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"Er ... Ma'am?"

Janine Melnitz, half-inserted in a file drawer, figured that no one in their right mind would be calling *her* "ma'am" and so ignored the ignominious appellation.

There was a moment of blissful silence, followed by a polite cough, followed then by a repeat of the dreaded, "Ma'am?"

Crumbs. She struggled to extract herself from the Ws and straightened just fast enough to bang her head on the Ps, sending her glasses awry and bestowing her with a handsome lump on the back of her head. "Whaddya want?" she snapped

irritably as she righted her glasses and rubbed the lump simultaneously. She focused on the newcomer and waited impatiently: This had better be good.

"Uh —" the teenaged boy, who was attractive in a smooth-faced kind of way with dark hair and dark eyes, and looked no more than 16 or 17 years old, began uncertainly. "Miss Melnitz?"

"That's 'Ms. Melnitz'," she corrected, peering at him through the pink triangles of her glasses. "Who are you?"

"I'm Larry Talbot — your summer help? The university told me you'd be expecting me ..." he tailed off, daunted by her natural ferocity.

Janine straightened, feeling foolish. This was the help she'd asked for, thrown tantrums for, and gone behind Doctor Venkman's back to get. And here she was treating the poor kid like dirt. She put on her best apologetic face and thrust her hand toward him. "Sorry. Been a bad morning." She gestured toward the precarious stack of job slips and credit vouchers as evidence. "Welcome aboard," she finished awkwardly as he nodded silently and shook her hand. "So, what did the university tell you?"

He swallowed hard, and answered hopefully, "They said I'd be helping with filing, typing, answering phones, anything you needed me to do."

She nodded once. "Sit down." As he did so, she rummaged through the top drawer of her desk, drawing out sheet after sheet of official-looking paper. "You'll have to fill out some forms," she waved the numerous sheets in his general direction. "You *are* old enough to work without a permit, aren't you? I mean, you look kinda young ..."

He gave her a look of world-weary resignation; obviously his youthful features were a cross he didn't enjoy bearing. "I'm, uh, over 18 — I don't need one anymore."

At that, she looked at him again, noting lines of tension she hadn't seen on first glance. Something was bothering this kid, and it wasn't just first day jitters. "You okay?" she asked suddenly.

He nodded slowly. "Yes, ma'am."

"Let's get one thing straight from the beginning — *I'm* not old enough to be a 'ma'am'. Janine'll do. You fill those out," she nodded toward the pile of papers in front of him, "and I'll call the university to let them know you made it here okay. You get extra credit for this, don't you?"

"Yes, ma — ah, Janine." Before he flubbed again, he turned his attention assiduously toward the paperwork.

Janine nodded with satisfaction and went back to Doctor Venkman's office to dial the number of the university. When she came back, she was even more self-satisfied — the cooperative education department secretary had given Larry a good recommendation and assurances on the quality of his work. She scanned his finished paperwork quickly and smiled. "Looks good. You're in the business administration curriculum, huh? The university said you got good grades in accounting — how about I put you to work getting this month's invoices together?"

He looked at the pile that threatened to spill onto the floor and grinned at her, the first hint of a smile since he'd come in. "Month's or year's?" he asked teasingly, his eyes sparkling with the first hint of humor he'd shown since presenting himself.

"Month's," she answered sternly, then grinned back at him. "Crime isn't the only statistic that goes up in the summer here in New York."

"Okay — what do you want me to do?"

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Ecto-1 roared into the firehouse, siren wailing and lights flashing. The engine cut and the noise died away, punctuated by a sputtering cough from the tailpipe. "Gotta check that carburetor," Winston noted as he climbed out of driver's seat of the old ambulance. Like his three co-workers, he was liberally decorated with a particularly noxious combination of green, gray and orange slime; they each stayed as far downwind of each other as they could, but none could escape their own personal eau de ectoplasm.

"We could just replace this hunk o' junk with a new van — something nice and flashy, you know — art on wheels?" Peter offered, exiting the passenger's side and eyeing the vehicle with disdain, eyebrow arched suggestively in Ray's direction as his partner hauled himself wearily out of the back seat. "This thing really puts a damper on our upscale image."

"Aw, come on, Peter," Ray chimed in, as Peter knew he would. "Ecto's been a good and faithful member of the team," he added, patting the fender affectionately.

"Ray, this old bucket of bolts isn't a dog, you know — it doesn't have any feelings," Peter commented drily.

"Oh, I don't know about that, Peter," Ray rejoined, falling into the spirit of the exchange. "There've been times —"

"Gentlemen," a deep voice issued from the rear of Ecto-1, "could you save your discussions on the anthropomorphising of this vehicle and help me with these traps?"

"The what?" Winston asked, turning to help Egon.

"Talking about it like it's human," Ray offered in a whisper. "Ugh!" he gasped as Egon thrust a smoking trap in his face. "Geeze, I wish these goopers didn't smell so bad!"

"That's the sweet smell of success, Ray. Don't knock it — we could be — oh, yuck!" Peter gagged as another trap was ejected, this time in his direction. "I take it all back — nothin's worth this smell!"

Egon straightened from the trunk, holding three more traps aloft, unsuccessfully attempting to direct the fumes away from his face. "This group of ghosts do have a particularly loathsome odor. I wonder why?" he mused, frowning at the traps.

"The sooner we get these in the containment, the sooner we can all take a shower," Winston pointed out, taking his fair share off Egon's hands.

"Nah. The sooner we dump 'em on Janine, the sooner we can take a shower!" Peter answered, racing toward Janine's desk. "Oh, Janine," he called in his sweetest (and most untrustworthy) voice. "Who the heck are you?" he demanded as he came up short at Janine's desk, to face a young man slogging away at the computer.

Larry Talbot looked up at the all-too-frequent sight of Doctor Peter Venkman coated in slime and brandishing a stinking trap. "Uh, I'm Janine's assistant?" he answered, eyeing the blinking trap with wary curiosity.

"Janine doesn't have an assistant," Peter said authoritatively.

"Well, I do now," Janine called down from the top of the firepole.

"Janine, you're fired," Peter replied wearily.

"Thank you, Doctor Venkman. You've just made my day," she responded, and walked away from the pole.

Ray, Winston and Egon all caught up with Peter, and he turned toward Ray. "Remind me that she works for us, Ray. Then remind her."

Ray's attention was on Larry. "Hi, I'm Ray Stantz," he said, offering a goo-covered hand. Larry reached forward to take it, staring at the multi-colored glop.

Ray waggled his fingers at him and withdrew the offensive appendage. "Oh, sorry — heck of a morning. We nabbed five class fours!" he added proudly.

"And you're stinkin' up the joint," Janine observed, wrinkling her nose. She'd made her way down the stairs, and now stood a good ten feet away from the Ghostbusters.

"Yeah, so you and your *assistant* can get rid of 'em while we go make ourselves beautiful," Venkman snapped, marching up to Janine and thrusting the foul-smelling trap into her hands. "And then you can explain where your assistant came from and how you're going to pay for him!" With that, Peter stormed off toward the living quarters, completely prepared to enjoy a good mad.

