

The Holly and the Dryad

a *Real Ghostbusters* novella by

Mary Jean Holmes

originally printed in *Shadowstar* #29, published Winter 1988
original version written December 1987; rewritten February/March 1998

© copyright 1987 & 1998 by Mary Jean Holmes.

This story is a work of fan fiction and in no way intends infringement on any already existing trademarks or copyrights held by Columbia Pictures, DiC, Dan Aykroyd, or Harold Ramis.

**NO PART OF THIS STORY MAY BE REPRODUCED BY OR IN ANY MEDIUM,
PRINT OR ELECTRONIC, WITHOUT THE EXPRESS WRITTEN CONSENT OF THE AUTHOR.**

Preface

By now, anyone who's read my other RGB fanfic will have realized that I have no affection for the Spud, a.k.a. Slimer. When I first watched RGB 'way back when, the Spud struck me as nothing more than something stuck in by ABC as condescension to the kiddie market. They even went and robbed him of what I considered to be one of his funniest traits in the movie: the fact that everything he tried to eat fell right through him, which certainly explained his ceaselessly voracious appetite. The more screen time he was given, the more I grew to dislike the critter, and began to think of ways to get rid of the thing for good.

So why, you may ask, is the little rotter in this story?

Well, anyone who knows me knows how freaky I can get when it comes to incorporating as many details as I possibly can of a given mythos, whether or not they're apocryphal. As I've said, this is one of those universes where it simply isn't possible to reconcile every single part of every episode that's been written, but, whether I like it or not, Slimer is a consistent part of the RGB mythos. Thus, I figure that I have to at least mention the little scumbucket once in a while.

But — horror of horrors! — I wound up using him as a little bit more than mere background "scenery" in "The Holly and the Dryad" because I actually managed to find something for which he was *useful*: being the scapegoat. And since I needed a scapegoat to make this story work... well, heck, who else would fill this part so nicely? (No, not Peter. The man's got to be sympathetic once in a while, after all....)

So, I suppose this is a warning of sorts: for all the more he's used, the Spud's in this story (for all of about two pages, I think).

Oh, one more thing: The reason the name "Elanor" used in reference to an American Linden is "obscure and not-so-obscure" is twofold: 1). The blossoms of American Lindens are small, yellow, and five-petaled, somewhat star-shaped, and 2). *Elanor* is the name of the small, yellow, star-shaped flowers that grew in the grasses of Lothlorien in *Lord of the Rings*. Being both a hobbyist botanist and LotR aficionado, it was an obvious little in-joke to me, but I imagine it might be rather obscure to most normal folk.

When Winston Zeddemore woke up that morning three days before Christmas and looked out a bedroom window of the Ghostbusters' firehouse to the street that ran alongside it three stories below, he was looking, almost child-like, to see if it had snowed overnight, as the local weathercasters had predicted. What he saw were two disappointments, not one. The mere talcum-powder dusting of the white stuff which had fallen was a mild let-down; seeing The Tree — a young linden which had been planted by the city three years earlier and had struggled to survive ever since — damaged by vandals was more than merely disappointing. Winston found it downright infuriating.

"Blasted punks," he grumbled, squinting to see if more had been hurt than the one broken limb he could spot from the window beside Ray's bed. "Don't they know there're few enough trees in this city without idiots going around killing the ones that're left?"

"Something happen to Elanor?" Ray Stantz asked he reluctantly poked his head up from under his covers, hearing his friend's complaint. Since The Tree was the only one within three blocks (having been the sole local survivor of that most-recent tree planting attempt), the four ecto-eliminators had dubbed it Elanor, for a variety of obscure and not-so-obscure reasons. Curious to see what Winston was talking about, Ray wrapped himself in his blanket and joined Zeddemore at the window.

As Ray pushed the drape aside to improve his view of the street below, watery sunlight sneaked past it and struck Peter Venkman's bed, disturbing the psychologist's rest. "Closed the blasted drapes," he groaned, hurling a pillow at them for emphasis. "It's too early to be getting up."

"It's almost ten o'clock," Winston corrected tartly. "We really should've dragged ourselves out of bed hours ago."

"Not when we didn't sleep half the night," Venkman countered, using the royal plural. He shot a surly glance at the bed to his right, his expression wishing all manner of ill fortune to be heaped upon the head of its still-sleeping occupant. "Hey, Egon!" he bellowed as loudly and obnoxiously as possibly, clearly an attempt to aggravate the partner who was currently on his black-list. "Rise and shine! It's your turn on KP!"

It was difficult to tell whether or not Spengler actually heard him, so buried was he beneath his various covers. He mumbled inarticulately and said nothing intelligible. One long arm snaked out from under the blankets, fingers fumbling about the night-stand until it found an almost empty box of tissues. They claimed one then withdrew, an innocuous act followed by a series of short but prodigious damp-sounding sneezes. The hand reappeared briefly to drop the tissue into the already over-full wastebasket beside the bed; its owner then rolled over so that he was facing away from Peter, and went back to (or continued; it was still hard to tell if he'd ever truly awakened) his sleep.

Though he had expected nothing else, Peter nonetheless scowled at the mummy-swathed physicist. "I'm telling you, guys," he complained to the others, "it's him or me, tonight. I can't spend another night listening to someone coughing and sneezing in my ear 'til four in the morning. It's ruining my good looks and sweet disposition."

The laugh Winston tried to smother came out sounding like a half-choked cough. "You must have a lot of sleepless nights, then," he quipped, unable to pass up the opportunity. "Specially considering the way you snore...." Peter's frown shifted from Egon to target the grinning Zeddemore.

Ray was willing to be helpful in order to maintain peace in the household. "So if being too close to him is a problem, you can sleep in my bed, tonight. Stuff like that doesn't bother me. Egon really *is* sick, after all."

Venkman redirected his scowled toward the auburn-haired occultist. "I'm serious. Tonight, one of us is gonna go sleep in the guest room — and I'm warning you right now, it won't be me. My back can't take that bag of rocks somebody palmed off on us as a mattress."

Ray shook his head, exasperated. "Come on, Peter, don't be such a grouch. It's Christmastime, remember? Peace on earth, goodwill toward men, an' all that."

"Yeah," Winston agreed. "Give the poor man a break. He needs to sleep in a decent bed as much as you do, right now."

The psychologist's grin was wicked. "I'd like to give him a break, all right," the very soul of unguent cooperation. "Right around the knees, or maybe his neck...."

Stantz *tsked* him most disapprovingly. "Aw, c'mon, Pete, it's not Egon's fault he caught the flu. Blame it on that refrigerated warehouse job we had last week..."

"...or on getting drenched by passing traffic every time we open the front door," Zeddemore amended. "I thought the city said they'd get that leaky fire hydrant fixed before Hallowe'en. Here it is, almost Christmas, and we've *still* gotta part the Red Sea out there whenever we leave home." His colorful metaphor referred to the large puddle

that seemed to have become a permanent lake in the gutter just outside their main entrance ever since the hydrant on the corner had developed its annoying — and seemingly irreparable — leak.

Peter harrumphed and burrowed back under his blankets. "I blame it on him wanting to get even with me 'cause it was one of my dates who gave it to him in the first place," he grumbled.

"Then I'd say turnabout's fair play," Winston grinned.

Ray sighed. "You know Egon isn't like that..."

"Don't count on it. It's the quiet ones you've always gotta look out for." The psychologist peered at the nearest clock, groaned, and then pulled his pillow over his head. "Wake me up in time for lunch," he instructed, trying to get back to sleep.

Ray and Winston didn't even consider arguing with him. They dismissed the incident as nothing more than a product of Peter's usual pre-holiday crankiness, since he was normally far more considerate and solicitous toward his friends when they were ill. Instead, they returned to their observation of the injured tree below. "That was no accident," the black man said of the broken branch, annoyed. He moved over slightly to let Stantz have a look for himself. "Stupid vandals. Wonder how they'd like it if someone came and busted *their* arms for no good reason?"

"It doesn't look too bad," Ray pronounced after he'd had a moment to assess the situation. "Back on the fam, we had trees that were broken up worse than this by wind-storms or ice-storms, and most of 'em survived." He wrinkled his nose critically. "That branch'll have to go, though, and the wound'll have to be tarred up, too, or she won't survive the winter."

