-feeling hands assisted, and one hand remained bracingly against his back. "Thank God for small favors," Peter muttered, rubbing his forehead.

"Who are you?" his companion asked, and Peter blinked until his eyes focused on a pair of very worried brown eyes.

"Doctor Peter Venkman, Ghostbuster Extraordinaire."

"Ghostbuster? Where are the others?"

"That, my friend, is a very good question. An excellent question, as a matter of fact," Peter said, looking around. "And I have an even better one: where are *we*? And how did we get here?"

"That's two questions," the sandy-haired man pointed out. He squinted at the horizon, and added critically, "*Looks* a bit like Africa, though I've never seen the sky quite this shade of yellow."

Peter looked up and blinked. The sky was yellow. Not a pale, dusty yellow, but bright, lemony yellow. He met the stranger's gaze and raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Patently impossible, of course. It must be an illusion. As for your second question, I haven't the foggiest idea."

Peter tilted his head and studied the man. His accent was British, but softened as if influenced by several years in the company of Americans. "You expected to see Benedek — Doctor MacKensie, I presume?"

"Yes, I am," the anthropologist said, smiling and offering his hand. "Perhaps you'd better call me Jonathan, since we seem to be stuck in the same illusion together." He looked hopeful. "It is just all some sort of an hallucination, isn't it?"

"Wish it was, pal," Peter agreed as he shook Jonathan's hand, then rubbed the back of his head, wincing. "But from what I saw back on the other side, I'd say we've passed through a dimensional doorway. Look, did you hike any distance from the place where you, uh, dropped in?"

Jonathan shook his head, puzzled.

The Ghostbuster looked relieved. "Good, then all we'll have to do is stay put until Egon and the guys come through to rescue us."

The thought of rescue was obviously infinitely cheering, but Jonathan seemed intent on finding the flaw in the plan. "What if they're not able to come immediately? I mean, it'll be nightfall in a matter of hours, and there may be wild animals out here ... And what if there are more of those Ramapithecus creatures? The one I encountered wasn't particularly friendly —"

Peter Venkman grinned. "Don't worry, Professor. If the hairy apes come around, I'll just give 'em a taste of Old Betsey here and," He reached over his shoulder, then froze for a moment. "She's *gone!*"

"I beg your pardon?" Jonathan's jaw dropped open in astonishment as Peter began turning in comic circles, trying to see his own back, rather like a dog chasing its own tail. "*Who's gone*, Doctor Venkman?"

Peter acknowledged defeat, his shoulders slumping. "My proton pack's gone," he told Jonathan. "We're defenseless."

"Proton pack? Is that some sort of weapon?"

"Best dang weapon there is, pardner," Peter drawled in his John Wayne impersonation. At Jonathan's blank look, he continued, "Our proton packs and ghost traps are what we use to capture and contain ghosts."

"But — I don't think we're dealing with ghosts," Jonathan pointed out, pausing over the word "ghosts." "After all, there are no such things —"

"Try telling Egon and Ray that, pal. Our containment unit is filling up to the point of overload," Peter informed him.

"With ghosts? I don't believe in —"

"I think you will before we're out of this mess," Peter suggested, clapping a hand on Jonathan's shoulder. "How can you hang around with Edgar Benedek and not believe?"

"I don't 'hang around' with Benedek, exactly. And I believe very little of what he spouts," Jonathan said with a disdainful sniff. "Science and logic can explain everything."

"I didn't always believe either, pal, but I've been educated. Egon and Ray are certainly more scientific than Benny, and Spengs has several degrees."

"Yes, I've read some of Doctor Spengler's papers, and I find it hard to believe such a brilliant man even entertains the notion that ghosts and demons exist."

Peter folded his arms across his chest and looked at a point just past Jonathan. "Oh yeah? Then what's that?"

Jonathan whirled around and followed Peter's gaze. "It's — it's —"

"It ain't Santa Claus, pal! But then, you probably don't believe in him, either," Peter declared, lowering his arms and looking around for a weapon. "Don't tell Ray Santa doesn't exist."

"How can we be facing a nonexistent, prehistoric man?" Jonathan muttered, staring at the approaching Ramapithecus loping toward them.

"Figure it out later, buddy," Peter said, grabbing the professor's arm and pulling him behind a scraggly thorn bush. "Hey, Jonathan, how good are you at lobbing rocks?" He indicated a small pile of stones he'd managed to gather. "If he gets too close, we're going to have to try to scare him off."

"This can't be happening," Jonathan mumbled, still standing up and staring across the plain.

Peter clutched the professor by the arm, hauling him down behind the bush. "You'd better wake up and smell the coffee, Jack, because we are definitely in trouble."

Jonathan blinked and stared at Peter, then shook his head. For just a second, he'd heard Benedek's voice. "I won't argue that point with you, Doctor Venkman," he admitted quietly.

"Glad to hear it," Peter grumbled, secretly wondering if the professor had some sort of a mental problem. He'd encountered enough absent-minded academic types during his college days to know the cliché had a basis in fact. "All right, help me get some more ammo together —"

Jonathan picked up one of the stones and gave it a thoughtful look. "This isn't going to work, Venkman. Primates aren't like other animals — a single lion or wolf can be driven off by this method, but chimps or baboons are more likely to attack if provoked."

Peter paused and considered that piece of information. "So whaddya suggest we do — just sit here and hope we're invisible?"

"Yes, actually." The anthropologist tested the wind, then nodded. "We're downwind. If we don't move, he may not see us."

"May not?" Peter stared at him, then shrugged. "Something tells me I'm not gonna like the odds on that, but we'll try it your way, Marlon Perkins."

Jonathan's brows drew down, then he gestured for silence.

The Ramapithecus slackened its pace as it drew even with the patch of brush they were hiding behind. It stopped, its head up, sniffing the wind for long minutes that seemed to last forever. Then, abruptly, it loped off in the opposite direction.

"I don't believe it," Peter declared softly. "That was a good call, Professor!"

"Thank you," Jonathan said, as he lost the battle to suppress a sneeze. "Allergies," he explained, fumbling for his handkerchief. "Animal hair, sets them off."

"I get killer hay fever attacks, myself," Peter said sympathetically.

"Animal hair ..." Jonathan repeated, looking thoughtful. "If in fact Ramapithecus is Man's ancestor, his hair should be more human than animal. But I'm sneezing, so it's more animal. Perhaps it's not as closely related to Man as we've surmised."

"I haven't surmised anything," Peter commented, peering over the bush to make sure the creature was gone. "I've never heard of Ramawhosis until your phone call, although Egon knew all about it."

"Ramapithecus," Jonathan corrected automatically, apparently used to Benny's slaughtering of the name.

"Whatever." Peter shrugged and stood up, dusting off the seat of his jumpsuit. "What now, O Great Leader? This seems to be more your turf than mine."

Jonathan ran a hand through his hair. "We should find shelter, food and water. We don't know how long we're going to be here — wherever *here* is. And I'm not sure it's wise to count on your friends finding us; we should try and figure out a way out of this place."

"It's the only thing you can count on, pal. Egon, Ray and Winston won't rest until they find me, and if they find me, then they find *you*, right?"

Giving careful consideration to Peter's logic, Jonathan finally nodded. "Yes, well, I suppose that's true enough. But we had best make certain we're alive for them to find. There is serious danger from exposure to the sun and dehydration in this climate."

Peter ran his forearm along his forehead, wiping sweat onto the sleeve of his jumpsuit. "It *is* hotter than Hades, isn't it?"

Jonathan removed his suit jacket and folded it, carefully draping it over his arm. "Just be glad it's winter."

"Yeah? How do you figure that?"

Smiling, Jonathan pointed to the thorn brush. "The native vegetation is green — that means we've arrived during the rainy season."

"Looks pretty dry to me."

Jonathan shrugged and shaded his eyes as he surveyed the landscape. After a moment, he pointed to a clump of scraggly trees about a mile away. "We'll have more shade over there, and we can use the trees to sleep in if we must."

"Must we? I don't care for heights much," Peter admitted. "What's wrong with sleeping on the ground, anyway?"

"Wild animals," the anthropologist advised as he bent down and picked up a stone from the heap Peter had gathered. "Let's use these to make a marker, so we can find our way back to this spot, if it really is as important as you say."

"Good idea," the Ghostbuster agreed, and promptly knelt to assist him in building a small cairn, with a crude arrow pointing in the direction of the trees. "For the guys," he added, and Jonathan nodded in approval.

The pair started walking across the plain, squinting against the bright sunlight.

"So Jonathan, how did you get hooked up with Benny?" Peter asked, hoping to distract himself from the fact he was hot and getting thirsty.

"As Benedek might say, 'karma'," Jonathan replied with a wry smile. "Doctor Moorhouse sent me to Fartham, California to investigate a supposedly haunted house and Benedek was investigating the same case."

"Bad timing, huh?" Peter sympathized. "Wrong place at the wrong time."

"Well, actually Benedek was quite — somewhat — helpful in solving the mystery," Jonathan admitted, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and mopping his forehead. "His enthusiasm can be overwhelming, but he does know how to ferret out information. I will admit some of his friends are, well, bizarre, but they are harmless." Realizing he was talking to one of Benedek's many friends, he paused and looked embarrassed. "Of course I don't mean that you are bizarre, but he has introduced me to some unbelievable personalities."

"Hey, pal, how many people do you know who risk their lives busting ghosts? I'd say that could qualify for bizarre," Peter suggested, patting his pockets for a handkerchief. "Egon, Ray and I have spent years defending ourselves and our profession. Winston has been with us a short time but he's had his share of put-downs, including his own father. Egon's old man has never forgiven him for pursuing ghostbusting instead of working at Spengler Labs. If our own families can't understand us, how can we expect total strangers to accept us? Fortunately we've had some pretty spectacular busts which have validated our profession."

"You really believe you've captured ghosts?" Jonathan tied his handkerchief around his head, providing slight protection from the sun.

"You're even more skeptical than I was, pal. Even though I had a degree in parapsychology, I didn't believe in ghosts until Egon and Ray confronted one. They dragged me over to the library and the rest, as they say, is history. They put their scientific heads together and developed the proton packs and ghost traps, and we were in business."

"The ghostbusting business."

"You bet," Peter agreed cheerfully. "Hey, pal, somebody's got to do it and it may as well be us. No one does it as well as the Ghostbusters."

"It seems like a rather elaborate scam."

"Scam? Hey, buddy, my pop runs scams; Benedek runs scams but we are legit!"

"My apologies," Jonathan said hastily, holding up a hand as if to ward off blows. "I just meant it *could* be a scam, charging people money to rid them of ghosts, when ghosts don't exist. Of course, if they believe they've been freed of troubling ghosts, then —"

"*We bust ghosts*," Peter announced loudly, enunciating each word. "Read my lips, MacKensie: Ghosts exist and we put the suckers away. We make the world a safer, quieter place and because we have expenses, we charge fees. It's a legitimate business."

Jonathan was staring at him, mouth agape. "I — see," he said at last. "Yes, of course it is. I'm sorry, Doctor Venkman."

Peter gave him a suspicious look, then nodded in acknowledgement.

They continued walking in silence for some distance, and finally Jonathan cleared his throat and ventured, "You don't seem very fond of Benedek, considering the way he's talked about you."

"Yeah, I can just imagine," Peter sneered. "What'd he say, anyway?"

"That you've been friends a long time."

"Is that what he calls it?"

Jonathan frowned. "Don't you?"

Peter shrugged. "You know Benny. He'll do anything for a story — even make the stuff up."

"That's a bit harsh, I think." Jonathan met the Ghostbuster's astonished gaze, and stammered, "Well, I know he tends to be a bit, er, flamboyant at times, but since I've known him he's been scrupulously truthful in recording our, cases. And I've never known him to deliberately set out to deceive anyone."

"Then you really don't know him, do you?"

"I believe I know him as well as he lets anyone know him," Jonathan answered quietly. "He spins wild stories and is quite colorful, and he has a freedom of spirit that I envy. Benedek hides a great deal of pain behind the jester's façade of his. His father was a disappointment, he lost his fiancée in a plane crash, and he has erected a considerable wall around his heart. It's safer than caring."

"He told you all that, did he?" Peter jeered.

"No. In fact, he's gone to extremes to hide it. But every once in a while there are cracks in his shielding, and I am allowed a glimpse of the real man. Most people probably ignore these glimpses or choose to believe it's just another part of Benny's scamming ways. Call me old-fashioned or naive, but I prefer to believe everyone has a core of goodness, even Benedek."

"Now you sound like Ray," Peter commented with a self-deprecating laugh. "Well, Ray found the goodness in me, so I guess it's possible Benny has a hidden heart."

"Anything is possible."

There was an underlying chastisement in the professor's tone that made Peter squirm, and he didn't like it. "Well, I've known the guy a lot longer —"

"But apparently not as well."

"How much further do we have to walk?" Peter asked, trying to change the subject. "We don't want to go too far or the guys will have trouble finding us."