Egon, Ray, and Winston wasted no time divesting themselves of their traps, handing two more to Janine and the last two to a confused Larry. "He'll cool down, Janine — and I can't wait to hear the story!" Ray called over his shoulder as he trotted after Peter. Winston shrugged, following suit, and Egon merely pushed his glasses up, frowning, then followed the others.

"Oh well," Janine said, holding the traps as high as her arms would allow. "This is where you really get to know the business. Come on."

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"You've been promising me some help for two years, Doctor Venkman. The business is doing great — don't look at me like that, I do the invoices and I do the bills. I know how much money is coming into this business," she warned, shaking a finger at Peter.

"Yeah, but we got high overhead," Peter began, glancing around him for support from the others. "We just can't afford another addition to the payroll right now —"

"Actually, Peter, I don't think that's true," Egon interrupted.

"I know it's not true!" Janine exploded. "And I know he won't cost that much — he's a co-op from the university. They pick up part of the tab —"

"And then there's the improvements Egon and Ray want to make to the containment unit — what did you say?" Peter stopped suddenly, finally paying attention to Janine.

"I said the university picks up part of the cost. And there's no insurances to pick up, 'cos he's already covered under the university's plan. All we pay is minimum wage —"

"Well, we're still not budgeted for that this quarter," Peter grumbled, still putting up a token fight.

"What's he supposed to do?" Winston asked.

"Help me with the books, take messages, that sort of thing. He's here to learn about running a business. He's already finished doing the invoices for last month, and he's designing a computer program to automate them in future."

"These co-op programs are great," Ray enthused. "Practical experience and credits for the student, cheap labor for the employer, not to mention goodwill — you know, Peter, Janine really could use the help."

"Yeah, but — "

"Yeah. Thanks, Janine — this could be fun!"

Janine eyed Peter warily, as though she was expecting the axe to fall anyway.

"Yes, and he could help with running errands and doing research," Egon added, warming to the idea.

"Somebody else to take a turn at making coffee," Winston offered suggestively, looking at Peter.

That did the trick. Another day a week when he didn't have to drink Egon's coffee was enough of an argument for him. "Well, heck. We wouldn't want to stand in the way of higher education, now would we?"

"Thanks, Doctor Venkman," Janine replied sourly. "I'll ask him if he knows how to make coffee — there's a great job skill for you," she grumbled to herself as she left the room.

"Yeah, well —" Peter started to rev himself up again.

"Leave it, m'man," Winston soothed. "Janine's been workin' too hard as it is — she really could use some help."

"And getting our invoices out faster means we get paid faster," Ray cajoled.

"Yeah, well, if his coffee's as bad as Egon's, he's history."

Egon raised an eyebrow at that, mentally working out the formula he used for coffee and wondering why Peter disliked it so much, while Ray and Winston exchanged commiserating glances.

"Well," Ray said, clapping his hands together. "What's next on the agenda?"

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For the first two weeks of June, Larry was the first to arrive at the firehouse, opening the front doors, firing up the computer, and setting the coffee brewing (it turned out to be good, so Peter made a great show of kindly letting him stay) a good fifteen minutes before Janine arrived. On the morning of the fifteenth, however, Janine got to the front door and found it locked. Cursing, she rummaged through her bag to find her keys; since Larry had started, she hadn't bothered to fish them out on her way up the subway stairs. Discarding three crumpled tissues, one used candy wrapper, and half of a theater ticket, she finally found the keys and let herself in. The garage was dark and silent; until that moment she hadn't realized how much nicer it was to come to work with the lights on and somebody waiting for her. With a cup of drinkable coffee waiting, too. Well, technically, Larry wasn't late. And he was young and reasonably attractive — he'd probably had a date last night, and had overslept. Shrugging, Janine dropped her purse behind her desk and trudged up the stairs to start the coffee.

The guys had left her a note on the refrigerator telling her not to rouse them unless doomsday came calling — and not even then, unless she planned to join the ranks of the unemployed in the immediate future. "Good morning, Doctor Venkman," she muttered to herself, measuring out the coffee. From the pile of credit slips on her desk, she knew they must have had a hard night, so she figured — magnanimously, she thought — she could let them sleep in just this once. She spread the morning newspaper out on the table while she waited for the coffee to brew and, once it had finished percolating, poured herself a cup and returned to her desk.

The time on her desk clock said 8:30. Still no Larry. Well, he was above the age of consent, and he'd probably make up the time. In fact, he frequently stayed late with her to help the guys unload the traps. Yeah, he deserved a late morning for once, too.

Feeling virtuous in her generosity, Janine attacked the stack of credit vouchers, inputting them into the program Larry had written for her. Slimer drifted in, sniffing for donuts, and finding none (another thing Larry had started taking care of, winning him the affection of the little ghost), drifted off again in search of munchies. Janine didn't even notice.

A little while later, she could hear the sounds of questionably human life stumbling around the upper floor as one of the Ghostbusters struggled toward consciousness. The sound of the shower echoed in the empty garage, and she glanced up, catching sight of her clock. Nearly 10:00. And still no Larry. Now she was beginning to worry — he'd been so dedicated in the past two weeks, she

couldn't imagine he'd just blow the day off. The answering machine was still, no blinking light indicating a message. Just to make sure, she rewound the tape and listened to the last few messages. Nope, all from last night, all business, except for one chastising message from Dana Barrett reminding Peter of a date he'd missed. She shook her head; Peter didn't deserve Dana.

She was still dithering about what to do about Larry when Egon came down the stairs. "Good morning, Janine," he greeted her absently.

Normally, she'd have used the opportunity to grace Egon with one of her more seductive smiles and a warm hello, but in her distraction, she only waved at him while she stared fiercely at the telephone. This uncharacteristic behavior finally caught Egon's attention where her normal greeting always failed to — he stopped dead in his tracks and looked straight at her. "Janine?"

"Huh? Oh, Egon. Good morning," she said in a strained voice.

"Is something wrong, Janine?" Egon asked solicitously. Like most men, he liked to have things in his life he could depend on; ignoring Janine's advances was one of them, and when she didn't offer them, he felt his world suddenly unbalanced.

"Larry's late," Janine answered him. "It's not like him ..."

Egon felt an unusual sensation just then, something akin to ... jealousy? No, must be fatigue. He'd had a hard, late night, and he wasn't feeling quite himself. Besides, what did he have to be jealous about? It wasn't as if he felt anything toward Janine ... he quickly squelched that line of thought before it led to any potential hazards to his way of life. Shaking himself slightly, he cleared his throat. "I'm sure there's nothing to worry about," he told her brusquely.

Just then, Larry burst through the little door in the big firehouse doors. The young man looked dishevelled, as though he'd been running, and a little pale, but otherwise none the worse for wear. Hands shoved deep in the pockets of his jeans, he trotted up to Janine's desk, apologizing all the way.

"That's okay, Larry — everyone seems to be having a late morning today except me," she replied to his assurances that it wouldn't happen again. She got up, picked up a stack of unfinished credit slips, and handed it to him. He stared at it a moment, then slowly extracted his hand to take the pile. Janine gasped; Egon's eyes widened fractionally. Larry's hand was swathed in gauze, dried and weeping blood staining the bandage. "What happened to your hand, Larry?" Janine demanded.

