

Part Two

*A friend loves at all times,
but a brother is born for adversity.*

Proverbs 17:17

"I thought you said you'd turn in as soon as that thing was finished."

As predicted, Ray wasted no time commenting on his friend's broken promise once he'd come down for breakfast, shortly after nine. By then, Evelyn's study was littered with neatly arranged stacks of books and papers, some barely more than a few sheets thick, others so tall they threatened to collapse whenever someone looked at them, but all clearly arranged in some definite if not immediately comprehensible order. Ray noticed this soon after he walked in, but he did not let it divert him from his original topic.

Egon — who was sitting cross-legged on the floor amid the worst of the clutter, a large and battered old book balanced across his knees and an almost-empty breakfast tray on the hearth rug beside him — didn't bother to look up from his reading. "I'd intended to," he admitted distractedly around a mouthful of muffin, "but something else came up."

Ray's expression twisted puckishly. "What, dinner?" he quipped, meaning the remark as a joke, if a bad one.

The physicist spared him the agony of an unfavorable review by taking the crack literally. "No. There was some new PK activity just after I brought up the monitors — that was around three, I believe — and I thought — someone should stick around to keep an eye on things, in case it happened again."

If Egon had engineered that comment in order to detour Ray from the subject of forgotten promises, then he'd designed it to accurate specs. At the mention of new supernatural doings, Ray's eyes lit up like a bored schoolchild's at the calling of recess. "Really?" he asked eagerly. "Was it a full manifestation this time, or just more of that sympathetic-vibration stuff?"

"Neither, actually," Spengler confessed, then explained in greater detail just what had happened during the wee hours of the morning. Ray settled down to listen, perched on an arm of the sofa — one of the few places not already occupied by a pile of books or papers — with a raptly fascinated look on his round face. When Egon came to the end of his soliloquy, he gestured in the direction of his hastily-rigged device. "I had one of our meters set up to record the monitor readings at the time, so you can see for yourself, if you want. It's all very curious."

Stantz did just as suggested while his blond partner went back to whatever he'd been reading. It took the occultist perhaps ten minutes to study the data as thoroughly as he wanted; he was just finishing his analysis when their remaining colleagues arrived, Janine and Winston about a minute ahead of Peter. "You're right, that is pretty strange stuff," he said as the others entered. "And none of it's primary source activity, either. Which means we were right the first time: Whatever's causing this *isn't* inside the house."

"Whatever's causing what?" Winston asked, sensing that they had walked in on the middle of a discussion. Ray obligingly explained, showing Zeddemore the monitor/meter readings and telling him all he knew about the morning's occurrences. He and Janine (and Peter, once he arrived) listened attentively, but felt precious little less perplexed than before. "So what you're saying is we still haven't found anything concrete, right?" Winston said when Ray was done. "No actual spooks or spuds or whatever to blame it on?"

"It doesn't look that way," Stantz agreed reluctantly. "Though at least now we know we should be looking somewhere else on the grounds."

"Not 'til after breakfast," Peter declared. He eyed the now-empty tray with disapproving disdain, since his hollow stomach was loudly reminding him of its own needs. "Y'know, you might've waited 'til we came down, too, Spengs. Or is this just some subtle way of saying you'd rather not spend your time with us?"

The physicist suspended his reading upon hearing Peter mention his name, but it took him a moment or two to figure out what Venkman was talking about. "Hardly," he finally said, turning back to his book. "It wasn't even my

idea. I suspect Lambert brought it in when I wasn't looking, but I don't know for sure. It might've been Aunt Evvie. They both have a preoccupation with what they like to call 'proper nutrition.'

The sound Janine made was one of politely restrained laughter. "Sounds like they both know you pretty well, then. I don't know anyone else who's so good at forgetting all the little inconsequential things — like eating and sleeping — when he's in the middle of a project." From her wry expression, she knew full well how he'd failed to keep his promise to Ray.

"Yeah," Stantz chimed in, waving one arm to indicate all the piles and stacks arranged on furniture and floor. "What's this all about, anyway — or did you just figure sorting out all this stuff was more important than sleep?"

"Only partially," was the equable reply. "I found some interesting information in the process, which might help our investigation—"

"Hold it," Peter interrupted before Egon could get into full lecture mode. "Not on an empty stomach. I want breakfast first." With that intent clearly stated, he headed for the door and, ultimately, the kitchen.

Spengler shrugged, then climbed to his feet. "No problem. The monitor's set to sound an alarm if anything happens, so there's no reason I have to stay here. I can tell you what I found while you eat."

That wasn't at all what the psychologist had had in mind when he'd made the suggestion, but he wasn't really in any position to argue, either. "Oh, joy," he settled for muttering sarcastically, "just what I always wanted. Breakfast and a lecture."

"It seems that Theodosia had certain literary aspirations," Egon explained to his cohorts once they had settled down with their breakfasts in a corner of Evelyn's more-than-generously spacious kitchen. Broken sunlight fell through the wide windows, warming the room inside and melting some of the ice outside.

Today, they would not be forcibly house-bound, a fact for which they were all grateful, since it appeared they would need to take their work outside before this job was done. Egon took a seat on a counter-stool alongside the kitchen work island while his partners found places around the table, and from there he continued his lecture. "She kept a rather large number of unusually detailed journals — one could almost get away with calling them an ongoing autobiography. I found at least fifteen of them among the books in the study, and I wouldn't be surprised if there're more in the attic that we missed."

"And you read *all* of 'em after we went to bed last night?" Ray asked, not quite sure he was willing to believe his friend if he said yes.

But Egon spared him that potential quandary with a shake of his head. "No, of course not. There's a veritable encyclopedia of stuff to go through, there, and that doesn't include all the letters and clippings and photographs she'd collected."

"She had *photographs*?" Janine asked, incredulous. "I didn't think they knew how to make 'em, that long ago."

"Scientists have known about the general principles of photochemical imaging since the late 1700's," the physicist pointed out, "even though they didn't achieve success with the process 'til the 1830's. These are more specifically daguerreotypes, since they predate later, more sophisticated photographic processes." He shuffled through the items he'd brought with him from the study 'til he found the packet containing the pictures in question, which he then handed to Janine. "They're in remarkably good condition, considering their age and the storage environment in the attic."

The others at the table craned their necks to have a look at the pictures when Janine slipped them from the envelope. There were five in all, each in a heavy protective paperboard sleeve and marked with the names of those depicted and the date the photo was taken. Two were portraits of the entire family, one depicted only the three children, another showed the children with their mother, and the last portrayed Erasmus and Theodosia. Despite the fact that the pictures had been taken a hundred and forty years ago, they were scarcely faded, showing clear images of the people now almost as many years dead. Erasmus looked a great deal like Egon's Uncle Cyrus, a tall, thin, bearded man with a serious expression and graying dark hair; but Theodosia was almost imposing in appearance, being neither small

nor frail, a tall, vigorous-looking woman with soot-black hair and huge, piercing black eyes that instantly burned themselves into the memory of anyone who saw them. Ray noticed this detail immediately and whistled.

“Pretty striking woman,” he commented, nodding toward the portraits. “At least now we’ll know her when we see her.”

Janine sniffed softly. “We could hardly forget.”

“Precisely my thought,” Egon agreed. “I suppose we should count ourselves lucky that Erasmus saw fit to spend his money on what was little more than a novelty, at the time. Anyway, to get back to the original topic... I skimmed through several volumes of her journal this morning, but I really only read the one for 1854 in any detail.”

“Okay, then,” Peter was willing to allow now that he’d had a chance to stuff a few bites of breakfast in to his unruly stomach. “So, what happened? Did the whole family die of the plague or what?”

“Not quite. The daughter died from whooping cough a few years earlier, and it seems that both Erasmus and his older son contracted one of the more virulent strains of influenza at about the same time, probably from the same exposure. According to Theodosia’s journal, Thaddeus died from it first, on January 23rd; Erasmus actually died the next day, but due to a severe snowstorm, their doctor wasn’t able to come verify either death ‘til the day after that, and Theodosia supposed he was either trying to avoid extra paperwork or made a mistake on the certificates, ‘cause he recorded both their dates of death as January 25, 1854.”

“What about Theodosia?” Janine asked. “Did she die from the flu, too?”

Again, the blond head shook. “She’d been given advice to sell the house and move into the city after her husband died, since she and the baby, Phineas, were living almost alone in what was then the middle of the nowhere, but she didn’t think that was what Erasmus would have wanted, so she stayed. The estate — the family’s monetary assets, not just the house and property — was worth a fair amount, even then, and Theodosia had pretty good business sense, so she was able to hire extra servants to do what she and the governess couldn’t without putting them in any sort of financial bind. She even had the foresight to set up a trust so that if anything happened to her before Phineas came of age, he wouldn’t lose his inheritance to a more distant relative.”

“Sounds almost like she knew what was coming,” Winston noted sadly.

“Almost,” Egon agreed. “As a matter of fact, the last entry in her journal — dated April 29, 1854, the day before she died — talks about her visit with the family lawyer just that morning, and how the trust and her will had finally been finished.”

Several of the others made peculiarly distressed faces. “Creepy,” Ray shuddered. “She didn’t mention anything anywhere in that journal about planning to commit suicide, did she?”

He was relieved when the physicist answered, “No. The journal itself doesn’t have any information about her death — obviously — but I found some clippings about it stuck inside, probably by the governess or one of the later descendants. It seems that Theodosia had gone alone into the city to get some medication for her son; on the return trip, she got caught out in a sudden thunderstorm and had almost made it back when lightning struck a tree alongside the entrance road. It fell right on top of her carriage and crushed both it and her. Unless she was prescient and knew exactly when and where the lightning would strike, it certainly couldn’t have been a suicide.”

Now sated and in a much better mood to discuss business, Peter was happily willing to agree with that conclusion. “And under all those rotten circumstances — and her husband and kid dying one right after the other is pretty rotten — she probably didn’t really know whether she wanted to live or die — which would explain why she wouldn’t’ve just gone on to her final reward like a good little ghost.”

“It would,” Ray conceded, pushing away his empty plate, “but we still don’t have any proof it’s *her* ghost wandering the halls, or why it only shows up at certain times of year.”

“Hey, it’s *her* ring that keeps reacting to all these PKE surges, isn’t it?” Venkman rebutted. “That an’ the fact that she *did* go out in a pretty nasty way is enough to convince me.”

“For once, I agree with Doctor V,” Janine put in, one finger tracing a circle on the rim of her coffee mug. “I’ll bet the ghost is Theodosia’s — but what I’d like to know is why nobody ever noticed her sooner, if she died a hundred and thirty-five years ago.”

Winston shrugged. “Maybe someone did and we just don’t know about it. From what Evelyn’s said, the manifestations were pretty minor for a long time. Even if somebody *had* seen it or heard it years ago, they might not have thought it was worth mentioning.”

Peter’s short laugh was scarcely one of true humor. “And if Quentin’s any example of what his ancestors were like, anyone who *had* seen something would’ve probably kept his mouth shut, if he’d known what was good for him.”

“Maybe,” Janine allowed. “But I’d still like to know for sure if we *are* the first people who’ve seen it.”

“It’s really irrelevant,” Egon reminded her, “since any prior sightings that were minor enough to have been summarily dismissed are also highly unlikely to provide any information with bearing on our current situation — but you can go through the records to look for it, if you want. I have them fairly well sorted out, now, and my Great-Aunt Winifred had done an impressively exhaustive job of compiling the family records prior to the turn of the century. But it’s still a lot of raw, unindexed information. It could take days before you find anything even remotely pertinent — and with luck, we’ll be finished long before then.”

“Finished with what?” Peter wanted to know. “This might’ve told us who the ghost is, but I still haven’t heard anything to tell us where she’s hiding or how to catch her.”

The physicist was not deterred by the mild accusation in that comment. “I’m sure that a careful sweep of the grounds will provide us with just that information, and barring unforeseen circumstances, we should be able to finish our business here and leave before nightfall.”

