

Part Four

*I have come
From pride
All the way up to humility
This day-to-night.
The hill
Was more terrible
Than ever before.*

*From "Dawn"
Alfred Kreyborg*

"What have you done with my family?!?"

When the hilltop was dark and silent and motionless once more, Justin wasted not one moment flinging himself upon the person he felt was directly responsible for the horror they had all just witnessed: his stunned sibling. Overwhelmed by the completely unpredicted actions of the released Anaye — for there was no doubt in anyone's mind that this was the alien creature they had seen — Egon didn't even hear his brother's angry bellow until Justin literally pounced upon him, grabbing him by the throat of his jacket, fully prepared to do whatever he felt was necessary to gain satisfaction to soothe his fury. "You swore you wouldn't put any of them in danger — and now they've been taken by that — that — that — that whatever it was! How could you be so stupid? Why didn't you just leave that thing alone? This is all *your* fault! What are you going to do to get my family back?!"

Egon stared blankly at his raging brother, doing nothing to either refute his words or stop his physical abuse; Justin would have happily continued if the other three Ghostbusters hadn't literally dragged him away.

"Back off, man," Winston growled deeply, meaning every phonym as a warning. "This isn't anybody's fault. No one could've predicted what that thing was gonna do once it was free."

"Then you shouldn't've freed it until *after* we were gone," Justin seethed, glaring at Zeddemore and Stantz, who were literally holding him in place, making sure he didn't act upon the urge to repeat his attack, which was clear in his expression. "You could've waited!"

"Maybe," Ray allowed, his allowance in no way a real concession. "And it might've made no difference if we had — except that if it *had* broken loose and we hadn't been here to even try to stop it, maybe now *all* of us would be its prisoners."

That possibility was enough to shut Justin's mouth, at least for the moment. While Winston made sure that the technologist kept his distance from his brother, Ray went to take readings of the spot where the Anaye had vanished. Peter sidled over to their still silent fourth, disturbed by his atypical lack of reaction.

"It's not your fault, Egon," he said quietly, not wanting Justin to hear even a single syllable of what he said. "You couldn't've known what was going to happen — none of us could. That twerp didn't hurt you, did he?"

The fair head shook briskly. "No," the physicist replied, his voice slightly hoarse from the scream that had ripped itself from his throat only moments before. "But Justin *is* right, Peter. It's my fault that his family and Janine were captured."

Venkman attempted to dismiss that with easy disbelief. "Bull. That thing was bigger'n the Statue of Liberty. How could *you* have stopped it from doing whatever it wanted to do?"

"By making sure everyone was off the property before we engaged it. I didn't stop to check the time first — we might not have waited long enough for them to get away. We could've given Janine one of the walkie-talkies and waited until she let us know they were gone before we did anything. I might've—"

Peter grabbed one of his taller friend's shoulders and shook him hard, breaking his self-damning litany. "Stop the guilt trip right now, Egon — I mean it," he said, no trace of humor in his tone or his words. "None of us thought of those things — and *all* of us should've, even Justin; hell, *especially* Justin. If he wanted to guarantee his family's safety, then *he* should've made sure they were well gone before we even came up here. But no, all he did was get on your back and goad you into wanting to get this over with as fast as you could, didn't he?" He didn't wait for answer; he didn't need to. "*This isn't your fault*. And I'll be damned if I'll stand here and listen to you try to take all the blame for it just because that's what your idiot of a brother wants."

The physicist turned his head to look at him. An errant fragment of light from one of the scattered flashlights caught in his eyes as it sometimes does in those of a cat, making them seem to glow eerily in the dark; Peter had never before seen quite so miserable an expression in them. "That thing took three children," he pointed out, though Venkman was all too unhappily aware of the fact. None of them liked it when their adversaries took it into their heads to attack innocents, but they all found it particularly disturbing when the target for that malice was children. "Peter, it has *Janine*."