Looking from Janine to Egon and back again, Larry's eyes slowly rolled up in their sockets and he fainted dead away.



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"He's coming around, now," Janine said hopefully, hovering next to the unconscious boy on the rec room couch where she and Egon had carried Larry. Peter was slumped in an armchair looking pathetic, carefully nursing his third cup of coffee of the morning. Winston leaned over the back of the sofa, watching Larry intently. Ray was sitting on the coffee table, putting away the first aid kit; he'd removed the sodden bandages from both of Larry's hands, and carefully cleaned the ripped fingertips and shattered nails, applied an anaesthetic antibiotic, and rewrapped the hands. Egon stood by expectantly, waiting to hear Larry's story.

Larry came to with a start, his eyes frightened like a cornered animal's. He jumped up, raising his hands to fend off some unseen attacker, when suddenly he took in his surroundings and realized he was among friends. He glanced at the well-padded bandages encasing his hands like mittens, and turned a sheepish face toward each of them. "I'm sorry ..." he muttered unhappily.

"Larry," Janine started gently, "what happened? How did you hurt your hands?"

His eyes darted fearfully from Janine to Ray, who exuded good will so strongly it was like a physical force. "Don't worry — you shouldn't get an infection, but you really should see a doctor," Ray told him reassuringly.

"No, no doctor," Larry replied, shaking his head. "No doctor can help me ..." He looked on the verge of tears; Janine and Ray exchanged worried glances over his bowed head.

"Sounds to me like there's quite a story you need to tell," Peter said suddenly, undraping himself from the chair. "How about you start at the beginning. Like the commercial says: 'We're ready to believe you'," he added encouragingly in his best bedside manner. He pulled up a footstool and seated himself next to the couch, squeezing in between the couch and coffee table. "So what's eating you?"

Janine looked at Venkman with wonder in her eyes — never had she seen him so gentle, so caring. She caught his eye and he gave her a warning glare that said, "You mention this to anyone and I'll deny it." Even a professional cynic had a reputation to protect, after all. She nodded silently.

By now, Larry had gotten himself under control, and Egon had perched himself on the back of the couch while Winston dragged over a chair from another part of the room. His audience arranged, Larry couldn't plead stage fright now; he'd never have another chance like this one. Drawing a deep breath, he plunged into his story.

"I hacked into the co-op education data base and fixed myself up with this assignment," he admitted, cringing as he awaited their protests. There were none, and he straightened slightly, looking around at them all; their faces were full of encouragement.

Peter finally piped up with, "Yeah, well, initiative has its own rewards. Betcha didn't think they'd be class five goopers and free-floating repeaters stinkin' up your clothes."

Larry shook his head, attempting a smile. He failed, and so opted for a serious expression more in line with his feelings. "I figured if anyone could help me, you could, and I figured maybe if I could trade working for you guys, maybe you'd be willing."

"Well, we don't like this to get around, but the Ghostbusters are kinda like hospitals — we don't turn away anybody who really needs our help," Peter interjected; his co-workers nodded agreement. Ray patted Peter on the shoulder, smiling affectionately.

Larry smiled, a real smile of gratitude. "Thanks. I can see that now I've been working with you, but I didn't know that then." He paused, gathering his wits. Nodding decisively, he continued, "You've all seen the movie *The Wolf Man*." Around him, heads bobbed as eyes darted around, suddenly confused.

"Great movie — Lon Chaney, Jr., was brilliant as —" Ray suddenly stopped, staring hard at Larry.

"Lawrence Stewart Talbot," Larry nodded. "My grandfather," he added with finality.

"Aw, come on — that was just a movie!" protested Peter. Janine shot him a quelling look. "Wasn't it?" he amended weakly.

"Yes, it was a movie. But what most people didn't realize at the time was that it was based on a true story. My grandfather was heir to the Talbot estates in Britain, and he was bitten by a werewolf. That much of the film was true. He paid the screenwriter, Curt Siodmak, to write the script and even helped fund the picture — in hopes that somehow, if people saw it, someone might come forward with a cure." Shaking his head sadly, he didn't need to say that no one had. The film had been accepted by a sensation-hungry public as merely one more — albeit excellent — Hollywood legend.

"But Lon Chaney, Jr., practically made a career out of playing that character, even appearing with Abbott and Costello," Ray remembered, perplexed.

"Oh, Granddad lost control of the property as soon as Universal bought the script. It made them a lot of money, and the series was very popular," he explained, as if repeating family legend by rote, which in fact, he was.

"In one movie, he was cured," Ray said softly. "But that was just a movie, wasn't it?" Larry nodded grimly. "But something happened to make him think he was cured, didn't it?"

Larry looked up at him with hope dawning in his clouded eyes — they believed him. He could tell in the way they all leaned in, even Egon with his clinical gaze, waiting for his answer. "An experimental treatment put whatever it was in remission, I guess. Granddad married my grandmother, and later my mother was born. He didn't ... didn't go through the change for a couple of years, and then suddenly, it was back. By then, the doctor who'd treated him was dead, and there was no more treatment." Larry's face was stricken with the dreadful memory of what followed.

"I think I can guess the rest," Ray offered quietly, laying a gentle hand on Larry's shoulder. "They say a werewolf can only be killed by someone who loves him ..." Larry nodded dumbly. "And your mother?" He shook his head. "Then whatever causes the metamorphosis skipped a generation —"

"And reappeared in the next," Larry affirmed. "Puberty was a little more difficult for me than most kids, and Michael J. Fox didn't know the half of it," he added with a bitter chuckle. He stared disconsolately at his swathed hands. "I've built a pretty effective containment unit — a cage, really — of my own in my apartment — took every last penny of what was left of the Talbot fortune to pay for it — but it doesn't stop the beast from trying to escape."

"There's an old story that goes like that — the curse slept for 100 years, only to be visited on the original werewolf's great-grandson," Egon offered from behind.

"And what cured him?" Winston asked.

"Death," Egon intoned grimly.

"Well, we're not going to let that happen here, are we?" Peter demanded with forced cheerfulness, jumping up from his seat. "We're the Ghostbusters, and we're not afraid of no curse!" The others looked at him as though he'd completely lost his mind. "Aw, come on, guys — we've got the best minds in the business right here in this room. We've tackled a werechicken and won, and we've put away some major goopers, including the Ghostmaster — what makes you think we can't we solve Larry's little problem?"

Silence descended over the room as they all exchanged glances. Egon was particularly thoughtful, pinching his chin between thumb and forefinger. "How often does the metamorphosis take place?" he asked.

"Only on the first night of the full moon," Larry answered with a sigh. "So I — and everyone else — am safe for another month."

"So we've got a month to study you before the next transmutation. We don't know if this is a metabolic change — a virus or some other medical condition — or some sort of possession ... we can use this time to determine that, at least," Egon suggested, his eyes taking on the gleam of scientific inquiry.

"You really think you can help him, Egon?" Janine asked him hopefully, favoring Egon with one of her worshipping looks.

"I think we've got to try," he replied confidently, secretly basking in her adoration, his world restored to some semblance of balance.