His confidence seemed to reassure the psychologist, but conversely, it didn’t sit well with Ray. “Don’t you think you’re being a little bit over-optimistic?” Stantz felt compelled to ask. “I mean, yeah, there’s no reason we shouldn’t be able to corner and trap someone who’s a simple Class Four repeater, but... jeeze, Egon, she’s one of your ancestors! Don’t you think there might be a better way to deal with this, other’n sticking her in with all those nasties in the containment unit?”

That possibility apparently didn’t bother the fair-haired scientist. “I didn’t say we’re going to put her into the containment unit,” he pointed out. “Once we’ve trapped her, we can go home, figure out a way to convince her to disperse peacefully, and *then* release her and let her do just that, all without ever putting her into containment. There’s nothing unethical about it, and it’s certainly preferable to taking up residence here for however long it takes us to find a compatible permanent solution.”

“He’s got a point,” Peter was forced to admit. “If last night was any sample of what we can expect from now on, I don’t think we want to stay here a minute longer’n we have to.” He glanced about the room; a crookedly puzzled look settled on his features. “Thinking of which, where *is* Godzilla today? I was sure he wouldn’t miss breakfast after all the fun he had at dinner last night. I was half-expecting him to break with tradition and eat in here just for the pleasure of our company.”

“Gone,” Egon replied at his unemotional best. “I believe I heard him leave somewhere around six, and I doubt he’ll be back before evening, if he’s going to be giving two days’ worth of exams in one.”

“Yeah, and if he really dislikes us as much as he says he does, I’ll bet he won’t *want* to come back before then,” Janine observed dryly, and just a shade bitterly.

Winston nodded as he pushed himself away from the table. “Probably. Well, then, if we’ve all finished stuffing our faces, let’s get moving. If we wrap this up quick enough, we might still be able to make it back to New York in time for Thanksgiving dinner.”

As they headed out of the kitchen — Janine to resume researching the problem, the four paranormalologists to make a sweep of the grounds — the subject of equipment came up. Since two of their four meters had been cannibalized to create the monitoring device in the study, the four partners would not be able to go off in four separate directions — a situation which bothered Peter not in the least, since they now had proof that something supernatural was indeed stirring on the grounds, and he never liked facing an spectral unknown without someone to cover his back. That consideration prompted him to raise the question of whether or not they should go out armed with their accelerators. Egon was against it, certain that the monitor readings in no way indicated an imminent manifestation; Winston was in favor of it, since his Special Forces training had taught him never to underestimate an enemy, no matter what your information on him; Ray vacillated for a few moments, then, somewhat apologetically, sided with Peter and Winston, since his Boy Scout training had taught him to always be prepared. Though he was no more convinced than before, Egon gave in without a struggle, figuring that the matter wasn't worth any extensive argument. Thus decided, they headed for the reception foyer and the closet in which Lambert had stored their heavier equipment.

When they opened the door, they found that their packs were no longer there.

"Are you sure you're looking in the right place?" Peter asked after they'd all spent a few seconds staring at the empty floor beneath the hanging coats and jackets.

"Positive," Winston, who'd opened the door, replied. "Those things weigh a ton; you don't drag 'em around without remembering where you left 'em. Somebody must've moved 'em."

Ray scratched his chin, peering at the meticulously dust-free floorboards on which their equipment had last been seen. "Why?" he wanted to know, no less puzzled than his friends. "Lambert said they'd be perfectly safe here. It's just a coat-closet, for pete's sake."

Something inside Venkman's head clicked almost audibly; sudden suspicion darkened his expression. "Not if Godzilla found 'em when we weren't looking," he said ominously. "He would've seen the stuff when he came home last night and hung up his coat — and I wouldn't put it past him to go out of his way to make trouble for us by walking off with our gear."

"Not this way," Ray felt certain, "not after that lecture he gave about stealing, last night. There's gotta be a better explanation."

"I agree," was Egon's opinion. "We ought to get a few more facts before we go jumping to unfounded conclusions."

"There's nothing unfounded about it," Peter insisted. "Your dad's a creep, and that's all there is to it. What other proof do you need?"

"You're being irrational, Peter. This argument is completely pointless—"

"Our stuff's missing and you think it's pointless?" Venkman sounded thoroughly aghast.

"Of course it is. We don't *need* the accelerators. The PKE levels still haven't indicated any coherent manifestation."

"I'll remember that if some supernatural ugly comes after you and you start screaming for back up."

The physicist remained undisturbed by his comments. "I still don't think we need any weapons," he maintained.

Peter harrumphed. "Yeah, and you don't think your father's enough of a jerk to do it, either."

"Why should I? Despite his idiosyncracies, I know he wouldn't resort to such a petty means of annoyance. And in any case, I have my doubts that he'd even know the equipment was ours. Why should he recognize the accouterments of a business he'll scarcely admit exists?"

Though he wouldn't acknowledge it aloud, the psychologist had to concede that point. He turned his attention back to the vacant floor and scowled. "Well, then where the heck *are* the blasted things?"

"Maybe we should ask Lambert," Winston suggested diplomatically. "He helped us put 'em there in the first place, so maybe he knows where they went."

They eventually found the old butler in the hall outside the guest rooms on the second floor, giving the housekeeper explicit instructions on something having to do with linens. He spotted the four visitors and quickly ended his lecture to politely respond to their presence. When asked about the missing equipment, he was instantly apologetic. "I assure you, gentlemen, there's no need to worry. Your belongings are all quite safe. Please, come with me, and I'll take you to them." He headed directly for the rear staircase.

"What I'd like to know is why you moved 'em in the first place," Peter said as they all followed the old man down the narrowish stairwell. "Did the Professor tell you to hide 'em?"

His insinuation went right over Lambert's head. "Why, no, Doctor Venkman. The orders came from Miss Evelyn. I was sure she'd mentioned it to you."

The psychologist's expression soured visibly. "It must've slipped her mind," he drawled, somehow not convinced that she, not Quentin, had actually given the order.

Again, the butler missed any negative implications in the remark. "Her intentions were entirely well-meant," he assured them as he led them through a door into the service areas behind the kitchen and from there to a closet, which he proceeded to unlock. "She felt that your equipment would be safer away from the public areas of the house."

"So she had 'em put under lock and key and didn't even bother to tell us?" Peter couldn't have sounded more skeptical if he'd tried. "That doesn't sound particularly 'well-meant' to me."

Lambert's features took on the demeanor of a wounded puppy as he watched the visitors remove their accelerators from the locker and shrug into them; he followed as they headed back to the main corridor. "But I assure you, Doctor Venkman, it couldn't have been intentional. I'm certain Miss Evelyn planned to tell you when she returned...."

"From where?" Winston asked innocently enough — or so he thought.

"From the airport," the butler answered promptly. "She left quite early, and I believe she was due to return before you wakened. She *is* rather late...."

"Well, I still don't see why she had you move 'em in the first place," Peter grumbled, pulling open the door to the corridor. "I mean, we're all adults, here — more or less. It's not like she had to worry about little kids poking around and playing with things they should keep their hands off—oof!"

As he stepped into what should have been the open emptiness of the hallway, a shrilling something collided with his legs, pushing Peter sideways into the jamb and knocking half the air out of his lungs. The whatever-it-was paused only long enough to get around the obstacle he presented, then resumed its headlong flight down the corridor, chasing another, somewhat larger whatever-it-was and followed by third, slightly smaller whatever-it-was that ran by almost too fast to be seen. Peter, still a bit dazed by the unexpected collision, instinctively stepped back into the protection of the doorway, and cautiously peered down the hall to see what had almost bowled him over.

What he saw were the backsides of three young children, none older than eleven, all still conspicuously dressed for the outdoors and racing for the far end of the hall like champion sprinters, to see who could get there first.

"Stop that!" a woman's voice — not Evelyn's nor the housekeeper's nor even Janine's — called from the direction of the entrance foyer, a stemly annoyed note plain in the snapped syllables. "Nikki, if you don't settle down and bring them back here this minute, you're going to be in big trouble!"

That no-nonsense command caused Peter's attention to be drawn in the opposite direction. Egon — the only other of the four eliminators in a position to see those in the foyer — suddenly let loose a low, moaning, and very nearly appalled, "Oh, no."

The children scurried back the way they'd come, their gait only marginally more decorous; they joined three adults who were just now coming through the front door: Evelyn, the woman who'd reprimanded the kids, and her luggage-laden husband.

"Oh, god," the physicist groaned, drawing back, away from the corridor and thus out of sight of those in it. "Justin."

Ray, who had been trying to squeeze past Peter far enough to see what was going on in the corridor, cut short his efforts. "Your brother?" he asked, already knowing the answer before Spengler nodded.

"Brother?" Winston echoed, standing on tiptoe in an attempt to see past Peter and wishing he'd move into the hallway and quit blocking the doorway. "First a black-sheep sister, then a father on the outs, now a brother I never heard of — man, I know some people don't like to talk about their relatives, but this is gettin' ridiculous!"

"I wonder what he's doing here," Ray mused aloud, leaning forward again to snatch his own confirming glance.

There was undilute sarcasm in the sound Egon made. "I'll give you one guess," he grumbled. He didn't elaborate; he didn't need to. All four of his partners knew the only possible answer: Someone — and there was no question as to who — had invited him.

"Your aunt didn't say anything about having other guests in the house," Peter noted, still standing in the doorway, out of the path of carousing children. "How're we supposed to do our job with a bunch of kids running around and getting in the way?"

"We probably aren't," was Egon's unamused opinion. "No doubt this is just another of Aunt Evvie's little... surprises."

Peter's mutter was sarcastic. "Yeah, an' I'm real surprised. It's not every day I get steamrolled by a pack of stampeding rug rats. Is it safe to come out now," he called down the hall, leaning out only as far as caution would allow. "Or hasn't the entire herd come through, yet?"

"Perfectly safe," Evelyn assured him, smiling at him as he — and, with widely varying degrees of alacrity, his partners — stepped into the corridor. She was in the process of taking off her coat; behind her, the much younger brunette woman who was the children's mother was performing a similar service for the smallest of the three youngsters, a boy who couldn't have been much older than three or four. At Evelyn's comment, the woman looked up for a moment, glancing first at the men coming toward them, then, with widened eyes, at her husband, who had set down the luggage to help his aunt with her coat. He was staring the same way his wife had first glanced, with a blankly unfathomable look on his face.

Dark-haired, brown-eyed, slender, and slightly shorter than either Peter or Ray, Justin somehow managed to resemble both his younger brother, despite their markedly different heights and coloring, and his aunt, despite his distinctly unfeminine appearance and his definitely unsmiling expression. The demeanor he projected was decidedly unamiable, yet was nowhere near as icy-cold as Quentin's. His was the unfriendliness of the self-contained, of a person whose all-consuming personal goals are the focus of his life, and one who reacts with displeasure when forced to deal with the unexpected erraticness of those not a direct part of his goals. Where Quentin had looked with disdain at his son's partners but never at his son, Justin's detached yet startled stare was for no one but his brother. The three other men might just as well not have existed, for all the attention he paid them.

If she was even aware of her elder nephew's reaction to this unforewarned meeting, Evelyn didn't let on. "I'm sorry, Doctor Venkman," she continued, still smiling, "but I'm afraid the children are... well, a bit restless. It's such a long flight from Tokyo...."

"Very long," Egon agreed tonelessly. "So long, in fact, that I'm surprised you didn't mention last night that you'd invited other guests."

The old woman's smile vanished. "I suppose I *did* forget to bring it up," she began uneasily. "It must have slipped my mind...."

The physicist made a sound of profound disbelief that was very unlike him, a sound that was analogously echoed in his brother's expression. "Twice over, it seems," Justin said in a light, almost noncommittal baritone. His eyes flicked from his aunt to her other guests. He cleared his throat softly, not quite a harrumph. "It's been a long time, Egon," he said matter-of-factly in place of a more congenial greeting.

The younger of the two was willing to take whatever tack the elder wanted, however distant or unfriendly. "But not long enough, I'm sure."