"Yeah, I know," the psychologist said softly, in complete sympathy with the horrified despair he could hear trembling faintly in his friend's voice. Over the years, he'd come to know quite well how difficult it had been for Egon to unlearn all the habits of his childhood and youth, the years upon years of training himself to bury his emotions so as not to be hurt by the cruelty of others, a pattern of behavior for which Justin and their father were largely responsible. Even when they'd first met, Peter had been able to see indications of just how much the physicist disliked that part of his nature and wanted to change it, that there was more to him than books and research and bland intellect, brilliant though it was; there was humor and wit and thousands of deeper emotions screaming for release from the prison of strict behavior that had been forced upon him since far too early in his life. Peter had done everything he could to help him achieve that freedom, just as he knew Ray had; it was probably the very first root of their friendship, Egon having seen in them a part of his life he had lost or never known, and both of them having seen in him the potential for an unusual but nonetheless extraordinary friend who needed only sufficient approval and support to break out of that restrictive shell. Even if it didn't always appear on the surface that much progress had been made, Peter knew his old friend well enough to know that he'd come a very long way from the terribly lonely and seemingly emotionless person he'd been almost twenty years ago, when chance had brought them together. What had once been cold and impenetrable armor against the world at large was now only a calm dignity that more properly suited the physicist's position and genuine personality.

As he had been there to help begin that long process of inner rejuvenation, Venkman had also been around to watch and encourage Egon's first adult relationship with a woman, and had been there when that woman had in essence betrayed him and torn his heart to pieces. Although he'd noticed virtually from the first moment she'd walked into their lives how Janine was completely enamored of her tallest employer, for a long time Peter had figured that she really didn't stand much of a chance, that after the Jeanne Mullins fiasco, Egon wasn't ever going to let any woman get close enough to risk hurting him so badly again, no matter how much his friends tried to persuade him otherwise. Peter even supposed that was part of the reason he tended to tease Janine about her attitudes toward the scientist; he'd been trying, after some vague fashion, to prepare her for the let-down that was inevitably to come.

But then Egon had gone and surprised him even more than he'd surprised Janine by beginning to accept her feelings toward him, and, more astonishing, by tentatively beginning to return them. Once that had begun, Peter allowed that there was actually some hope for the two of them, since he knew that Janine was nothing like the witch who had used then abused the then-young and utterly inexperienced physicist — and he was delighted, knowing that an Egon of not all that many years past could never have taken such a step on his own initiative. He did what he could to encourage them without seeming to do so, since he didn't want to take the chance that Egon would remember how Peter had also encouraged his relationship with Mullins and accidentally kick in some sort of protective fear reaction. He had even taken it upon himself to tell Janine about the Mullins disaster, to help her better understand that part of the physicist's complicated psyche, and thus hopefully avoid any hidden pitfalls. He was pleased to see how well things between them were progressing, even if it was awful slow by normal standards, because it was clearly making both of them happy, something he felt Egon hadn't had enough of in his life. He supposed that sooner or later, he'd have to find a way to nudge the physicist into proposing, since he'd probably never think of it on his own and Janine was not likely to do it herself — much though she might want to — for fear of destroying what relationship they had.

But if they didn't find a way to get her back, there was *no* hope of a future for them, or for any of the other prisoners, only an almost certain promise that Egon would once again withdraw to the security of science, away from the crushing guilt of such an awful failure — possibly even away from the rest of his friends. There was only so much

a soul could take before crumbling under the strain of too-oft battered emotions, and Egon's had taken more than many people's do in a lifetime even before Peter had first met him.

That was why he could now manage to staunchly look his friend straight in the eye and say, without dissembling, "We'll get her back, Spengs, I promise. We'll get all of 'em back. It's not your fault — and even if it was, you know damn well that feeling bad about it isn't the way to make amends. Guilt trips don't solve anything; they just make things worse. You've gotta show your empty-headed relatives that you're better'n that, that even if we *do* make something wrong — which we didn't; which *you* didn't — we always make it right again. Okay?"