Winston snorted, half irritation with the vandals, half resignation to the situation. "Terrific. Well, I guess I can take care of it this morning, if we don't get any calls. I'd hate to see her die just 'cause of some jerks' warped idea of fun."

"Why don't you just notify the Public Works Department? That's what they get paid to do, after all."

Zeddemore's features twisted expressively. "Sure, and if they get around to fixing Elanor as fast as they've gotten around to doing something about that blasted hydrant, she'll be nothing but a dead twig inside a week."

"You've got a point," Ray had to concede. "But I thought you and I were gonna go pick up the Christmas tree after breakfast. The party for our clients is the day after tomorrow, remember."

Winston shrugged as he went to fetch his clothes. "I remember. We can still do it after lunch."

"If we don't get called out on a job."

"We haven't gotten a call in the last two days — why should today be any different? Besides, the Christmas tree can wait. Elanor can't."

Stantz glanced down at the damaged tree again, then sighed. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Y'know, most people in this city wouldn't give a darn...."

"Most people in this city don't appreciate the value of trees, either," Winston replied, his voice muffled by the pajama top he was pulling off over his head. "Heck, half of 'em probably don't even know what a tree *looks* like."

Ray grinned. "Well, I think they ought to give you an award for this. Outstanding Citizen or Linden Humanitarian of the Year or something."

Zeddemore grunted as he pulled on a sweatshirt. "If Elanor lives," he said simply, "that'll be thanks enough for me."

Performing first aid of the injured tree turned out to be a relatively simple matter, as Winston discovered when he looked into the matter shortly after breakfast. A brief stop at the nearest library to research the subject of minor tree surgery, a stop at a hardware store to find the appropriate supplies, and a half hour of actual work found the task completed, quite satisfactorily. When it was done, he stepped back to survey his handiwork, studied it critically, then nodded in approval. As far as he could tell, everything appeared copasetic; he even fancied that the tree itself approved of his efforts, since it already seemed healthier, holding its remaining branches a bit higher now that it was out of pain.

Laughing at this patently ludicrous flight of fancy, Winston decided to ask Ray to check it out when he had a chance, since he seemed more familiar with the matter of repairing damaged trees than anyone else he knew. For the moment, however, he was satisfied that Elanor would survive, so he collected up his tree-surgery gear and headed back into the warmth of the firehouse. Behind him, he could almost imagine that the wind blowing through the linden's bare branches was whispering a heartfelt, "Thank you." It was a silly thought, of course, but it made him feel good to think that the tree, in its own primitive way, understood what he had done for it and appreciated his help.

He wouldn't have thought it so silly a matter if he'd looked back just before rounding the corner, when he would have seen a pair of huge, softly glowing and distinctly inhuman green-gold eyes looking out from the cover of the twigs and branches, watching him go with immense gratitude — and eerily undeniable affection.

When he stepped inside through the main doors of the firehouse, Winston saw none of his friends and co-workers in evidence. Ecto-1 sat alone in the garage; Peter's office was empty, and even their secretary, Janine Melnitz, was not to be found at the reception desk. Curious, he dumped his tree-repair gear into the already overflowing closet beside their lockers, then headed upstairs to find Ray and inform him that he was now free to resume their scheduled plans for the day. He found Egon first, sitting on the sofa in the rec area, looking disheveled, half-awake, and thoroughly miserable. Though he was still in his nightshirt and wrapped in a blanket, he had a large book on his lap and several others on the coffee table before him, along with a recently-opened but already well-used box of tissues and a wastebasket. From his expression, he had been trying to concentrate on the open book, an effort which had failed dismally and had thus prompted him to contemplate more drastic measures to rid himself of the annoying virus.

"I hate to say it," Winston said, though not unkindly, "but you look terrible, Egon. What're you doing out of bed, anyway? I thought the Doc told you to take it easy for the rest of the week or you'll be asking for nice case of pneumonia."

"I was trying to," the blond physicist snurfled, pausing to cough and blow his nose, "until Peter decided it was time to change every piece of bedding in the house."

The dark eyes widened with disbelief. "Peter? Doing housework on his own initiative? What is he, sick? Usually we have to threaten him with pain of death to get him to do even his own fair share."

Spengler was philosophical on the subject. "He says he's doing it to get the place presentable for the Christmas party, but I'm sure this sudden burst of energy has nothing to do with an unprecedented expression of responsibility. He's still mad at me for disturbing his sleep the last few nights, and kicking me out of the bedroom is his version of revenge. Considering how hard it is to get him to do any of the housework, I wasn't about to argue him out of it. Besides, the change of position might encourage my head to clear." He sniffled for emphasis. "God knows, nothing else has worked."

Winston grinned. "Have you thought of giving chicken soup a try? The doctors say it really is good for what ails you...."

"Already beat you to it," he heard Janine call from the kitchen. A moment later, she stepped through the archway, an appropriately laden tray in hand. "This is the same recipe my grandmother always gave us kids when we were sick," she explained, "and it worked every time." With one elbow, she shoved aside the books on the table to make room for the tray.

The sigh-like sound Egon made was genuinely pathetic. "I'm really not hungry, Janine...."

"Tough. Starving yourself isn't gonna help you get better any faster." She plunked herself onto the edge of the couch, then picked up both bowl and spoon. "Open up," she commanded.

He had the indiscretion to retort, "But—" and got out no more than that before she shoved the spoon into his mouth, leaving him with the choice to either swallow the soup or choke.

"Y'know," she said sternly as she ladled up a second spoonful, "for a supposedly brilliant scientist, you can be pretty stupid when you're sick. You're *going* to eat this, then I'm gonna go upstairs, and if Peter hasn't finished this cleaning bit of his, I'm gonna throw him down the firepole and do the rest of it myself so you can get back to bed."

She proffered the spoon again. Briefly, Egon frowned at it; then, with woeful submission to the inevitable, he took both bowl and utensil so that he could feed himself and thus save some small remnants of his already tattered dignity. Though Janine clearly approved of this apparent change of heart, it was equally clear that she intended to sit there and make sure he ate every last drop. She continued her annoyed harangue against the absent Venkman. "I never heard of anything so ridiculous, kicking a sick man out of his bed just to get even for something you couldn't help, especially when it was his own airheaded bimbo of a girlfriend who brought the bug around in the first place. *He* should be the one sick with it, right now, not you...."

From the way her diatribe was going, Winston decided that he would be best advised to make himself scarce before Janine found some reason to chew him out, too. So, sympathizing with his poor blond colleague (who had no choice but to listen, cooperate, and endure), he retreated back to the garage level, where he found Ray just coming up from the basement.

"How's Elanor?" Stantz asked.

The dark man made an equivocal gesture. "I'm no tree surgeon, so I don't know for sure, but I think I did everything right. She'll be okay, if we can keep those blasted vandals from doing any more damage. Ready to get the Christmas tree?"

Ray's eyes lit up at the prospect. "You bet— but let's walk, okay? I just finished cleaning Ecto, and I don't want her to get full of needles and pine tar before the clients come."

"Fine with me," Winston shrugged, and, once the occultist had fetched his winter jacket from his equipment locker, they went.

The tree they had ordered weeks before was a Norway spruce, fragrant, short-needed, dark green, and a full twelve feet tall, since it was to go in one corner of the high ceilinged lobby/garage as a sort of centerpiece for their party. Carrying it back was a little difficult for two, but not exceptionally so, since the men were both used to dashing about after ghosts with fifty-pound nuclear accelerators strapped to their backs. They had to pause only twice before rounding the corner on the street adjacent to the east side of their headquarters, and then only to make sure they had a good grip on the thing. As they passed Elanor, they were certain they'd make it home without incident, when a large delivery truck went screaming by mere inches from the curb, plowing right through the large and still-fluid hydrant puddle and kicking up a tidal wave that drenched both men and their burden.

"Idiot!" Winston, who was in the lead, bellowed after the trucker while Ray coughed out the lungful of water he'd accidentally inhaled. "Come on back here, chicken-head, an' we'll do a little target practice on your tires!" The driver, totally oblivious to his shouts, didn't so much as slow down. In a moment, he went screaming around another corner and out of sight.

