
Ghosts of Forever

By Sheila Paulson



nly you, Egon." Peter Venkman shook his head in some disgust as he glanced sideways at his blond colleague. "Only you would bring a P.K.E. meter to a Rangers' game. There aren't any ghosts here for us to bust, and even if they were, we don't have our proton packs."

Spengler glanced down at the ice. "You dragged me here, Peter. At least this way I'll have something to do." Hockey wasn't Egon's favorite sport. Come to think of it, Peter realized, unless he could have sprung for tickets to the Toronto Blue Jays, he couldn't hit on a sport that Egon would enjoy. The physicist didn't go to local sporting events unless one of the others dragged him along.

"Well, you dragged me to the opera and I got attacked by valkyries. This has got to be safer than that. Anyway you could calculate the trajectory of the puck," Peter suggested. "You know, figure out the speed and what the goalie needs to do to compensate ..."

"Hmm." Egon stared down at the game in progress just as the Rangers scored and the Garden crowd burst into thunderous applause. Peter jumped to his feet and yelled, waving his arms and clapping, and was rather surprised to see Egon on his feet, too, though the physicist wasn't going crazy like the rest of the crowd. "That was rather exciting, Peter," he remarked.

"You made me miss it," complained Venkman, rattling his popcorn unhappily. "Sometimes you make me *crazy*, Egon."

The taller man's eyes twinkled behind his glasses and he turned back to the meter, just as it went crazy. The antennae extended to their full height and it started beeping, causing a burly man in front of Egon to spin around and glare at him. "Shut off the beeper, wise guy," he growled.

Egon promptly twisted a dial and the sound went away, but the meter continued reacting crazily. Moving the device in a small circle, Egon frowned as he localized the disturbance. It was a man several seats behind them and off to one side, tall and dark, with long hair confined at the back of his neck in a pony tail. He was sitting with a younger man with lighter and shorter hair. He seemed to be affecting the meter, too, but it was the dark-haired man that gave it fits.

"Are they ghosts, Egon?" Peter asked under his breath, staring at the two, who looked completely human. He didn't really want to miss the rest of the game to track down a pair of ghosts who were only minding their own business as they watched the game.

"No. That's what's strange about this, Peter. Both men *are* alive. But — the best way to put it is to say they are 'haunted' as if they both carried ectoplasmic residue from prior ghostly encounters. The dark-haired man has been in contact with literally hundreds of ghosts." He twisted dials. "What puzzles me is that contact with ghosts will leave a residue; we use that sometimes to verify calls when we arrive too late to bust a transitory ghost. Yet that residue always fades and if we come too long after the fact, it has faded entirely. The difference here is the residue isn't fading away. It's as if he had simply absorbed it."

"Absorbed it? You mean like sucking slime into your body? Disgusting thought." He shivered a little.

"A rather simplistic interpretation, Peter." Egon turned back to the screen, pulling out his ever-

present pocket calculator and entering figures. "This is something I have never encountered before, yet it sounds vaguely familiar, something I've read, something Ray might have mentioned ..." His voice trailed off as he punched in numbers.

Peter shook his head and looked over at the two mysterious strangers again, just as the younger man poked the taller one and pointed right at him. For a moment, Peter's eyes locked with the taller, older man, and a shiver ran down his spine. Even across that distance he saw something in those eyes he had never seen before, a mysterious sense of something beyond Peter's grasp, as if he had seen everything, done everything, experienced life in a way ordinary mortals rarely did. He was an old soul in a young body, and the compelling gaze pinned Peter like a butterfly in a display. Then the gaze passed on as if there could be no interest, and Peter shivered as if someone had walked over his grave.

"Egon. Hey, Egon ..."

"Not now, Peter, I'm busy."

"But those guys ..." He jogged Egon's arm. "Spengs, listen, there's something really weird about them, especially that big guy. Will you listen?"

"I know there's something weird, Peter, that's what I'm trying to determine now. I've never seen this type of reading before and I want to confirm it."

Peter glanced over again and then froze. "I think you're too late, buddy," he remarked over the roar of the crowd as one of the teams scored. "They're gone."

"Gone. They can't be gone. I wasn't finished." Egon looked up sharply and frowned at the two empty seats. With half the crowd on its feet yelling and cheering, neither Peter or Egon could catch a glimpse of the two strangers. It was as if they had vanished into thin air.

"W

ho were those guys, Mac?" asked Richie Ryan as he and Duncan MacLeod flagged down a taxi outside Madison Square Garden and climbed inside.

MacLeod gave the driver the name of their hotel and then frowned to silence Richie's anxious question until they could speak privately. The two men at the hockey game worried him. They didn't look like Watchers and there had been nothing malicious in their curious stares, but there had been something else, something he didn't like. It was as if they had guessed his secret and Richie's. It was as if the two men knew they were Immortals.

Worse, the men had possessed scientific equipment that had evidently pinpointed himself and Richie. If one of the Watchers had figured out a way to detect Immortals, Dawson might have told him. The two could have been Hunters, though, pursuing Immortals to do away with them. But once it was proven that Immortals could be detected scientifically, it would take away any advantage they would have against the Hunters in their quest to kill Immortals. Mac and Richie could sense the threat of other Immortals but they couldn't automatically identify ordinary human menace every time. Give their enemies devices to track Immortals and the odds would change drastically for the worse.

Richie was frowning. "You know, Mac, I've seen that guy before, the one with the weird blond hair. And I've seen the other one before, too. You don't think they've been watching —" He fell silent when Duncan curled his fingers around his arm to signal for silence. The cabbie probably wasn't paying any attention, but it didn't do to give anything away in public.

He said carefully, "They did look familiar, but I don't believe they are who you think they are. We'll have to check it out, when we get back to the hotel."

Richie nodded, then said regretfully, "Too bad about the hockey game."

MacLeod nodded. In four hundred years, he had lost out on things much more disappointing than this. He said calmly to Richie, "There are always other hockey games. We'll talk when we're back at the hotel."



It was truly fascinating, Peter." For Egon, the rest of the hockey game had been useful in that he could play with the meter, cross reference his readings and make some additional adjustments. "Better than that, I was able to record the dark man's biorhythms, and it might be possible to locate him."

"Oh, goodie," said Peter as they boarded the subway that would take them south and home. "I can see we're going to spend the rest of the night driving up and down the streets looking for him. Just what I've been wanting to do."

"But this is important, Peter. It's unique."

"Yeah, and so was that last mold culture you studied, but it smelled bad enough to shut down the whole city. Are we gonna get in over our head with this, Spengs?"

"Of course not," Egon replied, but his fingers still flashed as he worked on the calculator. By the time they reached Ghostbuster Central, Peter was fed up with it all. Egon's fascination had lasted all the way and from past experience Peter knew he'd keep it up until he'd satisfied his curiosity one way or another. They climbed to the second floor of headquarters, Peter still complaining, then he saw the other two Ghostbusters sprawled in front of the TV and he raised his voice.

"Look out, guys, Egon's got a whole new obsession."

"Raymond, do you remember once you told me about something that would affect a living being as if he was suffering from ongoing residual possession?" Egon asked, pushing past Peter and stopping directly in front of Ray Stantz.

The occultist looked started. "Not really. When did I say it?"

"I hope you never did," put in Winston Zeddemore, the fourth Ghostbuster, "because from that gleam in Egon's eye, we're gonna have to get up and run around and chase ghosts, and I'm too comfortable to move."

"A man at the Garden produced readings resembling those of someone who suffers from permanent residual exposure," Egon told Ray.

"Really? Wow." Ray's whole face lit up. "That's *great*, Egon. Did you talk to him? Did he explain?"

"He took off," said Peter. "Spengs here wants to crank up the meters and drive around town looking for him."

"I knew it," moaned Winston, grabbing a throw pillow and holding it against his chest as if it could fend off a whole flock of intrigued scientists. "I'm not going. At least not tonight."

"But we may lose the opportunity entirely." Egon protested.

"Spengs." Peter pushed him down into a chair and stood in front of him, arms folded across his chest. "It's gonna take an act of God to get me out of here again tonight. Think of it as research time. You said you remembered something from one of Ray's musty old books. It's after 11."

Reading is good. Go for it, big fella."

"What book?" asked Ray.

"I could swear that sometime we'd discussed a situation that would produce this kind of reading, Ray," Egon said. "But I can't pin it down. The residuals were strong but it was as if they had been absorbed. The person in question was definitely a living being and it's true I was some distance from him, but the meter reacted very strongly."

"Yeah, and I thought that bruiser in front of you was gonna punch your lights out for all the noise it made," Peter said with a reminiscent grin. If the character had actually tried anything, he'd have had Peter Venkman to reckon with but the memory of Egon's startlement as he shut off the meter's sound was a cherished memory.

Ray ignored that as unimportant. "Something that would make the meter react as if there'd been a ton of ghosts," he muttered under his breath. "You know, I kind of remember saying that. We'd been going through some of the old books we bought at that estate auction upstate, you know, from that old occultist who studied African tribal magic and werewolves, and had a copy of part of *The Nameless Book*. Gosh, he had some great stuff. I bet it was part of that. We brainstormed over some of his field notes for weeks."

"I remember it well," said Peter without enthusiasm. "You said you could reverse vampirism by the right dose of solar radiation. You wanted to go up to Lupusville and practice on the folks up there. It was *not* a very smart plan."

"It was something to do with one of the legends we came upon during that study period," Egon mused thoughtfully, so caught up in the subject that he raked his hands through his hair, messing it thoroughly. Peter sneaked a glance at his watch to see if the physicist's hairstyle would spring back into order in moments.

"I know. I remember talking about it now," said Ray. "But I can't remember which book it was. It was something about drawing energy from the dead, I think ..."

"That makes all the difference," groaned Peter. "One of those tribal magic books? A culture where they ritually devour their dead so they can absorb the best of the deceased into themselves. He throws a good spear so they eat his spear hand, or he's brilliant so they have a brain souffle. Give me a break here."

"Just where did you hear about *that* quaint local custom, Pete?" asked Winston.

"Cultural anthropology classes," Peter said quickly. "There was this girl in my class and she ..."

"You had to ask," said Egon with a smile. "But I don't believe it was that. I don't remember it being confined to a particular culture, and in any case cannibalism doesn't necessarily result in residual P.K. valances."

Ray bounced cheerfully to his feet. "Let's go up to the lab. I want to check a couple of books."

"Anybody but me think we should sleep on this?" asked Peter with a wide yawn. Egon and Ray each grabbed an arm and steered the reluctant psychologist toward the stairs.

"Maybe the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* ..." Ray called over his shoulder as he trotted up.

"Or something I read in *Legends of Doom*," responded Egon. "It wasn't tied to a particular culture, Raymond."

"Hey, that rings a bell. I remember you saying that. I don't think it was any one particular book either. I think it was something we found in a couple of books that tied together."

"The Phoenician," Egon muttered. "The legend of a Phoenician named Alcar who had lived for thousands of years." He headed for the bookshelves and pulled down a tome with a tattered leather cover and began flipping through the pages.

"I remember now," said Ray. "You found references to him in three of the books we picked up from Mordecai Welles' estate and said you could trace his history through the centuries."

"Okay, so somebody lived forever — like that character on *Star Trek* that time," Winston said. "The one who was Mozart and Alexander the Great and whoever?"

"Something like that, yes," Egon replied, turning pages. "Except it wasn't simply eternal life. There was more. And it wasn't simply Alcar the Phoenician. There were others."

"And they weren't all Phoenicians, either," said Ray. "We found some guy from Egypt who was mentioned a few times as late as the Fifteenth or Sixteenth Centuries." He opened a book and scanned the Index.

"So there are some really old dudes walking among us," said Peter with a grin, leaning against the lab table. "So why do they give residual readings on the P.K.E. meter? Tell me that, huh?"

Egon frowned as he realized it was a fair question. "I seem to remember coming upon a custom, or a legend about a death ritual. Do you remember it, Ray?"

The occultist's face screwed up in concentration as he tried to recall. He and Egon were always speculating about some weird theory or another and picking one out of the many took thought. Then he brightened. "Yeah. I do remember. They beheaded each other. Ritual death. It was the only way they could die. I found it in *Legends of Doom*, just like you thought, Egon. That was the only way one of them could die, if he had his head cut off."

"So they played guillotine games," Winston said, shaking his head. "I'm glad I don't have that to look forward to. But I'm with Pete. What does that have to do with ghosts and residual P.K.E. readings?"

"It was something to do with the life essence of an Immortal," said Ray, snatching down a huge tome labeled *Legends of Doom* in ornate golden script and setting it on the table beside Peter, opening it up and running his finger down a table of contents in faded brown lettering. "If one of them killed another, he could absorb the essence of the victim. Let's see." Carefully turning the pages, he found what he was looking for. "It was called the Quickening," he said. "'And he who would thusly behead his brother eternal would feed upon his spirit, drinking in the energies of his life; all wisdom, knowledge, honor, malice, strength and weakness, became a part of his spirit, for him to disseminate within.' Wow, that's pretty cool, when you think about it."

"Yeah, makes you want to think twice about taking out an immortal Charles Manson," offered Peter. "You mean they kill a bad guy, they turn into a bad guy? And if they're going around offing their own kind, maybe they're not so great to begin with." He could remember the look in the eyes of the man at Madison Square Garden tonight, the ageless sense of knowledge beyond Peter's ken. Somebody who had lived for hundreds of years might have that kind of expression in his eyes. Yet that guy hadn't looked evil, somehow. He looked more like he'd known a hundred lifetimes of sorrow. Peter grimaced. How could he avoid it? Every time he made a friend he'd have to watch him die. Suppose Peter became immortal — and his buddies didn't. He didn't even want to *think* about that, watching them grow old and die and leave him alone. He said quickly before anybody could answer, "I don't think I'd want to be one of them. Anyway, that guy didn't look like a combination of Hitler and Atilla the Hun and neither did the other one."

"You mean they were both eternal?" asked Ray.

"If so, the second man was either relatively new at it or he hadn't chopped off very many heads," said Peter. "He fluttered the meter but didn't make it go crazy like his buddy did."

Egon bent over a book of his own, turning pages hastily. "That's possible, Peter. This is actually quite intriguing." New theories and discoveries always fascinated Egon. Peter wasn't quite so sure about it.