It felt like a very long time before the physicist responded in any way to his words; when he did, Peter could see the reaction, the way in which the horrified numbness sloughed away, allowing Egon to pull his shaken self back together. "You're right," he said, the tremor of uncertainty disappearing from his voice, replaced by much firmer determination. "But we have to move quickly, or we may never be able to determine just where the creature took them."

"Already 'way ahead of you," Ray called out, startling them. They tended to forget just how sharp-eared the occultist could be, even though he was too decent-hearted a person to ever gossip about what he might happen to overhear. "And these are some of the *oddest* readings I've ever seen." He held up their sole remaining PKE meter so that his partners could see as they gathered around him. "I'm getting three separate traces here, and not a one of 'em looks like the ghosts we ran into this afternoon."

"This one definitely correlates to residual PKE from an Anaye," Egon said, tapping the portion of the readout that matched what he had seen on his own meter before it exploded. "I'm not sure I care to even hazard a guess as to what the second PKE source is, not without further data, but the third reading bears a strong resemblance to other readings we've gotten off dimensional rifts."

"A gate?" Peter said, grinning when his colleagues favored him with various expressions of amazement over his correct assumption. "Hey, what can I say? So I pay more attention to all your lectures than I let you know. But if I *am* right, that signal's fading, an' fading fast."

"He's right about that," Ray agreed. "If we're gonna try to follow it to wherever that thing took Janine and the others, we have to do it fast."

"And just how do you propose to do *that*?" Justin demanded, his face still set in a deep scowl of anger. "I didn't realize any of you were wizards or demons or whatever who can open doors between worlds with a wave of a magic wand."

"Magic isn't necessary," Egon said bluntly, the sudden germination of an idea allowing him to easily ignore the technologist's sarcasm. "If we aim at the remnants of the gate and cross the streams, there's a strong possibility we can activate it enough to get pulled through to the other side before it closes."

Justin was fortunate that, in the dim glow of the flashlights, it was hard to see how much he had paled. "You can't be serious! I may not think much of this so-called business of yours, but I know enough about nuclear physics to know that what you're proposing is unconscionably dangerous. You'll cause an explosion big enough to flatten the entire estate!"

"Nah, your swelled head's probably big enough to absorb the blast and protect anything in a five-mile radius," Peter quipped, smiling brightly when Justin bared his teeth at him. "You're right, you don't think much of our business, and you *know* even less about it and how it works, so why don't you just be a good little boy for a change, shut up, and let the guys who know what they're doing do their jobs?"

"It could work," Ray agreed with his blond partner as if the side-exchange had not taken place. "As a matter of fact, I was gonna suggest we try crossing the streams on the Anaye before it started flexing its muscles. But it's awfully risky, Egon. We've got no idea what's on the other side, or even if our equipment will work there. If we go in, we may not be able to come back out."

"But if we *don't* go in," the physicist stated levelly, "there isn't even a *chance* for the others to come out. According to what I was able to find about these entities and their behavior, the only way Anaye prisoners were ever seen again were in pieces. If the creature hasn't already destroyed them —" The deep voice choked for a moment as its

owner resolutely refused to consider that possibility. “If it hasn’t, it will, and there may not be much time to waste before it does. From the current readings, it appears that the energy it expended in order to rebuff our attacks, take captives, open a gate, and transport all of them to wherever it went has weakened the Anaye, enough so that it will probably require time to regain its strength before killing its victims. Since it does so out of malice and not because it draws power from the act, it should wait until it’s sufficiently recovered so that it can properly enjoy the action. If we’re to have any chance at all of freeing them, it has to be *now*, before the Anaye has time to recuperate. There’s certainly a chance that we won’t be able to get out again, but I’m willing to take the risk — alone, if needs be.”

Winston grunted softly. “You don’t have to ask me twice,” he said in stout support of the idea. “This is our job and we see it through, no matter what the end. I’m in.”

“So am I,” was Peter’s more sober than usual declaration. “No disgusting alien mess of tentacles gets away with snatching innocent kids and women and even grouchy old men without paying for it, not while Pete Venkman’s around.”