Zeddemore fumed, temporarily leaned the tree against Elanor while he checked on Ray, who'd dropped his end when he'd taken the cold water — which he was still coughing away — smack in the face. "Are you all right?" he asked solicitously. "That creep didn't hit you with any lumps of ice, did he?"

"No," Stantz wheezed, "just slush. I'm fine, Winston, trust me. I'll be all right just as soon as we get inside and get into something dry."

"Good idea. The last thing we need is to come down with Egon's flu for Christmas just 'cause some jerk couldn't watch where he's driving. You sure you can manage your end of things? I'll go get Peter to help, if you can't."

"And be stuck with listening to him crab about how much he doesn't like Christmas or Christmas trees for the rest of the day? No thanks. Give me a second to get this gunk out of my eyes, and I'll get it."

Attempting to be helpful, Winston rummaged through the pockets of his jacket and came up with a dry handkerchief, old and rumpled, but clean and much better than the soaked sleeve upon which Ray had been trying to wipe his eyes. As he stepped around the tree to offer the cloth to his partner, he turned his back on Elanor. Behind him, the same glow he had missed earlier again shimmered among the branches, a pair of greenish lights that adoringly watched him as he handed his friend the handkerchief, then disappeared as they slipped down the smooth gray trunk and into the boughs of the waiting spruce. Neither he nor Ray saw the incident, so neither eliminator could have known that when they picked up the bundled evergreen and resumed their trip home, they also picked up a small supernatural passenger.

When they finally got themselves and their burden inside, they found Peter, not Janine, sitting at the receptionist's desk, wearing an unfathomably blank expression as he stared off into space, seemingly in a state of shock. "What's the matter, Peter?" Winston asked as they set the tree alongside Ecto-1, a temporary resting place until they got changed and fetched the decorations from storage. "You look like someone just told you your best friend had died."

The psychologist blinked at him for a few silent moments before responding. "Janine threw me out of the bunkroom," he said, aghast. "Came after me with a broom and everything. *Me!*" He sounded thoroughly incapable of comprehending the woman's unprecedented belligerence.

Zeddmore made a soft sound that was half-laugh, half-chiding. "Do you blame her? You've gotta admit, Pete, that was a pretty rotten thing you did, kicking a sick man outta bed just 'cause you were miffed with him."

Venkman squirmed, looking remarkably — and sincerely — regretful. "Yeah, well.... I guess that wasn't very nice, but she won't even let me go and apologize. She throws things at me when I even *look* up the stairs to the third floor." He shook his head, utterly incredulous.

Ray's laughter was more pronounced. "You know the way she gets when she thinks you've picked on Egon too much, and you *have* been at him 'way too much, the last few days. You really kinda asked for it, y'know."

"I didn't think I was bad enough to warrant *this*. And I wouldn't laugh, if I were you. She's mad enough right now to keep all of us out of there, and from the way you two look, I don't think you're gonna enjoy spending the rest of the day soaking wet."

Winston's smile was conspiratorial. "Leave it to me," he promised. "I'll get her down."

"How?" Peter wanted to know, having already exhausted all his ideas for achieving that very end.

Zeddmore shrugged. "You know how much she likes Christmas. All we have to do is tell her we need her help decorating the tree, and she'll come down, no problem. Think you can help us and find the tree stand while we get into something dry?"

The skeptic eyed the still-bundled spruce with a wary expression. Even though he'd begun to get over his years-long dislike of the holiday season, lingering memories of unpleasant Christmases past continued to haunt him. They became fainter and fainter with each passing year, but the old reflexes were hard to banish. "I don't know...."

"Aw, c'mon, Peter," Ray urged amiably, "it's not like we're asking you to do the whole thing yourself. Besides, I'd think it'd be worth that much to you for us to get Janine off your back — wouldn't you?"

Venkman still had his doubts, but they were minor, so, in the best spirit of the season he could muster, he relented.

He ended up doing more than just that, since it took all three of them plus Janine to get the tall and awkward tree seated properly in the stand. Afterwards, they found that a ladder was required to reach the highest branches, and he was pressed into service, holding it steady while Janine — who was the lightest and therefore the least likely to tip it over when leaning — climbed to the top to hang the lights and ornaments and tinsel. At first, he groused over this additional levy on his time, but as things progressed and the tree started looking prettier and prettier, his grievances dwindled to an occasional grunt or grumble, and eventually stopped altogether. Though there was a certain amount of genuine justification for Peter's oft-proclaimed dislike of the Christmas season, much of it was now just for show, the Scrooge-like facade he felt obliged to wear even though his friends knew he had outgrown his childhood attitudes. He made no protest when Janine asked him to pass tinsel or ornaments to her; he even started humming along with the holiday music the receptionist was playing on the radio at her desk, though so quietly, no one else could hear.

So it was that Peter caused no trouble in the process of putting up the tree. That honor fell on the virtually non-existent shoulders of their spud-in-residence, Slimer.

When they were about halfway done, he (she? It? Determining the gender of a ghost whose one true love was food was nigh onto impossible) appeared from whatever corner he'd been lurking in, drawn out by the curious activity in which his... owners? ...were involved. He showed particular interest in the boxes and boxes of shiny glass ornaments waiting to be hung; when that portion of the process was reached, he wanted very much to help, and started plucking them from their boxes and carrying them up to Janine, since he figured she needed his help the most.

"Eeeyuck!" was her immediate exclamation when she blindly reached down, expecting Peter to hand her the next ornament and was instead handed a glass ball coated with a considerable amount of ectoplasmic goo. "That's absolutely disgusting!" she scolded. "Who told you you could help, anyway, Slimer?"

The little green specter shrugged and babbled, not a word of which was intelligible; nonetheless, he managed to get across that this was an idea he had gotten entirely on his own.

"Well, stop it," he was told in no uncertain terms. "I don't care if this *is* Ghostbusters HQ — Christmas ornaments are supposed to *shiny*, not *slimy*."

Properly chastised, the ghost withdrew, looking thoroughly dejected until he came up with a new way to lend a hand. A moment later, he was "helping" Ray distribute tinsel around the lowest branches. As he came around to the spot Slimer had done, Stantz grimaced.

"You can't help here, either, Slimer," he said, though not without some regret for disappointing the spook, whose heart — if such it could be called — was in the right place. "This has gotta look good for the party, and I'm afraid most of our clients wouldn't understand a tree dripping with ectoplasm instead of tinsel."

He started cleaning up, pulling off the gummy strands of silver foil as the ghost again backed off, looking even more forlorn. He brightened once more as he came up with a third idea, which was quashed the second he headed in Winston's direction.

"Oh, no," Zeddemore, who was in the process of clipping lights to branches, wamed. "You get slime all over these, and you could short out the whole lot of 'em. Why don't you be a good little ghost and just sit back and watch?"

"You said it," Peter piped up, in full agreement. "If you really want to help, Spud, *don't* help. You're just making a mess of things."

This final rejection — especially since it came from one he all but worshiped — was more than Slimer could handle. Whimpering and pouting and looking totally put out by their universal scorn for his well-intended assists, he floated up through the ceiling, sulking."

Ray saw it, and felt terrible. He tended to regard the ghost as a sometimes ill-mannered pet, and thus felt as if he'd just whipped a poor, ignorant puppy. "Maybe we could've found something he could do without messing up too badly," he reflected. "After all, he only wanted to help."

Venkman snorted. "Yeah, like Typhoid Mary just wanted to help find homes for a few vagrant germs. He's about as useful."

"We'll find something for him to do later," Winston promised. "But you said it yourself, Ray: The tree's gotta look good for the clients."

The occultist sighed. "I suppose so. I just wish we didn't have to send him out feeling so bad."

"He'll get over it. There, that should do it for the lights. Want to hand me some of those ornaments, Peter? She's looking a little bare on this side...."

Winston was paying more attention to the box he was being handed than to the tree, so he didn't notice it when an extra pair of green lights flared amid the branches, thrilled by his use of the pronoun "she."

It took nearly four hours to decorate the tree in what they all considered to be adequate style. Hence, it wasn't at all surprising that, when they came down the following morning and found most of the ornaments and tinsel scattered across the garage floor, ripped, broken, and covered with what appeared to be sticky, half-dried ectoplasm, they were all furious — and knew exactly who to blame.