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Over the next few days, Larry Talbot might have had cause to regret his decision to work for the Ghostbusters as he was poked, prodded, scraped and tapped as Egon and Ray attempted to establish a baseline reading on Larry's physiology.

While Egon and Ray spent all their time in the lab, Winston and Peter took the brunt of the business. New York was moving into the summer doldrums, but the only thing that wasn't moving was the inversion layer. PKE readings in the city were rising along with the temperature, and frequently, Janine was pressed into service to man — in a matter of speaking — a proton thrower. When he wasn't the subject of experiments, Larry monitored the phones, taking messages and handling what inquiries he could; the remainder he left for the professionals to take care of when they could. Having found someone who believed in him and who was trying to help end the family curse, he threw himself into the business with joyous enthusiasm, and even Peter started to wonder — but steadfastly refused to ask — what they'd ever done without an assistant for Janine.

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Two weeks into their study, Egon and Ray had amassed what appeared to be a complete workup on their resident werewolf.

"Well?" asked Ray over Egon's shoulder.

Egon held an MRI scan printout aloft, studying the image intently. "There's nothing in any of this to indicate he's anything but a healthy post-adolescent," Egon answered at last. "Nothing. Not a clue."

"Then you don't think it's a purely physical transformation," Ray surmised.  
"Possession?"

Egon nodded slowly, putting down the printout. "But something in his physical makeup must make it possible for the wolf entity to lock on. Perhaps some genetic mutation we're not seeing, something that catalyzes when the moon is full. I wish we could get samples of his brain tissue ..." Egon added wistfully. But none of them were skilled enough to perform such a delicate procedure from which the patient was expected to survive. The MRI unit he'd bought as a toy after a particularly lucrative bust a few years ago would have to suffice. He shook his head, dislodging his glasses so that they slid precariously to the tip of his nose. "We're going to have to keep taking samples and readings right up through the transformation itself."

"Which means we've got only a few days to build a containment unit for a werewolf."

"Precisely."

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In the end, it was Winston and Larry who built the wolf-containment, an 8x8x8 cage of high-tensile steel constructed in the basement in sight of the containment unit. Working from Ray and Egon's plans, Winston, whose many jobs previous to the Ghostbusters included a stint in construction, guided Larry's efforts. When the boy exhibited a rather vehement fear of the acetylene torch, Winston took over that job and relegated Larry to fetching, carrying, and holding lights in the proper place. Feeling only slightly less than useless, Larry nonetheless bore his humiliation in silence, grateful for the help of the Ghostbusters.

By the sixth of July, Egon insisted that Larry remain at the firehouse for constant observation. Taking blood and tissue samples at sunrise, mid-day, and moonrise, Egon kept careful notes on Larry's physical condition and his body's chemical makeup as the full moon approached. Larry became intimately familiar with all the equipment the Ghostbusters, specifically Egon, had accumulated; some medical equipment had been purchased for modification to use on the etheric plane, and Egon had had to re-modify it back to its original configuration.

At the same time, Ray continually monitored Larry with a PKE meter, noting with satisfaction that their baseline reading taken immediately after his disclosure had remained constant. For something to do as the hours stretched with no change in Larry's physical or ectographic condition, Ray fiddled with a second PKE meter, tuning it to exclude Larry's baseline frequency. Just in case, he told himself, Egon's theory of possession was correct, he'd like to know exactly how powerful an entity they were facing.

Finally, on the day of the 14th, the day of the full moon, they felt they were as ready as they could be. According to the Old Farmer's Almanac, moonrise was at 8:18 p.m.; a quick check of The Weather Channel confirmed that.

At 6:00, the Ghostbusters and their charge assembled in the kitchen for an early dinner, chinese ordered in by Ray. With the predictable exception of Ray, they were a subdued dinner party: Larry jumpy and nervous in anticipation of moonrise and his inevitable transformation; Janine full of concern over the young man of which she'd grown fond; Winston worrying over the integrity of the containment cage they'd built; Egon abstracted over the scientific breakthrough he hoped to make; and Peter observing the moods of the others carefully.

Over a carton of moo goo gai pan, Peter caught Ray's attention, and arched his eyebrow suggestively at his partner. Ray's eyes widened as he followed the direction of Peter's glance, taking in the solemn faces of their companions. Taking his cue, Ray offered brightly, "Well, less than two hours to ignition! Just think, Larry — by tomorrow, this'll all be a bad memory." Larry looked up, his face miserable, but a flicker of hope crossed his drawn face.

"Actually, Raymond, it's possible that we may only be able to gather data tonight rather than effect a cure," Egon replied between crunches on pan-fried noodles. The hope in Larry's face dimmed to nothing in response to Egon's matter-of-fact assessment.

"Aw, Egon, come on — we're as ready as we'll ever be! I for one have faith that we'll succeed — after all, we're the Ghostbusters!"

Egon merely favored Ray with a skeptical glance and returned his attention — limited though it was — to his meal. Ray floundered then, unsure of what else he could say to buoy the moods of his friends.

"Actually," Janine started, toying with her peking ravioli, "even if you aren't able to cure Larry tonight, you'll be closer to a cure, won't you, Egon?" She glanced up at Egon from under her unruly bangs.

Egon paused in his mastication a moment to consider his answer. "Yes. More conclusive data about the conditions of the transformation will be a definite asset." He looked up at the kitchen clock; the time was now 6:30. "We'd better take Larry down to the containment cage and hook up the monitors," he announced, tossing his napkin on the table. With that, he left the kitchen.

Larry put down his chopsticks, sucked in a shaky breath, and stood up. "You heard the man. It's showtime!" he said with false good humor. Unlike Egon, Larry took his plate to the sink to rinse it.

"Don't bother," Janine advised. "Slimer'll finish it off for you."

"Yeah, and then we'll burn the dish — ectoplasm doesn't come off in the rinse cycle," Peter added sourly. "All right, guys, let's get the packs," he added, standing also. Like Egon, he left his plate on the table; it didn't matter where the plate was, Slimer would find it and wipe it clean of edibles, if not slime.

"Whaddya need the packs for?" Janine asked as she followed the men out of the kitchen.

"To catch whatever it is that's causing Larry his monthly problem, Janine," Peter explained flippantly.

"Oh."

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The basement of the firehouse closely resembled the set of a bad science fiction or horror movie. In the center of the cement floor stood the containment cage, constructed of inch-thick high-tensile steel rods closely set together in a grid pattern. Inside the cage stood a diagnostic chair, bristling with electronic impedimenta of an esoteric design. Outside the cage, at a distance of about 10 feet, stood an elaborate control panel, from which Egon and Ray could monitor the vital signs of their summer co-op during and after his transformation. To the side of that was another control panel, which would allow them to view the transformation on a non-physical level. Remanded to a corner of the basement stood the MRI unit, along with some of the other medical equipment they'd been using to test Larry over the preceding weeks.

Earlier, Slimer had drifted in, whining plaintively. In patient tones, Egon had explained the potential risk to the little ghost during the experiment, and after urging from all four Ghostbusters, Janine, and Larry, Slimer had finally wafted back up the stairs and into the firehouse, closing the door behind him. The time was now nearly 7:00 p.m. Larry stood in the doorway of the cage, staring at the equipment Egon and Ray had added to it. He shook his head. "It won't last 10 seconds once I change, you know."