“And I’m sure not about to let my friends walk into something dangerous without me there to help,” Ray chimed in. “So what are we waiting for?”

Justin, who had been sputtering over Peter’s impolite words to him, now cleared his throat. “Yes, I suppose you all should try to correct the mess you made. I’m going back to the house to wait—”

He had taken no more than a half step backward when a hand very firmly fell onto his shoulder, pinning him in place. “No, you’re not,” Egon told him in an unyielding voice that could cow even Peter in his most obstinate moods. “You’re coming with us.”

Justin didn’t move, but neither did he meekly comply. “Why should I? I’m not responsible—”

His brother, however, did not waver. “Yes, you are. Even if you aren’t responsible for their capture, four of those people are your *family*, and you’re morally responsible for *them*, for their welfare. You’re coming not just because we may need all the help we can get; you’re coming because it’s the right thing to do. And you *will* do it, even if I have to knock you unconscious and drag you a long myself.”

The technician’s dark eyes narrowed with his refusal to believe that Egon could be serious; when the blue eyes looked back at him with an expression as utterly serious and unshakable as the foundations of the earth, his own eyes widened again in shock. “B—but I can’t! I don’t know what possible good I could do—!”

“We learn by doing,” the physicist said dryly, then turned back to his friends. “We should collect the flashlights; we may need them.”

“And it wouldn’t hurt if we brought along the first aid kit from the van,” Winston agreed as Peter went to pick up the scattered lights and Egon made sure Justin didn’t try to escape in an unguarded moment. “Knowing our luck, we’ll need it before we’re through.”

“There you go, Justin,” Venkman quipped as his darkest colleague trotted off toward the van. “You can carry the first aid kit. I think that should be easy enough for you to handle, don’t you?”

“But this could be suicide!” the eldest man cried, a thread of fear beginning to show in his baritone.

Peter shrugged, returning the discarded flashlights to his partners. “Hey, it’s the chance you take for trying to save the world’s butt time after time. Hurry it up, Winston! From the noises Ray’s making, we’ve gotta get this show on the road.”

Stantz, who had been keeping an eye on the PKE readings, agreed. “It’s closing fast. I think we’d better get into position.”

The other paranormalists did as suggested, Egon almost literally dragging his brother along until Justin had had enough of the treatment and roughly pulled away, highly indignant. He did not, however, refuse the burden when

Winston huffed his way back up the hillside and thrust the emergency kit into the technologist's arms before taking his position.

"You start, Ray," Egon recommended, since the occultist had the meter and thus knew where to aim. "We'll follow."

With a nod, Stantz took a final glance at the readings and the site to make sure he had the proper coordinates. Then, switching off the meter so as to not risk losing it in an unexpected overload, he again clipped it to his belt alongside his flashlight, unshipped his particle thrower, powered up, and took careful aim before unleashing a brilliant stream of energy to pierce the center of the barren circle.

"Winston, go!" he shouted.

Zeddemore, on his right, aimed his stream so that it would intersect Ray's just above the point at which it touched the ground. Peter, on Winston's right, brought a third stream into precise contact with the two already fighting against one another. Egon closed the circle, weaving the fourth and last stream into a deadly warp and weft. The ground beneath the interwoven energy suddenly began to pulse more brightly than the four-way nuclear collision; as it spread, they could all feel a steadily increasing pull, like the suction in a suddenly punctured pressurized cabin of a plane at forty thousand feet. Tethered to that pull via their accelerators, the four paranormalogists were inexorably drawn toward it; they did not resist when the glowing circle opened wide enough to at last drag them in. Justin began to back away, but at the last second, when he might have escaped the pull and let the other four go without him, he felt a hand grasp his arm in a grip too tight to break, then, with more than a little horror, felt himself torn out of one world and hurled like so much flotsam into the next.

If not for the still-active flashlight dangling from Ray's belt, they would have awakened on the other side in total blackness. Though there was no indication that any of them had passed out from the rough transition or their arrival, there was always a sense of lost time that accompanied movement between dimensions, and this occasion was no different than any other. They found themselves on the ground of this dark otherworld, a hard, pitted surface that poked and prodded unwary knees and shins and elbows. Other than the stony ground beneath them, their first awareness came in the form of a snarly baritone voice.