"I know Slimer was upset with us for not letting him help," Ray commented as he took stock of the debris, "but this...!" He swept one arm wide to indicate the mess strewn all over the garage and reception area. "There's no excuse for *this!*"

"Yeah," Peter agreed, probably the most upset of the lot, since his liking for the holiday was still tenuous, and anything that went wrong tended to make him feel that things were about to revert to the generally unpleasant form he'd known as a boy. "Just like there's no excuse for the Spud, either."

"This *is* pretty irrational behavior, even for him," Ray had to admit.

"That's what I keep telling you guys, but you never listen. Where *is* the little homewrecker, anyway?"

"I haven't seen him around since he went off to sulk, yesterday," Winston provided. "Maybe this is his way of getting even."

Venkman snorted. "If he wanted to get even, he should've stuck slime in all our shoes like he usually does, instead of trashing all the decorations."

Janine, who had finally managed to stir herself away from staring at the carnage which had met her eyes the moment she'd arrived for work, moved behind her desk and found the computer monitor plastered with sticky tinsel. "It's bad enough he had to pull everything off the tree," she moaned, grimacing in disgust as she attempted to remove the gooey mess, "but did he have to splatter it all over the place, too?"

"It's pretty bad," Zeddemore announced after surveying what was left of their handiwork, "but the tree itself wasn't messed up very much, and the lights are still okay. Once we clean up the stuff on the floor, we should be able to do it over again."

"And pay for new ornaments, too," Peter noted sourly, always unhappy with the notion of unexpected expenditures, especially when they were made necessary by Slimer.

Janine and Winston took care of redecorating the tree while Ray and Peter finished whatever housecleaning needed to be done before the party. They were very proud of themselves for the miracle they managed to work with the meager decorations that were all they could find in the stores two days before Christmas — until the next morning, when they again found some of the ornaments broken and sticky on the garage floor.

"I'm beginning to think he'd got something against me personally," Janine lamented as she picked up the remains of what had once been a delicate blown-glass snowflake. "All of these ornaments are ones I picked out and hung up. Do you think maybe Slimer's trying to tell me something?"

"Not unless he came up with some reason to get mad at you between yesterday and today," Ray observed, clicking his tongue at the mess. "He wasn't quite so selective the first time. You didn't go after him with a broom like you did Peter, did you?"

The receptionist shook her head. "No — not that I mightn't've been tempted, too, after that first mess, but I didn't see him at all yesterday."

"It's not as bad as last time," Winston sighed as he again looked over the damage. "Just those couple dozen ornaments — but I don't know where we're gonna find more, not on Christmas Eve. The stores were already picked pretty clean when we went to buy 'em yesterday."

"It's bad enough," Peter growled, inspecting one of the stickier shards. "I say we toss that little traitor right out on his ear. I don't care if he's mad at us or not; there's just no excuse for this, not two days in a row."

"We can't just throw him out onto the streets," Ray insisted, although he had to admit this was exceptionally bad behavior, even for their gluttonous resident ghost. "Who'd take care of him?"

"He took care of himself at the Sedgewick just fine for years before we came along. I say we send him back again. He can fend for himself."

"But we can't do that! They paid us to get rid of him...."

Egon — who, sick though he still was, had had his curiosity piqued by all the fracas — studied the scene of the crime from his vantage on the staircase. "More to the point," he observed, sniffing, "we can't turn him loose on an unsuspecting public."

"What about turning him loose on an unsuspecting *us*?" Peter demanded hotly. "Remember, I'm a psychologist — and from the way he's been acting, I'd say our little spud's developed some serious neurotic problems. What if he's turned bad on us or something? What are we supposed to do, put up with him making a wreck out of the whole firehouse?"

The blond scientist shrugged. "If you're convinced he really has developed sociopathic tendencies, then the only option we have is to trap him and put him back into the containment unit."

"I wouldn't exactly call it sociopathic," Ray said, uncomfortable with the term.

"I would," Peter piped up immediately. "What else can you call a ghost who prefers hanging around with and trying to help a bunch a living people who make their living get *rid* of types like him?"

"Well, I still don't think this means we should get rid of *him*. He may be a ghost, but he's still our friend...."

"Our pain in the neck, you mean," Venkman grumbled.

"Maybe Peter's right," Janine intervened. "This just isn't like Slimer, going out of his way to do something wrong when he *knows* it'll get everyone mad at him. But there's got to be something we can do to set him straight without stuffing him into the grid. It *is* Christmas, after all."

"Maybe all we have to do is threaten him with it," Winston suggested. "You know how much he hated it in there the first time."

Peter wasn't quite convinced. "But what if it doesn't work? You can't send a ghost to an analyst, y'know. And don't even *ask* me to try."

Ray sighed, having been thinking just that. "I don't see that we've got too many other options, then. If it's a choice between threatening him or putting him straight into containment, no questions asked, I'm willing to give him one last chance." He glanced toward the ceiling and the ghost's presumed location; even when he couldn't be found, Slimer was never far from the kitchen. He shook his head. "I'll go find him...."

"No, let me do it," Peter interrupted. "You're too much of a softie. He knows I don't like him very much. If he hears it from me, he'll *know* we mean business." His wicked grin gave ample proof of it.

"That's for sure," Janine sniffed dryly. She turned to Winston as Venkman headed upstairs in search of their misbehaving specter. "Should I go out and try to find some more ornaments?"

"No, Ray and I can do it. We were gonna go pick up some stuff for the party, anyway, so we might as well save time and kill two birds with one stone. The guests'll start showing up around three, y'know, and it's almost eleven now. Just keep an eye on that tree and make sure Slimmer doesn't try anything else while we're gone."

"He wouldn't dare," she felt certain, watching him and Ray as they fetched their coats, headed for the car, and climbed in. A blast of cold wind blew through the garage as they pulled out, sending waves of half-frozen water splashing in either direction as they plowed through the omnipresent puddle outside. Janine slapped one hand atop a pile of papers to keep them from scattering in the sudden gust. She shivered, and went to close the vehicle doors.

"Shouldn't you be back in bed?" she asked Egon, who was still on the staircase, contemplating the odd events surrounding the Christmas tree. "Standing in this drafty garage in your pajamas can't be good for you. You aren't even wearing slippers...."

"I can't stay in bed forever," he said logically, "and a few seconds in a draft isn't going to hurt me, flu or no flu." That reasonable statement was immediately belied by a sudden and uncontrollable fit of coughing and sneezing.

The expression she threw him was as wry as her inflections. "Right," she drawled, seeing through his flimsy argument. She started up the steps, taking his elbow and urging him to follow as she passed by. "Come on, then, at least get back upstairs where it's warmer. I'll bet you haven't eaten anything since lunch yesterday, either."

"Untrue. Peter made supper last night."

"Yeah? Well, I know what he considers cooking, and half a sandwich and a glass of orange juice do not a supper make, especially when you skip breakfast like you did this morning — didn't you?"

The physicist sighed, which was in itself an answer. "I appreciate your concern, Janine, really, but I can take care of myself."

"Not from everything I've seen, you can't."

"I've been doing it for years. You don't have to do this...."

Egon's voice faded to a distant murmur as they reached the top of the stairs and moved into the rec room, continuing from there into the kitchen. Thus, no one was present to see the green eyes once more come to life amid the boughs of the Christmas tree, nor did they see them slip down the trunk and across the cold garage floor, pausing to investigate Winston's equipment locker before moving up the stairs to the living quarters beyond.

If it had been any of her other employers — especially Peter — whose health was in question, Janine would likely have gone right back to her desk after making certain they'd returned to bed, but since the patient was the object of her all-too-often unrequited affections, she made a point of seeing to it that he was given a proper, if somewhat early, lunch before returning to the less rewarding job of manning their currently quiet business phone. After offering token protest, Egon surrendered and let her do as she would, since he knew she wouldn't give in. Besides, his sense of taste was finally beginning to come back, and if capitulation meant getting an edible meal rather than risking a relapse with his own pathetic culinary talents, then surrender was the wisest and most attractive course of action. The fact that he was beginning to enjoy her attentions had, of course, no bearing whatsoever on his decision.