"Hey, man, that cage is built to last," Winston objected with offended pride.

"Oh, I don't mean the cage — that should hold," Larry answered; Peter and Janine exchanged worried glances at the word "should." "I'm talking about the equipment — those wires and cables won't."

"Which is why we'll also be using these," Egon announced, holding up circular pads with tiny antennae jutting from them. "These will transmit data to the console as well."

"You think they'll stay on once I ... once I go all hairy?" Larry asked dubiously, taking the disks from Egon.

This seemed to stump the scientist; it was not a consideration he'd thought of while designing the transmitting pads. "Hrrmph. Well ... " Finally, he settled on simply pushing his glasses up to the top of his nose and frowning.

"Shall I put them on now?" Larry asked, trying not to allow his growing dejection to sound in his voice.

"Here, I'll show you where they go," Ray offered, bustling around the console to the young man. "Hmm. Guess you'd better take off your shirt," he added, holding the disks over Larry's chest.

"Don't worry — I'll close my eyes," Janine proposed as Larry blushed. She did as she promised, sneaking only a peek as Larry removed his shirt. His chest was hairless, the muscles poorly defined. In fact, he looked even more like a kid with his shirt off than he did with it on.

"Okay, Janine, you can stop pretending not to look — Larry's decent again," Peter teased.

"Not that it'll matter later on," Larry said wearily. "The shirt and all my clothes will shred when I transform."

"Oh," Janine said carefully. "You have brought a change of clothing, I hope?"

"Hey, don't worry — we'll make sure you're making coffee when Larry changes back, Janine," Peter quipped. "You won't see anything you're not supposed to see!"

"What does that mean, Peter?" Egon asked curiously.

Shrugging helplessly, Peter answered, "If you don't know by now, buddy, it may just be too late to teach you." Grinning, he glanced at Janine, who had started to fume quietly. Tease anyone you like, Doctor Venkman, her eyes told him, but lay off Egon! Peter grinned more broadly, but sidestepped out of hitting distance from his secretary.

"Okay!" Ray said brightly, clapping his hands together. "We've got a little over an hour before moonrise. Let's start taking readings, shall we?"

Larry nodded and stepped into the cage. Ray hooked up the local diagnostics, checking to make sure that Larry was reasonably comfortable in the midst of all



the wires and electrodes. He patted the boy on the shoulder reassuringly, whistling a spritely, albeit off-key, tune all the while. "Egon?" he called.

At the main console, Egon was calibrating the instruments. "Reset the third cerebral electrode closer to the medulla, Raymond. That's good. Set the fluids monitor a little ... there, you have it. Good." Then Egon moved over to the ectoconsole, and twisted dials and tuned signals for a few moments. "Hmm. Interesting."

"What's that, Egon?" Janine asked hopefully.

He glanced at the baseline figures on one screen, comparing them to the information coming into the system at that moment. "A slight increase in the ecto-energy surrounding Larry. His frequency is beginning to change."

"But moonrise isn't for another hour, yet," Ray protested, coming out of the enclosure to see what Egon was observing.

"It would appear that the metamorphosis begins earlier, perhaps preparing his system to accept the intrusion of the wolf entity."

"Electrolytes are rising," Peter reported from the medical console. "Brain activity ... there's a spike on the alpha rhythms."

From behind the ecto-camera, Winston called out, "There's a faint aura forming around him. Nothing definite, just a haze right now."

"Good. Take a measurement." To Ray, Egon ordered, "I think it's time to put him under restraint, Raymond. We want to be ready for the metamorphosis when it happens."

"Aw, Egon, it's an hour away —"

"He's right, Ray," Larry called out. "Just to be safe."

Grumbling under his breath, Ray returned to the cage and started to fit the restraints over Larry's ankles and wrists. "You sure you don't want to wait?" he asked once more as he maneuvered the head and neck restraint into place. "This could get uncomfortable."

"It'd be worse if I broke out of here before you guys were ready. Trust me on that one, Ray."

Nodding, Ray completed fitting the restraint in place. When that was done, he swung a small water bottle with straw into position near Larry's face. "In case

you get thirsty," he explained. Trust Ray to remember the amenities at a time like this, Larry thought.

"Thanks. Don't forget to lock up on your way out," he added, smiling wanly.

Ray nodded again, placing a hand on Larry's shoulder. "We're here for you. You're not alone."

"I gotta admit, that kind of frightens me, Ray, but I appreciate it."

Pursing his lips, Ray turned to go, setting the electronic lock on the containment cage as he exited. He looked through the cage bars at Larry and gave him a thumbs-up sign. Movement limited by the restraints, Larry returned the sign as well as he could.

Ray took up his position at the medical console while Egon remained at the ectoconsole. The readings were beginning to change more rapidly now, and Winston stood at the camera watching the aura grow denser. Beside him, a computer readout of the energy levels clicked through the printer, while the image was recorded on the Kirlian VCR Egon had designed. Peter, having relinquished the medical console to Ray, brought the proton packs closer to the consoles, checking their charges carefully.

"You don't really think you're going to need those, do you?" Janine squeaked.

"I'd rather have 'em ready than to need 'em and not have 'em," he answered, satisfied that the power levels were at optimum. Then he set about checking over the traps he'd brought to the basement. Janine watched with fear-widened eyes.

The remainder of the hour passed slowly as Larry's baseline readings slowly changed toward unrecognizable figures. "Damn," Winston breathed as he glanced at the energy readout. "Whatever it is, it's a class seven or better."

"And rising," Egon intoned in a sepulchral voice. "Ray?"

"There's an new bandwave on the EEG. Larry?"

"Uuuuhnnnn," was all the reply he got.

"What time is it?"

"8:20 p.m.," Janine reported anxiously. "Moonrise is taking place now." Cautiously, she inched up in front of the consoles and peered toward the cage. Inside, Larry was groaning, tugging at the restraints. "Jesus," she whispered. "It's really happening!"

"What — you thought this was a joke?" Peter demanded caustically.

His body convulsing, Larry started to sprout thick, wiry hair the color of wheat on his face and hands, and his body seemed to grow bulkier under his clothes, straining the fabric until suddenly the seams started to pop. His face lengthened, his nose blending into his upper jaw until it transformed into a black, twitching snout and his teeth grew into long, pointed canines. His eyes rolled back in his head as he growled his frustration. So far, the restraints were holding.

"Criminy, the readings are off the scale!" Ray swore.

"Class eight!" Winston called out.

"Geeze, what is this thing — a minor demon?"

"That's it!" Egon answered excitedly. "It's using Larry's modified genetic structure, catalyzed by the gravimetric forces of the full moon, as a portal to our world!"

An angry bellow erupted from the containment cage, and they heard the snap and pop of the restraints breaking. A huge lupine figure launched itself at the cage's door, leaving electronic leads dangling uselessly from the diagnostic chair. The medical console went dark. Larry had been right — the hard-wired electrodes had fallen off the hairy werewolf body, as had Egon's transmitters. They were now limited to what data the ectoconsole could gather from its remote sensors.