"So there's two guys running around New York who are gonna live forever unless they get beheaded?" Peter shook his head. "Come on, Spengs. That's just a legend." He gestured at Ray's book. "Just because the facts seem to fit doesn't mean it's real. It might be something else, maybe a dimensional gateway nearly opened where those two characters were sitting or something. And anyway, if they are immortal, so what? We're Ghostbusters, not immortal-busters, and nobody's paying us for this."

"All knowledge is valuable," Egon replied stubbornly. "Besides they saw us, too. Do you want to let that go, to have enemies who behead people knowing who you are?"

"Well, when you put it like that ..."

"S

o what do we do, Mac?" asked Richie the minute they closed the door on Mac's hotel room. "Do you think those characters were looking for us?"

"I'm not sure," MacLeod returned, pacing over to the window and pulling the curtain aside to look down on the street below. They were on the twenty-third floor, so it was hard to tell if someone was down there watching the hotel or not. "If they are, we have serious trouble. That device was taking readings from us — reacting to us rather than anyone around us. I don't know what it was, but if a way has been discovered to locate us scientifically, we have major trouble. We've always been able to sense when another Immortal is nearby and the Watchers know that. Someone among them, a scientist, may have postulated a scientific hypothesis for our awareness, the reason like calls to like. Whatever it is we sense may be something in particular, an energy field we're attuned to. If it's there, it can be detected, assuming someone knows it's there and can theorize about it and invent a device to do it."

"It looks like someone has," said Richie, flinging himself down on Mac's bed and folding his arms behind his head as he stared up at the ceiling, his expression none too happy about the night's events. "Whatever it was, it seemed to react a lot more strongly to you than it did to me."

"Maybe it can tell I've lived longer than you," MacLeod replied. He turned away from the window with a frown.

"So what do we do, Mac? Get out of town? Or do we find them and fight?"

Duncan shook his head. "Fighting won't help us if the device is known and its schematics recorded. Besides, those two men looked surprised, as if they hadn't expected the results they got. This might be a fluke, a device that serves another purpose but one that picks up on us accidentally as a by-product of its normal task. If that's so, we have to make sure —"

"It's never used against us," Richie concluded. "What then. Steal it?"

"Then what, Richie? Steal the knowledge from their minds? Kill them? Knowledge doesn't vanish. If there's a way to detect our 'auras' for want of a better word, we need to know everything about it we can. That means finding these men."

"Before they find us?" Richie sat up and slid down to the foot of the bed, dangling his feet over the edge. "They'll be looking for us, won't they? I saw that brown-haired one giving you the eye. He knew there was something different, didn't he?"

"I don't think he recognized us as Immortals," Mac returned thoughtfully, trying to analyze the reactions he had sensed from the brown-haired man. There hadn't been evil in his eyes, not that, but he looked like someone who knew the angles. A clever man, but not an insensitive one, because he'd reacted to the exchange of stares with something that might have been understanding. "But both of them were pretty smart in their own way. The blond was more interested in the science angle; the machine, its normal function, its unusual reaction to us. The other guy tried to figure *us* out. I could see it in his eyes. He knows people, how they react. What worries me is the total they'll get when they add their knowledge together." He strode over and stood looking down at the young Immortal. "You said you recognized them. You've got to remember where you saw them before. This could be very important."

Richie scrunched up his face in an agony of concentration. "I'm not sure. It was recent, though. I was in New York before I went to Spain. Maybe I saw them then. Only —"
"Only?" prompted MacLeod encouragingly. "Think, Richie."

"Only there were four of them," the younger man said. "I think I saw them on TV. You know, like a talk show. Letterman or something."

"In other words they're famous?" Duncan didn't like the idea of that. If they were famous, they would be noted, observed, and anyone who had business with them might be noted too. Even if they were nothing to do with the Hunters, even if they meant Duncan and Richie no harm at all, as much as mild fame could lead to trouble. "What are they? Scientists?"

"I don't know. I can't remember. I wasn't paying a lot of attention."

"Then let's see if we can attack it scientifically." MacLeod began to stride back and forth across the room, his movements economical and taut as he pondered what had happened.

"I'm hardly a scientist, Mac." Richie ran hands through his already rumpled hair and scrunched up his face in an agony of concentration.

MacLeod grinned. "I've done some studying over the years, because as time passed and more scientific discoveries were made, I began to wonder about the possibilities, and I've tried to keep informed. What we have is a device which evidently reads something you and I project but something which isn't found in ordinary humans. Somehow it can tell we're Immortals. What kind of device would do that?" He answered his own question. "One that reads energy fields. So why would anyone need a hand-held device that reads energy fields? What would it be used for? It's too obvious to use to detect moods, taking one to a board meeting for instance to read the intent of a competitor. I suppose it could be used as a portable lie detector, but that seems an unlikely thing to bring to a hockey game."

"I noticed the guy before the machine went crazy," Richie said. "I was thinking he looked familiar and wondering where I'd seen him. And he wasn't paying any attention to the hockey game. I think he brought that gadget the way somebody might bring a book to read in the subway. He was more interested in science than sports. You know, an egghead."

"Very different from you, Richie," MacLeod teased.

"Well, I never said I was an egghead," the younger man defended himself, making a humorous face at his friend. "He brought it to play with," he concluded. "He was surprised when it went off like it did."

"So what was it built to detect?" Mac asked, slowly pacing the room as he considered the problem.

"Auras, like you said," offered Richie. "Hey, Mac, why don't I call room service. I'm still hungry."

"You're always hungry," Duncan returned. "Auras. What has auras? Are we into things like mediums? New age mysticism?"

"Ghosts!" exclaimed Richie, erupting off the bed and waving his hand to make the point. "Ghosts, Mac. Those guys — I remember now. They were two of the Ghostbusters!"

That wasn't what Duncan had expected to hear. He stared at Richie as if to refute the unlikely suggestion then didn't when he saw Richie actually meant it. "I thought the Ghostbusters were a New York fad, a hoax," he said at last. "There aren't any ghosts."

"Right, Mac. Just like there aren't any Immortals. Didn't you ever see a ghost?"

MacLeod looked at him and was silent. Over the years he had become haunted by a great many ghosts, people he'd loved and left behind, old friends and even old enemies, Immortals dead at his blade, people who'd mattered to him, people he'd hated, people he'd loved. Darius. Tessa ... Their ghosts haunted him, all right, but that wasn't what Richie meant. There had been a few times, in strange old buildings, in the dead of night when he'd felt presences, not like those of his own kind, but different, faint and distant, but there. He'd always wondered at that, and had dismissed it as midnight fantasies. The other kind of ghosts were far more vivid to him.

"Have you?" he asked, pushing aside the thought of Tessa, still too painful even after all these months.

"I think I did. I was in Spain. It was before I realized I was being followed and before anybody died. I was staying in a castle — they'd turned it into a hotel and it was old and run-down and dirt-cheap, and believe me, I needed cheap. I woke up in the night halfway convinced there was another of us nearby. You know, the feeling we get. Only it didn't feel quite *right*. It was different, you know. Sort of like us, only not. And I opened my eyes and there was a guy in my room, in old fashioned clothes. I yelled and he vanished, and I thought it was a dream, but what if it was a ghost? Mac, what if what we sense when there's another Immortal nearby is the ghosts of all the people he's killed along the way, you know, from the Quickening."

MacLeod gaped at him. He'd never heard that theory before, but there was a kind of sense to it. Perhaps he'd been an Immortal too long to be open to such wild theories. Then he shook his head. "After you died, you hadn't beheaded anyone. Yet I could still sense you."

Richie hesitated, disappointed at the setback to his theory, then he grinned as an explanation occurred to him. "Maybe it was *my* ghost, Mac. I died, after all." His smile faded abruptly, and Mac realized he, too, was remembering Tessa, who had died with him but who had not come back. Mac didn't begrudge Richie his reincarnation but there were countless times when he wished Tessa had come back, too. She had been his perfect mate and if she had been an Immortal, they could have traveled the centuries together, the two of them and Richie, the only family he'd let himself have in more years than he even liked to think about.

"In the end there can be only one."

He heard the words in his mind and wondered. If Tessa had returned, would it have come down to him and her? Would it even now come down to him and Richie, or him and Connor? And if so, what would he do?

What he did now was to push away the darker thoughts. "You may have something," he said. "But that doesn't alter the fact that the Ghostbusters' equipment can detect Immortals and that

puts us in a grave position."

"So you want to take off tomorrow morning before they can track us down?" asked Richie. "That blond one, he's Egon Spengler. He's some kind of scientific genius, I think. I bet he won't just give up on us until he knows what happened. Getting readings from live people isn't their usual style. I don't know what the range of that thing is, but they might be able to use it to find us, no matter where we go."

If that were all it was, Duncan might have decided on retreat as a practical option, but he didn't have that luxury. "What bothers me is that it happened in a public place," he pointed out. "We don't know who else may have seen it and understood what happened. There may have been Watchers or Hunters present who saw and understood. If they did, you and I wouldn't be the only ones in danger."

Richie's eyes widened. "You think they'd go after the Ghostbusters, to find out what happened?" the younger man asked. He sat down again on the nearest chair, frowning. "So what do we do? We can't just go over to their headquarters and say, 'Hi, we're Immortals and some bad guys might show up and want your detection gizmos,' can we?"

"It wouldn't be my first choice." Duncan frowned. This was an unexpected complication but in the technological explosion here near the end of the 20th century, such a thing might well have been inevitable. Yet if one device could locate Immortals, there would inevitably be others eventually. He'd prefer to delay this particular discovery, though. "You know a little about the Ghostbusters, Richie. What kind of men are they?"

The young Immortal frowned. "I don't know that much about them," he admitted. "Just what everybody knows. They've gotta be brave, though, facing up to some of the things they do. When I saw them on TV, that blond one seemed really sincere about the job. The other guy, Venkman, who was with him tonight, was into the publicity, just eating it up, and having fun being on a talk show. I don't know what he's really like. But Letterman showed footage of their fight with Gozer and a couple of other things. They didn't back down." He shrugged. "I bet they won't give up on finding out about us, either."

"Then maybe we should go to them," Duncan said thoughtfully.

"You mean tell them what we are?" Richie's eyes widened. "Do you think that's a very good idea, Mac?"

Duncan didn't think so. Through the centuries he'd guarded his secret so carefully, sharing it with few mortals. He hadn't told Charlie what he was, not yet, but he had a feeling Charlie would have some questions when he and Richie returned to Seattle. Sharing the knowledge with strangers who happened to be scientists ranked very low on his list of sensible choices. But the Ghostbusters didn't work for the Government. They were private contractors. In that there might be a kind of safety. In recent years, Duncan had wondered if he might yet end up in a secret government lab somewhere being tested to determine the scientific cause of his state. He didn't think the Ghostbusters would do that. If a Hunter had seen and understood what had happened at the Garden, the Ghostbusters might be in jeopardy themselves, and Duncan couldn't allow that either. He didn't hide behind the innocent to preserve his own life and didn't plan to start now, even if these same innocents had inadvertently imperiled him and Richie.

"I think it's a bad idea, but I'm afraid we might not have much choice. We could wait and watch and make sure they aren't approached, but we can't post a twenty-four hour guard on them, not so close to equipment that can detect us. I think we'll have to go over there in the morning."

Peter yawned and stretched and reluctantly cracked open his eyes. Yep, it was morning. He'd been afraid of that. Last night Egon and Ray had theorized about the strange happening at the hockey game into the wee hours of the morning. For once Peter's fatigue wasn't due to a night of revelry but to a night of science. He was tired of hearing about immortal guys who had been around since ancient times. He'd listened to the theories fly and watched Egon and Ray produce vague reference after vague reference out of musty old books that were so obscure and nebulous they could have applied to almost anything, yet Egon and Ray were both convinced they'd made a great discovery. With all the "information" they had collected, it was a wonder nobody else had tuned into these immortal types down through the centuries. Then Peter sat up and shook his head. Maybe people had. Maybe there was a secret Immortal Registry where people called to report sightings like the Mutual UFO Network for space aliens. Ray had suggested there might be such an organization, but the references to that were even more fleeting and ambiguous than the ones about the immortals themselves.

Peter had drifted off to sleep while Ray cited references in *Tobin's Spirit Guide* and *Who's Who and What's That* to humans who gave readings as if they were possessed by multiple ghosts. In neither reference had there been an explanation or a suggestion that the humans in question were immortal, but it was as good a theory as any other, though the theory hadn't managed to follow up with an explanation for the readings.

Forcing himself to his feet, he looked around the dormitory and saw his buddies had all preceded him, leaving their beds neatly made. Voices filtered out of the lab. *Don't these characters need rest?* he wondered as he wandered into the bathroom for his morning shower.

When he came out, freshly showered, shaved and clad in his sweats, he headed for the lab. There he stood in the doorway watching Ray page through another leather-bound old book while Winston operated the computer and Egon bent his head over another of his technological gizmos, making careful adjustments. "Don't you guys ever sleep?" he asked.

"Not in the middle of a crisis," Egon replied without looking up.

"This is great, Peter," said Ray in open delight. "I've been making a list of cross-references now we know such a thing might exist and I've even found hints in some of my reference books that suggest there might be mention in the *Necronomicon*. I might have to go up to Arkham and check the full book. There's nothing useful in the bits that were printed up awhile back for the mass market."

"I should doubt there was anything really dangerous in that volume, Ray," Egon argued. "It's a reference book and a guide, but it is far from complete. Arkham might be a good idea in any case. They have an excellent occult collection in their library. We've found references to a series of obscure chronicles supposedly detailing lives of some of these immortals, and if there are copies anywhere on this side of the Atlantic they'd be in the Arkham library. Perhaps we could contact Alice Derleth and see if she's picked up any references."

"Egon, you're like a dog with a bone," Peter said, shaking his head in fond amusement, though he wouldn't mind seeing Alice again himself. Once she'd got all those museums and lectures out of her system, she'd let Peter take her out to dinner and dancing and she'd displayed a formidable capacity to party. Peter still called her occasionally and they went out whenever she came to town. "I still don't know what good this is going to do you, though. We're not gonna make big bucks off it or anything like that. Get it? *Nobody's paying us.*"

"But it's interesting, Peter," argued Ray enthusiastically, caught up in the joy of research. "I want to find out who these guys are and what's going on with them and *why* they wander around chopping off each other's heads."