"Until we can find some shelter. Since this is winter, we need to find higher ground or at least some trees," Jonathan told him, pausing to remove his shoe and shake out a tiny rock.

"Higher ground?"

"Flash flooding is a possibility," Jonathan said, wobbling on one foot as he tried to replace his shoe. Peter caught him by the arm to steady him and Jonathan mumbled his thanks.

"Flooding? In the desert?"

"Sudden rain squalls can result in flash flooding because the ground is so parched it can't absorb the water quickly enough. One time I was here on a dig and our camp turned into an island," Jonathan recalled. "The water went down fairly quickly, but until it did we were stranded. Fortunately Doctor Johanson chose a campsite that was on high ground or we would have been washed away."

Peter found this hard to believe, but he decided that Jonathan was sincere. After all, he was the one with experience ... "So you've been here before?"

"Not *here* exactly, but certainly to Africa. I'm not quite sure where we are now, but it resembles Africa's Great Rift Valley."

"I wonder why? I mean, I've been to the Netherworld before, and it didn't look like this," Peter said thoughtfully as they started off again.

"The — Netherworld?"

"Yeah, it's a lousy place to visit, and you sure wouldn't want to live there," Peter informed his companion. "It's a sort of limbo, next door to our dimension, chock-full of lost souls and nether-entities. The guys and I went across once to bring Egon back after he destabilized that time ..."

"And you think we're in this Netherworld now?" Jonathan asked.

Peter cocked his head to one side and lifted an eyebrow. "I'm open to better suggestions, pal. What do you remember about getting here?"

Jonathan's brows knitted as he considered the question. "Well, the, er, Ramapithecus had destroyed the glass doors, and Benedek insisted we follow it across the campus. We found it and it charged on us. Benedek was directly in its path, and I tackled him to get him out of the way, and the creature seized my arm — there was a bright flash of light, and I was here." He glanced back at the cairn of stones they had left behind, and added, "Well, over there, actually."

"Yeah, sounds like a dimensional doorway to me," Peter said, trying to sound as authoritative as Egon.

"If it's a doorway, can't we just go back through?"

"It doesn't work that way," Peter snapped irritably. "And before you ask, I don't *know* why — you'd have to ask Egon. We don't know if we'd end up back in our world or another part of the Netherworld. You want to take the chance?"

"No, no of course not," Jonathan stammered. "But isn't there something we can do besides wait to be rescued? I'm not entirely confident your friends will find us. What if the doorway they find doesn't lead them here?"

"You're a real optimist, aren't you? Egon will find us. I just want to know what you did to warrant a trip to this place."

"I've been wondering the same thing, myself. My life was so quiet, so normal until Doctor Moorhouse sprang her little 'surprise' on me," Jonathan related with a heartfelt sigh. "I just wanted a grant to pursue my research on Ramapithecus, but she insisted I do a little project for her first, and I haven't had a moment's peace since. And if she doesn't find some bizarre phenomenon for me to investigate, Benedek comes along with a wild idea and the next thing I know I'm halfway across the country looking for ghosts or aliens or some other crazy thing."

"Sounds like a skeptic's nightmare," Peter commented.

"Yes, it is," Jonathan agreed. "Especially since most of the phenomena we've investigated have had perfectly logical explanations ..." He hesitated, loosening his tie a little, and added reluctantly, "I'll admit I haven't quite worked out every single detail yet —"

"Like the flying apeman who nabbed you?" Peter asked mischievously.

Jonathan's mouth opened and closed before he replied, "Yes, well, er, I'm as much in the dark about why I'm here as you are."

"Maybe not," the Ghostbuster suggested, rubbing his chin. "Maybe you're here by mistake. Ramapithecus was after Benny, wasn't it?"

"Perhaps," Jonathan answered cautiously. "But — why? Benedek doesn't know anything about anthropology."

"But the first thing you did was call in Benny," Peter pointed out. "Whoever is the mastermind behind this knows the connection between you guys. By appearing to come after you, Benny was off-guard and would have been snatched if you hadn't interfered."

"So I'm here by mistake," Jonathan mused. "It wanted Benedek but got me instead. But why you?"

"Wrong place at the wrong time, I guess. I fell through the doorway," Peter said with a shrug.

Jonathan looked dubious, but held his peace until they had reached the fringe of trees. Both men collapsed in the shade of a particularly tall tree, grateful for the respite.

"I never want to move again," Peter declared, wiping his face with a bright red handkerchief.

Jonathan sighed. "Maybe it won't hurt if we just rest a few minutes. But I really think it would be best if we try to find —"

A rumbling snore interrupted him, and Jonathan realized that Peter Venkman was sound asleep. He sighed deeply. "I'll keep watch," he announced needlessly, settling his spine against the tree trunk and folding his arms across his chest. Peter snuffled in his sleep and Jonathan shook his head. Venkman reminded him of someone ...

Winston grunted softly as his boots impacted solid ground, the jolt moving up his bent knees. He squinted at the grayish-green sky overhead, and then looked across the rocky landscape before him. "Looks like we made it, guys," he commented, turning his head to look at the others.

"Sure looks like the Netherworld," Ray agreed.

"Indeed," Egon said. "Mr. Benedek, are you all right?"

There was no reply. The Ghostbusters scanned the immediate vicinity before looking at each other with realization: Benedek was missing.

"Uh-oh," Ray said, looking at Egon. "How could we have lost him?"

"Yeah, man, he was right behind me — wasn't he?" Winston demanded, swinging around to survey their surroundings.

"You were point man, and Egon and I brought up the rear," Ray assured him. "Benny had to be between us ..."

"Gentlemen, this does not look promising," Egon intoned in his rumbling voice. "Whoever — or whatever — we're after is systemically separating us. I now doubt that Doctor MacKensie and Peter are together, and our antagonist apparently believes in the adage there is safety in numbers so he is paring down our number. We must try and remain together."

"But how?"

"Good question, Raymond."

Winston was standing with his back to the others, his rifle at the ready and his gaze alert for trouble. "Egon, see if you can get a fix on Peter's readings now."

The physicist nodded and examined his PKE meter, his brows knitted thoughtfully. After a few moments, he raised his head and pushed his glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose. "According to this, Peter should be approximately 152.3 meters away, in that direction." He pointed northeasterly, across the rubble-strewn landscape.

Ray brightened at the news. "Well, that's good! We'll just go find him —" He started off, jerking to a stop as Winston grabbed his arm.

"Hang on, homeboy. We've gotta make sure we don't get split up. It'd be better if we had some spare rope to tie ourselves together, but since we don't, we need to plan our moves. Egon, you'd better lead the way. Ray, stay right behind him, and I'll be the rearguard."

"Very sensible, Winston," Egon commended. "Ray, please check your PKE meter for the readings of this doorway, and mark them, so we can find our way back to it once we've located Peter."

"Got 'em," Ray said after a few minutes. He pocketed the meter and pulled his proton-rifle, readying it for action.

The three Ghostbusters set off in single-file, stepping carefully across the uneven terrain stretching before them.

"Whoa! Talk about your sudden travel plans," Benny announced, staggering slightly as his feet touched concrete. Grinning, he looked around for the Ghostbusters and his smile slipped a little when he realized they were nowhere to be seen. "Yo, Egon? Ray? Winston? Come out come out, wherever you are! Olly Olly outs in free," he sang out, slowly spinning around. "C'mon, guys, we're a little pressed for time if we're gonna find Jack and Peter."

The sidewalk became crowded with passersby, and Benny found himself being jostled. "Give a guy a little breathing space, willya?" he muttered, pushing back. "Where'd you all come from, anyway?" No one bothered to reply, and it was as if Benny was invisible. "*Whoa!* Check it out," he said, whistling in surprise. "How'd I get here?"

"Here" was a crowded New Orleans street which looked hauntingly familiar. He'd been here before ...

"Pete! Yo, V-man, it's me —" Benny broke off, bright blue eyes growing wide as he watched Peter Venkman scuffing along the confetti-strewn street. It wasn't so much the sight of Peter which took Benny by surprise but it was the man running up to the Ghostbuster. "I always thought I was better looking," he mused as Edgar Benedek, journalist extraordinaire flung an arm around Peter Venkman's shoulder.

"What do you want, Benny?" the Ghostbuster growled.

"Yeah, it's great to see you, too," Benny's doppelganger greeted cheerfully. "Should have known Doctor V would show up for Mardi Gras in the Big Easy. Was that some parade or what?"

"Fine," Peter said with a shrug, "what I could see of it from Ecto's window." He sighed deeply and kicked at an abandoned whiskey bottle, sending it rolling down the sidewalk. "Nobody *told* me Mardi Gras was over! *Egon* probably knew it and let me come anyway, just to make a point."

The watching Benny perked up his ears at this. "Talk about *deja vu!* I've heard this before ..." About a year ago, in fact, the spring before he'd met Jonathan. He moved closer to the pair, his attention on their conversation.

"That's the breaks, pal," Benny's alter-ego said (he decided to think of him as Edgar, just for his sanity's sake). "But that doesn't mean you and I can't have a wild night on the town anyway! So how you'd ditch the rest of the 'Busters?"

"Left 'em at the hotel in Muddy Flat," Peter answered glumly. "I tried calling them, but I guess they're already on the way back to New York. Guess Egon's Paraphysical Conference is a dead loss, too — no pun intended."

Edgar laughed, and started steering his new-found companion toward a nearby building. "Let's grab a couple of brewskis and you can tell me all about it, and then I'll tell you about this great lead I'm working on ..."

Benny followed them into a dark bar and settled unseen in a corner of the booth they chose. "This is great, guys, but what's with the Memorex replay? Did I slip out of the time stream or something?"

Neither of his companions answered his questions.

"This place is a ghost-hunter's dream," Edgar was saying when Benny returned his attention to the duo. "There's this one great place in the French Quarter where they say they can still hear the rattle of chains, the moans and shrieks of the slaves being tortured —"

"I'll pass," Peter cut in.

"This slave owner had a mulatto lover who helped her torture her old slaves and children," Edgar continued, ignoring Peter's interruption. His voice and gestures grew more melodramatic. "She forced a little girl to jump out an upper story window, plummeting to her death. The woman was arrested and executed, but she and her lover continue their inhuman pastimes and on a clear night the screams of their victims can be heard echoing ... echoing —" Edgar broke off, waiting for Peter's response.

"Sounds like it's right up your alley, Benedek," Peter observed, sipping his beer. "But you can count me out on this one."

"I can't believe you said that," Edgar objected, as Benny shook his head dolefully. "The great Doctor V, refusing a chance to bust some evil spirits just because he's on vacation!"

"That's not it," Peter retorted. "It's because I haven't got anything to bust them with, 'cause the stupid airline sent our proton packs to Honolulu!" He realized that his voice had risen, and added more quietly, "And anyway, nobody's hired us, and Mama Venkman's little boy doesn't work for free."

"Not even for free publicity for you and the Ghostbusters?"

"From that rag you work for, Benny?" Peter snorted in disgust. "Give me a break."

Edgar shrugged, seemingly unperturbed by the slur against *The National Register*. Benny had to smile — he'd heard a lot worse from Juliana Moorhouse. "Suit yourself. I'm not here for that, anyway. What do you know about Voodoo, Pete?"

Benny was looking at his past-self with a mixture of apprehension and insight. "So *that's* what this is all about! But why involve Jonathan? I didn't even know him then!"

"Voodoo?" Peter repeated. "Ray made me read some books on it, but they had too many pictures of creepy-crawlies in them for much of the stuff to sink in. I did try making a doll of Egon once, though." He looked reminiscent. "I stuck a needle through the middle of it and left it in his bed. He just pulled the needle out and gave Slimer the doll to play with." He sighed. "Sometimes he's just no fun."

Edgar leaned forward. "How you'd like to meet a real Voodoo Priestess tonight?"

Peter considered the idea. "Is she cute?"

"Cute? We're talking Miss Universe here, pal," Edgar assured him, his hands forming a shapely outline.

Peter looked askance at the top-heavy proportions Benedek indicated, but the journalist did have a knack for knowing — interesting — women. "She doesn't have a pet boa or anything like that, does she?" he asked suspiciously.

"V-man, you have watched entirely too many horror flicks with Ray."

"With a friend of yours, anything is possible," Peter retorted.

Edgar just grinned and motioned for the waitress to bring two more beers. "Keep that in mind, Petey-boy — *anything* is possible." He wagged his eyebrows in a suggestive manner.

"Why are you willing to share such a 'treasure'?" Peter wasn't about to easily give up his suspicions about Benny's motives. He'd known the journalist far too long to trust him. Edgar Benedek was cut from the same cloth as Charlie Venkman, and Benny's own father was even worse. Peter still wasn't sure who was to blame for that fiasco in Dubuque but he wasn't about to forget it, either. Charlie had thought it a great scam and wanted to set up a partnership with Michael Benedek and it had taken every fast-thinking, fast-talking gene Peter possessed to talk his dad out of it.