One of Justin's dark eyebrows arched in a very familiar and very familial expression. "Did I say that?" he asked in tones so ambiguous, it was impossible to determine whether he was being sincere, sarcastic, or defensive. Peter — who had only met the man once before, and then very briefly — instantly recognized in Justin the polished evasiveness of one well-practiced in the use of words as a weapon both offensive and defensive — to put it frankly, a person in many ways very much like himself. He immediately disliked him. "Aunt Evelyn's free to invite anyone she wishes into her own home," Justin continued with the same elusively patronizing tone, "though I must admit, I hadn't expected *you* to be here."

From the tightening of his expression, Egon wanted to say something devastating in response, but he was either unable to think of anything to fling back or simply refused to be that unself-controlled and uncivilized. "The feeling's mutual, I assure you," was all he permitted himself to say. "Aunt Evvie," he added, insistently returning to the original topic, "I thought you swore that you didn't have any ulterior motives in asking us here."

Her attempt at a smile was both shaky and pallid. "I know, Egon, and I wasn't lying when I said I wanted you and your friends to help me with my problem...."

Her blithe evasion was almost enough to blow the lid off the physicist's rapidly evaporating patience. "You *know* what I mean."

She did: She'd gone and meddled again, deliberately. Her attempt to dismiss that implied accusation with a chuckle was feeble. "Yes, I know," she admitted, her voice catching slightly on the last word, "but there really *is* a troublesome ghost in this house, and if I'd told you last night I'd invited Justin and his family, too, would you have stayed to deal with it?"

Peter clicked his tongue before the tallest of his partners could respond. "Hey, that's not a fair question," he scolded. "For one thing, we've got legitimate reasons for not wanting bystanders around while we work. This is a dangerous business, and innocent people can get hurt if they don't know what to look out for. Hell, Egon *knows* what he's doing, and he almost got killed, last year!"

"I'm sure there won't be any trouble," the old woman felt certain. "We'll all be careful to keep out of your way. And tomorrow *is* Thanksgiving, after all. Family should be together—"

"Not as the result of deception," Egon interrupted, a thread of very real anger in his normally placid voice. It came as a surprise to none of his friends, all of whom had wondered how long it would be before the abrasive interaction with his relatives finally got under his usually insensitive hide. "If you were trying to arrange a genuine reunion, then where's the rest of the family?"

Evelyn was suddenly very uncomfortable. "Well... actually, I didn't invite anyone else—"

"I'm not surprised. Alexandra would've been on my side, and it's rather difficult to force a surrender when the odds are closer to even."

His aunt stammered without making a sound, not knowing how to deal with her younger nephew's anger, a reaction she obviously hadn't anticipated. Ray spoke up instead, hoping to curtail the all-out war he could see coming as the battle-lines were drawn. "I understand that your original intentions might've been good, ma'am," he essayed diplomatically, "and I don't think a family squabble's really any of our business, but Peter's right: You did ask us here to deal with a paranormal problem, and the more people who are around, the bigger the risk someone'll get hurt. We wouldn't want that to happen, especially not to the kids."

“That won’t be a problem,” Justin assured him with a loftiness just short of condescension. “Since neither I nor anyone in my family believes in the existence of so-called paranormal phenomena, we’ll leave you to conduct your games without fear of interruption.”

Both Peter and Winston wanted to smack the elder man for his cheeky insinuations about the value of their chosen career. Though he didn’t say a word, Ray felt Justin didn’t know his own children very well, if the awe-struck way in which the kids were watching the four semi-celebrities was any indication. Egon grit his teeth audibly, on the edge of overt fury. Ray, who was standing nearest him, half-expected his friend to lash back with all the verbal ripostes he couldn’t use against his father; he wouldn’t have blamed him if he had. From his sharp intake of breath, the physicist had clearly considered it, but had changed his mind at the last second. Instead, he snapped his mouth shut, let out his breath as sharply as he’d taken it in, and said stiffly, “Excuse us, then. We still have work to do.” With that, he turned on his heel and strode back into the service areas, headed for the rear exit. His partners, left with the choice of staying and offering an explanation for his abrupt behavior or following him in wordless support of his actions, chose the latter.

No one went after them, but from the look with which she watched them leave, Evelyn would have liked to, though she knew there was nothing she could say without running the risk of making matters worse.

“Well, that was a pleasure I certainly could’ve lived without,” Peter quipped a short time later, after the four of them had finally gotten out of the house. “Y’know, guys, now that I’ve had a chance to think it all over, I’ve decided Egon and I were right the first time: We *should’ve* chucked those plane tickets into the garbage and stayed home, work or no work.”

Ray shook his head. “Ah, I dunno, I still think Evelyn meant well. I just can’t believe she’d lie like that...!”

“Kinda makes you wonder just how well she really meant after all, doesn’t it?” Winston noted sadly.

“I warned you,” Egon said tightly, the undercurrent of expertly suppressed anger still noticeable in his voice. “She’s nice enough most of the time, but whenever the subject of making what she calls peace in the family comes up, all her ethics get thrown right out the window. She just can’t see why dragging us together against our wishes will only make things worse, not better.” He tried not to grind his teeth for a third time and was only marginally successful. “It certainly doesn’t help when she resorts to blatant deception.”

“Yeah, I can understand how that works,” Peter admitted, distance unfocusing his eyes as he remembered his own childhood attempts to force his parents into the so-called “normal” mold all his friends’ mothers and fathers seemed to fit. “Just when you’ve finally convinced yourself that everything’s on the up-and-up, she turns right around and proves you were better off not trusting her in the first place.” He stomped on a patch of melting ice, crushing its thinning edge under his heel. Curiously satisfied, he studied the resulting slush for a moment; then, he took a deep breath, lifted his head, and resumed his typical light-hearted manner without missing a beat. “So, if we’re gonna get this whole estate scoped out before Theodosia comes knocking on the door in the middle of the night, where do we start?”

In a similar fashion, Egon dismissed his own unprofessional anger, if not completely ridding himself of it at least subjugating the last of it into total obscurity. “The bridle trail, there—” He gestured, indicating a hard-dirt track that followed a slight ridge running parallel to the house, several hundred yards to the rear. “—divides the property into almost equal halves, east to west. Two of us should examine one side for psychokinetic activity, and two of us should examine the other.”

“Sounds fair to me,” Peter said most agreeably. “Which half’s got the cemetery?”

“The southern.”

He grinned. “Great. Then I’m volunteering for the north.”

“Why?” Ray wanted to know, tossing the psychologist a suspicious side-long glance. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of it?”

“Not at all. I’ve just got a healthy respect for the ghosts of... well, let’s call ‘em a bunch of non-conventional types.”

The sputtering noise Stantz let loose was a more than adequate expression of his opinion. “You’re nuts, Peter. It’s just a private cemetery. There’s absolutely nothing to be afraid of...”

“Fine. Then *you* go check it out. *I’d* rather take a nice little walk in the woods.” And with that, he claimed one of the two meters and headed north along the groundskeeper’s service drive.

“I’d better go with him,” Zeddemore decided a moment later. “When he gets this cocky, you just gotta *know* something bad’s gonna happen.”

“Be careful, Winston,” Ray called as the black man strode after Venkman. For a few moments, the occultist watched his two partners move off into the middle distance; Peter slipped on a patch of ice and was saved from the indignity of a graceless fall by Winston as he came up behind him. They continued on, moving beyond the end of the drive and across the slushy fields. Ray hoped they’d get back without breaking their necks, then turned and hurried to catch up with Egon.

While her employers were searching for their missing proton packs and in the midst of their brief confrontation with Evelyn and her surprise guests, Janine, who had left the kitchen by another route, was taking stock of the rearranged materials in the study. Knowing Egon’s not always predictable notions of what constituted logical order, she didn’t expect to be able to make any better sense of the stuff than before, but she was happily proven wrong. The paraphernalia, she discovered, had been sorted first according to year, then according to source or subject, and the journals of Theodosia easily made one of the largest collections of all. She remembered the neatly-penned books from her search through the attic, though she hadn’t realized at the time that they’d all been written by the same person. Now she marveled at them, impressed by the sheer number of them and wondering how anybody had ever managed to write all those millions of words without the benefit of a typewriter or word processor.

Not having a clear idea of where she should start looking for any evidence of prior hauntings, she picked up Theodosia’s journal for 1834 — the year of her marriage to Erasmus — purely on a whim. At first, the redhead scanned its contents casually, flipping the pages without really paying any attention to what was written upon them — until she came to the entry for March fifteenth of that year. The words fairly leapt off the page at her.

“...but you may well imagine my surprise when today, my affianced confessed to me that the promise ring he gave me but a fortnight past had first belonged to another...”

Startled, Janine stared at the sentence, especially at the word “ring.” Although, she supposed, it was entirely possible that this ring to which Theodosia was referring had absolutely nothing to do with the one they’d found in the attic, her intuition told her they were one and the same. And if Erasmus had had another wife — or, at the very least a another fiancée — before Theodosia and if she, not Theodosia, had been the one who had died the traumatic death....

For more than a minute, Janine sat there pondering the ramifications of this chance discovery. At length, though many possibilities occurred to her, only one stood out as universally worthy of attention: If they were making an erroneous assumption concerning the identity of this ghost, then they could also be making an even more seriously erroneous assumption concerning its potential danger. A forlorn mother weeping for her lost child could be considered harmless, but a former wife — or worse, a rejected suitor — could be weeping with rage, and looking to vent it upon the unsuspecting — especially upon unsuspecting men with the unsafe habit of sticking their noses into places and matters where angels fear to tread.

Janine’s first reaction to this realization was an urge to run straight to her employers and tell them of this unsettling discovery, but she quickly recognized that one sentence from a journal was hardly sufficient justification to start screaming that the sky was falling. Now that she’d had a calmer second in which to look at it, she could see that one could also take the entry to mean that the ring had first belonged to Erasmus’ mother or some other female ancestor, or even that the ring had been purchased second-hand. With her luck, this would turn out to be exactly the case if she went a-running to warn her bosses, and the last thing she wanted right now was to put up with Peter ribbing her about it for the rest of their stay in Cincinnati, and beyond. Her enthusiasm thus subdued, she decided to hold her

peace until she'd had a chance to read more about it, at least enough to determine whether or not real concern was warranted. What was needed here was cool, calm professionalism, not amateurish hysteria.

But professional or not, she *still* had a bad feeling about it.

It was less than an hour later when Peter's enthusiasm for this venture began to wane, dampened by the discomfort of slogging through slippery fields and melting ice that was rapidly turning to slush. Long before they were halfway through their assignment — an assignment that had thus far been completely fruitless — his shoes had gotten thoroughly soaked, his ears and nose had become numb with cold, and on the whole, he felt certain that if spent another minute in this condition, he was going contract a fatal case of pneumonia. He wanted to give it up and head back to the house, but Winston insisted they finish. Peter then suggested that, since there were two of them and only the one meter, his presence wasn't really needed, but Zeddemore reminded the psychologist that the idea of bringing along back-up had been *his* idea, and after several hours of dragging himself through the untended, still-wild fields of the estate's northern half with a fifty-pound pack on his back, he was certainly not about to let Peter weasel out before the job was done. Being the sort who never liked having his own words thrown back at him, Venkman griped and grumbled more than a bit and decided that, since he was so keen on finishing this pointless task, Winston could take charge of the meter. The black man had really expected nothing less; he figured they were better off doing the job right the first time — which was highly unlikely, if Peter kept on taking the readings in his current state of mind — so he was willing to take over and ignore his petulant colleague's complaints.

Well after noon — more than four hours after they'd started out from Evelyn's house — they were on the final leg of their trek, heading south along the still-unscanned western boundary of the estate, which was clearly marked by a mortarless stone fence undoubtedly as old as, if not older than, the house itself. Slightly less than three quarters of a mile from the bridge lay the wooded hill which Peter had mentioned earlier; now, as he and Winston finally trudged their way through it, he looked at the place with considerably greater disdain.