"So do I, long as it's not my head they want to take off," agreed Winston, turning from the screen. "This is really weird, Peter. Now that we know what to look for, there are all kinds of obscure references. This kind of thing must have been going on as long as there's been recorded history."

Peter was fascinated in spite of himself. "So who made the rules?" he asked, settling into the room's one comfortable chair and hanging one leg over its arm as he settled in. "How did they find out popping off some poor dude's head would keep him from coming back? The same guys that made the rules about shoving a stake through a vampire's heart or using garlic or a crucifix to keep him away?"

"Some of that is Hollywood hype, Peter," Egon intervened drily. He set aside the magnetometer he'd been adjusting. "But most of this isn't. We've found clues in some of our earliest source books, books that were originally hand copied by monks before the printing presses. Various grimoires and even spell books hold additional references. What we've found appears real, but without a key to it, we could have skimmed those references as meaningless. Even now, perhaps we are drawing shaky conclusions based on the reaction of one meter in an uncontrolled situation."

"Oh, guys." Janine stood in the lab doorway. "You've got guests." She stepped aside with an appreciative look at the taller of the two guests, the dark-haired man from the Garden, then stepped aside to allow him and his friend to enter the lab.

Several of Egon's meters went crazy.

"It's them," exclaimed Peter ungrammatically, jumping to his feet. "The ones from last night."

"The Immortals?" asked Ray, staring at them with wide-eyed fascination. "Wow, this is really great. You'd never know without the equipment. They really set off the meters, don't they? This is *great!*"

At his question the two men stiffened and exchanged a wary glance. "They already know, Mac," the younger blurted out in dismay, taking an involuntary step backward and lifting his hand as if to reach for a weapon, though Peter couldn't imagine where he might hide a sword in that short jacket and tight jeans.

"Mac" frowned quellingly at him and caught his arm to stop the movement, gripping it warningly for an instant before letting go. He wasn't thrilled with the uncontrolled outburst. Now *he* might have a sword; he was wearing a long raincoat that could hide any number of nasty weapons. Turning to the Ghostbusters he said, "I'm Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod, and this is my friend, Richie Ryan."

"We're the Ghostbusters," said Winston and introduced them by name, gesturing at his buddies and himself in turn. Richie seemed impressed, and fascinated by the sight of the lab, his gaze darting here and there, but MacLeod was graver and more thoughtful, not to mention a whole lot warier, though in an unobtrusive way as if he'd learned to hide concern and suspicion. When the introductions were out of the way he took a step toward Ray. "What did you mean about Immortals?" he asked. There was no real menace in his voice but he sounded cautious, allowing a hint of faint amusement into his voice as if he meant to refute any theories the Ghostbusters could produce. Peter was good at figuring out people's reactions. This guy meant to stonewall them.

"We talked a lot about the way you set off Egon's P.K.E. meter last night," explained Ray unhesitatingly, quite willing to share his information. Ray was trusting, but Peter wasn't ready to lower his guard. He glanced around, spotted a thrower on one of the tables, and positioned himself near it. If these guys could set off a meter, they just might be vulnerable to throwers.

Ray plunged on with his explanation, picking up a meter and turning down its volume, though it continued to blink wildly. "This is a P.K.E. meter. It detects ectoplasmic residue, or ghosts. What Egon got from you was a residual effect, the kind of thing we get when someone has been exposed to a ghost but isn't any longer. Mostly residuals fade when the ghost goes away, but yours wasn't fading. It was staying constant, just like this is. It reminded Egon of something he and I had once found in an old book, and we started checking —" he gestured at the piles of books and manuscripts scattered about the lab, "and we found a couple of references that suggested a long-standing race of Immortals who started out as human and became immortal following their first deaths. Once we had that, we found even more references, more obscure, that tied in to the theory. We make a habit of collecting esoteric books, partly because some of them are too dangerous to leave for the uninitiated to find and partly because we don't deal just with ghosts. We've encountered various paranormal phenomena: demons, trolls, goblins, imps, all kinds of nasty things, even witches and vampires. So we have a great reference library. We found nearly twenty references we could tie to our theories."

"But the icing on the cake is that you're here," put in Peter knowingly. "If it was just some fluke, you wouldn't have bothered to figure out who we were and track us here. You would have ignored us. But you —" he gestured at Duncan, "didn't look the type to let it go. I wasn't sure what I was feeling when you stared at me, but I got the idea you were what Ray calls an 'old soul'. Yet you're probably around our age — at least at first glance. So either you've got some scam going or our mad scientists' theories are right on the money."

"Or they could be wild speculation," said Duncan MacLeod. "You have no evidence or even proof of anything so unlikely."

"I think we do." Egon gestured to his monitors. "P.K.E. readings, electromagnetic measurements, aura detectors, all of them are giving off readings. I adjusted these devices to register the kind of readings I'd get if I were detecting an Immortal who absorbs energy from the deaths of other Immortals. They shouldn't register in this precise way if you'd been gang-possessed or any other possible explanation of the phenomenon I detected last night."

"Do you think it works like he says, Mac?" asked Ryan suspiciously, his eyes lingering on the instruments Egon had named as if he were very unhappy with the findings.

"I think we're facing something that was always inevitable," Duncan replied as if he had realized he couldn't deny the evidence of the equipment, at least not convincingly enough to make the Ghostbusters believe the readings were a fluke. "Scientific detection. I've given it some thought over the past twenty years as the computer industry mushroomed. If our own theories are correct, this is something we should have considered before."

"Yeah, but you thought the Ghostbusters were scam artists," Richie reminded him.

Peter grimaced. He knew there were people who viewed them that way, but the only way to fight it was to maintain a high profile so more and more people realized the validity of their work. That was why he endured Slimer's presence on the talk shows on which he guested, not because he was that fond of the Spud but because he was great as a visual aid — not to mention the fact that Letterman and Leno liked Slimer even less than Peter did and it was worth it to see their faces when he walked out onto the stage with Slimer bobbing at his shoulder.

"Whatever they are, they are genuine scientists," MacLeod replied quickly with a gesture at the equipment and the lab. "And I'll be interested to hear exactly how those devices work."

"Yeah, but that still doesn't explain why you're here." Winston rotated his chair so he could face the two newcomers. "Because you're right, Pete. They could have taken off and we'd never have found them, not unless we wandered all over the country with meters set to the right

frequency. But they came right here. That's the real proof, if you want it. They're worried about it so they showed up here."

"Then there's two reasons for that," said Peter. "They're here to make sure we keep quiet about them — or they want something from us."

"We do want something from you," MacLeod returned. "But not in the way you mean it. We want your silence. We don't intend to hurt you for it, but you'll endanger us if you talk about what you've learned."

"And you might endanger yourselves," Richie put in.

"What do you mean?" asked Janine suspiciously from the doorway. She had never left when she showed MacLeod and Richie to the lab, and now she stood there, eyes wide. This was the first time she'd heard of Immortals, and she looked unhappy with what she was hearing. She edged closer to Egon as if she planned to protect him from whatever threat these two characters represented.

"There are people who know about our existence," Duncan explained, conceding the point, though he looked uneasy about it, as if revealing the truth about himself were something rarely done. He had to know he could say nothing at this point to convince the Ghostbusters their theories were wrong. With a shrug at Richie, the older man continued, "Some of them are relatively harmless. They're simply interested. They're probably the people who have put veiled references to us in those books you've been studying. The others are a little too interested, and they're the real danger." He gestured at the lab table and desk where the Ghostbusters' reference volumes were scattered. "I knew there were references to us scattered throughout history. I've seen many of them. But without a key, a reason to check them out, I felt they were obscure enough to hold off all but the most determined of searches."

"And when these guys have a search, they're as determined as you get," offered Janine, turning aside when the telephone rang and snatching it up. "Ghostbusters."

She was silent a moment, listening, then she grabbed a sheet of paper off the desk and scribbled down an address. "You got one," she told the guys when she hung up. "It sounds really urgent. Four Class-5s trashing a warehouse."

"Why do they always go for warehouses?" Peter complained, remembering several particularly unpleasant busts in abandoned warehouses. "How come it's never anything upscale?"

"I think it'll be fun," offered Ray. He turned to the two Immortals. "We've gotta go and do this. Do you want to wait here so we can figure out what to do? It shouldn't take that long. Janine can keep you company."

Janine's eyes lingered on Duncan MacLeod with enthusiasm. "I'd be happy to."

MacLeod nodded. "We'll wait," he agreed, smiling at Janine.

That made Egon's eyes narrow but he didn't comment. Instead he picked up his P.K.E. meter while Winston shut down the computer. The secretary led the two men out of the room with an offer of coffee. The fact that they were willing to wait was the final confirmation of their identity. Peter shook his head. *Who'd have thought we'd ever run up against Immortals?*

"Better watch out, Egon," he said with a teasing grin. "She never offers *us* coffee. This could be serious."

"I can't imagine what you're talking about," Egon returned stiffly as he made adjustments on the

meter he held. "Let's get this over quickly. I want to return to my studies as soon as possible."

Or *Janine*, Peter thought with amusement. "Can it be our mad scientist is jealous?"

Egon didn't dignify that as a reply, though Ray grinned as he started for the stairs.

T

he bust proved to be just that, a bust. A man came out to meet them who introduced himself as Jones, explaining the warehouse had been abandoned for years but he'd recently purchased it for his business. He had been fine, he admitted, until he'd seen the spirits inside. "Big yellow ones," he added darkly. "No one's going to do business with me if I have ghosts."

"Strange, but I'm not getting any readings," Egon said, pointing his P.K.E. meter at the building.

"I didn't notice anything until I went inside," the owner explained. "I think they keep quiet unless somebody invades 'their' territory. Maybe you had better search the place thoroughly. If you each go in a different direction ..."

"That sounds good," agreed Ray. "Sometimes ghosts are quiescent until disturbed."

"Usually there are strong residual readings from recent manifestations," Egon argued, but it wasn't always the case. "Peter, you stay out here and circle the building. The rest of us will split up once we get inside. Everybody check your meters."

Peter watched them vanish inside, and saw the owner back away from the building to wait on the other side of the street by his car. He wore an expression of anticipation, probably hoping the Ghostbusters would finish right away and charge him a minimal rate. Peter looked forward to telling him there was a fee whether they found a ghost or not. Grinning, he headed for the corner of the building, P.K.E. meter in hand.

He went around the whole warehouse, picking his way between packing crates and trash containers with some distaste, once dodging a rat that was enjoying the contents of a garbage pail. The P.K.E. meter in his hand never beeped once in his entire trip. When he returned to the front of the building, he discovered that the owner was nowhere in sight, and even his car was gone. Peter's eyes narrowed. He had a pretty good idea they were going to be stiffed for the fee.

Winston emerged from the building as Peter reached the door. "Man, this is a waste of time. There isn't a ghost in there. I didn't even pick up residuals. The meter didn't even flicker, and I think that place is the cobweb capital of the known world." He scrubbed a hand through his hair as if to make sure he hadn't brought out any eight-legged passengers.

"I didn't get anything either, and Jones took off," Peter agreed. "You didn't get his license number, did you? I think we're gonna lose our fee, and I *hate* that."

"Didn't even think of it," Winston agreed as Ray came out of the building. "Did *you* pick up anything, homeboy?"

Ray shook his head. "I don't think there was a ghost in there at all. Ever. I adjusted my meter to top gain and fine tuned it like mad and I didn't get anything at all. I wonder if Egon had any luck."

"He must. He's still in there playing mad scientist," Peter observed, jerking his thumb at the building.

"Then why is his meter out here?" demanded Winston suddenly, pointing across the street, his body stiffening with tension.

Peter spun around and stopped dead when he saw what Zeddemore had seen. Crushed and broken, a P.K.E. meter lay on the pavement right where Jones's car had stood. Grabbing his walkie talkie from his belt, Peter activated it and jammed his thumb against the "transmit" button. "Egon. Come in, Egon!"

Seconds ticked by while Winston and Ray tried to reach Egon with their communicators, too. Peter dashed over and scooped up the meter. It was well and truly broken as if a booted foot had ground it under a determined heel.

Ray joined him, busy over his own meter. "Gosh, Peter, I can't pick up Egon's biorhythms anywhere around here. I adjusted for them just now but didn't get a thing. Do you think Jones might have *kidnapped* him?" he concluded, horrified at the thought.

"Looks that way," Winston agreed, gritting his teeth. "But that's crazy. Why would somebody want to snatch Egon?"

Peter frowned, feeling his stomach knot with tension. "I don't know but when I find out, they're gonna learn a lesson from Dr. Venkman, the kind of lesson that comes from having all their teeth rammed down their throats."

"You think this whole bust was a setup?" Winston asked, voicing Peter's unspoken concern. "We get out here and there's no ghosts, and now Egon's gone? Somebody wanted to snatch him, or at least one of us. And Peter being outside would have been the easiest one to grab. But Egon's the one who got grabbed. Damn it, I wish I'd got that license number. My brain's out to lunch."

"We don't make a habit of checking license plates on our busts," Peter pointed out. "We never had anything like this happen before." He stared unhappily at the broken meter in his hand. "Egon must have put up a fight," he said. "He'd rather break his arm than his P.K.E. meter. This is his favorite one, too."

Ray's eyes widened as an idea struck him. "Hey, do you think it might have been something to do with the Immortals?"

"I don't know what? If somebody has it in for them, I was there last night, too." He frowned, remembering MacLeod's remark about certain people being dangerous. "If Jones had just taken off on his own, I'd think this was some kind of decoy, to lure us away from the firehouse, but if so, why take just Egon?"

"You don't think Janine's in trouble, do you, homeboy?" asked Winston, frowning. "I'd better call her on the mobile phone and make sure she's okay." He headed for Ecto and climbed in behind the wheel.

"You don't think Egon's hurt, do you, Peter?" Ray asked anxiously, looking around as if he hoped they'd managed to overlook the physicist. "Maybe still in there?"

Peter shook his head. "We would have picked up his readings if he were anywhere around here," he refuted. *Unless he was dead.* The thought hit him hard and he took a dogged step in the direction of the warehouse only to have Ray catch his arm, eyes sympathetic as if he had caught Peter's thought. "No, if — if he were in there ... uh, you know, we'd still be able to tell. There'd be fading residuals, and the strongest residuals are right here where we found his meter."