He took a draught of his beer, oblivious to the startled look he was receiving from the unseen Benny.

"I never knew you felt that way, Pete," Benny murmured, confused by his sudden ability to "hear" Venkman's thoughts. "Hey, I wonder if the psychic stuff goes along with whatever's happened to me?" He grinned lopsidedly. "Heck, I wonder if it'll stick till I get back. Sure would be fun to try out on Doctor M, or Jack ..." He stopped smiling, remembering that Jonathan was missing. "Maybe not, if part of the deal is being invisible."

"Your distrust hurts, V-man," Edgar said, grinning ingenuously. "I can't believe you suspect me of having an ulterior motive!"

"I can't believe I was ever that shallow," Benny muttered, his tone disgusted as he eyed his doppelganger. "Put a sock in it and tell him the truth, Edgar."

"The truth is, I want an interview with Madame LeBrun, to top off the Voodoo chapter in my next book, but she's a little reluctant to talk to me. She's a little ticked off about an article I had in the latest issue of *The National Register* and I thought maybe if a good-looking guy like you kind of smoothed the way ..."

"Yeah, I remember how that turned out," Benny said. "Say no, Petey."

Peter opened his mouth to reply, then paused. "That's all? Just an interview? No séances or mumbo-jumbo?"

"Nah, I just want to talk to her," Edgar assured him.

Peter shrugged. "Sure — why not?"

"Grrreat!" Edgar tossed some bills down on the table and stood up. "Let's go!!"

Benny sighed and followed them from the bar. "I have a lousy feeling about this." He had good reason to be apprehensive — Madame LeBrun had been more than "a little" angry with him, and then he'd shown up at her door without warning, with Peter in tow ... tempers had gotten out of hand, and they'd been lucky to escape with nothing worse than a few bruises and a twisted ankle for Peter.

"Whoa!" Benny snapped his fingers, struck by an idea. "Maybe this psychic stuff works two ways — maybe I can warn Pete not to tag along with me this time!" He focused his gaze on the Ghostbuster, brows drawn together in concentration. "Yo, Pete, can you hear me? It's me, Benny. You've gotta listen to me — Peter?"

Peter continued to accompany Edgar to the curbside, and followed him into a taxi. He gave no sign that he had heard Benny's telepathic entreaties. Benny sighed and hopped up on the back of the cab as it pulled away. Whoever was in charge seemed determined to play it out.

"Aow far did you say it was, Egon?" Winston asked, one hand wiping at the sweat on his face. "It seems like we oughta be there by now, m'man. We've been walking for hours."

"Sure seems like it," Ray agreed, shifting the 40-pound pack on his back. "Wish we had some water."

Egon drew to a halt and checked his PKE meter. Despite the heat and exertion of the long hike, he was barely sweating and his always perfectly curled hair didn't display so much as a droop. "Hmm, this is extraordinarily odd."

"What's odd, Egon?" Ray asked, coming up behind Egon and leaning against his arm as he studied the PKE meter. "Wow! Peter must be moving as fast as we are — the readings indicate he's still 152.3 meters away."

"It seems highly unlikely that Peter would be maintaining the exact same pace." Egon frowned at the meter, then turned to Ray. "Check the readings on your meter, Ray."

The red-haired Ghostbuster nodded and pulled his meter from his pocket, turning to face the way they'd come. "Egon, this is really weird! The doorway — it's right there ... We haven't moved at all!"

"What?" exclaimed Winston, staring as Ray held out the meter for Egon to see. "All that walking and we're back where we started?"

"But we weren't walking in circles," Ray objected. His eyes widened as another idea struck him. "Hey — maybe we haven't moved at all! Maybe something's trying to prevent us from reaching Peter!"

Egon rubbed his chin. "Perhaps. But there is one other possibility, Raymond ... Something may be trying to prevent us from realizing we have reached Peter."

The three men looked at each other. "You mean, this could all be an illusion?" Winston asked. Egon nodded. "Oh, man."

"But if this *is* an illusion, why does it look like the Netherworld? Shouldn't it look like something familiar to whoever is doing this?"

"Ray, I do *not* like the sound of that," Winston complained.

"I must concur with you, Winston. Either this — someone — is personally familiar with the Netherworld or is able to access our memories. Either way —"

"— we're in deep trouble," Winston finished for the physicist.

"Precisely."

"How can we make ourselves see the reality of our surroundings?" Ray asked.

"I'm not certain. There seems little point in wearing ourselves out tramping around in circles —"

"Like rats in a maze," Winston said, sounding disgusted.

Ray and Egon looked at each other, then at the ex-soldier. "That's it!" the two scientists cried in chorus.

"Huh?"

"Egon, what happens to the rats when they stop running the maze?"

"It would seem logical to me that the experiment is ended, Raymond."

Winston frowned. "So what are we gonna do? Just sit still and hope for the best?"

Ray furrowed his brow, trying to formulate his idea into words. "Maybe if we stop walking, we can find out where we really are, and find Peter, and Benny, if he's here. Maybe we just need to stop thinking about the Netherworld, stop believing in what we see around us."

"Hmm. I concur. An excellent idea, Ray." Egon adjusted his glasses and sat down cross-legged on the ground, his gesture indicating that they should do the same. "I think we should coordinate our efforts to break through this illusion. Close your eyes and clear your minds of all impressions of our surroundings. Then open them slowly and allow your mind to absorb what you see without judgment."

"You've been reading Pete's shrink books again, haven't you, Egon?" Winston grumbled, even as he obeyed the physicist's instructions. "I just hope this works."

"As do I, Winston."

"All we can do is try," Ray said as he dropped down beside the other two. "Uh, maybe we should hold hands, just so we don't lose contact."

"I'm not that kind of guy," Winston warned. Nevertheless, he held his hands out and was grateful for the touch of Ray's hand. After a moment, Egon's fingers rested on Winston's palm, completing the connection.

"Remember, clear your mind of all impressions of what we've seen," Egon's deep voice instructed.

"Why is it getting windy?" Winston inquired a few moments later when swirls of wind began to wrap around them.

"Keep your eyes closed! Concentrate!" Egon shouted as the wind intensified, tearing at their hair and clothes.

"W-what is it?" Ray called out, tightening his grip on the hands he held.

"It ain't the Easter Bunny, Ray!"

"This is merely a distraction!" Egon reminded them. "Whatever happens, don't break contact, gentlemen!"

Jonathan gave a start and lifted his head, realizing he had been dozing. He glanced at Peter Venkman, who was still snoring beside him, then rubbed his eyes and squinted at the sky. The sun had finally left the lemony sky, and the horizon was lit up with slashes of orange and red. With a yawn, he poked his companion in the ribs. "Wake up, Venkman. We'd better be finding a proper campsite before it gets darker."

"Later, Mom," Peter murmured, batting ineffectually at Jonathan. "I'll get ready for school later ..."

Jonathan frowned and shook the Ghostbuster. "It's time to wake up, Doctor."

"Get your hands off me, Egon," Peter said in a threatening voice.

Jonathan immediately removed his hands. "Doctor Venkman, we must find a campsite before full dark. It's too dangerous to stay exposed —"

"Dangerous?" Peter sat up, eyes wide as he stared at Jonathan. "Oh, yeah, right. Let's make tracks, Jack."

"Jonathan — or Jon," the professor corrected automatically as they got to their feet.

"Right — sorry. I wonder what's keeping the guys? They should have been here by now," Peter said with a frown.

"Apparently whoever is orchestrating this — this scenario doesn't want them here," Jonathan theorized, dusting off his trousers and missing the expression on Peter's face.

"Then what has he-she-it done with 'em?"

Startled by the fear in Peter's voice, Jonathan looked up and met the other man's green eyes. "Why, I don't know, possibly nothing. It just may be making it impossible for them to follow our trail."

"The guys won't just give up," Peter insisted. "They wouldn't just accept a dead end and quit, not my guys. Egon and Ray will use every piece of equipment they can lay their grubby little paws on, as well as every little gray cell they've got to figure out a way to find me. And if they find me, they find you. Wait a minute! Benny was with them — if he's the real target, they may be trapped with him and *can't* come after us!"

"Trapped?" repeated Jonathan, not liking the sound of that. "Now calm down, we don't know that for certain yet. Let's deal with our immediate problems first, and worry about them later."

"*Later?*" Peter exclaimed. "You don't understand! These are my pals, and they're probably in the clutches of a demon right now!"

"And what are we supposed to do about it?" Jonathan demanded. "I think staying alive would be an excellent start. Come on, Venkman." He grabbed the Ghostbuster's arm and pointed at the horizon. "Do you hear those roars?"

Peter listened. "Yeah, they sound like — lions?"

Jonathan nodded. "And they're getting closer. We'd better start climbing into one of these trees."

"When you're right, you're right," Peter grumbled, glancing up at the tree above them. "The branches are a little high —"

"I'll give you a boost," Jonathan offered, bending his knees and bracing his hands palm up and fingers laced together.

"Why don't —"

Another roar from the lions made up Peter's mind and he sprang onto Jonathan's hands while reaching up for the bottom branch. Jonathan practically threw Peter up into the tree then tried to jump up high enough to catch the bottom branch.

"Grab my foot!" Peter called, his arms wrapped around the branch as he looked down at the frantic professor. "C'mon, Jonathan!"

Jonathan grasped the boot dangling in front of his face and Peter grunted as he pulled his leg up.

"Give me a little help here, Jon! Grab a branch or something!"

Jonathan glanced around and found a branch but his fingers slipped and he slid down until his chin was resting on Peter's boot toe. Teeth gritted, Peter wrapped one arm around his branch and reached down with his other hand to grab the back of Jonathan's shirt.

"Now!" Jonathan shouted, giving another leap upward. Peter obediently yanked the anthropologist up into the tree, and within moments they were sharing the broad branch, legs dangling as if they were sitting on a trapeze's crossbar. "Thank you, Peter. That was — extremely helpful," Jonathan said between gasps.

"Any time, pal," Peter replied, rather exhilarated by the adrenalin rush, now that the action was over. "You're not bad yourself, for a professor," he added magnanimously, conveniently ignoring the fact that he had been a professor himself once.

"Thanks," Jonathan answered with a wry smile. "I've had a lot of practice lately. This past year I've had to run from a lot of bizarre situations. Benny was investigating what he thought was a zombie factory but in fact the doctor was selling human organs, and Benny very nearly was an

involuntary contributor. We had to run from what Benny called the goon squad. Then there was the gang of Pharaoh worshippers who were going to use Benny as a human sacrifice —"

"Until you saved him, right? Let me guess: In every escapade involving Edgar Benedek you pulled his fat from the fire at risk to your own life," Peter conjectured, grinning at the astonished look on the other man's face.

"How did you —?"

"Hey, I told you I've known Benny a long time," Peter dismissed.

"Apparently his modus operandi hasn't changed," Jonathan said dryly, settling on the branch and bracing his back against the trunk. "How did you meet Benedek?"

"Oh, we were in Juvie Hall together," Peter dropped casually, and Jonathan nearly slipped off his branch.

"Juvie Hall? You — you were juvenile delinquents?" Jonathan's voice squeaked up an octave, much as it did whenever Benny blithely added to the expense account.

Peter grabbed Jonathan to steady him. "Chill out, pal. I was only there until Social Services could contact my mom. I was, uh, lost and they had to do something with me until Mom claimed me." From his tone of voice, Jonathan could tell there was more, probably involving Peter's father, but the Ghostbuster wasn't forthcoming with details. "I'm not sure why Benny was there, but he knew the ropes and showed me around. He apparently thought that made us buddies for life."

"Sometimes he reminds me of an overly-friendly large puppy who doesn't realize he's worn out his welcome," Jonathan sighed. "I'm forever trying to keep him out of Doctor Moorhouse's hair, but he seems to delight in tormenting her."

"Well, I can understand that," Peter commented, an impish twinkle in his eyes. "She just begs to be tormented."

"You know —"

"One class with her, but that was plenty," Peter interrupted, answering Jonathan's question before he could complete it. "She's your boss, huh?"

"Doctor Moorhouse runs a very efficient department," Jonathan said in her defense, correctly reading the sympathy in Peter's tone.

"I'm sure she does. Sooo — we spend the night up here? If you don't mind, I think I'll find a branch of my own," Peter said, shifting on his end of the branch and making it sway.

"But —"

"I don't share a branch overnight on the first date."

Once again Jonathan had the eerie feeling he'd just heard Edgar Benedek. Jonathan pressed his back against the tree trunk as Peter scooted closer until he could reach over Jonathan's head and grasp the trunk to brace himself as he got to his feet.

"Give me a boost, willya?" Peter requested, reaching up and draping his arms around the next branch.

Wobbling, Jonathan grabbed Peter's ankles and hefted him up. When he released Peter's feet, Jonathan cried out and waved his arms to regain his balance.