"Y'know," he reflected as Winston took the lead up the steep hillside, following a faint trail that had been made by local animals, not human feet, "I think maybe checking out the cemetery wouldn't've been so bad after all. Nobody told me this half of the estate was a nature preserve."

Winston shrugged, trying to keep one eye open for obstacles in the rocky trail and the other on the meter. "Hey, you're the one who picked it. Besides, a little fresh air and walking never killed anyone."

Peter harrumphed. "That's easy for you to say, Mister Army Veteran. Liberal arts colleges don't usually force students out on ten-mile hikes in combat gear. I wasn't trained for this."

Just before they reached the crest of the hill, the animal trail ended; Zeddemore stopped to get his bearings. Peter, waiting impatiently behind him, stuffed his hands into his pockets and wished the cold wind were a little less brisk. "C'mon, Winston," he urged when the sun went behind a cloud and cut off what meager warmth it had been providing. "We haven't gotten a flicker of a reading yet, and I don't think we're gonna. If this spook has any brains, it's probably hiding out in one of the buildings, trying to keep warm. And if we had any brains, that's where we'd be, too. Can't we just hurry it up and head back to the house?"

"We're almost finished," Winston assured him. "An' believe me, you don't know what cold is 'til you've gone out on maneuvers in December, in a pouring rain. C'mon, I think there's a clearer path that way." He pushed his way through a knot of bare-branched bushes to the right of a large tree that, from this vantage, appeared to be on the edge of a clearing at the top of the hill. Frustrated and cold, Peter sighed, considered taking off for the house and leaving his friend to finish the job on his own, then decided he didn't want to get ragged at for it. Resigned, he followed.

As he pushed his way through the bushes, small thorns caught at the psychologist's pants and jacket, further fouling his already fouled mood. When he finally reached the top of the hill and the end of the bushes, he nearly ran into his black partner, who had suddenly stopped. He scowled, miffed. "Gosh, Winston," he drawled sarcastically, "I can't remember when I've ever had such a wonderful time. Remind me to send you the repair bill when I take my clothes in to have all the holes patched. Why don't we just—?"

Peter abruptly fell silent, realizing that Zeddemore was paying him not the least bit of attention. He belatedly noticed that the black man was staring into the clearing, and that his PKE meter — which had been stone silent since they'd left the house — was silent no longer, that its readouts and indicators were registering more than mere traces of psychokinetic energy.

Venkman blinked at the seemingly agitated little device, then frowned, perplexed. "What the...?" he began.

Winston lifted one arm and pointed. "Pete, look!" he half-whispered. Peter did just that, following the line of his partner's arm.

Just beyond them, at the crest of the hill, lay a clearing that was precisely that: clear — *too* clear. Though the trees and grass and brush lay thick on the hillsides and flat-lands surrounding it, at the center of the clearing was a perfect circle of nothing, an area about thirty feet across in which no living thing grew, not even a blade of grass or spot of lichen.

Peter swallowed and attempted to remain flippant. "Well, it looks like someone's been here before us," he quipped, gesturing to the circle. "You don't suppose the gardener's planning on putting in a flowerbed here, do you?"

Winston's head-shake held no hint of indecision. "Not a chance. If that'd been made by a gardener, there'd be shovel marks or rake marks or footprints or *something* — but there isn't. And look — there isn't a speck of ice on it."

Venkman hadn't noticed that detail before; now that he did, he wished Winston hadn't mentioned it. All around them, the trees and bushes and grass were still dripping with the melting remnants of yesterday's ice-storm — but the circle of exposed earth and rocks was completely dry.

"And," Zeddemore added before Peter could relocate his voice and devise a properly vacuous explanation for this new twist, "it's givin' off enough PKE to light up Manhattan." He glanced from meter to circle several times, confirming that neither was an illusion; though the readings were not steady — they spiked and fell not unlike the phenomenon Egon had recorded early that morning — they were undeniably strong, and slowly rising in an upwardly-spiraling increase of power. Winston then looked up at his employer with a deeply worried expression that made Venkman's skin crawl. "This is no flower garden, Peter," he said darkly. "This is somethin' *big*."

Much as he hated it, Peter had to agree. Though he seldom seemed to take any part of their business seriously, the carefree attitude he affected was really his own way of trying to protect himself — and, to an even greater degree, his friends — from being overwhelmed by the more profound aspects of their work. The metaphysical implications of what they did — indeed, even the very fact that they were able to do it — were, if one stopped to consider them, awesome to the point of actually being frightening. And though he preferred not to talk about it, Peter knew that, from the moment they'd started their business, they had gotten themselves involved in — ironically — gravely important matters.

"Yeah," he breathed unhappily, eyeing the meter as one might the most heinous traitor ever born. "And it looks like this is gonna be another Big Twinkie, if those readings are on the money. You sure it's working right?"

Winston studied the device this way and that, then shrugged. "Near as I can tell, it is."

"Then how come we didn't pick up one peep 'til we reached the top of the hill? With something that juiced, shouldn't it've registered sooner?"

That very question had been niggling, unrecognized, at the back of Winston's mind; now that it had come out into the open, he found himself in no less of a quandary than before. "I'd think so, yeah, but I'm no parapsych expert. Either the meter's working right and there *is* something here, or it's on the fritz an' feeding us a lot of garbage." He paused briefly to consider the matter. "If you want my *opinion*, then I say it's right on target, 'cause that ain't the work of any gardener." His free hand once more gestured to the puzzling plot of bare ground.

Peter grimaced. "I wish you hadn't mentioned that, Winston. I was just beginning to convince myself this was all in the imagination of that blasted meter, and we weren't going to get into a mess of trouble again."

"We don't know this is gonna be trouble," Zeddemore noted, though he didn't believe it.

Neither did Peter. "With our luck? Of *course* it's gonna be trouble. It wouldn't be us if it wasn't trouble." He kicked at the muddy ground, feeling perplexed and more than slightly wary as he looked back at the unnaturally dry ground within the circle. "C'mon," he finally suggested. "Let's get back to the house and see if Ray and Egon are done yet. I'm not doing *anything* until we've got all four of us here to deal with it."

Winston understood that prudence and agreed with it, though he wasn't as certain they should leave just yet. "We could always call 'em here," he pointed out, tapping the walkie-talkie clipped to the waist-strap of his accelerator pack.

"And stand here and freeze 'til they show up?" The psychologist shivered at the thought. "No way."

"But what if something happens in the meantime?"

"That's exactly what I'm worried about," Peter replied, meaning it. He turned and headed for the nearest reasonably clear path down the hillside, grabbing one of Winston's sleeves on the way. "C'mon, let's put a little distance between us and that whatever-it-is."

Zeddemore remained adamant. "But, Peter...."

Exasperated, Venkman stopped his retreat long enough to glance at his colleague over one shoulder. "Look, Winston, I think it's really noble of you to want to stake out this frozen hell-hole — but just look at those readings, for god's sake! Do you know what they really mean, other'n that whatever's here is something that could chew off your toes without even taking off your shoes?"

Winston hesitated. "Well... no...."

"Then let's try to be a little less heroic and a lot more practical. You and I *don't* know what we're really dealing with here, so let's go get our two little boy geniuses and let *them* turn their brains into mush trying to figure out what it is *before* we go and make ourselves candidates for posthumous medals of honor — okay?"

It was a very rational argument, something Peter very seldom fell back on; Winston was suitably impressed. He nodded his concession but, still worried, he consulted the meter one last time, then cast a wary glance at the strangely, symmetrically lifeless patch of ground. "Okay, but I was just thinking: Maybe there's nothing growing there 'cause of something in the dirt. You know, like that field on Ray's cousin's farm."

Peter failed to see the significance of this observation. "So?"

"So maybe we ought to take some of it back so we can test it and see what's up with it."

A suspicious frown settled between Peter's eyes. "And where're 'we' supposed to put the stuff? In our pockets?"

The black man shrugged. "That'd do...."

"Not me! I gave up playing in the dirt years ago, and I'm not messing up a brand new jacket by filling my pockets with mud!"

Winston sighed. "Never mind, then," he said, shoving the meter into Venkman's hands. "I'll do it."

Peter bumbled slightly in token protest, but otherwise made no attempt to change his partner's mind. Winston strode toward the circle; he had covered no more than three of the six steps required to reach it when a sudden, shrill, and totally unprecedented whine from the still quite active PKE meter stopped him in his tracks. He was no coward, but dealing with matters as unpredictable as the supernatural had cultivated in him a healthy sense of caution.

"What's up?" he asked, not about to take another step until he was reasonably certain it was safe to do so.

"I don't know," Peter admitted honestly. "As soon as you started moving toward that whatever-it-is, the readings got stronger."

"You mean, they got stronger *because* I was moving toward it?"

"I don't know that, either. Try backing off, and we'll see if that makes 'em drop."

That sounded to be as good a plan of action as any, so Winston did just that. The meter's whine didn't abate; it also didn't get worse, so they could only conclude that the rise in energy levels had nothing whatsoever to do with their proximity to the circle.

Venkman studied the to-him puzzling readings; he glanced at the empty clearing, then nervously licked his bone-dry lips. "I don't like the look of this, Winston," he said without any hint of flippancy. "Hurry up and get your sample, then let's get out of here."

Zeddemore had gotten a look at the data being displayed on the meter's small screen, and he wasn't about to argue. He strode back to the edge of the circle, squatted, pulled off one glove, reached down to dig up a fistful of dirt — and bellowed the instant his bare flesh touched the soil.

Scared though he was rapidly becoming, Peter did not hesitate to come to his friend's aid. He was no MD, being a psychologist rather than a psychiatrist, but he'd been through enough in his lifetime to recognize a burn when he saw it. "How bad is it?" he asked as he smothered Winston's singed fingers in the handful of slush he'd scooped up off the nearest pile.

"Not too bad," Winston hissed, a reaction to the contrasting cold and heat rather than to any serious pain. "I was more surprised than really hurt — but, hell, I sure wasn't expecting *this!*"

Peter was quite sure of that. His face tightening with thought, he picked up a second handful of slush and tossed it onto the bare earth. It neither spat nor sputtered as water would when thrown onto a hot surface; it didn't even appear to melt, as ice normally would when near a heat-source, but it nonetheless evaporated with visible efficiency. In a matter of seconds, it was completely gone, leaving the spot beneath it dust-dry. Now even more perplexed, Peter tentatively brought one of his own hands as close to the exposed ground as he dared without actually touching it. His frowned deepened.

"It isn't even warm," he announced. "No heat radiation at all."

That clearly wasn't the verdict Winston had expected. "Well, it sure was two seconds ago!" he snapped, outraged — at the seemingly traitorous dirt, not at his partner. "I didn't imagine it!"

"I didn't say you did. But—"

As abruptly as Winston had cried out, Peter fell silent. He didn't know why, but something had stolen the words right out of his mouth, something that gave him a sudden, awful, terrible feeling in the pit of his stomach, the way he'd always felt when he'd been a school kid and had been about to get it from the principal for something even *he* knew was really rotten.

Suddenly, both men noticed how the trees around them were trembling, like news footage they'd seen of buildings about to collapse in an earthquake.

That was when they felt the ground beneath them start to move.

Winston swallowed uneasily. The black, bare branches swaying above them brought to mind all the old fairy tales that had scared him as a child — and if the meter's insistent whine was any indication, the monster at the heart of this forest of thorns was no mere fire-breathing dragon. "Pete," he croaked, his throat desert-dry, "I'm getting a really bad feeling about this...."

Venkman tried to grin, but the expression came out as sickly rather than cocky. "If you are, then you caught it from me." In his hand, the meter continued to register the still-fluctuating PKE levels, though now, the pattern of their

rise and fall had taken on a steady rhythm, like the pulsing of a giant heart or — in even more horrifying analogy — like an angered beast throwing itself again and again at the walls of its prison, trying to hammer its way to freedom and to vengeance on the ones who had dared imprison it.