"Where Jones's car was parked," confirmed Winston, returning. "He probably snatched Egon right away and took off while Peter was behind the warehouse."

"I'm still gonna search that place," Peter insisted fiercely. "We might learn something if we do." He stalked across the street to the door, and after a moment he heard the other two following

him. He could sense their concern. Whatever had happened here had been a set-up, luring the Ghostbusters here with an obviously fake ghost, so Egon could be taken. Had it been Egon in particular Jones had wanted? None of them had recognized him, so either he was simply a stranger who had it in for them or he was hired muscle.

They all but tore the warehouse apart, but the only thing they found to show them where the deed had been done was Egon's glasses, one lens cracked across, lying on the floor in a corner of one small room. Ray picked them up and folded the bows neatly into place before he looked up at the other two, his eyes huge and worried.

"What do we do now, Peter?" he asked in a voice that ached with concern.

"We call the cops," Peter said firmly. "Nobody messes with the Ghostbusters and gets away with it."

"You don't think this really might have something to do with those two characters back at headquarters?" Winston repeated Ray's earlier question. He folded his arms across his chest. "Maybe they don't like us knowing about them. Maybe they arranged that phone call to lure us here so some other Immortals could snatch us."

"Then why just take Egon?" argued Ray. "Peter was outside, an easier target. Why grab Egon and not the rest of us? Why not just kill us on the spot if they want to get rid of us? And if that guy was an Immortal, he would have set off the P.K.E. meters and we'd have got a reading instead of what we did get — nothing."

That was a good point, and Peter didn't have any answers. Instead he nodded at Winston to use the mobile phone to dial 911. In less than five minutes two patrol cars arrived and the Ghostbusters poured out their story, showing the police the broken P.K.E. meter and Egon's glasses.

"We can try to find him with our meters," Ray concluded, holding his meter up. "I've set it for his frequency, but he could be anywhere, maybe even outside the city. It could take a long time."

"Yeah, especially if he's in New Jersey," muttered Peter. He was still angry. If Jones suddenly drove up, Peter would have floored him with a well-chosen punch.

The oldest cop, a brawny character in his fifties and the look of an Irishman about his sandy red hair and bright blue eyes, pursed his lips. "We'll get out an APB. We might come upon him, too, even without those gizmos of yours. Now what about this Jones character? Probably an alias, and not as likely to be suspected as 'Smith'. Can you give us a description?"

The three of them described Jones with as much detail as possible, down to what he was wearing and the scuff marks on his down-at-the-heel loafers. As for the car, they had everything but a license number, and Ray insisted it had been a New York plate. "I didn't pick up on the number, but I glanced at it and thought he was a local though he didn't sound like it."

Riley pounced on that. "What did he sound like? Are we talking an accent here?" He made a note in his notebook.

"No, it was as if he had no accent at all. I never thought of that," concluded Ray.

Peter nodded. "Yeah, but I think I heard 'foreign' under it. You know, like in *My Fair Lady*. He spoke English too well, if you know what I mean. No slang."

"Anybody send you guys any threatening letters lately? Any weird phone calls? Anything to suggest somebody had it in for you?" asked one of the younger cops, a freckle-faced rookie

whose name badge introduced him as "Davison."

Winston shook his head. "No, we haven't had anything like that. Not a clue anything was wrong. Nobody seemed out to get us, anyway. You don't think it's a ransom thing, do you?"

"Hard to tell, this early," Riley replied. He jotted down their telephone number and address, though Ghostbuster Central's location was well known to New Yorkers. "Have you checked in at your office to make sure everything is okay there?"

"We called to warn her there might be trouble," Winston replied. "Everything was fine then." He frowned. "I didn't tell Janine Egon was missing, though. I just said the bust was a fake and to make sure everything was okay. She said it was fine."

"I'm gonna check again," Peter decided, realizing Janine had the right to know about Egon, though telling her wasn't something he looked forward to. He slid behind the wheel and snatched the phone, pushing in the numbers quickly. Janine answered right away, her voice completely normal.

"Hi, Janine." Peter knew his voice was anything but.

"What's wrong?" You could never keep a secret from her, at least Peter had never been able to. They were too much alike and she knew him too well. "Wasn't it a prank call after all? Is somebody hurt?"

"The bust was a setup like Winston said," he told her quickly, hoping she wouldn't hear how worried he was. It wouldn't help either of them. "But it wasn't a prank, Janine. The guy who hired us snatched Egon."

"He *what*?" Janine's voice rose to a shriek, forcing Peter to yank the telephone away from his ear to prevent his eardrum being shattered. Easing it back cautiously, he was subjected to a string of anxious questions.

"Easy, Janine. Slow down. We don't know much. We called the police and they're checking. We'll run some checks ourselves on the way home. But in case this is for ransom, we wanted to let you know because the kidnapper might call."

"Ransom?" she echoed in surprise. "You guys aren't rich."

"No, but we do charge a lot on each bust. Thing is, people forget how much it costs to maintain the equipment or else it doesn't occur to them. Egon might have some money from his dad, but he's not 'rich' either, not enough to warrant kidnapping. Are those two characters still there?" he concluded suspiciously.

"Yeah. I gave them the cheap tour of the place and now they're looking through those musty old books you guys had out. They're not causing any trouble." Her tone implied she was about to give them a second look right away.

"Well, keep your eye on 'em anyway," Peter urged, inherently suspicious. This could all too easily have something to do with those two men. Immortals? Peter was still skeptical of the whole bit, but if it was true — and he'd seen a lot weirder things in his time — maybe somebody had noticed Peter and Egon picking up on them at the Garden last night, somebody who might have wanted to know exactly what had been done. Egon had been the man with the meter. He might have seemed the logical target for any enemies the two Immortals might possess.

"You don't think they have anything to do with it?" suspicion flooded into Janine's voice. "You bet I'll watch 'em. I might even get my thrower out and keep it handy," she concluded darkly.

"Do that. We'll be home as soon as we can, and then we'll see what we can find out about Egon. We'll get him back. That's a promise, Janine."

W

ith New York's Finest on the case, the Ghostbusters headed home wearing identical grim expressions. Ghosts they could handle. Demons, trolls, zombies, no problem. But human criminals — well, they'd handled them, too, but it had been a long time since they'd been Crimebusters and it wasn't a job any of them wanted to resume.

For Egon they'd do it, though, and never hesitate. Of course the trick was figuring out who had Egon, what he was wanted for and where he was being held. Winston was at the wheel, but Peter and Egon had activated P.K.E. meters set to detect Egon's frequency and boosted to maximum gain. The slightest blip would steer them in the right direction.

The timing was the only thing that led Peter to suspect the two characters from last night had anything to do with this, and the sight of them peacefully checking out the old books from the library — or MacLeod checking them out while Richie prowled around the room, eyeing the scientific equipment — seemed harmless enough. Janine was standing in the doorway watching them, a proton pack on her back, though it probably wouldn't do any good against somebody who could come back from the dead.

MacLeod looked up when the Ghostbusters arrived. "Did you find your friend?" he asked.

"How did you know ..." Winston began suspiciously.

"I told them," Janine confessed. "I wanted to know what they were up to, and maybe they'd know where Egon is. But they didn't know anything about it. At least they *said* they didn't," she finished, her tone suspicious.

"Yeah," said Peter sourly. "They're real believable. Nobody ever tried to kidnap one of us before you two showed up, and who did they go for? Egon, the one who knows the most about science, the one who had the meter last night. I think the timing's kind of interesting, don't you?"

The two Immortals exchanged a thoughtful look, then MacLeod snapped the book closed that he'd been reading. "We told you there were Watchers, people who kept track of us," he admitted. "What we didn't really have time to say before your call was that some of them don't just want to watch. They want to kill us. They know how and they've done it to some of us already. We can sense when another Immortal is nearby. But we don't have a defense against someone we can't detect, other than caution and readiness. If one of them was at the Garden last night, we might not have known — until it was too late. If someone had followed us, he'd hardly attack us during the game. The meter might have changed his plans."

"And you didn't think to warn us about this little complication before we went out there?" Peter demanded hotly. "If somebody saw us last night, they know our meters can detect you — and I bet they'd love to get their hands on some of them, and find out how they work. If we'd known we might be targets we sure wouldn't have split up and we'd have Egon with us right now. You came to us, bunky, not the other way around. I guess you like taking risks. It's easy when you can come back from the dead. But Egon's not immortal —"

"Peter ..." Ray caught Peter's arm to restrain him. "We can't expect them to come here and tell us all their secrets. I bet they rarely tell anybody about themselves. For all they know, we're as big a threat to them as those bad Watchers are. I bet they were going to come here and sound us out."

"And then throw us to the wolves?" Winston joined in, his face full of anger. "We didn't want to get involved in this any more than you did, but we're in it now. If the guy who snatched Egon is one of them, then we're gonna need your help to get him away from them — and we're gonna

have to figure out a way to convince those characters what happened last night was a fluke, or none of us are going to be safe again."

"Can you do that?" Richie asked, intrigued in spite of the tension in the atmosphere. "If somebody saw the meter going off when it was aimed at us and saw us reacting to it, they're gonna know you guys can detect Immortals, aren't they?"

Ray frowned. "I'm not sure how it works. Let me take a reading and see what I get, okay?" He snatched up a P.K.E. meter and took readings of both Duncan and Richie, who eyed the equipment without any great enthusiasm. "Egon said you absorbed energy from the other Immortals you've fought with and killed. If that's true, maybe that's what the meter picks up, a different kind of spectral energy."

"But that's not what it's like," argued Richie. "We're not possessed."

"No, but we do gain things from those who die," MacLeod said thoughtfully, putting a restraining hand on Richie's forearm. "You're too new at this, Richie. It takes time to completely understand all the changes that have come into your life. We absorb the energy of those we must kill into ourselves and make it a part of ourselves. We call it the Quickening. I never thought of it as possessing my own personal ghosts."

"But it must be enough like that to make the meters work," insisted Ray, caught up in the problem now, his gaze shifting from MacLeod to the meter in his hand and back again. "You've been an Immortal a lot longer than Richie, haven't you?" he asked MacLeod.

"Four hundred years," MacLeod replied in a quiet voice, and Peter nodded. He'd seen all that in the Highlander's eyes last night, though he hadn't understood it then. "But Richie only became an Immortal last year."

"That ties in," agreed Ray. "I get a lot weaker readings from him — no, that's not right. Not weaker, lesser in number." He passed the meter over Richie, and the antennae barely stirred. "I bet this is what you sense in each other, too. Something about being an Immortal makes you sensitive to — well, it's not really ectoplasm, but it's similar. Wait a minute. I want to try something." He left the room and headed for the stairs.

"Do you know what he's up to?" Peter asked, leaning his elbow against Winston's shoulder. Ray came up with weird ideas sometimes, but so far he was right on the money.

"Got an idea," Winston replied, a spark of amusement momentarily lightening his face. "Wait for it."

Ray was back in five minutes. He walked into the room and Duncan and Richie straightened up and stared at him uneasily. "What the hell ..." Duncan began, catching himself and exchanging a questioning look with his friend. "It's not as if I could sense another Immortal, but it's a very similar feeling."

"Yeah. It's really weird. I didn't feel it earlier last night, but there was something, when we first got here ..." Richie concurred.

"I noticed it myself, though it wasn't as strong as this." MacLeod approached Ray, his brow puckered in a considering frown. "You didn't go downstairs and become an Immortal in five minutes. What did you do?"

"Me, me, meeee!" Slimer squirted out of Ray's pocket and hovered, green and sticky, in the air before the two strangers, hesitating at the sight of them. "Ghosts!" the little ghost insisted, pointing, then he shook his head so hard his whole potato-shaped body bobbed up and down.

"Not ghosts." He zipped over to MacLeod and touched him cautiously, sniffed him as if he could tell whether a ghost was present or not by his sense of smell, then backing away as if he'd been scalded. "Lots of bad ghosts!" With an elaborate shiver, he flung himself at Peter and grabbed him around the neck. "Save me," he gabbled.

"Gross. Get him off me," complained Peter, pushing at the Spud. It was about the same as pushing away a big bowl of jello, and he'd never reconciled himself to the feeling. "They're not ghosts, Slimer, and the bad ghosts can't get out and hurt you."

"Yeah, you're safe, Slimer," Ray assured their mascot, patting him on the arm, then surreptitiously wiping his hand. "They won't hurt you. I wanted to see if they could sense you without a P.K.E. meter. And they can. I think one of the things that changes when somebody becomes immortal is that whatever we do with the meters can be done by the Immortal. You guys would make great Ghostbusters. You wouldn't even need meters to track the ghosts."

"All very interesting, Ray, and maybe there's even big bucks in it," said Peter, still scrubbing at his neck to remove the ectoplasmic traces of Slimer. "But it's not important right now. What *is* important is Egon. Is there any way you guys can find your non-Immortal enemies or track them down?"

Richie's eyes were still on Slimer, his expression uneasy. "Is that a real ghost?" he asked. "I didn't know they looked like that."

"Slimer's real," the ghost proclaimed, buffing his "fingernails" on his chest.

"Yeah, and the other guys like him so we have to put up with him," muttered Peter. "Come on, you two. Any ideas for finding Egon? If it really is your Watcher types who have him, he's not going to give away information about our equipment free. We found his P.K.E. meter broken. Which either means it was damaged in the scuffle, or he was trying to protect *you*. So how about a little tit for tat here?"

"We don't live in New York," MacLeod replied, his face revealing a lot of thought. "We've been in Paris and are returning to Seattle. I'm an art collector and we stopped in New York to attend a showing at a gallery here that opened today. I bought a couple of pieces. Richie wanted to go to the hockey game last night."

"And the point?" Peter persisted stubbornly, unimpressed with the pocket travelogue.

"The point is we don't know any of the locals here. I didn't see anyone I recognized in the crowd and, apart from you and Egon, I didn't notice anyone paying particular attention to us. I assure you, I do look out for that sort of thing. That's why I spotted you two. I sensed no other Immortals, and I saw no one else watching us."

"I did," Richie said with a grin. "That blonde."

MacLeod shook his head, the corners of his mouth lifting in amusement. "That's something different, Richie. She wasn't looking for Immortals."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Winston suspiciously. "It would be a good cover if she was one of them, pretending to be attracted so you'd think that was her only interest."