"Jon, you okay?" Peter called down from his branch.

Facedown and arms hugging the branch, Jonathan squeaked out an affirmative answer and kept his eyes squeezed shut until his frantic heartbeat slowed down to normal and he was no longer gulping

in huge breaths of air. Gradually he pushed himself up into a sitting position and leaned back against the trunk. "Doctor Venkman?"

"Yeah, Jon?"

"Are you all right?"

"Just peachy."

"Wonderful." Jonathan closed his eyes, and swallowed hard. How did he get into these situations?

"MacKensie?"

"Yes?"

"Which one of us calls for room service?"

The three Ghostbusters held fast to each other's hands, their eyes tightly closed as the whirlwind buffeted them. Then, abruptly, there was silence and stillness.

Winston cautiously opened his eyes, blinked and stared. "Guys — looks like we're not in Kansas anymore."

Egon and Ray looked around them. The Netherscape had been replaced by a featureless white mist, which swirled around them. It was like the densest coastal fog imaginable, except it was neither damp nor cold.

"Someone's coming," Ray observed.

An elderly black man approached them from out of the fog. He limped, and used a cane for support. Upon reaching them, he halted and leaned upon the cane, watching the three men.

"Hello," Ray said tentatively. "Could you please tell us where we are, sir?"

The old man smiled. "At the Threshold between Worlds, young man. But you three are not dead, nor did you come here by calling me. I may be old, but my hearing is as good as ever it was. How did you manage it?"

"We are looking for some friends of ours —" Egon began.

"Jonathan disappeared first," Ray put in earnestly. "Then Peter, and we lost Benny when we came through the door."

"Three more intruders? I did not bring your friends to this place, yet I sense they are here."

"Are they alive?" Egon demanded tersely.

"For now."

"What?" yelled Ray as he scrambled to his feet. "What does that mean?"

Egon rose more sedately, his expression grim. "I think you had better explain yourself, sir."

The stranger shrugged. "Explanations are simple, provided one asks the right questions."

"Now see here —"

Winston stood up and put his hand on Egon's sleeve. "Chill out, guys. Threats aren't the way to talk to him."

"But if he's hurt Peter —" Ray began, breaking off as Winston shook his head warningly.

"Do you know who this person is, Winston?" Egon inquired in a low voice.

"I think so." The black Ghostbuster turned to the elderly man. "My Grandma used to tell me stories about you, mister. She said your name was Papa Legba, and that you're the Gatekeeper of the loas."

"Loas?" Egon repeated under his breath. "The spirits of voodoo —?"

"Voodoo," Ray murmured. "This is great!"

Ignoring his companions, Winston dug a pack of gum out of his pocket and extended it toward Papa Legba. "Sorry this isn't more, sir, it's all I've got. Would you please sit down and tell us what has happened to our friends?"

The old man studied him, then nodded approvingly and accepted the package of gum. "I was wondering when you would recognize me, Winston Zeddemore. You represent your ancestors well, remembering their teachings."

"Thank you." Winston's eyes widened as Legba waved his cane, dissipating the mist behind him until it formed into a wooden chair. The old man settled into it with a sigh of pleasure, then waved his cane once more. Three wooden stools materialized, ranged around a large free-standing mirror.

"Sit, all of you. I will show you what you ask."

The Ghostbusters exchanged glances, then obeyed. At Legba's gesture, they looked into the mirror, watching with astonishment as their reflections wavered and dissipated.

"It's Peter!" Ray exclaimed excitedly, pointing.

"That must be Doctor MacKensie," Winston suggested, his gaze on the two men in a tree.

"Yes, I've met him, and that's Jonathan MacKensie," Egon confirmed.

"Why are they in a tree?"

"Presumably for safety's sake, Raymond."

"Yeah, Pete's not crazy about heights, even though he handles it pretty well. He sure wouldn't voluntarily shimmy up a tree unless it was to save his butt," Winston pointed out.

"From what?"

"Perhaps the Ramapithecus, or rather, the creature masquerading as a Ramapithecus," Egon speculated.

"Masquerading? You mean it's not really a Rama-whatsis?"

"To date, Winston, there is no evidence to substantiate the existence of a protohominid known as Ramapithecus. I believe it to be ancestral to apes, particularly orangutans, rather than man. However, Doctor MacKensie belongs to the school of thought which supports Ramapithecus as the possible 'missing link' and he is the one the creature first appeared to and attacked. It is his belief which is giving life, as it were, to this creature."

"So, what you're saying, Egon, is that as long as Jonathan believes he's being pursued by Ramapithecus, he'll continue to see Ramapithecus. Wow, this is incredible!"

"And Peter has no reason to suspect otherwise. We were called in to investigate the appearance of Ramapithecus, and if Peter has witnessed the same illusion he will believe it to be this creature."

"Adding to the strength of the illusion. How can we help, though? We're here, wherever *here* is — and they're wherever they are," Ray said, frowning as he studied the mirror's image.

"Nail on the head, homeboy."

"And what about Benny? Is he with them?" Ray looked at Papa Legba and the old man just smiled. Mist swirled in the mirror, reforming the image into that of Edgar Benedek watching a pair of men as they stood before a door. The focus of the mirror narrowed in on the two men.

"Wait a minute! How can Benny be watching Peter? We just saw Pete with Doctor MacKensie. And that other guy —"

"— is also Edgar Benedek," Egon finished Winston's statement.

"Benny is watching Peter and himself?"

The others looked at Ray, then at Papa Legba as he said, "Your friend Benedek is witnessing the shadows of what once was. He is confronting the man he used to be."

"So it's another illusion," Ray guessed, turning his gaze back to the mirror.

"That's some trip," Winston agreed. "But who's making him do this? And why?"

Egon had aimed his PKE meter at the mirror and was studying the readings. "Gentlemen, it appears that both of these illusions are the result of the same spell. But as to who has placed the spell into effect —" He shrugged and shook his head.

"Watch, and find out," advised Papa Legba. He settled back in his chair, his interested gaze on the scene in the mirror.

"**A**re you sure she's expecting us, Benny?" Peter asked his companion, glancing dubiously up at the darkened front of the brick house in New Orleans.

"Absolutely," Edgar answered, his grin never fading. "Don't worry about a thing!"

"Don't listen to me, Petey! There's still time for you to turn tail and get gone," Benny shouted at the Ghostbuster.

The latter shook his head slightly, almost as if he had heard the invisible journalist, then jammed his hands into his pockets and shifted from foot to foot. "Well, if she doesn't answer in five minutes, I'm leaving. It's cold out here!"

"Not to worry," Edgar said, as he pulled something thin and pointed from his jacket pocket and bent over the keyhole in the door. "I'll have us inside, warm and toasty, in a jiff!"

"Huh? Wait a minute, Benny — you didn't say anything about breaking and entering!"

"Relaxovision, buds, I'm not breaking a thing," Edgar said breezily, making a triumphant grunt as the lock clicked. "See?"

"It's still illegal, and I'm not going in there," Peter protested. A sudden gust of chill wind ruffled his hair, and goosebumps popped up on his bare arms. "Wellll, okay, I'll just stand inside the door out of the wind, but I'm not taking part in the rest of your harebrained scheme."

"Where's your sense of adventure, pal?"

"Back in New York, where I should be," Peter grumbled.

"C'mon, Doctor V," Edgar cajoled, ignoring his complaints. He replaced the lock pick in his pocket and took out a pen-sized flashlight, thumbing it on as he crept into the house.

"Benny!" Peter shivered, then sidled into the foyer, his arms crossed over his chest. "Benedek, this is a lousy idea. Come back here and let's go."

"I'll second that," Benny called after himself. "Edgar, you don't know what you're getting into!"

There was a yelp from Edgar, and Peter ran toward the sound of his voice without a second thought. He bumped against the journalist and grabbed him, then they both went down in a tangle of arms and legs. "Benny, are you all right?"

"Tripped over the cat," Edgar admitted.

"Benny, I'm going to —" Peter's threat was interrupted as the lights suddenly came on, revealing a woman standing in the open doorway.

Peter's emerald green eyes widened in appreciation as he looked up at the stunning beauty. A faint blush of anger highlighted elegant cheekbones, and fire flashed in the dark eyes. Long black ringlets were held back with a multicolored scarf, and bracelets of gold and silver jangled on slender bare arms. The low-necked ruffled blouse offered tantalizing glimpses of cafe-au-lait bosom, and the flounces of her tiered skirt swirled about trim ankles.

"I told you, Mr. Benedek, I would not have you in this house again," she warned, her throaty Creole-accented voice sending ripples down Peter's spine. "You would risk the wrath of Santera?"

"I'm really sorry about that little misunderstanding," Edgar began, scrambling to his feet and offering her his flash-and-dazzle grin.

"Little? Printing my image in your newspaper against my express command, revealing secrets despite my warnings you dare to call a 'little misunderstanding'? And now you push my patience to the very limit by breaking into my home. Do you recall my promise?"

"You mean that bit about claiming my soul, turning me into a zombie?"

"I'm not with him!" Peter blurted, leaping to his feet and backing away from her.

"Then how did you come to be in my house, uninvited?" she purred, approaching him and running a finger along his jaw.

"Well, I was with him, but I had no idea! He — he tricked me!"

"Yes, I'm sure he did," she agreed, casting a chilly glance over her shoulder at Benedek. "What shall I do with him, do you think?"

"Uh — well, I know a real good lawyer if you want to sue him, ma'am," Peter said. "He wouldn't make a very good zombie at all ..."

"That's right, I wouldn't," Edgar said, offering a crooked smile. "Look, Peter didn't do anything, Madame LeBrun, so why don't you just let him go, and I'll promise cross my heart to get lost, too —"

The voodoo priestess narrowed her eyes at him, and the door slammed shut with a gust of wind, effectively closing off their escape route. "I don't think so, Mr. Benedek. You need to be taught a lesson about dabbling with mysteries you don't understand."

"Listen, this looks like it should be a private lesson and I'm just an extra —"

"You shall share the lesson."

"Oh, hey, don't trouble yourself on my account —"

"It will be no trouble," she assured Peter, smiling silkily.

Peter swallowed hard as she cupped his face between her hands and placed a kiss on his slightly-parted lips. Her breath was amazingly hot and he opened his mouth as if to draw her in.

"Pete —" both Edgar and the watching Benedek cried in warning.

Madame LeBrun broke from the kiss and glanced over her shoulder at Edgar. "Be quiet, Mr. Benedek." She smiled as the journalist gasped and clutched his throat, his voice suddenly gone. "That's better. Now —" She returned her attention to the man before her. "Tell me your name."

"Peter Charles Venkman," the Ghostbuster replied obediently, his gaze locked with hers.

"Peter ..." she murmured. "Yes, you'll do, I think. Would you like me to kiss you again, Peter?"

He nodded and nuzzled her throat, looking disappointed when she held him at arm's length. "Later, Mr. Venkman. For now you will do me a favor, eh?"

"Anything," he agreed.

She patted his cheek, then turned and led him over to the horrified Edgar. "Take hold of Mr. Benedek's arms."

"Pete!" Benny shouted, as the enchanted Venkman grabbed Edgar.

"Very good. Now bring him to the room I shall show you."

Peter nodded solemnly and marched the struggling Edgar along behind the priestess as she climbed the staircase.

Benny watched them go, his shoulders sagging. "It was all my fault," he said, shaking his head. "I should never have brought him here ..."

"What's happening to Peter?" Ray demanded, turning to the loa who was leaning back in his chair, a tall beverage glass in one hand.

Papa Legba waved a hand in negation. "You forget, young man, this has already happened to him."

"It couldn't have!" Ray objected. "We'd remember —" he paused and looked uncertainly at Egon. "Wouldn't we?"

The physicist pushed his glasses to their proper place on the bridge of his nose. "Not if we didn't know about it, Raymond."

"Peter was on his own for a few days in New Orleans," Winston said thoughtfully. "And he was pretty pissed off when he found out that we'd gone to Hawaii on the airline's nickel. Maybe ..."

"Maybe he didn't *want* to tell us," Ray suggested, sounding concerned and a little hurt.

Egon nodded slowly. "Indeed."

"Anybody want a rum and cola?" Papa Legba inquired, sipping his own drink.

"No, thanks," Winston replied absently for his companions, who were staring into the mirror again.

Legba sighed and glanced at Madame LeBrun's image. "I know that one. She has a temper! Your friends were fortunate to escape ..."

"Escape?" Ray's voice was hopeful. "Sure, they must have escaped, right?" He happily returned his attention to the mirror.

Madame LeBrun stood in the doorway to a darkened attic room. "Bring him in here, Peter." She moved aside to allow them to pass.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered as he shoved Edgar across the threshold.

"Now I want you to wait here while I make some preparations." She smiled and gently pushed him back into the room as he made a move to follow her, then closed the door in his face and locked it.

Edgar whirled, his hands to his throat, then took a deep breath of air and said, "Petey — snap out of it! We've got to blow this voodoo popstand! Pete?"