Once she'd convinced herself that the lunch she'd made wouldn't go to waste, Janine left the kitchen and returned to work, exacting from the physicist a promise that he would go straight to bed after he'd eaten and taken his medications. When he was finished with it, Egon dutifully cleaned up after himself (healthy or sick, cockroaches were something he tried his best to discourage) and was about to head upstairs when his left foot encountered an odd dribble of something on the floor, running from the lower staircase across the rec-room and up the spiral stairs to the

third level. Had he been wearing slippers, he would not have noticed it, but against the skin of his bare foot, it felt cold and sticky, like syrup. Curious and reasonably convinced it wasn't something Slimer had left behind — apparently, the little ghost was either so afraid or so miffed, Peter *still* hadn't been able to find him to deliver his ultimatum — he followed it up to the third floor, since he was headed in that direction, anyway.

The trail led him into the bedroom, where it went straight for Winston's corner of the room, leaving its tacky trace all over his bed, dresser, closet, and other belongings before moving toward the firepole-well, where it vanished. For several minutes, the physicist studied the path of the dribble most carefully, then crouched down to have a closer look at the stuff. An adjustment of his glasses confirmed his more distant initial observation. It certainly didn't look quite like the Spud's brand of ectoplasm; in fact, when he touched a patch of it, he found that it didn't feel at all like ghostly residue, being much more viscous and far less slimy than the paranormal norm. Most spectral ectoplasm was virtually odorless, for all that it was considerably more revolting; this substance had a strong and very definite scent, that of....

"Wood," he murmured to himself identifying it instantly. For a moment, he studied his fingers, glanced again at the route the spoor had taken, squinted more closely at it, then coupled this physical evidence with all the strange events of the past two days. Something was going on around here, all right, and this new development only reinforced what he'd suspected from the first that Slimer and his supposedly errant behavior had absolutely nothing to do with it. "Fascinating," he opined and, forgetting all about his malady and the medicine he was supposed to be taking, he went to fetch the equipment he would need to prove whether or not the theory he had devised was correct.

While he was in the lab, examining the residue under a microscope, Winston and Ray returned with several bags and boxes of food and beverages for the party and a single paper sack full of the unbreakable satin-type ornaments they'd found at the supermarket. Stantz was in the process of unloading the groceries when Winston, about to hang his coat in his locker, let loose an exclamation of irritation and disgust.

"That does it!" he bellowed, shaking the hand that had grasped the doorhandle in an attempt to rid himself of the gunk clinging to his fingers. "Where's that blasted spud? I swear, I'm gonna wring every drop of ectoplasm outta him with my bare hands!"

Peter, whose attention had been roused at the sound of Zeddemore's first shout, came out from his office, happy to hear someone else expressing his personal feelings toward the green nuisance. "What happened this time?"

As explanation, the dark man gestured furiously toward his locker, which had been visibly coated with a film of supernatural glop. "This," he growled. "I thought you were supposed to deliver him the ultimatum, Peter. Is *this* what we get for showing him we mean business?"

"I didn't give it to him," Venkman confessed, not without regret. "I couldn't even *find* Slimer. But maybe after this, you guys'll go along with me, and we can shove him into containment before the guests arrive."

"I dunno," Ray said, head shaking. "That doesn't sound fair. Look, he didn't even get all our lockers, only Winston's."

Zeddemore groaned. "Oh, great! Now he's got a private vendetta going against me...!"

"No, he doesn't," Egon corrected, coming down the stairs, PKE meter in hand.

Everyone looked up, surprised, Winston not the least of all. "He doesn't?" he echoed, frowning with puzzlement.

"What are you doing back down here?" Janine demanded. "I thought you said you'd finish your lunch, take your next dose of medicine, and go back to bed."

"I was going to," the physicist admitted, "but that was before I found a trail of this same residue that has Winston so upset."

"You mean there's more of this upstairs?" Zeddemore was appalled.

"Yes — quite a bit, in fact," Egon replied with the casual aplomb of a fascinated researcher.

Peter groaned. "That's just what we need, Slimer-gunk all over the place — and just before a big party."

"But it isn't Slimer's," he was again corrected. "And it isn't all over the place, just all over one distinct path, and Winston's belongings."

"What?!" The black man was now more than merely appalled. "All over *my* stuff? What does that spud think he's getting away with...?"

"Nothing, I'm sure. I keep trying to tell you, this residue doesn't belong to Slimer. Look at it closely — smell it."

Venkman grimaced. "No, thanks. I just had a big lunch."

Ray, however, was sufficiently intrigued by his tallest partner's comments to do just that. He touched the sticky doorknob, rubbed the residue between his fingers, and sniffed it experimentally. His eyes instantly widened, startled. "Why, you're right, Egon — that *isn't* Slimer's slime. It almost smells like..." He hesitated, not quite able to peg it.

Spengler had no such problem. "Like wood. Or, more precisely, tree sap."

Winston's dark brows arched expressively. "Tree sap? You mean like—" He almost hated to say it. "—like the tar off a pine tree?"

"Of that same general nature," Egon confirmed, "but definitely not of that particular family."

He sighed, relieved. "That's good. For a minute there, I thought this might be stuff from the Christmas tree that we'd tracked all over the place."

Peter, on the other hand, was anything but relieved. "But if isn't from the tree, where *is* it from?"

"That's exactly why I'm trying to find out," the physicist replied. He resumed following the tacky trail back to what he hoped would be its source.

This time, it was Ray's turn to be confused. "With a PKE meter? Isn't that like trying to catch a mouse with a ghost trap?"

Egon didn't look up as he answered. "If we were trying to locate a squirrel or a chipmunk, yes. But the visitor I'm looking for happens to be distinctly less mundane in nature."

That explained absolutely nothing to most of the others. Totally lost, Winston glanced at Janine, who shrugged and glanced at Peter, who made an odd face, then looked back at Winston. "What did you say?" the last in the circle asked.

Spengler halted when the path ended, at the foot of the Christmas tree. He looked up at it, not admiring its beauty but subjecting it to intense scientific scrutiny. "I'm getting definite supernatural readings from the residue, and the tree. I suspect when you brought it home, you also brought along an unexpected guest. Take a good close look at it," he suggested, pointing to the stuff on the floor. "That's not just a trail of sap. It's footprints."

None of the others were about to believe that patently absurd claim until they bent down and had a look for themselves. Sure enough, the shiny spots were in the shape of tiny feet, tracks that were remarkably human in nature, save for the fact that they had four toes instead of five. For several moments, they stood there staring at the prints with a mixture of fascination and incredulous awe.

Eventually, Winston broke the silence. "Oh, man, this is just too weird," he said, head shaking. "What sort of spook have we got here, anyway?"

"It's not a ghost," Egon provided confidently. "According to my preliminary analysis, all evidence would seem to indicate that our guest is a dryad."

"A what?" The question came from the same three who had recently traded glances.

"A dryad," Ray repeated, his confusion suddenly evaporated. "A wood-nymph. They're spirits who live in trees, and their lives are bound up with the tree they inhabit." A small frown narrowed his brown eyes. "But if you're right, Egon, then why doesn't this dryad's trail have a scent like an evergreen? This *is* a spruce tree, after all."

"Yeah," Janine chimed in, "and why does it keep trashing our Christmas decorations?"

"Not to mention gumming up all my stuff," Winston added, eyeing his locker most unhappily.

The blond scientist said nothing for a few moments; he continued to study the tree and his meter. Then, he scratched his chin and shrugged. "I'm not one hundred percent sure of this, but I believe this dryad is *not* the dryad who belongs to this specific tree."

"Then what is it?"

"Maybe it's a dryad condominium," Peter quipped. "Y'know, a time-share tree, and this little sprite's here on vacation."

"Not possible," Egon stated flatly. "As Ray said, the life of a dryad is bound up with its host-tree. If this one had had a resident dryad, it would have died the instant the tree was chopped down, or very soon thereafter. If it had any sense at all, it would have vacated as soon as it recognized a threat, and found another host."

The occultist nodded, almost regretful. "That's right. But if the dryad that belongs here is gone, where did *this* one come from? And why would it pick a tree like this to move into?"

"Well," Spengler confessed, pausing to cough, "I *do* have a theory..." His voice faded as his thoughts wandered into deeper contemplation of their unusual situation.

When he didn't launch into an immediate explanation, Peter prompted him, puckishly. "Are you going to share it with the rest of us, Spengs, or do we have to play Twenty Questions?"