MacLeod frowned. "It would, and such things have happened before. She might not have been what she seemed, but she didn't feel like a threat. After four hundred years, I have learned to know them very well."

"Gosh, I'll bet you have." Ray's eyes rounded in wonder. "You must have seen a lot, famous

people in history, major events. That's great. I think it'd be wonderful to be an Immortal."

"Or terrible," Peter said under his breath.

MacLeod heard him. "Why terrible?" he asked, his look lingering on Peter as he considered the psychologist's words and evaluated them. Whatever he thought of the question, he didn't let it show on his face.

"Yeah, man," Winston prodded. "What have you got against it?"

Peter hesitated, reluctant to express his inner thoughts. "It sounds great at first," he finally said. "But what if you guys weren't Immortals, too? I'd have to watch you get old and die — and leave me behind. Women, too. Wives? Girlfriends? Bad enough the people you lose in a normal lifetime. This time it would happen over and over and over again. You couldn't pay me to do it."

MacLeod winced, and Richie edged a step closer to him and clapped him on the shoulder. It was plain such ideas were still new to Richie and while he knew about them, he hadn't had a chance to dwell on the possibilities very much, or begin to experience them for himself. MacLeod on the other hand knew exactly what Peter was talking about. Pain flashed in his eyes, recent pain, if Peter were any judge. But all he said was, "There are benefits and there are drawbacks, Peter. Maybe one day we could speak of them. But you're right. Egon is our top priority right now. We don't know if his disappearance has anything to do with us or not, but if so, we have a serious problem."

"Yeah, Egon's gone." Winston grimaced. "He doesn't even have his glasses. He'd have a hard time getting away without them. He's pretty nearsighted. He's smart though. I don't think whoever snatched him would realize how smart he is. Given half a chance, he'll get away on his own."

Egon might have agreed with Winston's optimistic assessment but he had other, more pressing things on his mind at the moment. Firmly bound in the back of a panel truck, a cloth tied across his eyes, he was flung roughly from side to side as the vehicle took corners rather too quickly. Once Egon hit something big and solid that momentarily numbed his right arm, and he collected bruises at every movement. He could hear the driver whistling tunelessly through his teeth, but he could sense no other presence in the vehicle. Other than that, he had no clues to his location. Without his glasses, everything was blurry, and without the blindfold, he wouldn't have been that much better off. He could read labels up close without his glasses and he could recognize the general outline of his friends, but without them he was legally blind. He could get around. If he could escape, he could see well enough to flag down a taxi, recognizing one by its distinctive color if nothing else. But he was limited.

When something solid and gunlike had shoved itself into his back, he had thought it the ghost at first, though his meter hadn't manifested. "Gotcha," had breathed a satisfied voice in his ear. Egon had tried to yank up his thrower, but someone else had appeared beside him, grabbing his arm with a hand that was solid and alive rather than cold and wet with ectoplasm, and Egon had realized he'd fallen in among human nasty types rather than ghosts. The first voice, he'd realized, was strange to him, but the grabbing hands had an accompanying voice. "Be careful of the blinking gadget, Rafe. We need it."

The P.K.E. meter? had thought Egon in confusion. This involved a P.K.E. meter? *Yes, that does make sense.* Last night at the Garden and the two Immortals this morning; the pieces had added themselves together quickly in Egon's head. He and Peter had been seen and noted last night by someone who had a particular interest in the meter readings. MacLeod had begun to explain about their possible enemies. In New York, the Ghostbusters were well known, and it would be all too easy to lure them to a remote location with the intention of kidnapping one of them, most

likely Egon himself if possible, or more than one if it fell that way, and forcing them to explain the mechanics of a P.K.E. meter. It had dawned on Egon that there was little they could do other than claim kidnapping, because they could not reveal the identity of the Immortals to the police, assuming anyone would believe it. They would have to formulate a simpler explanation ...

All that ran through Egon's head in an instant, before the first man had said scornfully, "It's called P.K.E. meter. It detects ghosts."

"But that's insane. MacLeod isn't a ghost. That's the whole point."

"Don't be any more of a fool than you can help," the first man had told Jones. "Come on, let's get him out of here before any of his buddies show up. Listen to me, Spengler. You try anything and we'll take out your buddies on our way out of here. Call to them and warn them and they'll be the ones to pay. I only need *one* Ghostbuster alive. Just bear that in mind."

He'd meant it, too. This man was utterly ruthless; it filled his voice. Either that or he was thoroughly driven by his obsession and didn't care who got in his way. Egon had nodded carefully, even as he'd tried to wiggle free.

Both men had grabbed and subdued him, one of them had hit him a glancing blow on the back of the head with a the gun, that had staggered him. His glasses had gone flying. Effectively blinded and a little dizzy from the blow, Egon had turned to squint at them in hopes of seeing them clearly enough to identify them later. Not that they'd meant to allow him a later. If these were the enemies of MacLeod and Richie and pursued them simply because they had the fortune — whether good or ill — to live forever, then one physicist and paranormal eliminator wasn't going to be worth much to them. Once they'd learned from him exactly what they wanted, which must be how to use a P.K.E. meter to find Immortals, Egon had fully expected they would dump his body in an alley somewhere or in the East River.

He had to make it as hard for them as possible.

They'd encountered none of the others on the way out of the warehouse, where a blue panel truck waited beside Jones's car. It had lettering on the side, but Egon hadn't been near enough to make out what it said. He'd realized once he'd been shoved into the back of the truck, he would lose all control of his options, so he'd done the one thing left to him. He'd let the meter slip from his hand and ground it beneath his heel in an awkward stumble that he'd hoped covered the fact he had done it deliberately, instantly crying out in pretend dismay, "My meter! Find it. I can't see well enough ..."

There'd been a silence, then Jones had begun to curse furiously. He'd backhanded Egon across the face and sent him reeling, nearly upsetting his already precarious balance. His head had throbbled from the earlier blow and his face ached from the new one, but he'd fought to stay on his feet.

"You idiot!" had snarled Jones. "You've broken it." Egon had staggered backward and fell against the side of the truck, turning his head toward the lettering. He'd been able to see " ... ing, Inc," and a second line in smaller and harder to read letters that had said, " ... uters," but the rest of it had been out of his line of vision.

"We've got *him*. Just as good," had argued Rafe. "He's a genius, they say. We'll have him explain the principles of it. If we can get it in our heads, we'll have something to bargain with, and a *fait accompli*." He and Jones had manhandled Egon into the back of the truck and tied a blindfold over his eyes. His hands had been pulled roughly behind his back and the door slammed. A moment later he'd heard Jones's car start up just before the other man climbed into the truck and took off in a squeal of tires.

Egon had tried to keep track of the direction they'd taken since then, but after several sharp turns that flung him painfully about, he'd lost track of the direction. He could tell from the stop-and-start driving they were still in the city, especially when the sound of the tires never changed the way it would if they had crossed one of the bridges. They'd driven for about half an hour, during which time, Egon had found a sharp edged object and tried to saw through the ropes, abandoning the project when he'd been flung away from it and then back again, cutting his forearm. He could feel the hot wetness of blood on his arm, but not too much of it, not enough to indicate a vein or artery had been cut. A different angle could have done more damage, so he wiggled sideways away from the obstacle, abandoning the attempt.

Finally the van stopped and Egon listened, seeking clues. Instead the back door of the van opened and he was manhandled forward, rolled up in what felt like a rug, and hauled out, one man grabbing each end of the rug. Breathing became difficult, and he struggled to draw in breaths through the musty odor of the carpet as he was bounced up a flight of stairs. He was lightheaded and dizzy from lack of air when they set him down, grabbed one end of the carpet and pulled, rolling him over and over. Dizziness swept over him in waves and he blacked out.

"D

o you think Dawson would know anything about this, Mac?" Richie asked anxiously. They'd been tossing ideas around since the Ghostbusters had returned without Egon, and the young Immortal was worried about the way it would turn out. He didn't get along with the Watcher as well as Mac did, but he might have some ideas.

Mac grimaced. He'd thought of it already, of course. Richie was constantly realizing how quick a mind Duncan MacLeod had, how he automatically considered all the angles, the dangers they faced, where to look for new threats. He could evaluate a new situation and come up with things that hadn't even occurred to Richie, though Ryan was learning. He'd been hurt when Mac had sent him away after his first kill, but he realized somewhere along the way that the learning experience had been necessary, dangerous though it was. He'd thought he was pretty smart, until he got in over his head and tracked down Mac again. He'd like to keep the team together now. Mac could teach him a lot, and besides, he was the best friend Richie had ever had.

"I thought of that," Mac replied. "I mean to call him, but I'm not sure I want him to know about the P.K.E. meters."

"You don't trust him," Richie said quickly.

"Who's Dawson?" asked Ray, leaning forward eagerly. "Would he have any idea where to look for Egon?"

That made Peter's head come up. The brown-haired Ghostbuster had been in a foul mood since they'd come back to say that Egon had been captured. When they'd decided Winston would take a meter out and do some quick checks for Egon with it, Peter had talked about splitting up and all of them going until Ray reminded him they had to find out more about the people who had taken Egon, and that meant questioning the two Immortals. With a sour glance at them, Peter had agreed, but Richie realized Peter was like him in one way. He wasn't good at waiting. If it had been Mac who was missing, Richie would have wanted to jump in and start looking and would probably have done it. Peter reined himself in but he didn't like it.

"Dawson is one of the Watchers," explained Mac. "They study us and keep track of us. Sometimes one of them goes rogue. There was a man named Peter Horton who did that recently. He wanted to kill Immortals."

"Why?" asked Ray in surprise. "You weren't hurting the rest of us."

"We're different," Mac replied. "There have always been people who fear or hate those of us who

are different. History is full of it."

"Yeah, Ray," Peter put in sourly. "Look at Hitler and the Jews. Look at the Spanish Inquisition. Look at racial prejudice if it comes to that. Humanity's a great bunch."

"Mostly it *is* a great bunch," Duncan replied. "It's just that the ones who hate come in the louder variety."

"It's more than hate, though," Peter continued. "People are afraid of what they don't understand and tend to think it's a threat. You Immortals could be a threat. You could be manipulating history for your own ends."

"We could if we were united," Mac agreed, folding his arms across his chest. "But we're not. More often than not we try to kill each other. In the end, there'll be only one of us left."

Ray looked fascinated. "I wonder what kind of a biological imperative that is? A mutation that intends to lead to its own extinction isn't very logical. I wonder if somebody got his wires crossed somewhere."

"It's meant that way," Peter reminded him, interested in spite of himself. "Otherwise you wouldn't have this Quickening thing. Unless it's a by-product of an Immortal's death and over the centuries the rest of you have learned you can feed on it. Maybe it wasn't supposed to be that way and it got twisted."

"Gee, that's terrible," breathed Ray. "You've got this wonderful gift of immortality and you wasted it chopping off each other's heads."

"Yeah, practicing your fencing instead of bettering the human race," said Peter. He shook his head sententiously.

Richie turned to Mac in wide-eyed speculation. "Do you think they could be right, Mac? Do you think maybe we weren't meant to kill each other off?"

"I was trained this way," Duncan replied thoughtfully. "And there is an imperative to kill. You've felt it, too. It can be overcome and it isn't the be-all and end-all of our existence. We aren't trying to kill each other all the time. It makes me wonder if you could be right. Yet the Quickening has been around since the beginning."

"I still think it doesn't make any sense," Ray said stubbornly.

"Yeah, well, Ray, you can argue Immortal biology some other time, when Egon isn't missing," Peter cut in abruptly. "So if we've got one of these hostile Watchers after Egon, what do you think they'll do to him?" From the look on his face, Richie was pretty sure he wouldn't like any answer they'd give him.

"If this is involved with us at all, they saw the meter react to us at the Garden last night," replied Duncan. "They'll want to know how it works and why. Egon managed to destroy the meter so they don't have anything to use. They might use him to get a meter from you or they might try to figure out the scientific principles of the meter so they can use it."

"Yeah, but only if they're scientists, Mac," objected Richie. "I can see how they'd want a meter, but if it was me, I wouldn't have a clue how to build one. It'd be fun to figure it out, but I'd think they'd use Egon to trade for us — and a working P.K.E. meter so they could find other Immortals."

"Yeah, but they haven't called yet," Peter said. His eyes were dark with worry. "That only works

if ..."

"If Egon's still alive," breathed Ray, the color running out of his face. "Gosh, Peter, we should be out there with Winston looking for him right now."

Peter shook his head. "Uh-uh, no way, Ray. I'm not leaving these two characters unguarded. I don't trust 'em. Besides, we might need them to get Egon back, and who's to say they wouldn't take off the minute our backs are turned. It's their necks on the chopping block here and they don't owe us — at least they don't think they do. They're staying right here."

"And then what, Dr. Venkman?" Mac asked seriously, tilting his head as he considered Peter. "You'll turn us over to them?"

Peter opened his mouth as if to claim he'd do anything to get Egon back and then he shut it again. It was Ray who spoke. "We can't turn you over to them. They'd kill you."

"Well, they'd try," said Mac with a twinkle in his eyes. "If they have to resort to something like this, I'm not so sure how good they are." His face darkened. "We can go after *them*, though. We have to put a stop to them or there'll always be a new reason to look over our shoulders. I don't like this any more than you do."

"How serious should we take these guys?" Peter asked. "Will they just try to use Egon or are they gonna get really nasty?"

"Yeah," added Ray, his normally cheerful face full of worry. "Do you think they might — uh — kill him?"

"That'd be their last resort, I think," Mac said seriously. He frowned. "They want information. A dead Ghostbuster isn't any use to them at all. They want to know what Egon did last night and how it's going to help them. For all I know they may be Immortals themselves, who have allies who aren't."

"Yeah, but the meters would have picked them up, last night or today," Richie objected. "What's the range of those things anyway?"

"We can set them so we can check out a whole building before we go in," explained Ray, snatching up one of the meters and making a few careful adjustments. "I filtered you two out, so this one won't register you at all. You know, we'd better do that to every one we've got so if they sneak in here to take another one, it won't work on you. Maybe we can let 'em think last night was a fluke."

"That's the way to go, Tex," Peter lauded, clapping him encouragingly on the shoulder. "Go for it. Or does this mean I have to do some real work?"