"Listen to me, Doctor V," Benny advised as he walked through the closed door. He noticed his growing insubstantiality and gave a start, examining his hand, then pushing it halfway into the wall. "C'mon, guys — you've *gotta* get out. I know you can do it! We did it before, remember?" He walked over to the glassy-eyed Peter and peered into the vacant stare. "You're not gonna let her get away with it, are you? Fight it, Peter!"

"If we can just pry this window open," Edgar was saying, tugging on the window sash. "Give me a hand, Pete."

"Wait a minute! That window wasn't locked," Benny exclaimed, going over to inspect the window his doppelganger was struggling to open. "It was the shutters that gave us problems ..."

"Whoa!" Edgar cried, stumbling back when the window suddenly shot up and he overbalanced, nearly falling through. "Unless we sprout wings, bunky, we're not getting out this way. I don't know about you, but three-story falls are not my specialty, makes me scream a lot. Where's the fire department when you need 'em, I ask ya? A little hook-and-ladder action and we'd be out of here in nothing flat. Wonder if there's anything in here we can knot together for a rope, the old bedsheet-out- the-window-routine. Too bad Rapunzel doesn't live here ..."

"Put a lid on it, Edgar," Benny growled at himself, poking a finger into the Hawaiian shirted chest. "No wonder Jonny's got gray hairs."

He left his former self rummaging in the corners of the attic, still muttering to himself, and went back to the motionless Peter. "You know, Doctor V, we could really use some expert Ghostbuster advice right about now. Wakey, wakey!" He snapped his fingers in front of Peter's face, then frowned when there was no reaction. "Okay, so the direct approach's out ..." Benny closed his eyes and concentrated on reaching the other man's mind. "Come on, Pete, you're more psychic than you think. Wake up and smell the coffee!"

"Not if Egon made it," Peter mumbled. He blinked, and looked around in confusion. "Benny?"

"Gimme a hand with this, Petey," Edgar said, as he struggled with a coil of rope he'd found. It was old and stiff, and the ends were unraveling, but he began dragging it toward the window.

"Hey, the guy just came back from a trip to La-La land," Benny told Edgar. "The least you could do would be to ask him if he's okay!"

Edgar stopped and looked at the Ghostbuster. "You all right, Peter?"

"Uh — yeah, I guess so," Venkman answered, covering the fact that he had very little idea what had just happened to him. "What are you doing?"

"Coming up with a brilliant escape plan, if I do say so myself, while you've been listening to your hormones instead of your buddy. That is one mad mamma, Pete, and I don't intend to hang around here while she makes her little 'preparations'," Edgar proclaimed, looping one end of the rope around a broomstick and then tossing the free end out the window. "Ta-da!"

"Ta-da? What 'ta-da'?" Peter demanded, giving Edgar a suspicious look.

"We climb down —"

"— that — that fraying hunk of string? Are you nuts, Benedek?"

"It's either the rope or Madame LeBrun and her homemade zombie kit," Edgar pointed out. "The broomstick is wider than the window so it'll hold the rope secure while we shimmy down —"

"I'm not shimmying down anything!"

"That's what he said last time, too," Benny remarked to his alter ego.

Edgar glared at Venkman, who had folded his arms stubbornly. "If you've got any better ideas, let's hear 'em."

"Well, uh —"

"Yeah, thought so. You can stay here and be the Wicked Witch of the South's love slave, if you want, but *I'm* flying the coop! So long, pal." He turned back to the window and began to climb down his makeshift escape route.

"Love slave? Just what do you mean by that, Benedek? Get back here! Don't you leave me here — Benedek!" Peter ran over to the window and looked down to see Edgar clinging to the rope. The broomstick bent outward alarmingly, but it seemed to be holding. "I hope I live to regret this," the Ghostbuster muttered, climbing out the window.

"Yo, Pete! Hustle it, will ya?" Benny called in a stage whisper from the safety of the ground.

"I'm hurrying as fast as I can, Benedek," Peter retorted, causing Edgar to look up in bewilderment, since he hadn't said anything.

Benny's jaw dropped. "You *heard* me, V-man?!"

"Of *course* I heard you, Benny! Cut the chit-chat and get out of my way before I fall on you!"

Edgar shook his head and muttered, "A mind is a terrible thing to lose ..." He shimmed down the rest of the rope's length, jumping the last few feet and landing in the flowerbed beside the house's side.

"Peter, look out!" Benny yelled as his other self scrambled to his feet and stood next to him.

Clinging to the rope, Peter glanced up and paled at the sight of Madame LeBrun at the window, her upraised hand bringing down a machete on the rope and broomstick. He screamed and plummeted to the ground, landing with a sickening thud.

"No!" Benny and Edgar cried in unison as the Ghostbuster landed, hard, and didn't move.

Edgar ran to Peter's side, while Benny stared in disbelief. "It didn't happen this way! Pete was further down — he jumped and landed on me — didn't get worse than a sprained ankle!"

"Petey, wake up," Edgar pleaded as he shook his friend's shoulder. "No ..."

"You killed him!" Benny shouted at the voodoo priestess. "*Why?*"

She smiled at Benny and lifted both hands in a palms-out gesture. A ball of fire sprang from her fingertips and hurtled toward the ground, engulfing Edgar.

He and Benny screamed in shared agony, before Edgar simply vanished, leaving Benny alone in darkness.

Jonathan MacKensie gasped and opened his eyes, disoriented until he felt the bark of the tree against his back. "Benedek?" he whispered. "Where are you?"

From the overhead branch came the snuffling sound of Venkman's breathing, and Jonathan smiled a little, recalling his bizarre situation. He gazed at the horizon, realizing the sky was lighter, as though dawn was nearing.

His eyes drifted shut again, and he pulled his jacket closer around himself, trying to get comfortable enough to go back to sleep.

The sound of Benedek's scream brought him wide awake, heart pounding at the realization that this was not a nightmare.

"Doctor Venkman? Peter? Did you hear that?" he called up, tugging on the foot which dangled near his head.

"I'm sorry to say I did," Peter replied sourly. "I suppose you're gonna tell me it wasn't some wild animal with sinus trouble."

"It was human," Jonathan declared, scrambling down from his branch. "Benedek, I think."

"Not necessarily human then," Peter wisecracked.

"Doctor Venkman," Jonathan chided in the same tone Egon often used.

Peter heaved a resigned sigh and slowly straightened up. "You're gonna insist on checking it out, aren't you? Did you stop to think it might be a wild animal's breakfast and our interference might not be appreciated?"

"And then again, it might be," Jonathan pointed out from the ground. "I won't be long — I hope."

"Hold it right there, bunky," the Ghostbuster called, shifting on his branch until he could begin the downward climb. "You're not leaving *me* here alone! What if your Rama-whatziz comes back and wants a breakfast companion?"

"Doctor Venkman —"

"Uh-uh, pal. We stay together — got it?"

"All right, but let's hurry!" Jonathan stood by impatiently until Peter had reached the ground beside him.

Another blood-curdling scream caused them to wheel in alarm, looking in all directions for its source. "Where's that coming from?" Peter asked.

"This way!" Jonathan decided, taking off at a run in an apparently-random direction.

"Are you sure?" Peter called, even as he dashed after his companion.

They hurried through the sparse forest, dodging the stray low-hanging branch, and emerging out onto the rocky plain they had crossed the afternoon before. Jonathan halted, causing Peter to skid into him. "Hey, watch it, professor! What's — " he broke off as Jonathan pointed at a huddled figure near the cairn they had left behind them. "Benedek?"

"Come on!" The anthropologist sprinted toward the lone man, Peter on his heels.

Benny's eyes flashed open at the touch on his shoulder, and he tried to scramble away from his attacker. "Lemme go!"

"Benedek!" Jonathan exclaimed, his grip tightening on the disoriented journalist. "Benny! It's all right! I'm not going to hurt you!"

"Jonny?" The slighter man paused, his gaze focusing on the worried face of his friend. "Jack! Am I glad to see you!"

Jonathan grinned as Benny hugged him. "You're all right, then? What happened?"

"It was awful, Jon — she killed Peter! We've gotta get out of here ..." He stopped, looking puzzled as he took in his surroundings. "Pete? Is that you?"

"Yeah, Benny, and I've got news for you, I'm not dead. So forget about that obituary you're working on, huh?"

Benny nodded dumbly, allowing Jonathan to help him to his feet. "You didn't see Madame LeBrun?"

"Who?" queried Jonathan, frowning.

"Not unless she looks like a Rama-whosis," Peter said.

"Ramapithecus," Benny corrected, causing Jonathan to lift an astonished eyebrow. "Whew, I'm gonna have to lay off pizza with pickles and jellybeans before bedtime!"

Jonathan and Peter exchanged similar glances of disgust. "The sun's coming up," Jonathan observed. "Let's get you out of the open before sunstroke adds to your — er, condition." He held onto Benny's arm, a concerned look in his brown eyes.

"So you think I'm delusional, Doubling Jon? Then how do you explain all this?" Benny demanded, waving a hand to indicate the African landscape. "What makes you think what I've been through is any less real than all this, huh?"

"First off, *I'm* not dead," Peter pointed out, taking Benny by the other arm. "And I don't intend to conveniently kick off just to give reality to your little delusion."

"But I saw you die ... *I* died," Benny said slowly as the two taller men flanked him to escort him to the shade of the tree. "But I didn't die in New Orleans, and neither did you. So why did it happen that way? What was the point?"

"New Orleans?"

"Yeah, Pete, I just retro-cogged our little adventure in New Orleans but it went wacky."

"This whole thing has been wacky," Jonathan muttered. "One moment I'm teaching a perfectly normal class and the next I'm being attacked by a Ramapithecus. I've spent the night in a tree on the African Savannah and you suddenly appear, spouting more nonsense about people being dead who aren't and I don't even know how I got here!"

"And I want to know where the guys are," Peter added, letting go of Benny's arm when they reached the tree. "They'd have been here by now if they were all okay, so something's happened to 'em."

Benny looked worried. "They were all fine when we went through that dimensional doorway. Then I was standing on a street corner in the Big Easy, and they weren't with me."

"Start from the beginning, Benedek," Jonathan suggested. The three men settled themselves at the base of the tree, and Benny began recounting his adventures.

Ray looked at his friends. "Isn't there anything we can do to help them?"

Egon was frowning. "That would necessitate our being able to reach them — and I doubt very much that this Madame LeBrun would allow us to do so. She appears to be controlling their environment."

"Benedek's thrower and pack are missing," Winston observed. "But we still have ours — if we can get to the guys, we can help them get out of this mess."

As one, the three Ghostbusters turned to their host, but before they could speak, the loa shook his head. "You three are safe as long as you're here with me, but if you leave ... Well, there won't be much I can do to protect you. Are you sure you want to get involved in this business?"

"We are already involved, Mr. Legba," Egon intoned gravely.

"Peter's our friend," Ray agreed. "And Mr. Benedek and Doctor MacKensie are our clients. We can't just ignore them!"

Papa Legba nodded in approval, then met Winston's gaze. "The LeBrun woman is devoted to Santera, the loa of love and jealousy. She may try to distract you from your goal by sending spirits in — shall we say, pleasing forms? But if you remain resolute, you will succeed. Go to your friends — and take care." He waved his cane, and the mist disappeared, taking him with it.

The Ghostbusters were standing on an African Savannah, facing the rising sun. Egon met his comrades' glances, then consulted his PKE meter. "That way, gentlemen," he advised, pointing north.

They set off silently, half-expecting to be blasted with hurricane winds, or struck dead by lightning. But nothing happened, and they gradually relaxed a little.

"What did he mean about the loa of love and jealousy? Did it make Madame LeBrun mad when Peter and Benny escaped the first time? Is that why she made Benny relive the escape with a different ending?" Ray asked as they trudged along.

"Possibly," Egon said, studying his PKE meter. "It is obvious she wishes revenge, whether the slight was real or only in her mind."

"Pete can tick off a lady, but he can usually soothe her ruffled feathers," Winston pointed out, shifting the thrower in his hand.

"I guess Peter got in over his head with this one," Ray sighed.

"No doubt Benedek's influence," Egon suggested, unaware he was echoing Juliana Moorhouse's sentiment.

"Benny doesn't seem like such a bad —"

Winston broke off in mid-sentence, and the other two paused to look at him. Only Winston Zeddemore was gone.

"Egon! What," Ray turned to the physicist, eyes widening when he realized he was alone. "Egon? Winston?"

"You don't need them, *mon cher*."

Ray swallowed and blinked at the sight of the scantily clad woman taking his arm. "I, uh, what happened to the others?" he managed to squeak.

"They have been taken care of, and you need not worry about them," she purred, running a hand along his arm.

"They're my friends," Ray protested, watching her hand with all the fascination of a rabbit watching a cobra. "Of course I'm worried about them! They could be in danger ..."