"You can stop bruising my arm any time now, Egon. It appears that I no longer have any choice about participating in this little foray."

"Oh, joy," Peter drawled somewhere in the darkness as the physicist let go of his recalcitrant sibling. "And here I was hoping we'd managed to lose Little Mary Sunshine somewhere in limbo."

"Looks to me like we're all in limbo, Pete," was Winston's opinion, offered in a subdued timbre, as if he feared to disturb the sleep of something terrible waiting for them in the near-black shadows. "I hope somebody remembered to bring extra batteries if this is all the brighter this place gets."

"I dunno, I get the feeling we're inside something," was Ray's guess, which he voiced as he removed the flashlight from his belt and began to shine it about. "The sound's kinda funny, and see? You can make out the beam hitting whatever's above us."

"Which means it's far too close to be a cloud layer, even a very low altitude one," Egon reflected, performing the same experiment with his own flashlight. "An excellent deduction, Raymond. I would hazard to say that we're within a cave of some kind; all we need do is determine the location of the Anaye, and then find our way to it."

"Oh, no trouble at all, then," Justin quipped, each word dripping sarcasm. "These so-called spirits of yours can supposedly move through solid walls without giving it a second thought. What good is knowing where it is going to do us?"

"Hey, it's place to start," Ray returned with his typically sunny optimism. He replaced his thrower on its hook and picked up the PKE meter, which he prudently adjusted to allow for any potentially powerful readings in the area, not wanting to lose their last means of paranormal detection. It responded instantly. The occultist blinked at the readout

for a moment or three, then whistled softly. “Now *this* is weird. I’m getting clear residuals on the Anaye — nothing in the immediate vicinity, but strong enough to show that it *was* here, and not very long ago — but I’m picking up something even stronger close by, a definite presence and not just residuals. Do you recognize it, Egon?”

Spengler had just stepped over and glanced at the data Ray indicated when suddenly, they found themselves no longer in darkness. Stantz nimbly deactivated the meter and reached for his weapon, knowing well that such sudden changes in unknown territory often meant big trouble.

The source of the pallid blue light, they quickly discovered, came from a being very human-like in appearance, but clearly not human. Nearly twice the size of the average *Homo sapiens* male, the entity’s features and mode of dress had much in common with many Amerindian cultures, but could not be defined as a member of any one tribe, or even general group of nations. Its strong-featured face was as smooth as that of a pampered youth’s, but the eyes — solid-hued orbs of piercing blue — seemed as ancient as the seas, despite their lack of any feature, neither iris nor pupil. Its clothing appeared to be made of skins and cloth dyed in varying shades of gray and blue, and its long hair, neatly braided in long plaits that fell over its broad shoulders almost to its waist, was the color of iron-clouded skies. It held a long ceremonial staff in one hand, intricately carved and decorated, and from its woven leather belt dangled many pouches and talismans. It did not move in the slightest as it stood there studying the five men who were looking back in similar stillness.

“Is this good or bad, Spengs?” Peter eventually dared to whisper to his tallest partner, winning himself a reaction from the entity as it tilted its head slightly to regard him. He shivered, never liking it when things so obviously not human turned their attention toward him. “Please don’t tell me it’s bad.”

“Possibly not,” was Egon’s best reassurance. “M’téoulinsisk?” he ventured in a more normal tone of voice.

There was a pause before the creature replied. Its own voice was at least an octave below the physicist’s bass, and echoed in what they could now see was an immense cavern like distant thunder rolling across open plains. “I know that name,” it acknowledged coolly. “Have you come to bring more sorrow to my lands?”

“What do you mean, *more* sorrow?” Ray asked, not liking the sound of that. If the Anaye had already slaughtered its captives....