The moment those comparisons popped into Peter's thoughts, he chastised himself for being stupid enough to think them. Whatever was stirring beneath this hill was giving off readings that, confused though they might be, were still of a magnitude the psychologist had seen only a handful of times in all their years of paranormal business. He reacted to the sight of them as he'd reacted in the past: with the awful feeling that they were getting themselves into something with which no mortal could hope to compete, much less conquer. The usually reassuring weight of his accelerator suddenly felt no more useful than a proverbial millstone, bringing on a sense of futility that even Winston's staunch presence couldn't dispel. Peter furtively looked up at the quivering trees, felt the sickening undulation of the ground under his knees like the hungry, incessant lurching of some prehistoric tarpit, and rapidly came to a decision. "I think we'd better get out of here—"

Winston couldn't have agreed more. Both men climbed to their feet as fast as they were able; steadying each other against the uneven movement of the earth around the circle, they stumbled out of the clearing and down the hillside, heedless of the clothes-clutching brush that wanted to hold them there, their only thought to get away from this still formless danger before they became its victims.

When they were at last well off the hill, skin-scratched and clothes-tattered but beyond the eaves of the woods and several hundred feet into the surrounding field, they finally stopped, knowing, somehow, that they had reached safety. For more than a minute, they just stood there, gasping and panting as they tried to catch their also-ragged breaths and willing their pounding hearts to calm; eventually, they worked up the nerve to look back.

From here, the woods looked perfectly normal, its trees moving no more than trees would in a natural wind — and once again, the PKE meter was silent.

Peter scowled at the device, shook it, then rapped it a few times, as one might a pocket radio with a loose battery connection. "Please tell me I didn't imagine all that," he begged his companion.

Obligingly, Winston reached over and tapped the appropriate controls to switch the device from *scan* to *replay* mode. The screen blanked for a second, then displayed all the unnerving data it had absorbed while on the hilltop. "You didn't," he said, reassuring them both. "What the heck was that?"

Peter watched the last of the stored information replay itself, then shuddered and shook his head. "I don't know, but I think you were right about calling in Ray and Egon. 'Cause I'm willing to bet you anything you can name that whatever's up on that hill *isn't* Theodosia."

Although she hadn't noticed the passing time, Janine had been reading for five hours straight when she began to feel the eerie sensation of something watching her. At first, she paid it very little mind, assuming that it was nothing more than a minor side effect of what she'd been reading, strange stuff that had gotten stranger and stranger the more she delved into it. She dismissed it without a second thought and continued her reading — but the feeling refused to go away. The more it persisted, the more a notion grew at the back of her mind, a suspicion that she was being watched by the specter of the woman whose journals she'd been examining. That idea flourished until it became full-blown nervousness; finally, unable to stand it any longer, she looked up, half-expecting to see a ghost, half-expecting to see nothing.

Instead, she saw a face very close by, staring at her.

Startled, the secretary came very close to jumping out of her seat and screaming; to the good fortune of her dignity, she didn't. It took only a second or two for her to realize that the eyes watching her were quite solid, not spectral, and that the face in which they were set was very human — in fact, that of a child, specifically a girl of about seven with pale blonde hair and large vivid blue eyes, who was draped over the sofa-arm not far from Janine's right elbow. The innocent, pretty little face was such a contrast to the hideous ghost-visage she'd been expecting, Janine loosed a massive sigh of relief.

The child seemed glad to have finally been noticed. "Hi," she said, smiling but still staring.

"Hi, yourself," the woman replied, swallowing to put her voice back on track when it cracked on the first syllable. "Who are you?" It was a logical question, since she couldn't remember Evelyn saying anything about children living on the estate.

The girl was perfectly willing to be cooperative. "Nori," she said. "That's what Mommy calls me. My name's really Honorea, but Mommy thinks it's too big for me."

"She's right," Janine agreed, a crooked smile tugging at one corner of her mouth. With a name like that... "You've got to be a Spengler, right?"

Nori positively beamed. "Right. Great-Aunt Evvie asked us here for Thanksgiving. Did she ask you, too?"

"Sort of. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Mommy sent me here to look for Great-Aunt Evvie."

"Well, she isn't here."

"I know." The girl cocked her head to one side, studying the redhead for a moment or two like a curious bird. Then, out of the blue, she said, "You're Janine. Right?"

The receptionist blinked, surprised to have been so easily identified by a kid she didn't even know. "Right. Did your mother tell you that?"

"Oh, no. I've seen pictures. You work with my Uncle Egon, don't you?"

Ah-hah, Janine thought, the detective finally laying finger on the vital clue. The photo-album she'd found in the attic suddenly popped to mind, and she could now see enough family resemblance to figure out to whom the girl belonged. *So Evelyn invited Justin, too, did she? I wonder how the guys are gonna like that little twist...?* "Yeah, I do. But where did you see pictures?"

Nori shrugged. "In magazines an' on TV. Daddy doesn't like us to see that stuff 'cause he says he doesn't want us to believe in it, but Nikki an' Zak an' me think it's real neat." She paused, a most curious expression touching her small features. "Is it neat?"

The question caught Janine unawares. "Is what neat?"

"Chasin' ghosts an' things like that. The stuff in the magazines an' TV make it sound real exciting, but Daddy says it's all a big... a big..." She fished for the proper word.

Remembering how Egon had said Justin took after their father, Janine knew exactly what word she was trying to find. "A big hoax," she supplied, not without a faint trace of rancor.

"Yeah, that's what he called it. He says it's just a bunch of fibs people make up 'cause they're scared'a the truth — y'know, things like dyin' an' that. But Nikki says he remembers Uncle Egon from before we moved to Japan, an' he doesn't think he'd lie like that." She hesitated, biting her lower lip. "Would he?"

"No, he wouldn't." It then occurred to Janine that Justin might have been brainwashing his kids into their grandfather's kind of warped thinking; she had to find out for certain whether this notion was reality or mere fantasy on her part. "Do you think so?"

Non shrugged. "I dunno," she answered matter-of-factly. "I was too little before we moved. I've just seen Nikki's pictures an' the TV stuff — an' out in the hallway, when we came in." She blinked at the older woman, clearly prepared to accept whatever answer she gave as gospel truth. "It isn't all a big fib, is it?"

Janine didn't hesitate, wanting to reaffirm the child's faith and trust in the honesty of adults, and just maybe wanting to help reinforce her almost miraculously positive image of her uncle. "No, it isn't. Sometimes, I'm not really sure what all of these things *are*, but I know they're for real. I guess your dad thinks they can't exist 'cause he's never really seen 'em, face-to-face."

The girl nodded with all the wisdom of ages. "Yeah, that's what Mommy an' Nikki think, too." She glanced at the piles of books and papers scattered all over the room, then pursed her lips. "Great-Aunt Evvie says she asked you to come visit her 'cause she's been havin' trouble with a ghost. Did the ghost do this?"

Janine had to laugh. "I wish. No, we're just trying to find out more about it."

"Oh." She paused. "Can I help?"

Janine considered that question for a long moment. Over the last few hours, she had begun to see an awful pattern being formed by all the bits of information she'd gleaned from Theodosia's journals and the other clippings and diaries and genealogies she'd examined. She had pored over every bit of pertinent information she'd been able to find, had taken notes and scribbled out a diagram to chart a long and chilling sequence of events, and she still found herself short a few vital pieces needed to complete the puzzling picture. Nori's interruption had come virtually at the end of her research; now that she had a chance to reflect on what she had learned and what she still needed to know, she could see just what she had to do to find those missing pieces.

"I think maybe you can," she replied, to the little girl's pleasure. "I need to find your Great-Aunt Evvie, too, so if you can show me where you *haven't* looked for her yet, maybe we can find her together."

While Peter and Winston were trudging their way up the hillside to the surprise awaiting them there, and while Janine was having her chat with Justin's daughter, Ray and Egon had very nearly finished their own exacting inspection of the southern half of Evelyn's property, a task that had gone rather more quickly than their partners', not only because of its lack of PK activity but because it was considerably more cultivated and therefore easier to traverse than its northern complement. Having started at the northwest corner of their designated tract, the two scientists had systematically and painstakingly covered every square foot of land, including both interiors and exteriors of the various outbuildings. Intriguing though some of the older structures were, nowhere did they come across so much as a feeble flicker of spectral activity; even the cemetery — the last site to be checked on their carefully plotted route — was psychokinetically silent as they approached it.

Ray — who had let Egon do the actual meter-scanning, since that seemed to be what the physicist wanted, a desire that coincidentally left Stantz free to satisfy his itching curiosity to take a good close look at the place — didn't try to hide his disappointment over this final failure while he worked at opening the stiff latch on the cemetery gate. "I hope Peter and Winston found something," was his unhappy opinion, "cause if they didn't, it's sure gonna look like we don't know *what* the heck we're doing."

Egon didn't appear at all concerned by that possibility. "If they didn't, then we'll do it over again until we *do* find something. *If* there's a ghost isn't the question; the equipment doesn't have an imagination to play tricks on it. There's something here, all right; the only answers we need to find are what it is, exactly, and where it's coming from."

Ray sighed as he finally unhooked the recalcitrant latch and pushed open the gate. "Yeah," he sighed, "but I don't think your father or your brother are gonna look at it that way. If we don't find something on our first try, you *know* they're gonna say it's because there isn't anything here to find."

"Then it's their problem, not ours," came the equable reply. "Really, Ray, I don't see what you're worried about."

The occultist opened his mouth and was about to enumerate the more than half-dozen concerns that were on his mind, but all that came out was a lackluster, "Nothing, I guess." If he'd wanted to make an issue of it, Ray could have gone on in great detail, listing off his precise and not terribly complimentary thoughts concerning Quentin and Justin and their very one-dimensional views of life, the universe, and everything; he could have spent the next twenty minutes explaining exactly how he thought any apparent failure on their part would further undermine those already biased

opinions of their business; he could have spent another half-hour describing just how a failure now would reflect on them, personally. That he mentioned none of this was a matter of politeness, not politics.

Family friction was something with which Ray was only too familiar. He didn't get along very well with his own brother and sister for what he felt were somewhat similar reasons, but at least his father had never bad-mouthed his friends to their faces, nor had either of his parents actively campaigned against him and his choice of careers in the heat of a family squabble. Granted, their politely evasive explanations for his behavior — "Ray is just *different*, dear" — had had their own mildly patronizing patina, but they had certainly been a far cry from Justin's flat-out refusal to accept the existence of anything outside his own experience and Quentin's monumental indifference toward things and people he neither liked nor wanted to like. Ray even supposed that, if the truth be known, he wasn't really worried about how a failure at this point would reflect on him or Peter or Winston or Janine or even on their business as a whole — but he knew what Quentin and Justin would think of it and on whom they would ultimately pin any blame. In his own Boy Scout attitude toward life, Ray had decided hours ago that if he could spare his best friend yet another pounding in the arena of family opinion, he would. It was just his way.

He didn't bother to close the gate behind them, since it had been such a pain to open and they'd be leaving soon, in any case. He'd been sort of expecting the place to look run-down and shabby, like most of the old private cemeteries he'd seen abandoned on the edges of small towns or alongside country roads. He should have known better. Whoever Evelyn had hired — or, like Lambert, had inherited — as her groundskeeper was diligent to a fault; not a shrub or tree or blade of grass under his care went untended. The cemetery, like the rest of the formal grounds, was free from weeds and litter and other yard debris. The various stones and monuments were in neat rows, though some showed the unavoidable wear of wind and rain and long years. Ray felt a little disappointed, having subconsciously wanted something of a more Gothic-horror nature to liven up this last leg of what had thus far been a boringly uneventful assignment.

There was nothing ostentatious about the place. The wall around it was a simple stone fence like that along the borders of the estate; the headstones were little more than plain granite markers inscribed with names, dates, and an occasional decorative border or such. Some of the inscriptions had been nearly worn off by years of weathering, but after a little searching, Ray finally located the stones marking the graves of Theodosia and her family, toward the back of the yard. After studying the plain weather-beaten markers for a few moments, the occultist exhaled in a long, whistling sigh.

"You don't suppose she's actually sourcing from her grave site, do you?" he asked Egon, who was methodically pacing up and down the rows, eyes fixed on the meter rather than on any of the stones.