"Do I seem like such a threat? Your friends are with — sisters of mine."

"Uh, ma'am, I've got to go find them," Ray said. "Could you please let go of my arm now?"

She pouted. "Don't you want me?"

"Want you to do what?" Ray asked innocently.

"Let me show you," she said suggestively, her hand reaching for the zipper of his jumpsuit while she nuzzled Ray's neck.

He blushed and backed away. "No! Please, ma'am, I don't have time for this right now."

She merely smiled and advanced on him.

"Guys, Egon. Uh, Egon? Ray?" Winston called, spinning around in desperation. "C'mon, guys, this isn't funny! Where is everybody?"

"I am all you need, *cher*."

Winston spun around again to face the owner of the sultry voice. "No offense, ma'am, but I need to find my friends," he said, watching as the woman seemed to drift toward him, layers of cloud-soft chiffon fluttering about her voluptuous figure.

"Do not concern yourself with them," she replied, one hand resting on his arm while the other reached up to stroke his cheek. "They have forgotten all about you —"

"No —" Winston protested weakly, catching her hand and pulling it away from his face. "No," he repeated, sounding more sure of himself. "We're a team, and we look after each other."

"Do you truly believe it is so? Your friends *have* forgotten," she told him, a swirl of chiffon brushing his face. "Watch and see, *mon amour*."

Winston caught his breath as the cloudy image of Ray Stantz embracing a nearly-nude woman appeared in the midst of the cloth. "Ray?" he whispered, staring.

"You see? This one does not concern himself with your well-being."

"All I've got is your word —"

"You deny the proof before your own eyes?"

"Proof? I see Ray with a woman, but how do I know it's of his own free will? He could be fighting her off for all I know," Winston challenged.

"Why would a man deny himself the pleasure of her charms?"

"We're not talking just any man, lady, we're talking Ray Stantz. He has his priorities, and the safety of his friends comes a lot higher than a roll in the hay. He'd never even look at a woman under these circumstances ... unless —"

"Unless?"

"It's all part of a spell, isn't it? You're not really here, and Ray only thinks she's with him."

"Truly? What about this one?" Another wave of chiffon and the image of Ray Stantz blurred into Egon Spengler.

"You're using the wrong approach, Madame LeBrun!" Winston shouted, tilting his head back. "You've picked the wrong men to mess around with and the wrong game plan!"

"Have I, Winston Zeddemore? Watch and see!"

Wind rose around him, shrieking and pulling at him, and Winston was caught in a maelstrom of hostility and malice.

"Ray? Winston?" Egon called, looking around for his friends. By habit he checked the PKE meter and his blue eyes widened. "These are extraordinarily high readings," he muttered, adjusting the meter.

"I am for you, Egon Spengler."

He eyed the shapely blonde woman who was approaching him, then pocketed the PKE meter and reached over his shoulder for his thrower, pulling it free in a fluid motion. "I must warn you to halt where you are, madam," he informed her.

"Must you?" she said, pouting.

"Indeed." Egon's finger pressed the thrower's trigger, and the spirit before him was assaulted by a beam of pulsing yellow light and crackling blue energy. She threw her head back and screamed, then flew at the Ghostbuster, hands extended to claw at his face.

Egon dropped and rolled, keeping his proton rifle aimed up at the ghost as she passed over his head. A wind whipped his hair and clothing, blowing dust into his eyes and choking his throat.

"Told you so, lady," Winston said, activating his own thrower and targeting it almost by instinct on the dark-skinned woman who had taunted him. He was half-blinded by the wind and dust swirling around him as well, but he knew from her cry of outrage that he had made contact, and he steadfastly held the proton stream focused at his target.

Abruptly, there was silence. Winston squinted one eye open, then blinked and shut off his thrower. "Egon —?"

The physicist lifted his head and looked at his comrade. "Winston, where is Raymond?"

"We'd better find him," Winston suggested, offering Egon a hand and pulling him to his feet. "Last I saw, he was being seduced by Mata Hari."

"We may be too late," Egon intoned solemnly, pushing his sliding glasses back up on the bridge of his nose. "If she is anything like the one who tried her charms on me, Ray will be defenseless."

"Don't sell him short, Egon," Winston protested. "Ray's not as innocent as you guys like to think he is. He *has* gone out on a few dates —"

"But nothing to prepare him for an assault such as this," Egon cut in. "Ray believes in the inherent goodness of everyone, and he's too much a gentleman to use his thrower on her, provided he still has his."

"No reason why he shouldn't have — we've got ours," Winston said, patting his thrower. "We didn't pass through any more gateways, like the one Pete fell through when he lost his pack. And even though Benny was carrying Pete's, he wouldn't think to hang onto it like we did ours."

"Hmm," Egon murmured, not totally convinced. "It's quite possible his innocence is his best weapon."

"What do you mean by that, Egon?"

"She just may succeed in her seduction, but she will never corrupt Ray."

"I hope you're right."

"Forget your friends, mon cher. I am all you need." She twined her fingers in Ray's hair, pulling his face close to hers.

"Uh, ma'am, I really hate to argue with a lady, but Egon, Peter and Winston are more than friends — they're my family. We're like brothers and we look out for each other. I'd give my life to save them."

"Would you?"

"Well, sure," Ray agreed, unaware of the calculating look in her eyes. "Any of us would risk our own lives for the others."

"Such devotion," his seducer said, her image blurring and reforming into that of Madame LeBrun. "I should like to see for myself if your friends are as devoted as you believe."

"B-but —"

"Come, *mon petit*," she invited, wrapping a length of scarf around his wrists. Before Ray could pull his hands free of the material, it metamorphed into cold steel.

"It — it — how did you do that?"

"I can do many things which would amaze your little mind," LeBrun sneered. "Your friend Peter made a mistake when he chose to mess with Madame LeBrun."

"No offense, ma'am, but Peter's never mentioned you —"

"Silence!" shrieked the voodoo priestess, and a gag materialized over Ray's mouth. "Do not push me too far, little man."

Ray mumbled against the gag and tried to raise his manacled hands up to his mouth but a band of rope wrapped around his chest and waist, pinning his arms to his sides.

"Yes, this is much better," Madame LeBrun purred, holding one end of the rope and giving it a tug, pulling Ray toward her. One index finger tipped Ray's head back and she held his wide-eyed gaze, staring deep into the amber depths. "No," she denied, taking a step back and narrowing her eyes. "I refuse to believe any man could hold such innocence, such goodness in his heart."

Ray blinked, obviously confused by her protest.

"No man is capable of such pureness of soul!"

"You are quite mistaken, madam," Egon announced, and she turned to see the two Ghostbusters standing with throwers drawn and aimed at her. "Please step away from Doctor Stantz."

"You can't be here! It's not possible — my power —"

"— isn't as great as you thought, lady," Winston broke in, flashing an insincere smile.

She stared at him, then slowly nodded. "So. He was right — you are all ready to risk your lives for each other."

"That is precisely correct, madam," Egon agreed solemnly, hefting his thrower for better aim.

"You've got that right," Winston asserted. "Let him go!"

Madame LeBrun tilted her head. "And if I release him, and return you to your world, will you be content with that?" She turned to Ray, one long-nailed finger caressing his neck above the pulse-point of his jugular vein. "Santera can be merciful, after all."

"We're not going anywhere without Pete and the others," Winston promised, as Egon shook his head and powered up his thrower. "Last warning, lady — get away from him, or we'll start shooting!"

"You will not harm your friend," she said, pulling Ray in front of her as a shield. "But he is no longer of interest to me — take him!" She shoved Ray toward them.

The bound man stumbled, and Winston reached out a steadying hand to help him. Ray blinked in amazement as his ropes and manacles faded away, and he tore the gag from his mouth. "Egon, stop her!"

Madame LeBrun laughed, waved her hand and vanished, leaving the three Ghostbusters staring at each other.

"Where did she go?"

"Are you okay, m'man?"

"This is an extraordinarily bad turn of events."

They all spoke at once, their voices a babble in the sudden silence.

"She's gone after Peter and the others, hasn't she?" Ray said worriedly.

"I'm afraid so, Raymond."

"Then so do we, right?"

Ray looked at Winston, then nodded. "There has to be a way for us to get to them. She can't be as all-powerful as she lets on, or else she'd strip us of our packs. She has to know by now that they're weapons."

"But why did Pete lose his? And then Benny lost it, too."

"I believe I have an answer to that, Winston," Egon said, his voice taking on his lecturing tone. "We were aware of the power we were facing and we concentrated on maintaining a grip on our throwers, whereas Peter merely fell through the doorway, ignorant of the fact he had even stepped through a dimensional doorway. Benedek was merely acting in the role of pack mule, carrying the proton pack until we could locate Peter. Our awareness and strength of concentration nullified her ability to strip us, as it were, of our weapons. Our knowledge and our ability to use that knowledge is her downfall, gentlemen."

"If this place is magical, causing us to see what we expect to see, then if we expect to see Peter —"

"But we must be certain we see the real Peter, and not another apparition created by her," Egon cautioned.

"We know he was with Doctor MacKensie and they thought they were in Africa," Winston recalled.

"We don't know what happened to Benny after he disappeared —"

"And which Peter was the real one? The one with Benny and his doppelganger in New Orleans, or the one with Doctor MacKensie?"

"We know it is the latter, Ray. Papa Legba said Benedek was watching shadows of what had passed; therefore, he was witnessing an echo of himself and Peter in New Orleans. Peter did not die in New Orleans, nor did Mr. Benedek; ergo it was all an illusion created by Madame LeBrun." Egon cleared his throat and pushed at his glasses in reflexive habit, waiting for the others' reactions.

"And ergo Peter is with Doctor MacKensie, right?" Winston concluded, slapping a hand on Egon's shoulder.

"Precisely."

"So now we just have to concentrate on reaching them," Ray added, a spark of his usual enthusiasm bubbling.

"And once we are reunited, we simply convince them to see the truth and I believe Madame LeBrun's power will be too weak to cause us any further problems."

"You're a genius, Spengs!" Ray exclaimed, and his praise caused a sparkle in Egon's blue eyes.

"So what are we waiting for?" Winston demanded.

Egon met his companions' eyes, then nodded and once more consulted his PKE meter. He pointed, and the three men proceeded resolutely onward.

"I could really use a nice tall one right about now," Peter complained, wiping the perspiration from his brow. "It's hotter than New York in August, which is hotter 'n hell."

"Don't think about it, Doctor Venkman," Jonathan advised, as he tried to find enough of his own saliva to swallow. "It only makes the thirst worse." He glanced over at Benny, who was leaning his head against the tree, his eyes closed. "Benedek, how do you feel?"

"Pretty thirsty, Jack, thanks for asking." The journalist's voice lacked his usual flippancy. He opened his eyes and looked tiredly at his companions. "Listen, guys, I'm really sorry I got you into this mess. It's all my fault ..."

"You can say *that* again," Peter muttered.

"That's not quite fair, Doctor Venkman," Jonathan protested in Benny's defense.

"Oh yeah? Ask him who set this whole thing up, and why," Peter argued, glaring at Benny. "Who ticked off the lady in the first place, Benny?"

"What lady?" Jonathan asked, looking truly puzzled.

"Madame LeBrun, Jon-Boy," Benny replied, nodding at Peter. "Haven't you been listening to anything I've said? Pete is one-hundred percent on track. I'm the one who dragged him into her place and nearly got us both killed, and she's out for revenge. She's done her research, boy-o, and knew you'd be the perfect tool."

"She knew you'd call us in," Peter added, rubbing his forehead. "Who else would you call but the Ghostbusters?"

"I hope she hasn't done anything to the others," Benny said worriedly.

"You'd better hope she hasn't, bunky, because then she'll have to get in line behind me and if there's anything left, she can have a turn at you," Peter threatened.

Benny hunched his shoulders and looked away, not trying to defend himself.

"I told the guys we shouldn't have taken the case — that you weren't worth the bother," Peter went on, contempt lacing his tones. "You haven't changed, have you, Edgar? You're still the same miserable —"

"All right, that's enough!" Jonathan exploded. Benny glanced up at him in disbelief, gratitude in his eyes.

Peter gaped. "What are you defending him for? You're only here because of him —"

Jonathan cut in, "I don't doubt that that's true, and once we get back to Georgetown I'll cheerfully put him up against the wall and let you extract his liver, if you like."

"Hey!" Benny objected.

Jonathan ignored him, gaze fixed on the Ghostbuster. "However, as long as we are here, we are in this together, and petty bickering amongst ourselves is not going to help us survive! If your friends are unable to reach us, we're going to need to make serious efforts to find water, food, and shelter. And that means we can't sit here sniping at each other about things which cannot be changed! Do you understand, Doctor Venkman?"

"Yeah," Peter said, eyeing the professor with new respect, "I guess I do."