“It was a human whose magic brought down the curse upon my realm,” M’téoulinsisk said, a hint of anger coloring its otherwise level voice. “It brought the evil to this place, and held it here, where it has done great harm. I have spent many of your years trying to undo the magic that was done, but it was human magic, and I could not defeat it. If you come as invaders to aid the ancient evil, then I shall destroy you.” It began to raise the hand holding the staff.

“Whoa!” Peter piped up right away. “Let’s not jump to any hasty conclusions! If you’re talking about the Anaye and a curse that some stupid woman accidentally put on it, then I can see why you might be pretty pissed off, if it trapped that thing right in your own back yard. But we didn’t make the curse, and we sure as hell don’t have any intentions of helping it. We’re the ones who just *broke* the curse — or haven’t you noticed it, yet?”

The entity returned its gaze to Venkman, making him wish he hadn’t been quite so forthright. Just when he was beginning to think that the creature was debating the type of insect he should make of the psychologist for being so impudent, it spoke again. “I have noticed. The evil is now free, as you have said. It has not yet left my lands, but with the magic gone, I can now banish it forever. For your part in this, I am grateful. I shall return you to your home before I go to destroy it—”

“No, wait!” Egon interrupted when M’téoulinsisk again began to gesture with its staff. The entity now turned its featureless eyes to the physicist, its smooth, ageless brow creasing with what might have been interpreted as mild annoyance. Egon hastened to explain. “When it was freed and returned here, the Anaye took captives with it, women and children and an old man. They are completely innocent of any wrongdoing — one of them even helped us to determine what had caused the curse, and thus how it might be broken. We came to try to rescue them, and if you return us, you must return them as well.”

M’téoulinsisk considered this for what seemed a very long time; then, to the mere mortals’ surprise, it sighed. “I cannot.”

This simple statement stirred varying degrees of outrage in the humans. “Why not?” Winston demanded first. “If you can destroy a thing like that and return us where we came from, you sure should be able to liberate a few of its prisoners, too.”

But the entity shook its head. “I can destroy it now because it is free of the curse and sleeps, regaining the strength it lost in battle. I cannot wait until it awakens to act, nor can I break the spell by which it binds its captives. My power comes from nature itself, and the Evil One draws its strength from foreign sources over which I hold no command.”

“But if you destroy it, won’t that break whatever spells it put on things?” Peter asked, thinking it a very reasonable assumption.

Again, M’téoulinssisk shook its head. “No. As the curse by which the human woman bound the Evil One continued long after her own death, so too it is with the magic of that accursed thing. If they are held captive outside it, they will remain captive even after its passing; if they are held within it, they will die when the Evil One dies. I pity those whom it chose to imprison, but I cannot free them — nor can I allow it to live and bring final death to my land.”

“Well, then, if you can’t do it, maybe we can.” The ringingly positive remark came, of course, from Ray. The others looked at him as if he’d lost his mind. “No, really,” he insisted, trying to make them understand. “If M’téoulinssisk’s right and the Anaye’s weak right now — just like you thought it might be, Egon — then maybe science might be able to do what magic can’t.” He patted the particle thrower still in his hand for emphasis. “Heck, we’ve done it before, haven’t we?”

“But we still don’t know if the accelerators’ll work here,” Winston pointed out.

Peter shrugged. “One way to find out.” With that, he aimed at the ground a few feet before his toes, and fired. A satisfyingly normal stream of energy briefly burst forth. “Sorry,” he said to their “host” when M’téoulinssisk reacted with astonishingly genuine surprise. “Ray’s right, though. We might have a chance to do what you can’t, maybe just like you couldn’t break the damn curse that trapped that tentacled ugly here in the first place. You’ve gotta at least give us a shot at it before you give up on ‘em and send us away.”

For another seemingly interminable minute, the entity contemplated this, studying each of the five men with an unnervingly blank gaze that nonetheless penetrated like a cold gale through cheesecloth. Finally, it nodded heavily. “I will allow you to attempt this,” it said. “However, this is but the entrance to my land; before you pass beyond the threshold, I will know your secret names, and why you are here.”