Thus prodded, Egon returned to the here-and-now and got straight to the point. "I think she might be Elanor."

His three partners were so startled, they could do nothing for a minute but stand there with their mouths hanging open. Janine, however, was considerably more garrulous. "Elanor?" she repeated, puzzled. "Who's Elanor?"

Venkman was next to find his voice. "You honestly think we've got a spook from that tree around the corner living in our Christmas tree?" He shook his head, sighing with sympathy for his poor, deranged colleague. "I think maybe this flu's cooked a few too many of your brain-cells, Egon. That stunted excuse for a tree couldn't possibly have its own nymph — and even if it did, she'd have to be pretty hideous—"

A red glass ball suddenly came flying from the upper branches of the tree; it hit the skeptic on the nose, bounced off, and shattered on the floor with a loud *pop!*

"I rest my case," the physicist announced dryly.

"I don't get this," Winston had to admit, no more greatly enlightened than before. "Why would Elanor suddenly decide to give up a healthy tree and move into one that's got maybe a week or two to live — if you can call standing in a bucket of sugar-water 'living.' What's in here that she doesn't have out there?"

Egon cleared his throat, faintly uncomfortable. "Ah..." He seemed inexplicably reluctant to voice this particular hypothesis, almost embarrassed. "At the risk of sounding maudlin, Winston, I'm afraid what she's after is *you*."

"Me?" He sounded both amused and horrified. "Why the heck would she — uh-oh." The answer occurred to him even before he finished thinking the question. "Don't tell me: She's got a crush on me 'cause I fixed that branch the vandals broke."

A sigh rustled from the tree, a cooing sound of adolescent delight that confirmed Zeddemore's worst fears.

"Precisely," Egon nodded, sympathetic. "All her interests seems to be centered on you, the decorations she threw off the tree were the ones the others put on it.... I'd say there's no doubt whatsoever."

The man who had been singled out for this dubious honor buried his face in his hands and moaned. "Oh, that's wonderful, that's just what I need: a teenage tree-nymph for a groupie."

Janine giggled, unable to help herself. "Oh, I don't know, Winston. I think it's kinda romantic."

He winced. "*You* might think so, but what will Lydia say?"

"I'd say it's terrible," was Ray's opinion. "If that *is* Elanor, we can't just let her stay here."

"Why not?" Peter wanted to know, his sense of humor tickled by the situation. "It might be fun, having a sticky spook around with a crush on someone besides me."

"You don't understand. If she stays in that tree, she won't *be* around long enough to have a crush on *anyone*."

"Sure she will. I know / wouldn't kick her out...."

"No, but Nature will. If she's moved into our Christmas tree and abandoned her linden, her life's bound up with this spruce, now, and she'll die when it does. Which means she's got about two weeks to live — maybe three, at the outside. And they won't be very healthy weeks, at that. This tree's pretty much dead already; we're just delaying the end, keeping it in that bucket."

He said it without the slightest trace of humor; the others reacted with varying degrees of dismay. "We can't let that happen," Janine said firmly, "even if she did bust up all the best ornaments."

"Yeah," Winston agreed with equal, if not greater, fervor. "I don't want to see her die, either — and she wouldn't be in this mess, if it wasn't for me. But how do we get rid of her?"

Egon considered the question briefly. "It's not a matter of getting rid of her," he finally ventured. "We can't just drive her out with the particle streams..."

"...not unless you want to break her heart," Ray added, "and dryads are so sensitive to emotions, that'd wind up killing her, too."

Peter made a thoroughly indecipherable face. "So what do we do, find some nice male dryad and have him come in and sweep her off her feet?"

"Hardly," Egon replied, "since 'male dryad' is a contradiction in terms. No, we — or, rather, *you*, Winston — have to persuade her to leave of her own free will while there's still time."

Zeddemore found that option acceptable. "And how do I do that?" he asked, quite reasonably, he thought.

Spengler, however, had no reasonable solution to offer. "I honestly don't know," he admitted regretfully.

That wasn't the answer Winston had been looking for. He turned to the next best source of such ideas, a note of pleading in his voice. "Ray?"

But Stantz, too, shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know, either. I've never dealt with a dryad before, only read about 'em."

This plethora of negativism drew a heavy and exasperated sigh from Peter, who was still a little miffed with their unexpected guest for bonking him with an ornament. "Well, isn't this just great?" he asked, his voice dripping sarcasm. "Here it is, almost one o'clock on Christmas Eve; we've got important guests coming in two hours, expecting to party, and what do we have for them? Nothing ready to eat or drink, a mess of sap on our floor and stairs, busted ornaments all over the place, a neurotic spud off sulking in who-knows-what corner, and a moonstruck dryad haunting our Christmas tree. I don't know about you guys, but this is *not* my idea of a way to start out the holidays on the right foot."

"Is it that late already?" Ray lamented, checking his watch. He groaned, seeing the time, which Venkman had undershot by ten minutes. "Oh, jeeze, Pete's right. We'd better get this place cleaned up and ready quick, or we're gonna have a lot of angry clients on our hands."

"But what about Elanor?" Winston demanded, squinting at the tree in an attempt to spot the elusive sprite. He didn't see her, but she saw him and giggled girlishly.

"She won't die right this minute," Stantz was certain. "We can deal with her after the party."

"Just make sure she doesn't climb down and start following you around," Peter warned. "Explaining Slimer to some of the guests'll be hard enough, and they *know* about him, already."

Zeddmore blinked at him, befuddled. "So how do I do that?"

The psychologist shrugged. "Talk to her. She's a woman, isn't she?"

"More like a girl," Egon reflected. "She came from an adolescent tree, after all."

"Whatever. Flatter her or something. Finish hanging up those ornaments and tell her how beautiful she is. That always works on my dates, keeps 'em quiet for hours."

"Yeah, and that's probably why most of 'em never go out with you twice," Janine sniffed critically. "They know a snow-job when they hear it."

He stuck out his tongue at her, doing absolutely nothing for the credibility of his advice. "Teenage girls are *all* impressionable," he stated emphatically. "Besides, if Winston finishes the job, maybe this time, the ornaments'll *stay* where we want 'em."

Seeing that he had no better idea of how to placate a dryad in love, Winston decided to take a chance and try Peter's recommendation. Steeling himself for the worst — talking to groupies always made him uncomfortable, and the fact that this one wasn't even human improved matters not one bit — he collected the sack with their most recent ornament purchase and went to do the dirty — or, come to think of it, not so dirty — deed.

Once he'd arrived at the foot of the tree, however, he found himself standing there staring at it with his mouth hanging open, feeling quite the fool. "Uh..." What did one say to a dryad, anyway, especially when they'd never been properly introduced? For all he knew, the sprite already had a name — which he didn't know — and would object to being called Elanor, though from the way she'd been giggling and carrying on, he suspected she wouldn't care *what* he called her, so long as the name came from his lips.

Moaning softly at the very thought, he surrendered to the inevitable and gave it his best shot. "Ah... Elanor?" he began tentatively, peering up into the branches to try to catch even a moment's glimpse of her. "I don't know if you're listening, but this is me, Winston."

Another sound of spritely pleasure shivered through the tree, making the remaining ornaments dance and sway. Well, he had her attention — at least he was fairly sure he did.

He cleared his throat and continued. "I can't see you, sweetheart..." *Oh, God*, he told himself the moment he'd said it, *that was a mistake*. "...but I just wanted to say — Egon, would you mind going somewhere else for a while? I think I'll do better if I don't have someone staring over my shoulder while I do this, watching me make a jerk of myself."

The bespectacled scientist — who was supposed to be upstairs taking his overdue medication but had lingered out of curiosity, hoping to get a look at the dryad — blinked at the darker man, his expression blank. "Was I staring?" he asked innocently. "I didn't intend to..."

"That's what you always say," Janine sighed. She finished cleaning off her desk and stepped out from behind it to herd the physicist upstairs. "C'mon, Egon," she scolded, "leave him alone. You can get a look at the dryad later

— *after* you've taken your medicine and gotten some rest. Remember, the doctor prescribed bed rest for at least four days, and you've spent more time out of it than it in, today...."

Her chiding and Spengler's subsequent defense were lost as they reached the top of the flight and turned onto the second floor. Winston waited until he was sure he was alone before continuing. "Anyway," he said, addressing the tree's unseen inhabitant while he hung the new ornaments, "I just wanted to tell you that I'm really flattered you like me..."