"Mother Pussbucket!" Peter swore, goggling at the enormous creature that battered at the door. "Is that thing gonna hold?"

"Damn well better," Winston replied tightly. He, too, was staring wide-eyed at the huge werewolf. "And he's such a scrawny kid, too," he wondered aloud.

The werewolf roared its rage, encircling the bars of the door with mammoth paws, its claws glittering like stilettos in the light. Suddenly it stopped rattling the door and stood staring at them, its mouth curled in a snarl. It seemed to be studying them, and then the wolfish face seemed to smile at them.

"I don't like the look of that smile," Peter sing-songed, reaching for his pack.

"What are you doing?" Ray demanded.

"What I get paid for, buddy," Peter answered, shrugging the heavy pack onto his back.

Glancing at the werewolf that was slowly backing up in the confined space of the cage, Ray nodded warily. "Egon?"

"Yes, Raymond?" Egon replied as he frantically took notes over the ectoconsole.

"Do you think it's possible to separate the class eight from Larry?"

"Only if we can isolate its frequency from Larry's, Ray." Suddenly the werewolf launched its full weight against the door, causing the cage to shudder with the impact. They all held their breaths, but the door held.

"All right!" Winston crowed. "There's good old-fashioned American know-how for you!"

"Actually, it's Japanese," Egon corrected mildly. The werewolf was backing up again, preparing for another assault on the door. This time the impact was greater, causing the cage to tip forward slightly; the diagnostic chair slid forward a few inches.

Ray was rummaging for the PKE meter he had modified earlier. "I know it's in here somewhere," he muttered as he tossed aside bits and pieces of leftover electronic gear. Finally, at the bottom of the box, he unearthed the modified PKE meter and thrust it toward the shaking containment cage. Its twin antennae shot up immediately, the warning lights flashing insistently as the little device beeped continuously.

"There!" Ray exclaimed shoving the PKE meter under Egon's nose. "I modified it to exclude Larry's frequency — can we use that?"

Egon nodded excitedly. "Perfect. We'll have to modify the packs, too —"

He was cut off by the howl of the werewolf. Gathering itself inward, it suddenly launched itself once more at the containment cage door. This time the cage lurched forward, snapping the power cable to the door lock. With a fitful hiss and sputter, the door lock powered down and the door burst open. Crouching low to the floor, the werewolf bellowed its exultation at freeing itself, its huge wedge-shaped head turning to look at each of them malevolently as its slavering jaws snapped open and shut.

"I don't think we've got time for that, Ray!" Peter called, unshipping his thrower and powering up his proton pack.

"Peter! We don't know what putting Larry in a trap will do to him in this condition — his lifeforce may blend permanently with the demon's!"

The time for decisions was past as the werewolf catapulted itself over the ectoconsole, directly at Egon. The blond-haired scientist yelped and dove for cover, not quite rolling out of range of the razor-sharp claws. Blood welled up from the long, deep scratches on his left arm, and Egon clamped his hand over the wound as he scuttled away.

"That's it!" shouted Janine, grabbing her power pack and hooking the harness over one shoulder as she unclipped the thrower and thumbed the power button.

"I gotta agree!" Winston yelled over the din as the werewolf roared its frustration at missing its kill. Egon was rapidly scrambling away, but Ray was standing at the medical console staring open-mouthed at the massive lupine form slowly straightening before him.

"Ray, get away!" Peter screamed, igniting the power stream and starting to train it toward the werewolf. Winston's particle stream erupted in time with Janine's, and the sound jarred Ray back to his senses. He vaulted over the medical console and ran toward Egon as three proton streams converged on the hulking werewolf, slowing its progress. "Boost your power!" Peter ordered over the sizzle of the streams and the bellows of lupine rage.

The streams grew brighter still as power levels increased to the limit of the packs. Still the werewolf struggled against the confining beams, snarling and growling as it twisted its huge body in an effort to free itself.

"We're at full power!" called Janine.

"It's not enough!" Peter replied through clenched teeth. The writhing of the beast was pulling his beam with it, and he fought to maintain control of the beam.

Egon and Ray had made their way to the remaining two packs. Pale and sweating, Egon didn't look as though he could even stand, let alone take on a werewolf with a particle thrower, but he hauled himself up by the camera's tripod and gestured for Ray to help him put on the pack. With only a moment's hesitation to glance over to the werewolf slowly freeing itself from the beams, Ray nodded and picked up Egon's pack, trying not to jar Egon's injured arm as he helped his friend into the pack harness. Ray unclipped the thrower and handed it to Egon, who immediately powered up and joined his beam with the other three. Ray shrugged on his own pack and drew the proton gun, aiming it to mesh with the combined strength of the four streams.

"That's doing it!" Peter crowed as the struggles of the werewolf grew more frenzied but the containment web held. Biting his lip, Ray kicked a trap across the containment unit floor past Peter, and the psychologist stamped his foot down on the cable to stop its flight. When the trap came to rest near the werewolf, the five Ghostbusters pulled back on their streams to lift the werewolf

off the floor and guide it over the trap. Decisively, Peter brought his foot down on the pedal and the trap snapped open, emitting its coruscating cone of white light. The werewolf bellowed and railed, but the streams brought it close enough to the trap for the unit to do its job. The white light sucked downward, bringing the werewolf into the trap, and the trap slammed shut with a satisfying snap! The red indicator light blinked smugly at them.

As one, the streams cut off, and all five Ghostbusters sagged with relief. Egon sagged a bit further, and Ray quickly shucked his pack to go over to support his weakened friend. "We need to get you to a hospital, Egon," he said as he removed Egon's pack.

"I think ... I think that might not be a bad idea, Raymond," Egon answered faintly. "I believe I am going to pass out ..." Matching reality to prediction, the scientist collapsed.

Janine rushed over to him, shouldering Ray aside. "I'll take care of him — you figure out what we're going to do about a class eight in a trap — we can't put Larry in the containment unit!"

Ray straightened slowly, nodding. "She's right — if we put him in the containment unit, he might revert back before we get him out of there — no telling what the ghosts inside will do to him!" He looked to Winston and Peter for support.

"Okay. So what do we do with this?" Peter demanded, holding the blinking trap aloft. "It's not gonna hold a class eight for long — and it took all five streams to contain this mother."

"I'll help Janine get Egon upstairs to wait for an ambulance," Winston announced. "Then you can explain that one to me, too."

\* \* \*

Ray worked frantically to retune the packs to the demon's frequency he'd recorded earlier. As he did that, Peter and Winston erected a webwork of cables around the righted containment cage. Inside the cage, the trap blinked a sullen red, time ticking away to the point when the demon would prove too strong for the little device. On the ectoconsole, the modified PKE meter sat silent, a sign that time had not yet run out.

"You sure this is going to work, Ray?" Peter hollered over to him as he linked yet another cable into the system.

Ray considered a moment as he finished the fourth pack. "I think it'll work — I mean, in theory, the cage should operate as a remote containment unit."

"In theory?" Peter made a blasphemous sound. Winston grinned, wiping sweat off his forehead with his arm. They were all tired — their adventure had already gone on until nearly midnight.