Several of the humans frowned; Winston spoke up, puzzled. “Why we’re here? But we just told you, and we don’t have any secret—”

“No, Winston, wait a second,” Ray interrupted, tugging on his sleeve to stop him when he saw M’téoulinssisk’s frown begin to return. “It’s not what you’re thinking. He’s talking about a kind of ritual. A lot of different cultures — especially some of the Native American ones — believed that names held a form power, that knowing an enemy’s, or even an ally’s, true name would grant some control over their actions.”

“Like in Rumpelstiltskin,” Peter noted, seeing a parallel.

“Right. Some cultures gave their kids public names that were used for everyday purposes, but they were also given secret names that were hardly used at all, if ever, for protection from enemies and evil spirits. Letting somebody else know your true name was a sign of trust, ‘cause if you did anything to betray the other person, they could use it against you. By asking us for our secret names and our motives, he’s trying to make sure it’s safe to let us pass into his land.”

A derisive snort came from Justin’s direction. “This is positively ridiculous! We’re supposed to take on the danger of dealing with that hideous thing, and this... this *creature* wants guarantees of trustworthiness from us? I’d be just as happy if he sent me back right this moment! I only came because I was literally dragged along....”

For its own part, M’téoulinssisk eyed the shortest human, and viewed him with contempt. “Unworthy,” it said flatly, beginning a gesture of dismissal.

Before he could complete it, Egon grabbed his brother by the arm and pulled him close enough so that he could speak in a whisper and be heard. "Humor it, Justin," he ordered, "or there's a very good chance you may not see all of your family again."

The technologist very nearly sneered at his sibling, but he reluctantly complied. He gathered his pride as best he could, looked down his nose at the glowing entity, and said, "I don't know what you mean by this 'secret name' business, but I am Justin Xavier Spengler, and I'm here because of my family."

"Nice name," Peter quipped wryly when suddenly, a clear echo of the technologist's voice sounded, ringing off into the distance of the cavern as if verifying the truth of his claim: "*What have you done with my family?!?*"

"So that's the ticket," Ray muttered to himself, understanding. He then unhesitantly addressed M'téoulinssisk. "My name is Raymond Philip Stantz, and I came to help my friends."

"Now, that's almost *too* normal, Ray," the psychologist teased while in reply, another echo chased after the first: "*And I'm sure not about to let my friends walk into something dangerous without me there to help.*"

Winston nodded. "Yeah, I get it. I'm Winston Tyrone Zeddemore," he told their luminescent host, "and I'm here 'cause I helped start this job, and I'm gonna help finish it. What can I say?" he mumbled as an aside to Venkman before he could comment. "My Mom had this thing for Tyrone Power."

A third, deeper echo resounded that truth: "*This is our job and we see it through, no matter what the end.*"

Peter, who was standing beside Winston, sensed M'téoulinssisk's piercing eyes upon him, and squirmed. "Aw, do I *hafta* say the whole thing?" he asked, clearly reluctant to play the game in quite the way he knew was required.

Ray grinned; Winston laughed. "Hey, if we had to put up with the wisecracks, so do you, Pete."

"And if you don't tell him, Peter, I will," Egon added. "There's too much at stake to let mere vanity get in the way."

The psychologist grunted his doubt. "Yeah, well, let's just see if you feel the same way when your turn comes." He shifted uneasily for a moment more, then gave in. "My name," he began, suddenly speaking as fast as he could and as quietly as he felt he dared get away with, "is Peter Archibald Venkman, and I'm here 'cause like I said, no one gets away with stealing innocent people while I'm around to do anything about it."

The echo of his own voice helped, he hoped, drown out the sound of his own detested middle name: "*No disgusting alien mess of tentacles gets away with snatching innocent kids and women and even grouchy old men without paying for it, not while Pete Venkman's around.*"

"Archibald?" a grinning Winston muttered to an also grinning Ray. "Who the heck gives their kid a name like that in this day and age?"