"Good." Jonathan stood up, stretching his legs. "I'm going to take a little walk — try not to kill one another while I'm gone." He strode off, hoping to walk off his anger before it got the better of him. He'd always been even-tempered except when injustice was being done, but Benedek had managed to bring out the worst in him, moving him to unexpected anger. Benedek could effortlessly make him lose his temper and Venkman was running Benny a close second.

He found a bush and attended to the call of nature, then turned around to find a woman standing before him. He blinked, wondering if he was suffering hallucinations brought on by sunstroke. "Er — hello?"

"Hello, Doctor MacKensie," Madame LeBrun greeted, as she looked him up and down in a way that made him flush. "I'm pleased we have finally met."

"We have? You are?" Jonathan stammered, giving her an uncertain smile. "I'm sorry, but I don't recall —"

"You're Jonathan MacKensie, a special friend of Edgar Benedek's," she said, placing a hand on his arm. "The one man he considers a true friend, the one who is willing to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Well, I don't know that I'd go so far as all that —"

"You are the one who will give me my revenge."

"What?"

"You are the instrument of his destruction."

"Now just a minute —!"

She twined one arm around his neck and kissed him, silencing his protests.

Jonathan's eyes widened, and he broke away as soon as he was able to, holding her at arms' length. "Look here, I don't know who you are, but I have a pretty good guess, and I can tell you right now that I am not going to help you destroy Benedek or anyone else!" He let go of her and backed away, hoping he didn't look as flustered as he felt. His romantic encounters had usually proceeded a little less impetuously than this — he didn't even know her name! "I'm sorry, I've got to go now," he announced and turned hastily back toward their campsite.

She watched him go, and smiled. "You'll do very well indeed, Doctor MacKensie," she informed his retreating back.

"There's just one thing I want to know, Pete," Benny said, as they waited for Jonathan's return.

Peter grunted, not opening his eyes or moving the Yankees' cap he'd pulled down over his face to shade it from the climbing sun.

"Why didn't you ever tell me you blamed my old man for getting your pop in trouble?"

Peter sat up, the baseball cap falling to the ground. "How'd you know *that*?"

"I'm a mind-reader," Benny answered with a lopsided smile. "It sure wasn't from you."

Peter shrugged. "Yeah? So what? It's too late for you to apologize now, Benny."

The journalist laughed. "I wasn't going to apologize — I was just gonna ask you where you got that crazy idea. My old man did a lot of things, but he never conned a friend."

Peter scowled. "Sounds like you didn't know him very well, Benedek."

Benny's expression darkened. "Maybe I didn't. Maybe I spent most of my childhood in an orphanage 'cause he was off trying to make a fortune, or else ..."

"In jail?" Peter finished nastily, when Benny stopped.

Benedek scrambled to his feet and glared down at the *Ghostbuster*. "Yeah, well, *your* pop ain't exactly an angel. And for the record, it was *his* idea to pull that con they did way back when!"

Peter jumped up and seized the smaller man by his brightly-colored shirtfront. "It wasn't!"

"Get a clue, Venkman — he was in it up to his neck, and he got what was coming to him!"

"Take that back!" Peter advised, balling his fist and shoving it under Benedek's nose.

Benny's blue eyes stared defiantly into his captor's, then he smiled. "I never took anything back when we were kids, and I'm not starting now. Look, V-man, why don't we admit both our fathers were losers, and call it water under the bridge?"

"My dad's not a loser!" Peter shouted, as he punched an astonished Edgar Benedek in the jaw.

"Peter!"

The dark-haired Ghostbuster froze, then let go of his rival with such force that Benny tumbled to the ground and sat, hard, on an exposed tree-root. "Egon, you mighty white hunter you — I *knew* you'd find us!" He whirled and grinned at the trio of tired Ghostbusters who were approaching them.

"I assume this means you're all right, Peter," the physicist observed, as Peter dashed toward them, hooking an arm around Ray's shoulders, and then slapping a high five with Winston.

Not certain whether to rub his jaw or his backside, Benny sat where he was and watched the reunion among the quartet of friends. He really had always thought he and Peter were friends, but the recent revelation as well as Peter's joy at seeing his real friends shot the truth home with a pain as sharp as Peter's tongue. He was probably wrong about Jack, too ...

He had once told Jonathan that people didn't exactly line up to help him out, and it was true. Oh sure, he knew zillions of people and called 'em friends, but when it came down to the nitty-gritty he'd never had anybody who cared about him — until Jonathan happened along.

And what had Jon gotten for his troubles? Nothing but aggravation, heartburn and twisted ankles. Did Benny ever really say thanks? No, of course not. He just kept pushing, irritating both Jonathan and Doctor Moorhouse, putting Jonathan's life in danger. And for what? Another sensationalistic headline, another few bucks in the bank, a little more flash-in-the-pan fame. Maybe Madame LeBrun had done them all a favor ...

"Where's Doctor MacKensie?" Egon inquired, offering Benny a hand up.

"He took a walk to cool his jets," Peter said, one arm still draped around Ray's shoulders.

"Was that wise, under the circumstances?" Egon asked, frowning at Peter.

"Probably not," Benny agreed, dusting off his rear end. "But tempers were getting a little out of hand, and I think it was either take a hike or kill someone — me, most likely."

"I can understand that," Egon murmured, meeting Peter's gaze. "I think it would be prudent for us to locate the professor as quickly as possible, before Madame LeBrun finds him."

"If she hasn't already gotten her mitts on him," Benny said, shading his eyes with one hand and scanning the horizon. "He should have been back by now — it doesn't take Jonny long to cool off."

"Which way did he go?" asked Ray.

"That way," Benny indicated, after a few seconds. He pointed east, then gave his shoulders a hitch. "I'll go find him."

"He went that way," Peter dissented, pointing west. The two men glared at each other, while their companions exchanged glances.

"No problem, guys," Winston finally interjected. "I'll go with Benedek, and you guys can check out the other direction, just in case. First one to find Doctor MacKensie, give a shout."

Egon and Ray were nodding, and Peter shrugged as if it didn't matter to him one little bit.

The group split up, heading out on their searches.

Jonathan stumbled to a halt and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He was fairly certain it hadn't taken him this long to walk from the tree — why was it taking so much longer to walk back to it? But then, he'd never had a fine-tuned sense of direction, and had been known to get lost before. But being lost in a North American forest was one thing, a mere aggravation. Here, it could be his death.

He glanced up at the sun, realizing that midday was nearly upon him. He had to find some sort of shade before he collapsed. "Mustn't panic," he muttered to himself, his 'mantra' since meeting Benedek. And why hadn't he retrieved his sunglasses from his suit jacket pocket before storming off?

"Those two idiots, arguing like — like school boys," he said to no one in particular, shaking his head. "Maybe they're used to this sort of thing, but I'm a professor of anthropology, despite what Doctor Moorhouse has tried to turn me into, and being zapped into another dimension by a voodoo priestess isn't normal! I just want to go home, take a nice shower, drink a gallon of tea and crawl into bed."

Realizing he was beginning to babble, Jonathan paused and rubbed his eyes. "Perhaps I should just stand here and shout for him, rather than waste my energy wandering around," he told himself, blinking at the wavering horizon. "*Benedek! Benedek!*"

Winston paused, one hand upraised. "Hear something?"

"Sounds like one lost little anthro prof," Benny observed, grinning, "and it's coming from over there." He raised his voice and hollered back, "*Hang on, Jack! I'll save ya, buds!*"

Winston watched the journalist break into a jog in the appropriate direction, then hurried to keep up with him. He'd wait until MacKensie was in sight before shouting for the others.

"Jon? Yo, Jonny! Send up a smoke signal or something, will ya? Come on, Jungle Jack, give me a clue!" Benny shouted, hands cupped around his mouth like a megaphone. He waited a moment, ears perked, but there was no reply. "Jonny!"

"Benny, m'man, are you sure this is the right way?" Winston puffed, catching up to the slighter man. Hands pressed to the front of his thighs, Benny stooped over and sucked in air. "I'm sure," he said, once he'd gotten some breath back. "If anybody can find the wandering prof, it's Edgar Benedek. Jonny's always said it's like he's got a built-in homing beacon I can zero in on no matter where he goes."

"Kinda like a bad penny always turns up?"

Turning his head, Benny met Winston's grin. "That's Doctor M's version," he admitted, straightening up. "See that lump? That's our boy."

Shading his eyes, Winston followed Benny's pointing finger. "Well, it could be a body," the Ghostbuster agreed.

"It's Jonny," Benny insisted, starting off once more.

Winston hesitated a moment, then pulled his thrower and shot a proton blast into the air before following Benedek.

It seemed to be at least an hour before Benny reached Jonathan's side, pushing the professor onto his back. "Jonny? Wake-up call, pal. J.J., don't force me to lug a dead prof back to Doctor M — she'll cancel the expense account. Man, I wish we had some water," Benny muttered to Winston who was kneeling on one knee across from the journalist.

"W-water?" Jonathan croaked, grasping Benny's hand.

"Thataboy, J.J.," Benny cried gleefully, putting one arm around Jonathan's shoulder to help him sit up.

"Water?" the professor repeated hopefully, managing to open his eyes and trying to focus on his rescuers.

"Sorry, m' man," Winston apologized, patting his jumpsuit pockets. "Here, try this," he suggested, offering a lollipop which had somehow escaped Slimer's attention.

Benny pulled off the wrapper and stuck the candy into Jonathan's mouth. "See if that puts some power in your pucker, boy-o."

After a few moments Jonathan managed to work up enough saliva to moisten his parched mouth. "Grape?"

"Hey pal, don't look a gift sucker in the mouth," Benny chided him, his fingers tightening on Jonathan's shoulder. "It's better than nothing, isn't it?"

"Thank you," Jonathan mumbled around the lollipop stick, glancing at Winston. He removed the candy and inquired, "Is Peter all right?"

"Yeah, he's back with his buds," Benny said. "They caught up with him, just like he said they would." Something flickered in his eyes, quickly veiled as he changed the subject. "So, you think we can get you on your feet now, Jonny?"

"Yes, if you'll just help me up —" He stopped, and the others turned to see what he was staring at. "You again?"

Madame LeBrun stood with her arms folded, watching the three men with a superior expression. "This is a very touching scene, gentlemen," she informed them. "But perhaps it is time to dispense with the games. You wish to know why I have brought you here, do you not?"

The trio looked at each other, then Winston stood up, placing himself between the woman and his companions. "I'd say that was pretty high on our list, ma'am."

"Who is this woman?" Jonathan asked, realizing he hadn't hallucinated her after all. "Benedek, do you know her?"

"Oh yes," she affirmed, as Benny opened his mouth. "We are acquainted. I am Madame LeBrun, Doctor MacKensie, and I have a proposition for you."

"Uh — me?"

She nodded, sidestepping Winston and standing directly in front of Jonathan. "There are six of you here. I only need one of you to stay behind, and the rest will be free to go."

Benny cast an uneasy glance at Jonathan, whose jaw was hanging open a little as he stared at the priestess, and he replied hastily, "Right, then it'll be me! I'm the one responsible for all of this happening, so I'll just —"

"I don't *want* you, Mr. Benedek," she said silkily. "I want *him*."

"But Jack didn't do anything to you!" he argued desperately. "I'm the one who wrote that story and broke into your house — I'm the one who's got to be punished —"

"You *will* be, Mr. Benedek." She met his gaze, smiling at his expression.

"But — why me?" Jonathan at last found his voice to ask.

"Because you are his friend." She pointed at the dumbfounded Benny and added calmly, "He will return to his own world and his life, but he will be unable to forget that he has lost his best friend, and that he has been the reason for this loss. He will live with that guilt forever."

Jonathan and Benny's eyes met, and the journalist shook his head. "Jack, no! You can't do it! It's not your decision."

The professor's voice was quiet. "If not mine, then whose, Benny?"

"You don't have to do this, man," Winston objected, his thrower aimed at Madame LeBrun.

"Yes, I believe I do, Mr. Zeddemore," Jonathan countered softly, glancing at Madame LeBrun. "No point in risking six lives when one will do."

"You got it, Jack, but the one life is gonna be mine," Benny said firmly, glaring at the priestess.

"I have chosen this one," she asserted, flashing a deadly smile and holding out a hand to Jonathan. "Your punishment begins now, Edgar Benedek. You shall be witness to his life draining away."

"No!"

Jonathan's body jerked upright, his head thrown back and his eyes wide open as he looked skyward. His limbs stiffened and his jaw went slack, the color slowly fading from his face.

"Jon!" Benny shouted, trying to throw himself at the priestess. A spark flew from her hand, catching Benny in the chest and slamming him to the ground behind Winston. Gasping for breath, Benny struggled to his knees only to be knocked down by another lightning bolt.

Powering up his proton pack, Winston aimed his thrower at the woman but he hesitated. "Don't make me neutronize you, lady," he growled in warning.

Smiling at his threat, Madame LeBrun waved her hands and the air was filled with screaming winged creatures dive-bombing the Ghostbuster.