Ray made a face at him and handed him a meter, and Richie noted with interest that Venkman went to work on it without hesitation and without directions. Until now, Richie had had the impression that Venkman, while good at busting ghosts, tried to ease out of real work when it came his way. He had let Ray and Egon give the tech answers, though he had scored big in other areas. Ray had explained Peter was a psychologist. That made Richie a little uncomfortable, but Peter was so laid back he'd soon forgotten about it except when Peter said — or did — something unexpected, something that didn't match the image he liked to present.

"Anyway," said Ray, passing an adjusted meter to Mac, and picking up another one to adjust, "this is what it does. Activate it, yeah, like that. Now you twist that dial. That gives the distance. We generally set them fairly close because there is a lot of ambient energy in the Tri-State Area ever since Gozer came though, and if we set the meters on 'infinite' we get a kind of 'ground

clutter' that messes up our readings. So I like to set mine to take in about a block. Check yours now. Individual ghosts will register like blips on radar. Got anything?"

"Yes," said Duncan, not above being delighted with the meter. "It looks like I'm getting a strong class 5 reading — that's what these numbers at the bottom mean, right? — in that direction." He pointed at the floor.

Peter groaned. "Slimer. In the kitchen. What else is new. I hope he leaves my ice cream alone. I want to pig out on that tonight — well, soon as Egon's back. Hey, Ray!" His eyes widened. "The Spud. I never thought of that. Why don't we send *him* after Egon?"

"He's never been very good at that, Peter," said Ray, but the idea appealed to him anyway. "Yo, Spud," he bellowed down the nearest firepole. "Front and center."

Slimer disconcerted Richie by popping up through the very floor and leaving a thick green smear where he'd passed. Hovering in front of Ray, he threw a snappy salute, shedding slime in the process. "Aye, aye, Ray."

"Slimer, this is important," Ray told the little ghost earnestly. "You know Egon's missing."

"Uh-huh," agreed Slimer in his garbled little voice. "Bad men take Egon."

"That's right, Spud." Peter hadn't displayed any liking for the green ghost earlier, but now he joined Ray and continued in a cajoling voice, "That's why we need your help, Green Guy. We think Egon's in trouble, but we don't know where he is. Winston's out looking, but it takes a long time. We need you to go and find him quick, before anything bad happens to him. Can do?"

Slimer concentrated. His face scrunched up into an even uglier expression than normal with the effort of thinking. "Slimer ... try," he offered doubtfully.

"You've gotta do better than try, Spud," Peter wheedled. "Tell you what. You find him and I promise you I'll renew your Diners Club Card. I'll forget about what happened last time, long as you help us get Egon back. Deal?"

Slimer brightened as if by magic. "Oboy, oboy," he caroled in delight. "Slimer find Egon." He flung his arms around Peter and planted a big squishy kiss right on Venkman's mouth. The psychologist cringed, planting both arms on the ghost's "chest" and shoved as hard as he could. Slimer ended the kiss with a loud "pop" that made Richie shudder at the very thought, then without further ado the ghost zipped out the nearest window, never mind the fact that it was closed at the time. Peter made gagging noises and ran his sleeve over his mouth as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

"That does it," Richie said. "I don't ever want to be a Ghostbuster."

"Diners Club Card?" Mac asked doubtfully.

Peter frowned, still scrubbing at his mouth. "Take it from me, you don't want to know."

"I just hope he can find Egon," Ray said seriously, hiding a smile at Peter's reaction, though his voice sounded wistful.

"And stop the men who took him," Duncan replied, a frown on his face. Richie realized he was a lot more worried about this than he let on, but then Mac had never liked innocents being caught up in the problems of Immortals and he didn't like it this time, either. Richie could tell he liked the Ghostbusters, even the suspicious Peter. Now if only the ugly little ghost could find their missing teammate. Then there'd be plans to make.

Egon revived in a very uncomfortable position, bound hand and foot and secured to a hard chair. For a long moment, he didn't move, trying to concentrate, to clear the cobwebs from his brain. Only when he felt he was as alert as he was going to be did he lift his chin from his chest and open his eyes.

"He's awake," said Jones quickly. The two men converged on him, granting Egon one hasty, blurred view of a small, dingy room before his field of vision was filled with the unpleasant faces of his captors.

"Yes, I'm awake," he replied. "I should warn you that you will be in serious trouble for this. Taking me against my will is nothing to what my friends will do to you. And they have particle throwers."

Jones's face fell, but Rafe's jaw hardened. "He's trying to scare you. They'd get in big trouble if they vaporized a person, and he knows it."

"Self-defense is legal," Egon replied in a calm voice.

"That may be, but you don't have anyone but us to complain to," insisted Rafe, folding his arms and grinning unpleasantly. "This doesn't have to be hard. We want one thing. We want to know what happened last night. We want to know about your detection meters and how they detect Immortals."

"Immortals?" echoed Egon, putting scorn into his voice. "They don't. There's no such thing. I am a scientist, not a New Age fanatic. My equipment detects ghosts, based upon very scientific principles. The P.K.E. meters are designed to detect the valences of ectoplasmic residue, no more, no less. They can be adjusted to pick up human electro-metabolic frequencies in a crisis, but they do not detect little green men, fairies, zombies, witches, Satanists, or anything as unlikely as Immortals."

"Nice try, but I saw it happen last night at the Rangers' game," said Jones with even more scorn than Egon had.

"Last ni — oh, the overload," exclaimed Egon as if he had suddenly made sense of the whole mess. "I brought the meter to the hockey game, if that's what you mean, to give myself something to do. I'm not a fan of most competitive sports. I was making adjustments on the meter and I made the mistake of setting the power grid on 'infinite'. It picked up a backlash of every ghost that has ever been on the site. We busted a ghost at the Garden three weeks ago." That, fortunately, was true and could be verified. "The meter reacted to the site of that bust, not to any fantasy immortal humans or aliens, or the site of an out of body experience." He looked at the two men with careful scorn. "What I do has a basis in fact. It can be proven. I don't deal in mysticism, magic or superstition." He hoped he sounded convincing, especially since what he was saying, except for the presence of MacLeod and Richie, was completely true.

"Then you're a fool," said Rafe. "You didn't even understand your own equipment. You picked up on Immortals all right. Now I want to know how you did it."

"I can't tell you what I don't know," Egon replied without hesitation. To give anything away would be to betray the two men who had come to headquarters that morning, and it wouldn't be just for now but down through history. Egon wasn't prepared to do that. MacLeod and Ryan had come to the Ghostbusters in good faith but these two had resorted to violence and threats. It wasn't difficult for Egon to choose sides.

"Oh, I think you can," Rafe said with a vicious grin and punched Egon in the stomach.

Spengler's breath erupted in a whoosh and he doubled over against the ropes that held him to the chair. When he could speak, he panted, "Violence can't make me tell you what isn't true."

"No, but if you're being all noble and heroic, you might run out of steam after awhile," Rafe explained. "You don't know what you're protecting. Immortals are a threat to the entire human race. They don't have to accept any responsibilities because they won't die no matter what happens. They can work for a long-term agenda that doesn't give a damn about the rest of us. They're a threat to all of us, and if you defend them, then you're a threat, too. You ought to side with normal humanity."

"If you're ... an example of 'normal' humanity, I'm not impressed," Egon wheezed.

Rafe backhanded him across the face. "Talk."

"Very well. The value of pi is represented by a number that can never be resolved. Three point —"

The Hunter's blow slammed against his other cheek. "Talk about Immortals."

"Very well. Immortals. A life form postulated by fools and science fiction writers, which, it would seem, is not subjected to death. Various *Star Trek* episodes have dealt with such entities. I seem to recall one starring James Daly —"

"Fool. You don't know what you're protecting."

"I do know what a P.K.E. meter does, however. Until one was invented it was not possible to prove the existence of ghosts scientifically. The meter picks up ectoplasmic residue, since it's set for a frequency previously unknown by any detection equipment. It does not detect physical bodies. It can detect an electro-metabolic frequency, but only when a specific frequency is known. For instance, I know the frequencies of my friends, in case one of them should be incarcerated. Which means, if you have the intellect to appreciate it, that they will eventually track me down with the equipment. Electro-metabolic frequencies vary from individual to individual and since this is a weak field, it requires close proximity. If I know my friends, they are criss-crossing the city searching for me, and when they locate me, you will be arrested for kidnapping, assault and battery —"

Jones's fist impacted with Egon's jaw, causing the room to spiral around him and its brightness to fade. Only half-conscious, Egon shuddered as Jones pounded him with flurry of blows until Rafe snapped, "Give it up. If he's right about such frequencies, we don't have much time."

"No, but we can take readings of MacLeod and Ryan and use it to track them."

"If it's a weak field, that would take as much time as a physical search," Rafe reminded him. "Not that I believe this geek, but he's not helping us any."

"So what, we kill him?" asked Jones. Egon felt a flicker of alarm. He had almost believed he could talk himself out of this, until the two decided to get violent, but he was too dazed to struggle.

"Nah. We dump him in an alley somewhere. He doesn't have copies of our metabolic fields and we're gonna split town anyway, so the odds of him finding us again aren't very good. I didn't come here to kill Ghostbusters, just Immortals."

Jones grimaced. "He'll get us into trouble."

"No. I've got a great idea. We dump him out behind their headquarters and make an anonymous call that he's out there. Then while they rush out to see, we break in and steal one of those

meters. Take it to somebody who knows something about physics and we're home free."

Egon closed his eyes. His friends might be in danger, especially since the two Immortals were probably still at the firehall. But consciousness trickled away like grains of sand through spread fingers, and he didn't even feel them start to untie him.

Peter was pacing the floor. Winston had just returned to grab a bite to eat and check in with his friends, and now was gobbling sandwiches and gulping coffee in preparation for returning to the search. Janine was on the telephone with the police, hotly demanding to know why they hadn't found Egon yet, and Ray had just finished with the last of the P.K.E. meters, making Immortals safe from detection while Richie hung over his shoulder and asked question after eager question about the equipment and what it was like to bust ghosts. Ray so far forgot himself to answer, describing some of their most exciting cases. The little green ghost had come back to report he still hadn't found Egon and vanished again. Duncan MacLeod had a bad feeling about the whole thing.

After four hundred years, his protective instincts were finely honed. Danger seemed inevitable this time, not from another Immortal but from the men who had taken Egon. And he knew Peter Venkman's temper was hovering on the edge of breaking. He was the kind of man who used anger to camouflage his concern, and right now he was pacing back and forth like a caged tiger. It might be a system that worked against ghosts, but against ill-intentioned humans, it was a very good way to get killed.

Duncan fell into step beside Peter. He didn't speak, just matched the pacing and kept it up until he got Peter's attention. Venkman turned his head and studied the Highlander through narrowed and considering eyes.

"So what do you get out of this, anyway?" he asked. "Now we've rigged the meters, you could just take off, get out of town on the first plane and never come back."

"This is my fight," Duncan replied. "Those men who took Egon are after me. I got him into this, and it's my job to get him out."

Peter was silent a moment. "Yeah, and you're doing a great job of it," he said sourly. "You get the gold star for sure."

"I can sense other Immortals, Peter. I can't sense malicious people on their own. Finding Egon is something you and the police can do better than I can. But from what I saw of Egon, I don't think he'll tell them anything useful unless they drug him."

Peter's muscles tightened in alarm; he obviously hadn't thought of that before, and Mac wished he hadn't mentioned it now. He added quickly before Peter could produce a furious outburst, "I think they'll come here eventually. Egon managed to destroy his meter. They're going to want one as a sample. That's why I'm waiting here."

"And you'll do what?" Peter asked suspiciously.

MacLeod produced his sword, the one he wore down his back under his coat. He'd taken it off while the Ghostbusters were out on the fake call and covered it with the coat, and now he whipped it around in a display of skill. "I can take care of myself."

"Wow!" gasped Ray. "That's great? You use that to behead people?"

"If I must," MacLeod replied. "Richie has one as well."

Peter eyed Richie suspiciously. The younger Immortal had come in wearing only a short jacket over his tight-fitting jeans and knit shirt. "Yeah, right. A switchblade sword. I like it."

Duncan passed the sword to the fascinated Ray, who made a couple of clumsy passes with it. "Egon knows fencing," he said. "He took a class while he was in college." His voice trailed off as his worry came to the surface, and he added slowly, "Of course he's out of practice." The sword tip sagged, and Richie eased it out of Ray's grip and passed it back to MacLeod, who set it aside. He caught Richie's eye and gestured at Ray, and Richie nodded in understanding and turned the occultist back to the workbench, asking him another question about busting ghosts. After a moment, Ray straightened up and started answering.

"So you've been playing this gig four hundred years?" Peter said in a quiet voice. "Gives you a lot of chances to get good with that sword."

"More than I would have chosen," MacLeod replied.

"The Immortal part might have its perks," said Peter thoughtfully. "Think of the bucks you could collect in interest. More than enough to pay for fake IDs in this day and age. But — " he shook his head. "I'd hate it. You have to watch your family die, your buddies die. And even if you've got Richie, what happens with this 'only one can be left' stuff?"

MacLeod stiffened. Peter had put his finger on the hardest part: the losses, the inevitable losses. He hadn't expected to lose Tessa, not yet, and there was still an empty place inside him that had been her place, a place that felt cold and hollow, that didn't ease with the passage of time. When he looked at one of Tessa's sculptures and ran his finger along the stone, he knew it was the closest he would ever come to touching her warm flesh again, and his stomach knotted. He'd lost friends before, even lovers, but somehow it had never been like this. Maybe because for a little while he'd had someone to trust, someone who knew him for what he was but loved him in spite of it, someone who had stayed with him and never hesitated. With her and, later with Richie, he'd had a family. For awhile he'd allowed himself to forget, to take each day as it came, even when he was reminded of the future by faces from the past.

When he didn't speak, Peter said, "Sorry. I was just thinking about Egon. I met him in college. I've known him for nearly twenty years. He was the first person I ever met besides my mom that I could really trust. I always thought you had casual buddies but when the chips were down it was every man for himself. But Egon wasn't like that. He saw past the jerk I must've been and helped me turn into something better. He knows me even better than I know myself. Then Ray came along. He's known us both almost as long. I know the job's dangerous and we could get vaporized by a proton pack explosion or trashed by a ghost, but that'd be all of us together, and even if it wasn't, it would still make sense. I'm not used to this." He flung his hand wide in an expansive gesture to indicate their entire situation.