Peter elbowed his darkest partner to shut him up. Egon ignored their byplay to address the waiting entity. "I am Egon Jeroen Spengler, and I've come..." He hesitated, but only slightly. "...to save the life of someone I love."

"Jeroen?" Venkman mouthed with the oddest expression, wondering where in all the odd Spengler family names they'd dug up that one, but also understanding why the physicist, like him, had never indicated his middle name beyond the first initial. The final echo of confirmation came as no surprise to his friends, but widened Justin's eyes: "*Peter, it has Janine.*"

Fortunately, before the technologist could open his mouth to react, M'téoulinssisk spoke. "Your cause is worthy," the creature declared like a judge handing down a final sentence. "If you are resolved to attempt this, then know two things: You may call each call upon me once for aid, but choose well when you invoke my name, for if the cause be unjust, I will not respond. Also, for each soul who came in succor to this place, one more may leave. Who among you will bear the burden of balance?"

"I will," Egon said before the others could quite figure out the full meaning of the entity's words.

“Then go,” it replied, satisfied. As you count time, you have twelve hours to free them and return to this place before I must act against the Evil One. You must be gone before that time, or you risk being destroyed along with it, frail creatures that you are. Follow paths leading down and to the west and you will find those you seek; return then by those paths marked in red.” With that, it raised both arms, cried out in words that sounded like the raging wind, and was gone.

Or, more precisely, *they* were gone, for the five humans suddenly found themselves not within the bowels of a deep, dark cavern, but at its yawning mouth. From its vantage on a tall and jagged cliff, they saw a terrible vista: a vast land of parched and rocky ground, pitted almost as if the surface had been pock-marked by meteors, blowing with dust driven by a wind that one moment gusted fire-hot and the next ice-cold. Deep chasms cracked the unhappy landscape like scars on the face of an old battle-worn veteran, probably the remnants of what once had been rivers and streams, and what plant life could be seen was ugly and deformed. Above it all, black and sickly gray clouds crawled and scuttled across the sky like protomorphic life forms lurching and twisting through seas of primordial slime; what was occasionally visible between the infrequent gaps in the cloud cover was not a pleasing blue, but a disturbing purplish red. And in the shadowed land below, not all was still; things moved, scurrying from one gully or crater to the next, too fast to be identified, but slow enough to be seen.

Winston shuddered. “Is this the kind of place that critter was supposed to be in charge of, Egon? *He* didn’t seem all that bad, but this looks like one of the lousier neighborhoods in Hell.”

The physicist shook his head. “No. Undoubtedly, this is what M’téoulinssisk meant when he spoke of the Anaye bringing sorrow to his land. Some paranormal creatures present a negative influence to the environs they inhabit in that their particular variety of PKE inhibits what we think of as natural growth. That’s undoubtedly the real reason behind the bald patch in my aunt’s woods. Madeline’s protection circle defined the point at which the Anaye was physically confined and touched our plane of existence, and its presence rendered the ground unable to sustain life.”

“Then most of it must’ve been trapped here,” Ray speculated, shivering at the awful sight. “And after a hundred and fifty years of having it around.... This is really terrible! Do you know what this reminds me of?”

Winston had already expressed his feelings on the matter, but he looked curiously at Egon as the physicist offered what seemed a very odd response. “...*a dying land, but it was not yet dead. And here things still grew, harsh, twisted, bitter, struggling for life.*”

“You said it,” Peter agreed with a grimace, knowing the quote as well as Ray did. “Mordor. All we’d need is a nice little active volcano smack in the middle of things to give it the perfect ambiance. Just the kind of place I *didn’t* have in mind for a cross-country hike.” He took one more look at what lay before them, then sighed, clapping a hand on his tallest friend’s nearer shoulder. “Well then, Gandalf, ol’ buddy, since you’re the one who knows the most about what this place is *supposed* to be like, maybe you should lead the way. Only we’d better not come across any orcs or monster spiders or Ringwraiths or Balrogs along the way, or I think I may turn in my Ghostbusting permit for a nice padded cell in Bellevue.”