"The theory is sound," a deep voice spoke from the head of the stairs to the containment unit area. "You're retuning the packs, Raymond?" Egon asked as he delicately made his way down the stairs, Janine hovering at his side.

"Egon!" Ray greeted, a delighted smile lighting his chubby face. "You're okay!"

"He's carrying around a pint of good old-fashioned Melnitz blood, but he'll do," Janine answered, glancing fondly at the scientist, who harrumphed and blushed in response. His arm was in a sling, and clean white bandages swathed his upper arm. The uniform was a write-off, the sleeve having been shredded by the werewolf's attack.

Just then, the modified PKE meter gave off a bleat of alarm. "Oh, shit!" swore Peter, redoubling his efforts to complete the power couplings. Winston likewise speeded up his work. Ray turned his attention back to the last pack, quickly completing the frequency retuning.

The PKE meter's warning became more rapid, signalling the degradation of the trap's containment field. "It's gonna blow any second now!" Ray warned as he hurried to tap the five proton packs into the net Winston and Peter were completing.

"Got it!" Winston declared, in unison with Peter's "Done!" Egon had taken up his position at the ectoconsole once more, with Janine at his side. She held out the PKE meter and read off the figures to the scientist. Ray nodded satisfaction as he linked up the final pack and scurried back to join the others behind the ectoconsole.

With a whoosh and a roar, the trap exploded, the funnel of light flaring briefly as the werewolf demon was released. Simultaneously, Ray flicked the power switch activating the power net around the cage; brilliant white light enveloped the cage like a cocoon. Beside him on the console sat another trap, ready to fling forward to recontain the entity and place it in the permanent containment.

The room throbbed with the power coalescing around the cage, the scent of ozone strong in the air. All five waited breathlessly as the werewolf inside the cage contorted painfully in the containment field.

"Okay, good — it's holding," Peter observed, letting out an explosive sigh of relief. "How long can we keep it up?"

"Not long," Ray responded. "Okay, bringing up the packs," he announced, thumbing the secondary power switch. The power packs whined as the nuclear accelerators came on line and fed more power to the net. The white light grew even more brilliant, painful to the eyes as it filled the vaulted chamber. They could no longer see visually into the cage, but the angry bellows and hideous snarling told them the werewolf was still inside.

"I'm getting a fluctuation on the meter," Janine called out. "Frequency modulation —"

"It's working," Egon breathed, pulling the meter over so he could see it more clearly. "We're getting a phase shift. The entities are separating."

Ray beamed; he hadn't really known if this would work. He picked up the trap, preparing to throw it into the containment field.

"Not yet, Ray — the frequencies aren't stabilizing," Egon warned. "Boost the power another 10%," he ordered.

Ray turned up the power dial, wincing at the increased wailings of the creature inside. Suddenly, a very human scream erupted from within the containment field.

"Larry! Hold on!" Janine yelled over the noise.

Beyond their sight, something heavy and very much alive thudded against the wall of the containment cage. Janine looked anxiously to Egon, who merely shook his head. The frequencies were still too enmeshed to attempt the trap.

"Another 10%, Ray," he said calmly. A shriek from within the containment answered his order, and Ray's hand hovered uncertainly over the control. "Another 10%, Ray," Egon repeated firmly. "We're almost there."

Swallowing hard, Ray nodded and turned the dial once more. A hellish bellow sliced through to their bones. Egon slammed his hand on the console, immediately regretting it as it jarred his damaged arm. "That's it! Two separate frequencies, holding steady! Now!" he yelled triumphantly.

Within seconds, the trap was skittering across the floor into the containment field. Ray jumped on the pedal, and the light went supernova, blinding them all. Abruptly, the animal roaring stopped, leaving only the sound of very human whimpering in its place.

"Power down, power down now!" Ray ordered frantically. At the console, Janine groped for the power switch to the packs and pounded it with her fist. Likewise, Peter found the switch for the containment net and slammed it to "off."



The field faded, but the afterimage of the blinding light remained on their retinas, making it difficult to move around in the sudden darkness. Janine felt for the robe she'd set aside earlier for Larry, hugging it closely as she stumbled forward to the containment cage. Ray fumbled for the cage's locking mechanism, and after several abortive tries, finally freed the door and swung it open. "Larry?" he called tentatively, blinking his eyes furiously to clear the bright spots.

"Here," came the weak reply.

Janine pushed past Ray, guided by the sound, and knelt down beside the boy. He was shivering with reaction, and his skin was cold to the touch. "You're in shock, Larry. But you're okay. You hear me? You're okay!" she told him fiercely, willing it to be so. The Melnitz will was something to be reckoned with, and Larry murmured agreement.

The blinding effects of the containment light were fading now, and Winston joined Janine in the cage. "Larry — your face!" Janine breathed, touching the oozing wounds left by the raking claws of the werewolf. The cuts were deep, the kind that left lasting scars. Winston reached forward and helped the boy shrug on the robe, then lifted him in his arms to carry him out of the cage.

Ray picked up the blinking trap and carried it to the main containment unit. "This is one hellspawn that won't be bothering any innocent kids anymore," he spat vehemently, shoving it into the containment unit with unholy glee. With a whoosh, the trap emptied its contents into the containment unit, and the light switched to a clear green. "Clean!"

"Get him into the chair, Winston — I want to check him over before we take him upstairs," Egon ordered.

"Hasn't he been through enough, Egon?" Winston demanded angrily. "Now's not the time to be experimenting —"

"I'm not experimenting. I want to check him over to make sure he's completely rid of the entity," Egon replied mildly, but the widening of his eyes indicated the offense he'd taken at the accusation.

"Sorry, m'man," Winston answered, his face contrite. He lowered his burden into the chair Egon had indicated, and the scientist quickly attached his backup set of electrodes to Larry's pale and clammy skin.

"Peter, bring over the PKE meter," Egon commanded imperiously, and the psychologist leapt to obey. Quickly, he scanned the boy for residual PKE, finding only the original baseline reading in answer. Egon nodded with satisfaction, then turned his attention back to the medical readouts. "Dehydration, exhaustion, iron

depletion ... nothing permanent, nothing fatal. Those gouges may take some time to heal," he added sympathetically, glancing at his own bandaged arm, "and you might have some scarring, but they will heal." Straightening, he pushed his errant glasses up again. He reached out and put his hand on Larry's shoulder, and the boy raised bloodshot eyes up to look at him. "I think you're free, Larry," he said gently.

"I hope you're right," Larry answered in a whisper and closed his eyes.

\* \* \*

A week of bedrest and daily deliveries of Mother Melnitz's Chicken Soup did wonders for Larry's recovery. The local emergency room had stitched up the clawmarks on his face, promising him minimal scarring in the long-run. By the beginning of the next week, he was back at work logging invoices and manning the phones. By the second week, he was again helping to unload traps and flush them into the containment unit. Gradually, his physical strength returned, but the boy was still subdued. Finally, Peter stopped by his desk to find out why.

"So, pal, what's got you so glum?" Peter opened.

Larry looked up from the pile of credit vouchers and shrugged.