Dropping to one knee and bracing the thrower against the other, Winston valiantly tried to blast the bat-like beasts but there were too many of them.

"Yeee-haaw!" came Ray Stantz's battle cry as his proton beam joined Winston's and the black Ghostbuster rose up from the ground, filled with renewed determination.

"Get 'em, Tex!" Peter encouraged, leaping into the fray to pull Benny behind the armed Ghostbusters.

Egon, a grim set to his jaw, took a position on Winston's other side and proceeded to bag a creature. "Trap out, Peter!" he cried, and Venkman grabbed a trap from Spengler's belt and threw it out.

With a practiced kick, the psychologist sent the shoebox-sized device sliding along the ground until it was positioned under the bat-winged, serpent-tailed monkey. "Got it!" he called, slamming his boot heel down on the pedal on the ghost-trap's extension cord. The black-and-yellow doors opened, releasing a bright white light which pulled the creature down inside the trap, and the doors slammed shut upon it.

Ray and Winston had two entities captured together in their proton-streams, and Peter didn't wait for his cue, as he tossed another trap under the pair and opened it.

"I could use some help here, Benny," he said, shoving an empty trap into the reporter's hands. "Just slide it out, stomp on the release trigger and let it go when the trap's got them."

Benedek looked down at the trap, then nodded and obeyed Peter's instructions, soon trapping Egon's current prey. The remaining monkeys had withdrawn to a safer distance, chattering at their attackers, and Benny tugged on Peter's sleeve. "We've gotta stop her, V-man — she's killing Jon!"

The chief Ghostbuster followed Benny's pointing finger, then shouted to his partners, "Cover me!" With that, he sandbagged Madame LeBrun from the rear, tackling her and taking her to the ground.

Jonathan gasped and went limp, freed at last from her energy-drainage. Benny scuttled to his side, while Winston hurried to help Peter with the irate voodoo priestess.

"I will kill you a//!" she threatened, as they hauled her to her feet.

"No." They looked up in astonishment as another woman appeared. She wore a gown decorated with shards of mirrors, and her long raven hair was braided with multi-colored ribbons. "No one will die. You have misused the power of voodoo, Madame."

"My lady," the priestess whispered, causing Winston and Peter to look at her curiously. "I am your devoted servant —"

"You are the servant of jealousy and revenge, but not of love. There is no love in your heart, only bitterness and hatred."

"Santera," Winston whispered, and the loa turned her gaze on him.

"Ah, Winston Zeddemore," she said, smiling at him.

"You — you know me?" Winston demanded, gripping his thrower and looking at her suspiciously.

"You may put away your weapons, all of you," she invited, waving a hand at the Ghostbusters. "I mean you no harm."

"Oh yeah? Well, try telling MacKensie that," Peter snapped, pointing at the unconscious Jonathan. "Your little handmaiden there did a number on him." He jerked his head at Egon, and together they walked toward the two paranormal investigators. Ray immediately took Peter's place by Madame LeBrun's side as her guard.

"Come on, Jack, wake up," Benny pleaded, Jonathan's head in his lap. "You can't do this to me, pal. You can't leave me to face Doctor M to tell her you've gone to that big Anthropology Lab in the Sky, Jon-boy. I need you, you're the only conscience I've got, and Peter will be the first to tell you that's a big job."

Holstering his thrower, Egon knelt beside Jonathan and pressed his fingers just under the man's ear. After a moment, he looked up and met Benny's anxious gaze. "I'm sorry, Benny," Spengler began solemnly, a grave look in his blue eyes.

"Jonny's not dead," Benny denied firmly, looking down at the deathly-still face. "C'mon, Smilin' Jack, show Egon he's mistaken."

"Are you?" Peter asked Egon, and the physicist shook his head. Taking a deep breath, the psychologist grasped Benny by the shoulders. "It's over, Benny — I'm sorry," he said as Egon gently shifted Jonathan from Benny's lap to the ground.

"It's not over 'til the fat lady sings," Benny announced, pulling free of Peter's grasp and going up to Santera. "Exchange us," he demanded, blue eyes flashing.

"I do not under —"

"Read my lips, sister. Give Jonny back his life and take mine. I'm the one responsible for all this — Jack had nothing to do with it. It's not fair to make him pay with his life for my stupidity."

"You believe I have this power?" Santera asked gently.

"Hey, you're the loa of love. You've gotta make it right," Benny added, swallowing hard.

"No, you cannot —!" the voodoo priestess screamed, trying to throw herself at Santera but held back by Ray and Winston.

The loa looked at Madame LeBrun and her features hardened for a moment. "You have done much damage in my name," she pronounced, eyes lighting with a strange glow. "Your hatred is no match for the love these men have for each other; no match for brotherhood."

Benny and the Ghostbusters watched in amazement as the loa seemed to float over to Jonathan and her image superimposed itself over his. While they continued to stare as if frozen in time, Jonathan's chest began to rise and fall and color flooded his cheeks.

Then Santera departed, and Jonathan's eyes fluttered open.

"Jonathan?" Benny asked in disbelief, helping his friend sit up. "You okay, buds?"

"What happened?" mumbled the professor. Then his eyes focused on Benedek. "You called me Jonathan!"

"It's your name, ain't it, Saint Jon? How do you feel, bucky? No chimes ringing in your ears?"

Jonathan rubbed his head. "I must have passed out. I had the oddest dream. I was surrounded by mist — and an old man with a cane gave me a glass of ice tea ..." He trailed off, his brows knitted as he tried to recapture an elusive memory.

"Looks like you were mistaken, after all, Spengs," Peter observed, grinning at the physicist, who was eyeing their clients with a dubious expression.

"Indeed." Egon raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Most extraordinary. Doctor MacKensie, I think I should inform you that you were clinically dead for nearly five minutes."

"De-dead?"

Benny grinned at the look on his partner's face, and gripped his shoulder reassuringly. "That was some Lazarus act, Jack. I bet you weren't dreaming, after all, just having an OBE!"

"NDE," Egon amended with his customary precision. "And I would venture to say you are correct, Mr. Benedek."

Benny nodded, then looked up at the loa. "Thanks, ma'am. I owe you one. Do you want me to go with you now?"

"Benedek!" Jonathan objected.

Santera shook her head. "It is not required. You will respect the secrets of voodoo in the future, will you not?"

"Yes ma'am," he vowed, looking subdued. "I'm sorry."

"The seeker of truth," she commented, smiling at him. She met Jonathan's bemused gaze and added, "The hero."

"I'm not —" he began, stopping as Benny shushed him.

"A formidable combination," Santera continued. "As are you four," she told the Ghostbusters, allowing her gaze to rest in turn on Egon, Ray, Winston and Peter. "The scientist, the idealist, the warrior, the leader. I am sorry you have been brought here against your wills. Now, it is time to deal with this one." She approached Madame LeBrun, who sank to her knees before the loa.

Santera gestured, and the flock of nether-entities the priestess had summoned dove at her with ear-piercing shrieks. Another gesture, and Madame LeBrun vanished, her screams echoing behind her. Santera smiled once more and faded slowly away.

The six men stared at each other in astonishment. "Oh, man," Winston sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Now what happens?"

"Now," said Papa Legba, "it is time for you to leave." He stood behind them, leaning on his cane as they turned and gaped at him. He straightened up and waved the walking stick, sketching a rectangular opening in the air. A glowing mist filled the opening, and the Ghostbusters exchanged glances, recognizing a dimensional gateway.

One by one they filed through it, vanishing as soon as they stepped into the mist. Benny had an arm around Jonathan's waist, supporting the unsteady professor. Winston, the last to go, paused and

noded at the Gatekeeper. "Thank you, sir." Then he too was on his way, tumbling through darkness to land on the grass of the Georgetown campus.

"Whoa! That was some trip!" Benny exclaimed, grinning at the still-befuddled Jonathan. "Ya okay, Jonny? A little unsteady on your feet, aren't ya? Wait 'til Doctor M hears about this! She's gonna wet her pants!"

"Hope I'm not around," Peter muttered with a shudder.

"No, she won't, because you're not going to tell her!" Jonathan protested, clutching Benny's arm.

"Knowing the redoubtable Doctor Moorhouse," Spengler spoke up, "you will have to tell her something, and I have found the truth is an excellent purgative."

"Besides, you have to explain the Ramapithecus, don't you?" Ray added helpfully.

Jonathan moaned and slapped a hand to his forehead. "I forgot all about that —"

"I believe it was just another of Madame LeBrun's creations, designed to entrap you and thus draw Benedek into her web," Egon expounded, shifting the trap he held. "I believe we should confine these in the portable containment unit, this trap appears to be malfunctioning."

"What? How can, the readout says it's empty," Peter said, stooping over to squint at the trap Egon held.

"So does this one," Ray said, holding up his trap.

"Same here, homeboy."

"How can they all be empty? We trapped those critters!" Peter exclaimed, checking the traps his partners held.

"Hmm."

"What 'hmmm', Egon? Explain 'hmmm'," Venkman demanded, whirling on the physicist.

"Apparently they did not belong in this dimension and remained behind when we came through. I'm not certain how that is possible. Fascinating," Egon murmured, looking thoughtful.

"So long as they don't come knocking on our door, I don't care how it happened," Peter declared, hooking the empty trap on his belt. "Wonder what happened to my pack?"

"Benny was carrying it, but it got lost somewhere along the way," Ray explained, looking around the area.

"Oh yeah? How come you guys kept yours, anyway? Mine never made it through the door," Peter complained.

"Egon theorized it was because we made a conscious effort to hang on to ours and you fell through the doorway," Ray said in a comforting tone. "Benny was carrying it, but he lost it when he went through the doorway."

"So there's a proton pack wandering around somewhere? Great," Peter snorted in disgust.

"Hey, Pete, does this look familiar?" Winston asked, holding up a proton pack. "I found it in these bushes."

"It's Ol' Betsey!" Peter cried, examining the pack.

"Found this, too," Winston said, picking up the rolled chart that had once held the drawing of Ramapithecus.

Benny snatched it and unrolled it, then showed it to Jonathan. "Hey, it's back, big as life and twice as ugly. Whaddya know, huh?"

Egon held his PKE meter near the chart, then nodded. "Very faint residual traces of psychic energy. I would say this chart is no longer enchanted, gentlemen."

"Isn't this great? We're all back, safe and sound," Ray proclaimed happily.

"Reasonably safe and sound, Raymond. I believe we could all do with some food and rest, however," Egon pointed out.

"Yeah, can we go home now?" Peter whined.

"Let's go get some pizza, courtesy of the Institute," Benny suggested expansively. "It's the least we can do, J.J." he added when Jonathan started to protest.

"I was thinking of something a little more substantial than pizza," Jonathan corrected, looking at the *Ghostbusters*. He smiled at the clamor of approval and agreement, then clapped a hand on Benny's shoulder. "And we'll put it on your charge card, Benedek."

Benny considered, then grinned at Jonathan. "Why not? I'll charge it to the *Register*, after all, Jordy's gonna sell extra copies when this story hits the stands."

Jonathan's jaw dropped. "You can't —!"

"Hey, boy-o, this will knock Elvis sightings off the front page!"

Twenty minutes later the group was gathered around a table at an all-night coffee shop near the *Ghostbusters*' motel. Jonathan looked up as Benny came back from the pay-phone. "Well?"

"Jordy says dimensional travel isn't hot right now." Benny sighed and dropped into his chair.

"Thank Heaven for small favors," muttered Jonathan.

"I'll try pitching it again tomorrow when he's awake."

The professor glared at him, then frowned in puzzlement. "Benedek, why did you offer to stay behind in my place?"

Benny tried to shrug the question off. "Self-preservation, Jack. I didn't want to be the one to tell Doctor M I'd lost you." He stopped stirring salt into his cola and added, with a crooked grin, "Besides — you've got too many people who'd miss you, all those students, not to mention the coeds ..."

"You've got a lot of friends, too, Benny," Jonathan broke in. "I mean, look at all those people who attended your funeral! Your wall feeler friend, Miss Lacey, was there all the way from Liverpool. Hortense and Zabbo even sent flowers ... and Doctor Moorhouse accompanied me. Ms. Malloy performed an, uh, interesting dance —"

"Yeah, it was a great funeral," Benny said, hastily explaining, "I had Boom-Boom videotape it for me." His fond grin faded, and he added quietly, "It's just not the same, Jonny. I mean — there's friends, and then there's *friends*." His gaze wandered over the *Ghostbusters*, who were talking quietly among themselves. "I've got a million acquaintances, but *friends* ... Not so many of them." He met Jonathan's eyes. "You're my best one, Jack."

"Same here, Benny."

Egon elbowed Peter, who cleared his throat. "Uh, Benny, I'm sorry for that little fight we had."

"Me, too, Pete. I had it coming."

Jonathan looked from Benedek to Venkman, then shook his head and raised his glass of ice tea. "A toast, gentlemen. To friendship."

"Friendship," the others chorused, clinking their various beverage glasses together.



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