"Losing someone who matters, that's the one thing that never gets easier," MacLeod said in a low voice. "I lost — I lost my lady last year. She wasn't Immortal but we'd been together a long time. I'd asked her to marry me. A street punk killed her and Richie." He avoided Peter's eyes. "Richie came back. She didn't."

Peter clapped him on the shoulder with sincere sympathy, suspicion and resentment fading. "I'm sorry."

"And I'm sorry about your friend. He may be fine."

"You know what these characters are like," Peter said, his eyes like chips of green ice in a cold face. He pulled back his hand, unwilling to trust any reassurances. "Do you think they're just gonna let him go?"

Duncan didn't. He wanted to offer Peter sympathy, as Peter had done to him, but the look on the psychologist's face was one he couldn't lie to. "I wouldn't expect that," he said. "Not unless they

had a reason for it. Trading him for us comes to mind. And if they make a deal like that, I want you to take it."

"Just hand you over? You expect me to believe that?" Peter demanded suspiciously, lowering his voice so Ray wouldn't hear him.

"And our swords, of course. We'll be carrying them. We're not helpless. Your friend is a scientist. He's used to facing ghosts with a weapon in his hand. I know he's a brave man, but he isn't used to human evil. None of you are. So if you're offered a trade, agree to it. We'll defend ourselves."

"It's not all your fault you got into this," Peter said, though he looked like he wanted to grab Duncan's offering in both hands and run for it. "Egon — Egon wouldn't buy that, not with the meter going off last night at the game."

"But you would?" MacLeod asked.

"Well, yeah, I'd do anything to get Egon back." But Peter grinned. "Only, I'd tilt the odds a little. Give you an edge. You could go in with the Spud in your pocket and he could jump out and try to freak 'em out." He grinned. "I kinda like that idea. He's slimed me often enough. Let him slime the baddies for a change."

MacLeod considered the idea without enthusiasm. He hadn't been that happy with Slimer, but his mental picture of the Hunters' faces at the sight of Slimer assuming a menacing face was too good to resist. His eyes sparkled with amusement at the image, and Peter grinned back. "The guys always told me the slimebag was good for something," he said. "Maybe it's time for him to prove it."

As if the thought had summoned him up Slimer came bursting through the back wall of the lab. "Egon!" he wailed, pointing behind him. "Egon *hurt!*"

Grabbing up his sword, MacLeod fell in behind Peter and Ray as they headed for the stairs in a rush. Winston crowded in behind MacLeod, his sandwich flung aside unfinished, and Richie and Janine fought to come next. "Where is he, Spud?" Peter demanded.

"Alley. Isn't talking. Sleeping," the ghost moaned, wringing his hands as he bobbed in front of them. "Blood. Nasty."

Peter's mouth drew a hard line across his face. "They're gonna pay for this," he snarled. "Are they still there, Slimer?"

"Bad men gone. Drove truck in alley, threw Egon out. Drove away." His speech was garbled but understandable.

"This way." Peter led the way at a run to the back of the first floor to the left of Janine's desk, where a door led out behind the old firehouse into a narrow alley. Then he stopped so abruptly Ray ran into him. MacLeod jerked his sword up out of the way of any of them and put up a hand to halt the ones behind him, moving to one side to allow them out while he looked up and down the alley for signs of ambush before he glanced down at the unmoving form of Egon Spengler.

Slimer had exaggerated. There wasn't much blood and most of that was from a cut on the blond's cheek, probably caused when he'd been tossed into the alley. There were fledgling bruises on his face and his mouth was swollen as if he'd been struck there several times. Hands bound behind his back, he lay unmoving.

"Egon," yelled Peter in a voice compounded of outrage and sheer panic. He flung himself down

at Egon's side while Ray joined him, a Swiss Army Knife in his hand as he cut away the bonds. Egon's wrists were chafed but not raw. He hadn't been bound that long.

Carefully the two men and Winston checked him for major injuries, broken bones, evidence of internal injuries. They seemed to know their first aid and didn't do any moving that might aggravate an as-yet unknown condition. The unconscious man was breathing well and stirring a little as if about to regain consciousness.

"He's alive, Janine," Peter said, eyes singling out the secretary, whose face was white as paper. "His breathing's good and his pupils look okay. Go call 911. We'll take care of him till the paramedics get here. Let the cops know, too."

With an anguished look at the physicist, she turned and fled into the building.

Peter dropped a hand on Egon's shoulder and squeezed. "Hang in there, buddy, the cavalry's here," he said in a voice that didn't begin to disguise his concern. He wasn't even trying to sound flippant.

The sight of a man down on the street brought memories of Tessa back to MacLeod and he closed his eyes for an instant before opening them immediately to check the ends of the alley again. Richie edged over to stand beside him and patted him on the arm as if he'd guessed what Mac had been thinking. He had his sword in his other hand.

Egon groaned and opened his eyes, squinting nearsightedly up at his friends who hovered over him anxiously. "Egon!" Ray blurted happily. "You're awake."

"I give you Ray Stantz, stater of the obvious," said Peter, relieved enough to begin to relax. "Hey, Spengs. You okay?"

"I must say I've had more comfortable beds," Egon murmured, his voice a little fuzzy around the edges though sharp enough to show he was fully conscious and alert. He sat up abruptly before the other men could restrain him, then gasped and sagged, his breath whistling out in pain. Peter caught him and eased him against his shoulder, supporting him with his body, one arm around his shoulders. "Ah-ah-ah, no moving till the paramedics say you can," he chided, grinning. "That's our health tip of the day. Better, big guy?"

"Considerably." Egon leaned against Venkman with relief, catching his breath in small, careful gasps. "My ribs may not agree, however," he admitted.

"Let me see, buddy." Winston squatted in front of him and ran his fingers over Egon's chest. "Try to sit up as straight as you can, and don't hunch over. Oh, man, they worked you over pretty good, homeboy. I think you might have a broken rib. Cracked, for sure."

Egon grimaced at the pressure of Winston's questing fingers. "I wouldn't disagree with that."

"Who did it?" Peter demanded, an edge of anger in his voice. "Where are they? Nobody uses one of my buddies as a punching bag and gets away with it. I'm gonna make 'em pay, and that's a promise from Dr. Venkman."

"Yeah," agreed Ray hotly, prepared to go into battle with the bad guys at Peter's side.

Egon looked past them, his gaze seeking MacLeod. "They wanted the P.K.E. meter to track Immortals," he said. "They —" He caught himself, his eyes widening in alarm as a memory came to him. "They planned to sneak in while you came out here and steal a meter."

"We fixed 'em all so they won't detect Immortals," Peter said smugly. "Ray filtered them out. So don't worry —"

"Janine!" gasped Egon, forcing himself up again, though Peter tightened his grip on the injured man's shoulders to hold him down. "Is she in there?"

"No, she's right here," said an ominous new voice, and they turned to see the redheaded secretary, struggling in the grip of a dark-haired man who had a gun up against her temple. "MacLeod. You're here. That proves my point. Get out here, Jones," he called over his shoulder.

Egon was braced against Peter as if he meant to spring up and deck anyone who dared threaten the secretary. Peter's mouth was tight and his whole body resonated like a coiled spring as he though weighed the odds of jumping the gunman. Ray gaped up at the captured woman in alarm while Winston rose slowly to his feet, his hands spread so as not to trigger the gunman into any foolish moves. Something in his eyes indicated he was mentally gearing up to do whatever was necessary.

The second man emerged from the firehouse, a P.K.E. meter in one hand and a gun in the other. The Highlander had seen him before, recently, though he couldn't pin it down. On the plane from Paris, maybe.

"You blew it, MacLeod," Jones said smugly. "Coming here only proves what we already knew, that we've got a foolproof way to detect your kind." He activated the P.K.E. meter and pointed it directly at Duncan.

Nothing happened.

Both men frowned. He swung the meter around toward Richie, and before he could get it there it reacted. Slimer hovered in front of the device, making a face at the two thugs.

"It's picking up the Spud," said Peter sourly. "I don't know what you're saying but what you've got there is a P.K.E. meter. It detects psycho-kinetic energy, the stuff that makes ghosts. It doesn't pick up people. Somebody gave you a bum steer. Now how about letting go of our secretary before I have to give her a raise."

Jones pointed the meter at Richie. Its antennae sagged again and the beeping noise faded.

"This is crazy, Rafe," Jones spat out, shaking the recalcitrant meter in frustration and whacking it with the heel of his hand. "I know it works."

"Are you sure you're doing it right? Give it to one of them. Him." He pointed at Ray. "You. Ghostbuster. If you don't want to see your secretary's brains scattered all over the pavement, you better make this work."

Ray took the meter, his face carefully doubtful. "It only registers ghosts, not people," he insisted. He turned on the meter carefully, pointing it one at a time at everyone in the alley, finally at Slimer, who caused the meter to register. "Here, look," he said, pointing to the screen. "Slimer's a class five free roaming vapor. The class is listed here and the strength of the readings here. You can try another meter if you want."

"We will." Jones spun away and went back into the building.

"You better let me go." Janine sounded irritated rather than afraid. "Dr. Venkman doesn't like to pay me overtime."

"Don't struggle. I've put a lot of time into today and it hasn't gone well. I just might take it out on whoever is handy," Rafe snarled in her ear.

"Let her go." Egon grabbed Winston's arm and pulled himself to his feet, Peter helping him all the way. The blond man took a step closer, his face cautious, his eyes narrowed, though that might have been an attempt to compensate for his missing glasses. Peter came with him, still holding on.

"If you think you want me," MacLeod cut in before the injured man could do something risky, "then come for me. Don't waste your time with innocents. Janine never hurt you. Only cowards hide behind women."

It might have provoked Jones, but Rafe was evidently made of sterner material. He merely tightened his grip around Janine's neck, though her hands had a firm grip on him and her fingers were digging into the bare flesh of his arm hard enough for her nails to draw blood. "Stay back or I blast her," he threatened.

"If you hurt her ..." Egon breathed, his face dark with anger.

"Oh, Egon," breathed Janine, enchanted at this evidence of devotion, her eyes shining. Then, before Jones could return to complicate the equation, she winked at the physicist and abruptly slammed her spiked heel down against Rafe's foot.

"Yeeeeouch!" The gun sagged momentarily and Egon and Richie grabbed Janine and pulled her out of Rafe's grip as MacLeod swung his blade around and stopped it an inch from the gunman's throat. "Put the gun down now," he said in reasonable tones. "If I am what you believe, then you know I'm good at what I do. Even if not, do you really want to take the chance?"

The color went out of Rafe's face and the gun clattered to the pavement. Peter dove for it and scooped it up in one hand, leveling it at Rafe. "You okay, Janine?" he asked over his shoulder. "That was a great move!"

The secretary wrapped her arms around Egon and clung to him, not so much frightened as enjoying the embrace, smiling when Egon pulled her close and hugged her.

"I'd say she's okay," Winston said with a grin. "Did you call the police, Janine?"

"No, just the paramedics before ..." her voice trailed off as she realized a lie would have served her better.

"Don't worry, we've got 'em," Peter replied, his voice full of satisfaction. "I'll go call 'em now." He stopped. "Is that gonna get you two in trouble?" he asked, eyes turning briefly to MacLeod.

"I don't see how," the Highlander replied. "They won't make claims to the police, and even if they tried, they wouldn't be believed. You'd have Egon's testimony. They blew it this time."

"You wish," muttered Rafe, his face dark and angry. "If it isn't me, it's going to be someone, MacLeod. You might think you've beaten us, but we're only two men. If we don't get you today, someone will tomorrow or the next day. You'll always have to look over your shoulder, because we know who you are. We know who your friend is." He gestured at Richie, who glared at him. It wouldn't take much to make Richie jump the guy, and Duncan suspected Rafe knew it.

Worse, Peter was still angry. His grip on the gun implied he wasn't nearly as familiar with it as he was with a particle thrower. In Duncan's book, an angry and inexperienced man was the last person who should have charge of a gun. From Winston's expression, he'd reached the same decision.

"Come on, Pete, let me have it," the black man urged. "You know I'm better with guns than you are."

Egon detached Janine from his arms and turned considering eyes on Peter, looking worried. "Winston's right, Peter. You're no marksman, at least not with that."

Duncan had started toward Peter, gesturing Richie in to watch Rafe when he sensed a movement out of the corner of his eye. Jones must have realized what had happened, and he'd circled around to come at them down the alley instead of out the back door of the old firehouse. Clearly he'd picked out Peter who held the gun as the immediate threat, and as MacLeod turned his head he saw the second gunman leveling his weapon at the psychologist, who was completely unaware of him and who was blithely assuring Winston and Egon he could handle a gun until the police came. "Deadeye Pete, that's me," he concluded.

"Peter!" yelled MacLeod in warning and did the only thing he had time for. He stepped between Venkman and Jones just as the gunman fired.

The bullet took him in the side near his waist, passing through the fleshy area there and hitting no major organs. He'd become used to the feel of a "fatal," or even a serious wound, and this wasn't one. Behind him, Peter yelped as the Highlander sagged backwards. Richie screeched, "Mac!" in automatic alarm and lunged for the gunman, who fired again, too quickly to take aim. The bullet dug a hole in a trash receptacle. With a wail of panic Slimer vanished through the wall of Ghostbuster Central, and Duncan collapsed on his back on the pavement, gasping with pain and shock.

"Okay, hold it." Winston's voice was steady as a rock, and Duncan's distorted upside-down view of him revealed a man who was at home with weapons and knew how to use them, though he was clearly not very fond of them. Probably he'd been in the service. "Drop it, buddy. I'm faster than you are and I've got the drop on you," he called to Jones.

"Yeah, and if you try anything, your buddy's going to be missing parts of his anatomy," added Richie in grim and convincing tones. Duncan rolled his head to the side and saw Richie with his blade against Rafe's throat. Richie might be young and inexperienced, but he'd been learning for almost a year now and Rafe apparently had no trouble believing he meant what he said.

"Drop it, Jonesy," he warned his companion uneasily, gulping at the presence of the sword at his throat, and with a muttered curse, Jones complied. Ray edged past MacLeod, sparing him a shocked and worried glance, careful not to get into Winston's line of fire, and retrieved the gun between thumb and forefinger.