"Hey, come on — if even I noticed you're down in the dumps, something's gotta be wrong," Peter replied.

"Oh, come on, Doctor Venkman — you're a lot more sensitive than you'd like people to believe," Larry chided with an attempt at good humor.

"Yeah, but don't let that get around or my rep is ruined," Peter quipped back. His face grew stern. "Seriously — what's bothering you?"

Larry looked at him for a long moment, then expelled his breath all at once. "You all have been great to me. Better than I ever could have hoped. And you risked your lives to help me. Egon still hasn't got full use of his arm yet —"

"Yeah, but Janine is having a field day playing lab assistant — we may never get her back to her desk after this," Peter grinned and Larry joined him, wincing as the healing slices stretched painfully. "But?"

"But what if it didn't work? What if ... what if another wolf entity decides to take out a lease?"

Peter's eyes narrowed. It was a possibility they'd all discussed, and even Egon wasn't sure they'd managed to eliminate whatever genetic mutation had made the demon's possession possible. Nothing unusual had shown up until

immediately before the transformation, and they hadn't discovered that until after Egon had had time to do a DNA profile on skin samples taken just prior to the metamorphosis. "Today's what — the 28th? And the next full moon is —"

"August 13th. Not a Friday, thank goodness," Larry answered with a trace of a smile.

"Right. Well, Ray and Egon have fixed up the containment cage, and we'll ... we'll wait and see, come the thirteenth," Peter counselled gently.

"The thirteenth," Larry echoed.

"Yeah. That's when we'll know for sure."

\* \* \*

"Well, I've got a big chocolate cake for dessert," Janine announced over dinner on the late afternoon of August 13. "But nobody — and that includes you, Slimer," she warned, shaking a finger at the hovering green ghost, "gets any until later."

Winston grinned as the little ghost whined and wheedled, but Janine would not reveal the location of the confection. The others joined in on teasing Slimer, until the company's mascot drifted disconsolately to Ray, imploring his pal with his improbably big eyes. "Aw, come on, guys, leave the Spud alone. It's okay, Slimer," he consoled, putting his arm around the floating ghost. "You'll get a piece of cake — you just make sure you leave it alone until Janine's ready to serve it."

"I'm not servin' it," she protested, "I just bought the damn thing."

"Well, we can't let Slimer serve it or it won't be edible!" Peter put in, laughing.

"We'll let Larry do the honors," Janine said warmly, glancing at the young man who quietly pushed his food around his plate. "After all, he's the one who'll be celebrating."

"I sure hope so," Larry replied. "I sure hope so."

\* \* \*

"PKE reading holding steady," Ray reported from the ectoconsole.

"No change in electrolytes or brain activity," Peter put in from the medical console.

"No fluctuations in field strength," Egon chimed in from beside Ray.

"Hey, m'man, how you feelin'?" Winston asked Larry through the containment cage's bars.

Larry considered a moment, glancing around at the electrodes leading off his body. Finally he answered in a surprised voice, "I feel fine."

"Eight o'clock and counting," Janine reported excitedly from the clock. "The moon has already risen, 12 minutes ago."

"Let's keep checking for another hour, just to be certain," Egon decided. "We can't risk a transformation outside of the containment cage." He nodded toward a long-handled device on the medical console. "Janine — take a skin sample."

Janine picked up the gizmo, which looked like a mechanical hand at the end of a broomstick (which in fact it was), and took it over to the cage, fitting it through the narrow space between bars. "You okay in there, Larry?" called Janine as the mechanical hand brushed up against the boy's arm, scraping off a tiny sliver of skin.

"Yeah. Yeah, I am. An' I don't mind waiting another hour, just to make sure," he answered, an edge of excitement lacing his voice.

Smiling encouragingly, Janine threaded the device back through the bars. She brought the construct back to Egon, who took the sample and prepared it for DNA profiling. The test would be complete within the hour, since Egon had made some minor — for Egon — improvements in the equipment in the last month.

At the end of the hour, the readings had not changed by even a percentage point. Even Egon was forced to admit that the transformation was not going to take place. The readout on the DNA profile confirmed it; the additional chromosome that had appeared in Larry's cells last month was nowhere to be found. Flexing his left arm a bit and feeling the residual tightness in the healing skin, Egon was relieved not to have to go through it all again. Breaking into a rare smile, he declared, "It worked. You're free, Larry."

Larry closed his eyes and offered up a prayer of thanks. Then Ray unlocked the cage door and started to remove the electrodes from Larry. "Looks like you made it, kid," he teased.

"Looks like you guys did, Ray," Larry amended, grinning and completely ignoring the pain that that caused in his face.

"Hey, will you guys hurry up — there's a piece of chocolate cake with my name on it waitin' upstairs!" Peter exulted, shutting down the medical console. "Last one up has to share with Slimer!" he yelled, and raced up the stairs.

"Not me, man!" hollered Winston, only steps behind.

Janine turned to Egon, who was turning off the ectoconsole. She smiled at him, but he didn't notice. Raising up on tiptoe, she kissed his cheek and whispered, "Thanks, Egon." Not waiting for a reply, she turned and ran toward the stairs, yelling, "Wait for me — you don't know where the cake is!" For his own part, Egon rubbed the place where she'd kissed him fondly, smiling like an idiot.

\* \* \*

"Okay, Janine, give!" Peter ordered petulantly. Chocolate cake was high on his list of necessary foodstuffs.

"Just gimme a second, okay?" she shot back, taking her keyring out of her pocket and going over to her filing cabinet. With great ceremony she unlocked the bottom drawer and lifted an enormous cakebox out of the drawer. Her solemnity got quickly to Peter and he made a lunge to snatch the cakebox out of her hands; deftly she sidestepped him and arched a warning eyebrow in his direction. "Nobody gets any until Larry gets up here, okay?"

Finally, they were all assembled in the kitchen again, plates laid on the table, and the ceremonial cake-cutting knife in Larry's hand. With more showmanship than they'd thought possible, Larry removed the lid of the cakebox with a flourish, to reveal ... a cake-crumb-covered Slimer blissfully sleeping off a sugar rush.

"Slimer!" Janine wailed. The little ghost merely hugged himself happily and rolled over. The Ghostbusters and their summer co-op all sighed with disappointment, glaring at their resident mascot.

"Oh well. Mr. Frosty it is!" Peter announced.

"Hey, I want a double-fudge swirl," Ray agreed as they both made their way to the door; a passed-out Slimer was too good an opportunity to miss for a pig-out on ice cream.

"My treat!" called Larry.

That stopped Peter in his tracks. "What — are we paying you too much, kid? How can you afford to foot the bill for Mr. Ice Cream's gluttony?" he demanded, hooking a thumb at Ray.

Larry grinned. "I've been saving my pennies. Come on — let's go!"

Even Egon couldn't resist the allure of free ice cream, and within an eyeblink, Janine was the only person standing in the kitchen. "Oh, Slimer," she bemoaned, frowning at the slumbering ghost. "How could you?" Then she realized she was missing out on an ice cream feast, and hightailed it out of there, yelling, "Hey! Wait for me — I want a double-dipped strawberry cone!"

End