"Doubtful," the physicist replied distractedly. "From past experience, life — and the afterlife — is seldom that predictable."

Ray had no choice but to agree. "Yeah, and most ghosts who keep hanging on because of a traumatic death usually stick close to the place they died, not their grave." He stuffed his mittened hands into his pockets and continued on along the row. "Which still doesn't explain why we haven't picked up any PKE traces. If Theodosia's haunting this place 'cause she didn't like the circumstances of her death, we should've picked up *something* back along the road, where she had the carriage accident."

Egon apparently didn't find that observation to be the least bit troublesome. He shrugged. "Unpredictable, like I said. The local PKE cycles may completely disrupt any normal ghostly patterns. In fact, I believe that is amply verified by the fact that my sister has visited here any number of times throughout the years, and not once has her presence incited any ghostly manifestations. Clearly, whatever is causing the natural PKE into a pattern of peaks and lulls inhibits the appearances of any local specters."

Ray harrumphed softly as he came up behind his tall partner. "Which means she may be sourcing from a tree somewhere out in the pasture, 'cause it's got the strongest natural PKE concentration. I just wish we had something a little more solid to work with."

"So do I, but we have to be patient, Ray. We know there's a ghost here, and we'll find it, sooner or later."

"Well, I hope it isn't too much later, or we'll be here 'til *next* Thanksgiving." Feeling more useless than before since there wasn't much to look for here other than reactions on a PKE meter, Stantz moved off at an angle

perpendicular to the aisle he'd been following when an oddly-shaped stone in the next row caught the corner of his eye. At first, he thought the thing might mark the final resting place of some particularly important ancestor, but a closer look showed that the stone's shape was the result of natural forces, not of any stonecutter's tool. He sighed, disappointed yet again.

"'Jechoniah'," he said aloud, that being the name on the more-than-a-century-old, battered rock. He ambled along the row, reading the inscriptions as he went. "'Theophilus' — 'Chriseida' — 'Eudora' — 'Justinian' — I hate to say it, Egon, but I think Peter was right about odd names running in your family." The physicist didn't react, so Ray continued his recitation. "'Philomela' — 'Endimion' — 'Maximilian' — 'Leonie' — 'Creighton'...." He stopped, took a step backward, and gave the last stone a second look, to locate full name and dates. "Hey, Egon, are these your grandparents?"

Having finished his scan of the previous row, Egon had caught up with him just then; this time, he spared a brief glance at the marker Ray found so interesting. "Was," he both corrected and confirmed.

The remark was so thoroughly colorless, Ray was certain he'd unwittingly stuck his foot into something personal with all the grace of a T-Rex in a Waterford Crystal shop. "Hey, I'm sorry..." he began.

But his companion dismissed the half-started apology as dispassionately as he'd corrected the occultist's error in tenses. "No reason. I have no more superstitious misconceptions about death than you do, Ray. Personally, I find the common rituals surrounding burial to be a primitive misdirection of energy and expense. The body is nothing when compared to the mind." With that, he resumed his sweep of the area.

Ray shifted position uncomfortably, but said nothing. He had heard Egon expound that particular philosophy before, and while he agreed with him on general principles, he also had to acknowledge that those "primitive rituals" were both valid and valued by most of the rest of the world. Lord knew, he personally would have felt much better if the plane crash that had killed his parents had left behind *something* they could have given a decent burial, instead of leaving him and his siblings wondering whether or not their bodies were still floating around somewhere in the Carribean, or if a passing shark had eaten their remains for lunch.

As he watched Egon continue on down the last of the narrow rows, quite his usual placid and imperturbable self, Ray found himself wishing that just once, he could see inside the head of his sometimes enigmatic friend to find out just how he managed to take so calmly things that the rest of marginally sane humankind couldn't.

What he would have seen at that particular moment was a fragment of a memory stirred by the sight of the name cut into the stone, a very old memory that echoed in the mind like sound in a long, empty cavern.

"Grandma, why doesn't Justin like me?"

"Who says he doesn't like you?"

"He did. Look what he did to my chemistry set."

"That doesn't mean he doesn't like you. It was probably just an accident."

"Oh, no, it wasn't. I saw him do it. He broke it on purpose."

"That's all right, sweetheart. Your grandfather and I'll buy you a new one—"

"And he'll bust that, too."

"Well, maybe it's just because you're so much younger than he is. Big brothers sometimes pick on little ones. I know mine did."

"But he doesn't pick on Alex."

"That's because she's a girl. Boys shouldn't pick on girls."

"Why not?"

"It's one of the rules."

"So's not breaking somebody else's stuff."

"Well, you know he doesn't understand what a five-year-old is doing, playing with things like that."

"But I'm not playing with it, Grandma...."

"I know. Maybe that's what Justin really doesn't like."

"He doesn't like my chemistry set?"

"No; maybe he doesn't like what you do with it."

"But why?"

"I don't know, Egon. I just don't know...."

"Ray? Come in, Ray — it's Winston. Ray?"

That considerably less distant squawking overwhelmed the mere memory-echo and returned Egon's momentarily diverted attention to his still-lifeless meter and the much more active walkie-talkie on Ray's belt. Though the physicist kept on with his almost-complete scan of the cemetery, he listened while his partner answered the frantic-sounding call.

"I'm here, Winston," Stantz responded, unclipping the radio and thumbing the transmit switch in one motion. "What's up?"

Zeddemore responded without preamble. "You guys have got to get over here — *now!*"

Ray's eyes widened, surprised by the unadorned urgency in Winston's voice; he glanced at Egon, who was looking in his direction, also startled. "What happened?" the occultist asked into the pickup, voicing the question on both their minds. "Where are you?"

"Pete an' I are in the field just north of the stables, maybe half a mile or so from the bridle path. We were checking out that big hill you can see from the back of the house when...." One could almost hear the black man shaking his head. "I don't exactly know how to explain it. All hell broke loose, that's all I know."

"You mean, you saw a manifestation?" Ray had difficulty keeping the excitement from his voice; he'd been hovering on the verge of severe boredom for at least the last half hour.

Again, Winston seemed to be shaking his head. "That depends on what you call a manifestation. Not a ghost or anything, but...."

Peter's voice cut in, staticky with distance, as if he was talking over Winston's shoulder. "Is a PKE reading of 9.3 manifestation enough, Ray?" he asked, his voice heavy with sarcasm. Stantz whistled at the report, but Peter continued before he could comment. "Just hustle your buns and get over here, now — both of you! This thing is bigger than we thought."

It was, indeed; both Ray and Egon confirmed it when they arrived a short time later. "These are the readings you got when you reached the top of the hill?" the former of the two asked as he and Spengler studied the replay from Winston's meter.

"Yeah, and *only* when we reached the top," Winston confirmed. They were still standing in the middle of the field, since neither Zeddemore nor Venkman felt inclined to pay the hilltop a second visit until they had some plan of action in mind. "It was pretty spooky. Not one squeak from that thing for four hours, then, *boom!*"

“Strange that it should be so entirely confined to one site,” Egon mused, glancing from the meter to the wooded hill and back again.

An ironically amused breath whistled through Peter’s teeth. “Seems to me I’ve heard you say that before. And weren’t you wrong then, too?”

“It’s not a question of wrong or right,” the physicist replied distractedly as he continued to contemplate the meter readings and their implications. “Merely an observation. And one of more serious consequences this time, I should think.”

Winston didn’t like the sound of that at all. He swallowed nervously. “More serious? Why more serious?”

“Because in the case of a house-bound spirit, one could speculate certain natural limitations...”

“Like the what-were-they-called in Ray’s aunt’s dining room?”

“*Domovien*,” he was helpfully supplied. “Yes, something of that general nature was what I had in mind.”

“Yeah, but there’re critters with natural limitations that *aren’t* housebound,” Ray pointed out. “Dryads, naiads, sylphs, stuff like that.”

“True. But in all instances, they’re relatively minor entities — nothing this powerful. And Peter’s right to draw a comparison between this and the demon in Mrs. Faversham’s attic. It had been contained deliberately — and I suspect whatever this is, it’s been trapped here, too.”

Peter had been listening with more than his usual attentiveness, for one of Egon’s impromptu lectures; now, he frowned. “But I thought none of your father’s relatives were into anything supernatural.”

The physicist shrugged. “Other than occasional casual scientific interest in the subject — and usually in debunking it, not in treating as an area of serious in-depth research — you’re right, they haven’t been, at least not in recent memory, and certainly none of the relations who lived here.”

“Then how did this whatever-it-is get stuck here? If it’s been bound on purpose, someone had to do the binding — and ‘til you guys came up with this nifty ecto-containment system of ours, there weren’t a whole heck of a lot of ways to do that, except by magic.”

Egon had never been entirely comfortable with that term, at least not in its common, casual usage; it carried too many implications of pure superstition, the pop-culture products of an over-active imagination rather than the solid facts of level-headed scientific observation. He preferred to think of “magic” as a ritualistic form of manipulating psychokinetic energies performed by non-spiritual entities with exceptionally high psi sensitivity. And when it came to applying even that concept to the ultra-realistic scientists and scholars in his father’s side of the family.... Needless to say, he had his doubts.

“There’s no way of knowing how long this creature’s been trapped here,” he essayed as an answer to Peter’s question. “This area was once populated by various tribes of Native Americans; it’s possible this was the result of some very ancient binding ritual performed by one of their shamans.”

Peter wasn’t completely satisfied. “Fat chance,” he snorted. “*You* haven’t seen the site. Unless *nobody’s* ever been inside those woods, someone would have noticed it before now, especially if it’s been there for hundreds of years. It’s not exactly the sort of thing you can miss.”

Again, Egon shrugged. “Quite likely, it isn’t evident at all times of year. Remember, this area does seem to be subject to a significant natural cycle of psychokinetic energy. And given these readings and the nature of the instances reported in my aunt’s house, I’d say it’s entirely possible the two are completely unrelated.” He paused to look up at the hill. “Of course, the best way to determine whether or not they are is to have a closer look at it.” With that, he started across the field.

“Can’t we just study the readings and leave the thing alone ‘til we know what it is?” Winston asked, no more eager than Peter to go back.

“Meter readings alone can’t tell us everything,” was Egon’s blunt answer.

“Besides,” Ray added with a grin, eagerly heading after his cohort-in-science, “there’re four of us now, so if things *do* start getting nasty again, we can take care of it, no problem. C’mon.”

Neither Peter nor Winston was even half sure of that, but, seeing they weren’t to be given another option, they followed — slowly, and at what they hoped would be a safe distance.

Once they reached the top of the hill, the meters again registered powerful psychokinetic energy readings, somewhat stronger than before but still no better defined; the physical manifestations, however, were gone. Ray and Egon entered the clearing without a moment’s hesitation, but Peter and Winston continued to hang back, warily remaining at the very edge of the underbrush. Ray’s reaction to his first sight of the unnatural circle of bare earth could be called nothing less than excited.

“This is great!” he crowed, pacing around the wide ring while Egon examined its readings with care. “I haven’t see this big an example of spirit-presence influencing physical objects since *Poltergeist!*”

Peter, uneasy over being this close to the thing, grumbled. “Bad choice of comparisons, Ray. The spooks in that movie swallowed a whole neighborhood!”

Stantz grinned. “I know. Wouldn’t it be great if we had something that big on our hands instead of just a plain old Class Six haunting?”

Appalled, Peter groaned. “I think we need to find this boy a nice padded cell somewhere,” he muttered to Winston. Zeddemore nodded.

Egon was neither excited nor appalled. “I doubt very much that we’re dealing with spirits from desecrated graves, here. But this is quite fascinating.”

“You know what it is, then?” Winston asked hopefully.

But the blond head shook. “No; there’s too much random PKE concentrated in the area for the meter to pick up any specific characteristics. But from the level of energy, I’d say what we have here is at least twice as powerful as a simple Class Six repeater.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Peter moaned. “That’s just what I wanted to hear.”