A thoroughly girlish sigh of rapture thrilled through the branches, sounding not unlike wind in the treetops. Zeddemore winced, but went on.

"...and I'm sure you must be very pretty, as dryads go, but we've got some real important people coming in a little while, and I don't think they'd understand you not being human an' all, so I'd really appreciate it if you'd just stay here 'til they're gone and not upset any of 'em. Do you understand?"

The giggly voice said no words Winston could comprehend; briefly, he worried that she might not understand his language, either. But suddenly, in the shadows of the boughs and needles right in front of him, he saw a pair of large and distinctly inhuman, though very pretty, golden-green eyes staring at him, like two glowing lights. He could see nothing of the creature to whom they belonged, but their expression alone said volumes, being a look he'd seen all too often before, in the eyes of barely pubescent female admirers: unquestioning and unalloyed affection. The sight of her eyes and the sound of the nymph's delighted coo convinced him that she'd understood enough of his pleas to comply with them. It also convinced him that this was one unasked-for situation he was going to thoroughly regret before the night was out.

Just as he was hanging the last of the ornaments, Ray and Peter came up from the basement with mops and buckets, prepared to deal with the sticky sap all over the stairs and garage floor. He went to give them a hand.

"Y'know," he told Stantz as he claimed a mop, carefully keeping his voice low in case Elanor was still listening, "I'm kinda worried that she won't behave herself. What if she doesn't understand English? How do we keep her from coming out in the middle of the party if she doesn't even know what I was asking her?"

Ray didn't seem at all concerned. "She may not understand your *words*, Winston, but I'm sure she caught your *intentions*."

Zeddemore grunted, skeptical. "I'm glad *you* can be so certain. I'm sure not. What makes you think she did?"

The occultist shrugged. "Like I said before, dryads are very sensitive to emotions; that's the main way they communicate. Most of 'em can pick up empathic emanations from the living things around them; some even sort of broadcast 'em back, as a defense mechanism. It's hard to hurt someone who's radiating really strong good feelings as you. Unless you were yelling at her, I'm sure she understood what you were trying to get across, even if she doesn't know any of the actual words. And if she really *does* have a crush on you, she'll do anything rather than make you unhappy with her."

Peter snorted softly from where he'd settled with a bucket and a brush, scrubbing sap-spots off the wooden stairs. "Yeah, and don't you wish Slimer was that eager to please? Maybe we ought to consider planting a tree here in the garage so we can keep Elanor and get rid of him."

Ray threw him a dirty look; from his reaction, Winston wasn't even aware Venkman had spoken. "So you're pretty sure she'll keep quiet?" he fretted.

"More than pretty sure," the occultist replied. "I'm positive. If you don't believe me, we can get a second opinion from Egon, or look it up in one of the guides...."

"No, I'll take your word for it. But I want you to know: I expect you experts to come up with the solution to this mess by the time the party's over, 'cause Lydia's coming to dinnertomorrow, and I am *not* gonna give my steady lady an explanation for why I've got a nymph hanging all over me as her Christmas present!"

When they were finished cleaning up the dryad's trail of sap and the remains of broken ornaments, the three men went directly to the kitchen to give Janine a hand preparing refreshments for the party. Egon had said something about helping out after he'd taken his medications and rested for a few minutes — climbing up and down the stairs several times in two hours had been more exercise than he'd had in days, and his lungs were still fairly congested — but even that short a time spent in a comfortably prone position was more than enough to send him back into a sound sleep that Janine forbade the others to disturb. They didn't argue, Ray and Winston because they thought Egon needed the rest far more than they needed his help, and Peter because he didn't want to run the risk of angering their client/guests by spreading flu germs onto the food they were about to be served.

They made fairly short work of it, in any case; the bulk of the preparation was complete fifteen minutes before their guests were due to arrive. Taking advantage of the time they had left, Ray and Janine cleaned up the mess they'd made in the kitchen while the others ferried the goodies downstairs. As part of the cleaning effort, Ray collected all the trash they'd accumulated and hauled it out to the garbage cans, scooting through the front doors rather than the back, that being the shortest route; it was cold outside and he didn't want to bother putting on his coat. Since the door latch was set to lock behind him (an instinctive precaution in this neighborhood), he left it ajar so he wouldn't have to fumble with his keys or bother the others to let him in again. He dumped the bags as fast as he could so that the door wouldn't be left hanging open for long, and was back inside in less than a minute.

That, however, was more than enough time for a car to go by and slosh the water in their ever-present puddle. Though it didn't hit Ray, who was in the midst of closing the cans at the time, it did wash all over the sidewalk and lap up to the doors themselves, letting a small amount of water inside. When he returned a few seconds later, he noticed the dampness on the floor but decided not to get upset about it. With that arm of the Atlantic waiting just outside, they'd likely see a lot more water tracked inside before their guests headed home. As he closed the door, however, he *did* hear a sound that was both oddly musical and distinctly disgruntled, like a proverbial babbling brook with a gripe against Mother Nature. He listened to it, but it stopped a moment later, so he chalked it up to being a new quirk of the water moving through the firehouse's old pipes and didn't give it a second thought.

But he *would* have if he'd noticed the new set of supernatural eyes — luminous blue, this time, not green — that had watched him enter before they slipped into a shadowy corner of the garage and disappeared.

After helping Winston set up a long folding table so that he and Peter could move the refreshments off Janine's desk and onto it, Ray was heading up to get the last of the stuff from the kitchen when he heard the sound of the front-door buzzer announcing the first guest's arrival. The receptionist was still in the kitchen, kneeling on the floor and peering into the cabinet under the sink. "Lose something?" the occultist asked pleasantly, in a good mood despite all that had happened to threaten the day's success.

She glanced up at him; he could see that she didn't share his positive spirits. "No," she grumbled. "First, I couldn't get any hot water to finish doing the dishes, then the blasted garbage disposal decided to give out. I think it's jammed, but I can't find anything blocking it from the inside, and the wrench for it isn't where it's supposed to be."

"Peter was probably using it to get olives out of the bottom of the jar again," Stantz postulated.

Janine wrinkled her nose. "That's disgusting."

Ray shrugged. "I think so, too, but that's what he always used back in college, and old habits die hard. He probably used up most of the hot water, too, taking his shower after cleaning off the stairs. Don't worry about it, Janine, we can take care of it later. The guests are starting to arrive."

She wasn't quite convinced that they'd get around to it after the party, and she found the thought of letting a disposal full of garbage sit all night long truly revolting, but it was their house, not hers, so she let it go. Sighing, she closed the cabinet doors and dimmed to her feet. "Is everything downstairs, now?"

"Everything but the ice, us, and Egon."

"Oh, no, not Egon," she said flatly, determined to be stubborn on this account. "He's still coughing pretty badly, and he'll never get better if you guys keep letting him run all over the place when he's supposed to be in bed."

Ray didn't quite share her adamant point of view. "Aw, c'mon, Janine," he cajoled, "it's Christmas Eve."

"Tough," she declared, crossing her arms in staunch defiance.

Conversely, he remained persuasive. "Don't be heartless. When you were a kid, didn't you ever have to spend Christmas in bed 'cause you were sick, while everyone around you was having a good time?"

Her stubborn posture remained unchanged, but she gave his question due consideration. Some of the hardness melted from her expression. "Well... yeah, I guess I did once or twice, and not all that long ago, either...."

"Then you know what it's like," he said, apparently pleased that she understood his position so well.

The sidelong glance the redhead threw at him was inarguably wry. "Yeah, and I also know just how much Egon *doesn't* enjoy big parties."

"But how's he supposed to learn if you won't let him come?"

"You're reaching, Ray. It's only one party, and these are clients, not friends or family..."

"...but it's for the business, and all of us should be there."

That was an admittedly telling argument. It nearly got to her, but she maintained her resolve at the last second. "The clients'll understand if we tell 'em he's sick."

Stantz snorted. "If we tell 'em *that*, they might go home instead, and then we'll be stuck with all this stuff on our hands. And we've been planning this for weeks. Peter and Winston would be so disappointed...." He gave her a look like that of a puppy whose feelings she had just mortally wounded.