"Nice move, Ray," lauded Winston. "Now, Richie, I think it might be smart if you took your sword and MacLeod's inside and put them somewhere out of sight. I'll cover these two jokers. Yeah, you, Jones. Get over here with your buddy. Nice and slow. And I want to see your hands all the time. I know how to use guns and I will if I have to. I won't like it, but you'll like it a whole lot less."

Grimacing in disgust, Jones stalked over to stand beside Rafe, who cuffed him on the side of the head. "Idiot!"

"I took readings out the window with every meter I could find," Jones muttered under his breath. "None of them picked up a thing. You called it wrong, Rafe. They may be Immortal but the Ghostbusters didn't do us any good."

"Shaddap, you jerk." Rafe's face revealed he agreed with this assessment and hated it, but he didn't want Jones to know.

"Well, I was just ..."

"Quiet," ordered Winston. "Egon, you go in with Janine. Call the cops, Janine, and make sure Egon lies down on the couch in Peter's office until the paramedics get here. Ray, put that gun on the dumpster. Yeah, there. I don't want you waving it around."

Ray grimaced and complied. He looked shaken by the shooting, but in control of himself.

Richie gathered up Mac's dropped weapon, pausing long enough to rest his hand on his shoulder and squeeze. "Hang on, Mac, you'll be okay," he soothed. "Let the paramedics bandage you up," he said. "Fewer questions that way. As long as they get here quick enough, they shouldn't see anything they're not supposed to."

"I'd figured that out already," said Mac with a grin. The wound would heal quickly but it was serious enough to give him a few minutes grace before healing would be obvious to the EMTs. "Go on, move. They could be here any minute."

Richie nodded, tightened his grip a minute, then got up, taking both weapons with him, and followed Janine into the firehall as she supported Egon, one arm around his waist. Egon squinted back over his shoulder, his face clearly revealing his grasp of what Duncan had done. His eyes lingered, relieved, on Peter then he moved his gaze to MacLeod and smiled. "Thank you for saving Peter," he said fervently before Janine led him away.

"Yo, MacLeod?" Peter bent over him. The bullet Duncan had taken had passed through his body cleanly and evidently grazed the Ghostbuster's arm, but it had been a spent bullet and there was little trace of blood around the tear in Peter's sleeve. Venkman had his hand gripped just above it but it was probably an automatic reaction because he scarcely seemed aware of it. "You coulda yelled," he said reproachfully, not without gratitude but with concern at the sight of the bloody wound in MacLeod's side.

"Not in time. I should have realized he'd check on us out the window." He sucked in his breath. Being immortal meant he'd survive this with no difficulty and he'd heal much more quickly than a normal human being, but it didn't give him any immunity to pain. He pressed the heel of his hand hard against his side.

"Let me stop that bleeding," Peter offered, pulling up Duncan's shirt. "Looks messy. Betcha it hurts."

"You'd win that bet," said MacLeod, wincing, though he couldn't hold back a grin.

"I halfway expected bullets to bounce right off you," said Peter, pressing a folded handkerchief against the wound. "And here you are bleeding like the rest of us."

"No such luck. We're not supermen, Peter. If we're hurt, we suffer. We simply heal much more quickly, and we heal of things that would kill an ordinary man. This'll start closing up before very long. If the paramedics are very late, I might have to duck out on you so they won't start asking awkward questions."

"That's great," enthused Ray as he knelt on MacLeod's other side. "Gosh, Duncan, you saved Peter's life. He would have taken that bullet if you hadn't moved, and *he's* not immortal. It might have killed him." He passed over another folded handkerchief. "Here, Peter."

"It's not nice to alarm Dr. Venkman," said Peter in a voice that held knowledge of his near escape. "Besides, it didn't miss. I'm sure I'm gonna be scarred for life." He gestured at his tiny wound with the hand that wasn't pressing his own handkerchief against Mac's side. He didn't lift it, but simply shifted MacLeod to apply Ray's to the exit wound, which was a lot messier. Mac grimaced at the pressure and bit his bottom lip. The more severe the wound, the more it hurt, and the longer it took to heal. He'd be up and around tomorrow, maybe even later today, but in

the meantime he wouldn't enjoy himself.

Peter looked MacLeod straight in the eye, no trace of flippancy in his green eyes. "I know it won't kill you, but even after all this time it has to take guts to jump in and take a bullet for somebody else. I owe you."

"I owed you already," MacLeod said, nodding toward the building. "If not for me, your friend Egon wouldn't have been hurt. It hardly seems fair that I'll be healed of this much more quickly than he will."

"We'll take care of him," Peter vowed, and Mac heard loyalty, friendship and devotion in his voice that was seconded by Ray's fervent nod. "Yeah," continued Peter, beginning to smile, "and Janine will fuss over him until he's ready to climb the walls. Egon isn't like me. He can't enjoy a little healthy downtime." He glanced measuringly at his forearm as if deciding how much "downtime" he could claim for himself.

"You only rate a bandaid for that, Peter," said Ray knowingly, pushing up Peter's sleeve carefully to check the wound. It was barely a scratch, bleeding very lightly and nearly stopped at that. Peter lifted his eyebrow as if in disappointment that he couldn't capitalize on it.

"So what do we do with these characters, Mac?" he asked, making sure the handkerchief pads were still in place. "What'll they say to the police?"

"Lies," MacLeod replied, craning his neck to see the two gunmen. "They won't even mention Immortals."

"Good. I was afraid you'd say to let 'em go, and nobody who beats on my buddies or shoots friends of mine gets off lightly."

Pleased he'd graduated from being a suspect character to a friend, Duncan eased his head down again against the pavement and closed his eyes. He could hear the wail of sirens in the distance and the thud of Richie's returning feet, but it was hard to concentrate for the moment. He was probably going into shock, but his body's defenses would kick in and deal with that. He hoped the paramedics got here quickly before he gave them anything to speculate about. A wound like his would not heal immediately, but it wouldn't be long before he'd be as good as new. He wasn't sure, even now, if Rafe and Jones believed the P.K.E. meters didn't work, but they'd write it off as a bad job, and with luck, he and Richie would be gone before the two Hunters got out of jail.

"Here come the paramedics, Mac," said Richie, kneeling beside him next to Ray. "Try and look really bad, why don't you?" From the alarmed tone of his young friend's voice, he looked bad already.

He opened one eye and grimaced at the younger man. "I think I can manage that," he said wryly and closed it again.

"Yeah, and what about this horrible wound," Peter said. "Look at it. I'll never play the piano again."

"You never played it before," argued Ray.

"Yeah, homeboy," said Winston with a grin. "I've heard your music. This could be a Very Good Thing."

"Die, Zeddemore," said Peter cheerfully as the approaching sirens cut off to be replaced with thudding feet.

"A

t least none of the meters registered the two of you," Egon Spengler said an hour and a half later. Rafe and Jones had been arrested and charged with assault and battery, kidnapping, breaking and entering, grand theft, attempted theft, shooting MacLeod and several other charges. Peter had spun a tale of possible industrial espionage, explaining the two thugs had tried to get their equipment. Egon had capped this with an explanation of his treatment at their hands and the way they had tried to get information from him on the workings of their equipment, not to mention stealing his proton pack, which was extremely valuable, and the thugs' plan to hold the Ghostbusters hostage until they got what they wanted. Rafe and Jones denied it sullenly, putting forth no explanations. Egon's proton pack was found in a van parked nearby that had been stolen from a Queens computer company.

With the evidence of the weapons, Jones's fingerprints on the one that had wounded MacLeod, and Egon's bruised and battered state, there was no difficulty in getting the two men arrested. MacLeod even theorized there might be other wants out for them.

The paramedics had treated Mac at the scene, trying to insist he come to the hospital, but he had declined. Seeing him in the morning would give too much away. He volunteered, instead, to go to his own doctor, simply to stop their arguments, and Richie told the paramedics he'd watch out to make sure Mac didn't keel over. Egon was examined and taken in for X-rays, returning fairly quickly. He didn't have a broken rib but two of them were cracked, which meant he'd need to take it easy for several days and not wear his pack for a few more. He didn't have a concussion but he did have a headache. Knowing the symptoms of head injury, Egon proposed to monitor himself and ask Winston to do the same. Bad enough Peter and Ray were fussing over him like maiden aunts. He didn't mind, really. He knew they were doing it because they cared.

Much harder to bear, of course, was Janine, who had hovered at his side ever since. She was there now, replacing the cold cloth across his forehead before whisking away with a promise of cold drinks.

At the insistence of his friends he was stretched out on his own bed, and Duncan was sprawled across Peter's for the moment, regaining strength at an amazing rate. He and Richie would stay here for the rest of the day in case the two thugs got bailed out and came back, but a call from the police had reported they hadn't made bail yet.

"Ray reconfigured all the meters," Peter replied to Egon's comment. He was sitting cross-legged at the foot of Egon's bed, as if he had appointed himself the physicist's official guard-Ghostbuster. "We thought they might try something, and as long as they couldn't get readings they'd have no proof. When we found your meter was broken, we thought there was a good chance you'd done it on purpose, so they couldn't use it against Mac and Richie."

"I did. They wanted to be careful of the meter, so I reasoned it involved the two of you." He gestured over at Duncan and Richie, who had a similar pose to Peter's on the foot of the big four-poster bed. "I saw no need in giving them any advantage. You'd come here politely to talk to us and learn what we knew. They used guns. It was all too clear to me which side I should take, and so I did."

"You could have made something up," Peter said sternly. "It's not nice to scare your buddies and get turned into a punching bag."

"It wasn't my first choice either," Egon replied, pushing his spare pair of glasses into place on his nose. It was nice to see everything in focus again. "But it seemed the only option at the time. I'm only glad they meant to use me as a lure to get you out of the firehall so they could steal a meter. If they had been smart, they would have grabbed Janine when she came in and gone after the meters without alerting us at all. However, we were fortunate. They were not particularly bright."

"Well, bigots usually aren't," agreed Winston, taking the tray Janine had reappeared with and passing out glasses. Beer for him, Peter, Ray and Richie, orange juice for Mac which Janine said might help with the blood loss, and another glass of it for Egon.

"Because you might have a head injury," she explained, taking the third glass of orange juice for herself.

Egon started to sit up and winced. Peter shook a chiding finger in his face. "Ah-ah-ah. Careful, Spengs. Let Uncle Peter lend a hand." He pulled Egon up carefully while Ray fluffed up a pillow behind him. Mac sat up without effort, shifting carefully so as not to pull the quickly-healing wound.

"You could use a little of that super stuff, Egon," Peter said thoughtfully, then shook his head. "Not unless we all do," he added. "Just think of it, guys. Busting ghosts down through the centuries. We could really modernize our equipment a hundred years from now. Pocket sized proton packs. City-wide ghost alarms. Higher fees. I love it."

"Anything to do with money and you love it," Ray teased fondly. He grew serious, turning to Duncan. "We'd like to run some more tests on you if you've got the time to spare. Maybe there's a genetic link for the Immortality variation. We could run tests on people who are really sensitive to ghosts for similar readings to the two of you. We might find some things that could help you."

"Indeed," agreed Egon. "I haven't had a chance to go over everything Ray documented, but what I've seen is fascinating. The drive to kill other Immortals seems well documented in our research, yet the two of you exist in harmony. I'd like to come up with a scientific reason for the apparent need to kill other Immortals. It might prove useful to you as well. My only regret, of course, is the need for secrecy, but I will honor it."

"We didn't doubt that," MacLeod reassured him. "We'll probably be here another day or two and we can give you some time. Anything you can learn will be useful and we'll be grateful for it."

"Yeah, modern science should have some good answers," Peter said. "And with the boy genius here on your side," — he prodded Egon's foot — "there might be answers right around the corner."

"So what will you two do now?" Winston asked MacLeod.

"We have to be here when they have the trial for those two," MacLeod said. "That should be months away. In the meantime we're going home. We stopped here because there's a special showing of sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. Some of Tessa's work. She was ... someone very close to me and a gifted artist."

"Was?" echoed Ray sadly. "I'm sorry."

MacLeod didn't answer immediately, then he said, "We had good years. That's what's important. People to love and people to care about you are the only thing that really matter. That's why I know you Ghostbusters are lucky, even though you're not immortal. Because you have a special friendship. Hang onto that."

"That's one thing you didn't have to tell us," said Ray with a broad smile. "We're a great team."

"Yeah, famous, good-looking, and smarter than the average bear," agreed Peter contentedly. "Hey, Mac. Got a favor to ask you."

MacLeod exchanged a skeptical glance with Richie. Egon shook his head fondly. Peter would be sure to come up with something outrageous. He always did.

"What favor, Peter?" asked Mac, evidently willing to give him the straight line.

"Well, when you get to the future, make sure they remember us. We're famous now, but heck, I'd kinda like to be famous for all time." He preened himself unbearably, causing Egon to reach out and poke him with his foot. Peter grabbed him around the ankle and gave him a fond squeeze, not remotely dismayed.

"You won't be around to appreciate your fame, Peter," Ray reminded him.

"Won't I? If I can't be an Immortal, I'm gonna be a ghost. Because by then I'll know every possible trick so no Ghostbuster could ever get me."

"You live with this all the time?" Richie asked Winston, shaking his head in amusement.

The black man nodded, grinning in delight. "Yeah. We must be crazy, man. Sometimes we even like it."

"Only sometimes?" Peter demanded, bouncing up off the bed. "Now the truth comes out. You're gonna pay for that, Winston. Oh, Slimer!" He stuck two fingers in his mouth and emitted an earsplitting whistle. "Yo, Spud. Get him, Slimer. Get him!"

Slimer swooped into the room, looked around and dove straight for Peter, embracing him affectionately around the neck and planting a big, messy kiss on his cheek. "Hi, Peter," the little ghost said and kissed him again, this time on the ear.

Peter shoved hard. Egon felt amusement bubbling through him. Wrapping his arm around his chest as he laughed, he held on hard to ease the pain of his ribs. It was worth it for the look on Peter's face.

"Yeah, and when you get to the future, no need to mention the Spud," Peter concluded, wiping slime out of his hair. "Because he's gonna be *long gone* by then!" Still complaining, he chased Slimer from the room while the rest of them burst out laughing.