“Hey, it’s not all that bad,” Ray put in at his reassuring best. “At least whatever it is, it’s focused here. We won’t have to go around, trying to corner it.”

The sound the psychologist made could only be described as pained. “Thanks, Ray. That makes me feel so much better.”

Having completed his preliminary scans, Egon had turned his attention to the circle itself and stood studying it for several long moments. “There’s nothing I can see to indicate any connection between this and my aunt’s problem — although I do wonder whether or not Theodosia’s ring is reacting to this energy build-up. If there *is* a connection, it’d be reflected in PKE resonance-levels in the ring.”

“Great,” Venkman applauded, seeing in this an excellent excuse for retreat. “Let’s go back to the house and find out.”

Spengler, however, was not so easily persuaded to leave. “Later. The monitor will record any activity in the study. I think we should make certain we’ve examined this site as thoroughly as possible before leaving it. I’m surprised I never noticed this when I was here as a child — but then, it may not manifest in this fashion during low PKE times of year.”

"I tried to get some of the dirt to take back for a soil sample," Winston said, "but when I touched it, the stuff burned like fire."

"Even though it wasn't giving off any heat," Peter added.

"Did you try more than once?" Ray asked, squatting at the circle's edge to place his hand close to the exposed earth, as Peter had.

"No," Winston replied. "I didn't think there was any point in being that stupid."

It was a perfectly good explanation and Ray listened to it politely, but the moment his black partner had finished speaking, he reached down and scooped up a fistful of dirt.

Both Winston and Peter started to holler for him to stop, but — to their astonishment — Ray didn't bellow or even wince in pain. He merely poked at the stuff with his other hand, and rolled some of it between his fingers. "It's not even really warm," he reported.

"Well, it was as hot as a devil's behind half an hour ago!" Winston protested. "I wasn't imagining things!" As proof, he pulled off his glove and held up his reddened palm for them to see.

Ray briefly glanced in his direction, but Egon didn't even look up. "I'm sure you weren't," the physicist assured his indignant colleague. "But the outward results of spiritual activity can change dramatically from one minute to the next."

"There's nothing odd about this stuff," Ray announced after he'd sniffed and prodded and rubbed it. "No residue or anything, just dirt."

"I suspected as much. This could be nothing more than a perfectly normal point of concentration for local PKE, a naturally-occurring pocket in the immediate continuum. Any manner of psychokinetic activity could be attributed to its presence, even the agitation of a considerably less powerful and usually dormant resident specter in response to its cyclical fluctuations.

Ray nodded sagely as he dropped the dirt and brushed off his hands on his pants; Peter and Winston looked at each other, confused. "Did you get that?" the latter asked.

"I'm almost afraid to say it, but... yeah, I think I did," the former confessed.

Egon was oblivious to their exchange. "Perhaps we could get more informative readings from the center of the disturbance," he reflected.

Peter understood that without any trouble. "You want to go in the middle of that thing?" he asked as he pointed to the ominous-looking circle. "You'd be better off tying the meter to a rope and throwing it in there on its own, if you ask me."

From the look he cast the psychologist, Egon didn't agree; neither did Ray. "C'mon, Pete, don't be ridiculous. It's just a patch of dirt, not a black hole. We've got our accelerators, and it's only maybe thirty feet across. What could happen that we couldn't move fast enough to get out of?"

"It could swallow you," was Venkman's totally sober reply.

Ray laughed it off as he pushed himself to his feet. Already erect, Egon started into the circle.

But the moment he tried to cross the edge of ring, he struck something — invisible, but as solid as a brick wall.

"On the other hand," Peter drawled, "maybe it'll get its kicks by bouncing you around for a while."

Egon was not amused. "Very funny," he said, then tried again to cross the boundary. The invisible barrier remained firm.

Peter tried not to laugh, unsuccessfully. "Maybe it's just *you* the whatever-it-is doesn't like," he proposed. "Y'know, this being the family homestead and all."

The physicist scowled at his insouciant partner; while he was trying to think of an appropriate response, Ray attempted to enter the circle, and was similarly rebuffed.

The occultist favored the not-so-imaginary barrier with a truly disapproving frown. "Well, this is the pits," he grumbled. "Did you guys run into this earlier?"

"No," Peter replied, "but then, we weren't dumb enough to try walking into it, either."

Ray turned his grimace on Venkman. "It's strange that it'd let me reach in and pick up the dirt, though...."

"Which would seem to indicate a directing intelligence behind this barrier," Egon opined. He glanced at his PKE meter, then at where the wall would lay, were it visible. For a moment or two, he studied the not-wall with unfocused eyes, scratching his chin and thinking; finally, his eyes focused again as his thoughts returned to the here-and-now. With his attention fixed on the meter's readout screen, he tried again — unsuccessfully — to cross the boundary. "Interesting," he said when his experiment was complete. "The PKE levels remain fairly constant when we stay away from the circle, but they increase markedly when an attempt is made to enter. Ray, try crossing at the same time I do." Stantz obliged; both were once again bounced off the invisible wall. "Yes, there's a definite correlation, the degree of increase being in apparent proportion to the number of bodies trying to enter."

"So?" Peter wanted to know, unable to see what point Egon was trying to make.

"So, it could be significant."

The skeptic harrumphed. "So could the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin, but I haven't seen anyone wasting research money on it since the Dark Ages."

Ray chewed on his lower lip for a bit, obviously thinking hard. At length, he asked, "Did you and Winston try hitting it with the streams?"

Both men shook their heads. "We didn't see any particular reason to," Zeddemore admitted. "There weren't any actual ghosts around to shoot at."

"Sure, but sometimes, hitting a non-personified spectral power source at its center can overload it. We've done it at least half a dozen times before."

Peter groaned. "Yeah, and we always end up getting knocked around and bruised like a bunch of overripe bananas. I can think of better ways to spend my Thanksgiving than in traction."

Winston wasn't quite so skeptical. "Yeah, but I can see what they're driving at."

Peter blinked at his dark partner, surprised. "You *can*?"

Winston nodded. "If this whatever-it-is is responsible for wakin' up the ghost that's been bugging Evelyn and her staff, getting rid of it might let the ghost go back to sleep for good, without havin' to trap her and put her into containment."

Ray beamed. "Right. And overloading it might just do the trick."

Egon wasn't quite so enthused. "Perhaps," he ventured, "but I think I'd prefer to have a more definite idea of this entity's precise nature before we try anything so drastic. The data's still too vague to make a positive classification, and I'd rather avoid making it angry 'til we have some idea of what we're dealing with."

Peter's eyes widened in genuine surprise. "You mean for a change, you're not just keeping your mouth shut to stop us from chickening out? You really *don't* know what it is?"

The physicist shook his head, albeit reluctantly. "I'm afraid not."

The psychologist could scarcely believe it. Ray's glowing zeal dimmed a bit, damped by his tallest partner's logic. He sighed, but submitted. "I guess you're right about not making it angry. But," he went on after a moment's pause for reflection, some of his enthusiasm restored, "stinging the thing with a shot from our packs might be enough to bring down this force-field without getting it too riled."

"Now, *that* sounds a little more reasonable," Venkman approved with a nod.

"I'm willing to try it," Winston chimed in. "How d'you want to do this?"

"A short burst from the four compass points ought to provide a sufficient jolt without concentrating too much energy at any one point," Egon suggested. That seemed quite rational to the others, so they spread out to equidistant positions around the circle.

"Try a half-power setting first," Ray recommended. "Everyone ready? Okay — fire!"

"Did that do it?" Winston asked afterward.

Ray attempted to step into the circle; once again, he collided with the unseen wall.

Peter snorted softly. "Well, *that* was a wonderful waste of time."

Egon consulted his PKE meter, then sighed. "As a matter of fact, the energy levels are up slightly, not down."

"Maybe we need to try a stronger setting," Ray said thoughtfully. No one disagreed, so they tried again, at three-quarter power.

As before, the barrier stayed firm, though the PKE levels rose.

"I think maybe it's time we pulled off the kid gloves," Winston opined, his combat training thoroughly irritated by their continued lack of even marginal success. "Full stream, an' keep it on the blasted thing 'til *some thin'* happens."

Peter's smile was crooked. "Yeah, an' if it doesn't like it, we'll tell it to call our agent."

Ray blinked at him, innocently. "We don't have an agent, Peter."

The psychologist shrugged. "Then we'll do what we always do."

"Close our eyes, shoot, an' get ready to run like hell?"

"You've got it."

Determined to get some sort of significant reaction out of the whatever-it-was, the four eliminators followed Winston's plan of action and held their full-force streams trained on the circle. A reaction they got, indeed — but one none of the quartet had anticipated.

The barrier surrounding the barren plot of land suddenly became visible, turning to a milky, translucent wall that hovered about ten inches above the ground, a flat ring over seven feet high. A moment after it had thickened enough for the ghostbusters to notice its presence, it split into six equal fragments that just as quickly coalesced into six ambiguous but nonetheless clearly ghostly shapes. Without the slightest hesitance, they dove straight for their attackers.

"Holy—!" Peter was first to exclaim as a pair of the wispy forms shrieked by less than two inches over his head. He ducked and reflexively cut his stream, now on the alert for this more direct danger. "What the hell *is* this?" he demanded as he opened fire on one of the specters that was again swooping toward him.

“Hard to tell,” Ray hollered back as he warned off a particularly shrill assailant with a blast from his accelerator. “Could be actual ghosts, could just be random ectoplasm the controlling entity called up to scare us. They’re pretty indistinct.”

Winston, whose hands were full with the three spirits that had chosen him as their target, took a hurried shot at the group as he ducked the overshoot of Ray’s blast and just barely missed giving Peter’s jumpsuit rear air conditioning. “They’re pretty hacked off, too,” he growled. “I guess maybe—” He paused to fire again. “—we shouldn’t’ve tried so hard.”

Egon, having successfully fended off the attentions of one of the two spooks that had first dive-bombed Peter, cut his stream and went for his PKE meter. “Too much interference from the central source,” he announced as he dodged Winston’s second shot at his ghostly trio. “And they’re moving too fast, too close together. The meter can’t separate them enough to get a clear reading on their spectral type.”

“I *knew* this was gonna be no fun,” Peter grumbled. Having driven off his two original harassers, at least for the moment, he was able to give Winston a hand by hitting his three from behind. The first two were further dissuaded by a shot from Ray. Slowly, the specters appeared to comprehend the threat their weapons posed, for they were no longer so quick to re-engage after backing off. The three men, in fact, were soon quite able to choreograph their actions well enough to hold the spirits at bay, though not well enough to even attempt to trap them. There were simply too many.

Egon — who had had the great good fortune to be the one least harried by the ghosts — did not hesitate to make use of this opportunity. Once he was reasonably sure his partners had things under control — meaning once he was sure he could move without too much fear of having his head blasted off by their errant misses — he moved into the no-longer-barricaded circle.

Peter was first to notice this. “Egon, have you gone completely crazy?” he yelled, not feeling the least need to be polite. “Get out of there!”

Spengler was not deterred. “We may not get another chance like this,” he alibied, carefully avoiding their proton-fire-fallout as he hurried to the center of the ring. “It’ll only take a minute to get the readings I need.”

Peter ground his teeth. “It’ll only take a minute to get your head bitten — look out!” Even as he spoke, one of the specters slipped between their streams to dive at the unwary physicist. Venkman fired a warning shot to drive the thing away; not completely inattentive, Egon threw himself onto the ground at the center of the circle.

“Don’t be stupid, man!” Winston shouted, in complete agreement with Peter. “Get the hell out of there!”

But Egon was not about to pass up the observational opportunity presented by his position, so close to the heart of the effect. “One second....”

Two more of the spirits slipped free of their guard, having determined the pattern to their defense. Both dove for the middle of the circle, skimming the ground in a fashion that almost seemed designed to urge the scientist to leave rather than being an attack. Uncertain if this was true or a mere illusion of angle, Peter and Ray set up a crossfire to herd them away.

“Got it!” Egon called a few moments later. The spirits — which became more agitated the longer he remained in the circle, apparently angered by his presence there — were keeping his partners quite busy in their efforts to hold them off long enough for him to get out again. Looking up to get his bearings, the physicist pushed himself into a squatting position, waited until it was safe for him to stand, then rose to his feet—

—and the ground beneath him, which had been undeniably solid only seconds before, suddenly turned to a quicksand so greedy, he was swallowed up to his knees before he even realized what had happened.

“Guys!” he shrieked, unable to do anything else. It was such an uncharacteristic sound, coming from him, his partners all looked reflexively in his direction, their mild annoyance instantly changing to horror.

Without thinking, Winston started to run to help, but the moment his foot touched the interior of the circle, he could feel the dirt turn to mush under his boot sole. He pulled back before he'd fully put his weight on that foot; he teetered on the brink for a moment before regaining his balance on the solid ground outside the ring.

"Didn't I warn you?" Peter snapped with pseudo-anger even as he tried to lean out over the circle as far as he could, extending one hand toward his endangered partner. "I *told* you that thing'd try to swallow you, but did you listen? Noooo...."

"Don't panic!" Ray recommended when Peter's reach fell short by at least a foot, leaving Egon -- who was now mired up to his waist — to sink ever further into the unnatural bog. "Just relax and try not to move, or you'll go down even faster."

The beleaguered physicist was not especially impressed by the advice. "I don't think the Boy Scout manual is going to help, Ray," he retorted, his usual stoic composure gone in the grip of this only-too-real peril. "I think it's actively pulling me down!"

Peter's expression twisted wryly. "Well, that's what you get for wanting to go where no man has gone before." He glanced at his free partners. "One of you didn't think to bring a rope or a ladder truck, did you?"

"No," Winston replied with the rage of the helpless. He hefted his useless blaster, then was struck with sudden inspiration. "Could we use the cord on the packs...?"

But Ray instantly shot down that hope. "Nope — too short, and not strong enough. We need something long enough for him to grab onto."

Peter, who had just half-heartedly fended off one of the suddenly less agitated spirits, was looking up at the trees when Ray said that and, like Winston, fell victim to inspiration. "Would a tree branch do?" he asked.

Ray nodded vigorously and started checking out the underbrush for a suitable one among the fallen deadwood. "Yeah, that'd be perfect, if we can find one long enough...."

Peter grinned. "Don't worry, then. I've got just what we need." With that, he took aim at the only tree whose branches reached far enough into the clearing to extend over the pool of ground-turned-quicksand. His shot was true; accurately, cleanly, he blasted through the biggest available branch overhanging the clearing. It plunged earthward amid a spray of wood chips and autumn-dried leaves and impacted well within the boundaries of the circle.

Too well within the boundaries. The branch landed a good seven feet from the edge, beyond the reach of anyone without and too far from the center for the almost immobile Egon — who had by now sunken nearly to the top of his sternum — to grab hold of.

"Damn!" Peter swore, furious to have his brilliant scheme so precipitously ruined and no less distressed by the failure than his imperiled partner. "That was the only decent-sized branch out there, too!"

"It's okay!" Ray exclaimed, now seeing the answer to their plight in both Peter's failed attempt and the stand of saplings just beyond the western edge of the clearing. "We can bring down one of those younger trees and use it like a boat-hook to pull him out."

"Then hurry!" Egon suggested with more than a hint of panicked urgency, since he was no longer able to impede his downward progress, no matter how motionless he tried to remain.

"Don't worry," Winston said firmly, an attempt to be reassuring in what he knew were anything but reassuring circumstances. "We'll have you out of there in two seconds."

The spirits — which had backed off for the most part ever since the more powerful entity, undoubtedly their master, had caught one of its adversaries — suddenly became agitated again, apparently displeased by their certain-to-be successful plan. Before they could resume their swooping attack, Winston's well-trained battle-eye caught onto it; he immediately opened fire in an attempt to prevent any interference before it got underway. "Peter!" he shouted as Ray sprinted for the stand of saplings. "Help me!"

Venkman didn't need to be asked twice. With a comparative ease attained through a lot of practice — and a lot of mistakes — he and Zeddemore laid down (or up) a pattern of fire designed to keep the specters from harassing Ray and thus preventing him from felling the badly-needed sapling until it was too late. Their concentration was, by necessity, so focused on that one task, neither man noticed that the partner for whose life they were fighting was very close to going under.

From Egon's point of view, time and the whole of life compressed into a few all-too-fleeting seconds, lapsing into oblivion frame by frame, like frozen images on film being snapped off, one at a time, by the keen blades of an unrelenting cosmic clock.

Tick... and Winston's fire drove off two frantic specters, who went shrieking about the clearing with no apparent aim.

Tick... The suction of the angry entity pulled the physicist down 'til the not-quicksand almost covered his shoulders.

Tick... In his hurry, Ray tripped over a brush-hidden tree-root and almost fell, but miraculously regained his balance at the last possible second and pushed on, determined.

Tick... The thing below took another gulp, and the mire rose around its victim by yet another torturous fraction of an inch.

Tick... Peter, nimbly managing to fend off the simultaneous assault of two spirits, nonetheless was forced to throw himself to the ground to avoid the diving of third, which he had to let go as yet another pair avoided Winston's fire and turned instead on him.

Tick... The noise of a single proton blast was followed by the satisfying sound of splintering wood — but too late, for Egon could feel the suffocating pressure of the supematural muck as it began to lap against the base of his throat, up his neck, against his chin. He closed his eyes, wondering how it could possibly end like this and hoping it would be over with quickly...

...and then, unexpectedly, there was something there for his hands to grab onto other than mud, something solid but definitely not sinking, something with the rough feel of bark. Egon opened his eyes, expecting to see his friends at the other end of an improvised rescue-rod, ready to pull him out — but what met his eyes were eyes in a nother, ghostly-pale face, translucent, smiling, and — to his astonishment — *familiar*.

Winston, quite busy with the task of holding the marauding specters at bay, pivoted to follow the ghost that whizzed past him when a hurried shot missed its target; it was then that he saw the shadowy spirit-shape hovering over the center of the circle, intent on the trapped scientist. "Egon, look out!" he shouted in warning and, assuming the ghost was up to no good, opened fire.

That was enough to completely shatter the illusion of slowed time which had held Egon prisoner in the just-past seconds that had almost been his last. As he clung to the floating branch that had somehow been moved within his reach — indeed, had been pushed right into his hands — a sharp, "Winston, no, *don't!!!*" escaped him

It came milliseconds too late. Zeddemore's shot burned the air across the clearing and, though it didn't quite hit the specter, it drove the thing off. Silent, once more amorphous, it fled to the skies above the clearing where it joined its five fellows in a hastily disorganized retreat.

Just then, Ray burst back into the clearing, a felled young maple in hand. "Got it!" he exulted, immensely relieved to see that he hadn't arrived too late. "Peter, Winston — help me!"

Even with the few branches it boasted, maneuvering the long sapling-trunk across the quicksand without poking someone in the eye was difficult, but with Peter's assistance, Ray managed the trick without incident. Reasonably certain the ghosts had finally backed off for good, Winston shouldered his weapon and helped his two partners pull their unfortunate fourth out of the muck, once Egon had gotten a decent grip on the smooth-barked young trunk.

It took more effort than any of them had anticipated — the thing below the hill was, to all evidence, loath to release its captive — but they finally met with success, though it left them all breathless and muddy.

But even when Egon was safely ashore, the fun was far from over. As soon as its prisoner had been pried from the circle's clutches, the four paranormalogists were treated to a repeat performance of the earth-dance Peter and Winston had witnessed earlier. "Let's get out of here!" Venkman recommended the moment he felt that sickening rise and fall of ground that he never again wanted to experience. There was no opposition to his suggestion; they fled, with Winston and Ray more than half carrying Egon, who was too limp with fatigue to stand, much less run. When they reached the spot where they had rendezvoused before attempting the second expedition to the clearing, all four collapsed.

After what seemed like an hour of simply sitting there, trying to keep body and soul together, but was, in fact, no more than five minutes, Peter finally found his voice and the strength to use it. "I want a bath," he said flatly, "and someplace warm to sleep, and no more ghoulies an' ghosties an' long-legged or even short-legged beasties to blast until at least next July." He tried to run a hand through his hair, but the half-dried, half-frozen mud with which all of him had been splattered tangled his fingers almost immediately. He groaned. "Make that 'til July of 2020."

Ray, like all the rest of his partners, had no trouble commiserating; he didn't have the energy to sit up just yet, much less consider making the long hike back to the mansion. "I'm glad I got back when I did," he said between deep breaths, staring up at the tattered clouds, "cause I've never seen anything work that fast — not quicksand, not tarpits, not sinkholes — nothing."

"That's what Egon gets for never listening when people try to warn him," Venkman scolded, though with no real disapproval. "I *told* you that thing'd try to swallow 'im!"

"Not like this, you didn't," Winston pointed out. "You were lucky you managed to get a hold of that branch when you did, Egon, or I don't think we could've pulled you out with a construction winch."

"I didn't," came the less-than-whispered reply. Like shrieks of terror, this, too, was very out of keeping with Spengler's usual manner, and thus was enough to prompt all three of his companions to sit up and look at him, something they hadn't really done since they'd pulled him from the mire. The physicist, though normally somewhat on the pale side of natural coloring, was as white as the proverbial sheet and was shivering visibly. Though their first inclination was to suspect this condition was the result of exhaustion and the cold, all three had had enough exposure to first aid training to recognize the symptoms of shock.

Again, they all had the same reaction — worry — but Peter spoke up first, with atypical solicitude. "Hey, are you all right, Egon? That thing didn't break any bones or anything, did it?"

To their mutual relief, the muck-covered scientist shook his head. "No," he said, still faintly. "But I didn't reach the branch on my own. Someone *gave* it to me."

Winston blinked, puzzled. "Someone...?" Something vital clicked in his head; he saw the connection. "Not that ghost that was hangin' over you...."

This time, the mud-plastered head nodded — but Winston remained politely skeptical. "You must've been imagining things," he essayed. "Those spooks were tryin' to make trouble for us...."

"Or they might've been trying to help us," Ray interrupted thoughtfully, seeing a possibility Zeddemore could not. "Think about it, Winston. They might've been trying to get in our way because they *knew* what would happen if we went into the circle. They could've been on our side all along."

"We've seen stranger things before," Peter felt compelled to agree. "And it wouldn't be the first time we've had trouble telling our enemies from our allies."

Their dark colleague reluctantly conceded that truth. "Maybe. But a ghost deliberately stepping in to stop someone from dying?" He shook his head. "That'd be like a shark giving a life preserver to a drowning man."

“No, Winston,” Egon insisted. “It’s not the same thing at all.”

Zeddemore turned his eyes to the rather pathetic-looking physicist; though the man was still pale and shivering and as shaken as a survivor of the *Titanic*, he was also quite definitely *not* trying to be funny or arguing for argument’s sake. Winston frowned, now completely confused. “Why not? I mean, they’re still ghosts, aren’t they? We’re not exactly number one on their hit parade, y’know — an’ it’s not like you actually *know* ‘em or anything...”

“But I *do*.”

That quietly-voiced statement of fact had a bigger impact on the three listeners than anything they’d seen or heard that entire day. Their reactions were both similar and different: Ray was both startled and fascinated, as this was something about which they’d often speculated but had never actually encountered; Winston was stunned, not having expected that reply; and Peter was torn between shock and disbelief. “You *what?*” the last echoed, not quite sure he’d heard correctly, or wanted to.

“I recognized them,” Egon repeated, as shaken by the fact as any of them. “Or at least, I recognized *one* of them, the one who gave me that branch.”

The black man studied his fair-haired employer for a long moment, looking for any hint that this was some strange sort of joke; he found none. “Who was it?” he finally had to ask. Like Peter and Ray, he fully expected the answer to be Theodosia, the striking face in the old photograph and the ultimate subject of all these trials and tribulations.

The physicist closed his eyes, shivered, hesitated for what seemed an eternity, then, almost inaudibly, replied, “My grandmother.”