She'd never been any good at winning arguments with this particular employer. Ray was too nice and too sincere for her to withstand for long, especially when he used the pathetic puppy tactic. She caved in. "All right, all right, I get the point! But everyone isn't here yet. How about if we compromise and let him sleep until all the guests've arrived?"

That sounded good to Ray. "Fine with me," he agreed as they collected the last of the party supplies and headed downstairs.

"By the way," the secretary's voice could be heard saying just before they moved out of earshot, "have you seen the knife I was using to cut the fruitcake? Or did Peter need something to use for an emergency screwdriver...?"

As her words faded into the distance, in the kitchen behind them, one of the cabinet doors Janine had closed creaked open just wide enough to permit something small to slip out. Briefly, the same pair of glowing blue eyes that had watched Ray's entrance watched their departure, then winked out of sight. A sound like the laughing of running water echoed softly in the kitchen, then vanished with a gurgle, as if it had fled down the drain.

"We've got a little bit of a problem," Winston informed Ray a short while later, when slightly more than half their guests had arrived.

From the man's somber tone, Stantz was expecting something of apocalyptic proportions. "What is it? A leak in the containment unit? Eleanor crawling out and making trouble? We're out of ice already?"

Zeddemore quickly shook his head. "No, nothing like that. We're having some trouble with the plumbing in the back bathroom. Mrs. Arbogast went to wash her hands, and the spray from the faucet got her right in the stomach. Pete says there's something wrong with the chain on the float valve, too; it keeps coming loose and the tank just keeps runnin' an' runnin'."

"Did you check it out?"

"Not me, but Peter did, and he says he can't figure out what to do about it."

The occultist made a softly disparaging sound. "Doesn't surprise me. He never was any good with anything even remotely mechanical." He sighed. "I suppose I could go have a quick look at it, but if it's something I can't fix in a few minutes, let's wait and call a plumber. I don't want to miss out on the party."

"Good idea. I'll have the guests use the second floor bathroom 'til you're done."

But the problems Winston had mentioned seemed to have disappeared on their own, or so Ray discovered when he went to investigate. The faucet was performing as it should, sending water straight down into the basin without annoying side-sprays, and the float valve was working perfectly. Puzzled only for a few moments, Ray dismissed the incidents as one-time flukes, and went to tell Winston that everything was fine.

Zeddemore, it turned out, was having a few minor troubles of his own. Though she had behaved herself admirably thus far, Elanor had apparently considered an occasional peering-out through the branches acceptable within the parameters of Winston's request, and the glowing eyes had not gone unnoticed by several of the sharper-eyed guests.

"I think it's really interesting," one of their prettier female visitors, a young and buxom blonde, was telling Peter as she stood and admired the tree (a genuine feat, considering her IQ and the fact that she was doing several things at once: standing, talking, and admiring). "Making it look like there're glowing eyes looking out at us from the tree...." She breathed deeply in appreciation, a truly impressive sight. "Have you guys ever considered going into special effects? I'll bet you could make a lot of money, working for Hollywood."

"Well, I think it's absolutely unnerving, not to mention inappropriate," the less attractive and much older Mrs. Arbogast sniffed, still miffed from her mishap in the bathroom and inclined to find fault because of it. "Things like that belong at Hallowe'en parties, not Christmas affairs, and that coughing-noise part of the effect is simply *ghastly*. Not keeping in the Christmas spirit at all, I should say. No, not at all." She raked the tree with a jaundiced eye, wrinkling her already wrinkled nose at it in lofty disdain.

Winston caught the ornament Elanor hurled at her just in time and in such a fashion that everyone looking thought he'd merely saved it from an untimely slip off an upper branch. He seemed less interested in this breach of the dryad's unspoken promise than in the society matron's comments. "Coughing?" he echoed, suddenly worried. "What coughing?"

Mrs. Arbogast turned her haughty eye on him. "Oh, come now, Mister Zeddemore, there's no need to be coy. Why you can hear it as plain as the opening bell on Wall Street, if you stand anywhere near it. That horrible, awful *wheezing* sound, like someone on the verge of pulmonary collapse. You must've known that it would sound like that — or weren't you in on the joke?" Her accusing eye changed direction and stabbed at Peter. "I shouldn't be surprised, were that the case."

Venkman refused to be intimidated, or pinned with the rap. "It's nothing anyone did on purpose, Mrs. Arbogast," he assured her with a pasted-on smile, trying his best to be polite, even though he wanted to strangle her with the poor, dead, mothball-smelly foxes she was wearing around her shoulders, their little glass eyes giving him the crawls every time he looked at her. "It's probably just Slimer, hiding in the branches and pulling one of his little jokes. He's been misbehaving all day, you know, and I'm sure he thinks he's getting even with us for yelling at him." He patted the matron's shoulder solicitously (suppressing the shudder he felt upon touching the dead foxes), an Oscar worthy feat, considering how much he loathed the woman. "Just ignore him, and I'm sure he'll go away."

Mrs. Arbogast remained doubtful, but the psychologist had her sufficiently charmed so that she bought his line and allowed him to lead her away from the tree to the punch bowl, the blonde bimbo in their wake. When they were gone and the crowd studying the tree had dispersed, Winston leaned closer to it, straining to hear if what she'd said was true, or if she'd just been hearing echoes of Egon coughing and sneezing two floors above. Sure enough, there was a distinct wheezing sound coming from amid the branches, and none too quietly, at that. He'd heard breathing that unhealthy only once before in his life, when he'd gone to visit his tuberculosis-stricken grandfather shortly before he'd died. His face creased in a frown; he stepped back and studied the glittering tree, concerned.

"Do you think Mrs. Arbogast is right?" Janine asked quietly as she came up behind him, having heard the entire exchange. "Is Elanor really sick?"

Winston wanted to say no, but he honestly didn't know what to say. "I don't know. I don't know anything about dryads, 'cept what Egon and Ray told us earlier. Maybe this has something to do with this being a cut tree she's in; maybe she's caught something like Egon's flu, and it's killing her. I just don't know — but I'm worried. I didn't ask for her attention, but I can't just stand here and watch her die, either."

Janine nodded, sympathetic. "Maybe you should have Ray take a reading. It might tell us something useful."

He sighed heavily. "Maybe, but right now, he's busy with the plumbing again. Officer Stahowiak just got a faceful of water in the back bathroom — he's mad as a wet hen, and now the second floor john's leaking, too."

"Great," she groaned. "This dump's got a wonderful sense of timing, y'know? It couldn't wait until *after* Christmas to start falling apart; it has to do it right in the middle of a party — and on Christmas Eve, when any plumber'll charge triple, *if* you can find one willing to make the house call." She studied the brightly lit tree for a bit, then let loose the breath she'd been half-holding. "Well, I was gonna wait a little longer, but I guess I can go wake up Egon and have him come down now. He'd at least know what he's doing, which is more than I can say for Doctor Venkman."

The face Winston turned her was hopeful. "You don't mind...?"

She smiled. "Not for you, Winston. Just don't let loverboy there—" Her gaze flicked toward Peter and the well-endowed blonde to whom he'd returned his undivided attention. "—elope with his lady of the hour until I get back."

Ray, in the meantime, had returned his attention to their recalcitrant plumbing, the errant bathroom sink in particular. Again, when he examined the spout, he found no evidence of a malfunction that could have caused these repeated and untimely squirts. He removed the aerator and screen, checked them for any mineral deposits or other blockages that might've been responsible, found none, and was about to replace the fixtures when some small impulse prompted him to look up the faucet itself, just in case. A moment later, he realized what a supremely stupid act it was, for the second his eye was under the spout, cold water gushed out, flooding his entire face.

Gasping and sputtering for breath, he pulled back, certain he must've turned it on accidentally by catching his sleeve on one of the knobs or some such — but this, too, was disproved when the flow of water stopped the instant he moved back.

Briefly, he entertained the notion of a deliberate prank; the timing and duration of the water's release had been too good to be mere coincidence. He dismissed it almost as soon as he thought it when he realized that, on the floor above, someone had just flushed the toilet, which could have easily caused the mishap by changing the pressure and forcing out water trapped in the pipe. "Must be a water-pressure problem," the occultist muttered to himself as he replaced the screen and aerator. "Maybe I should check the pipes and heater in the basement." That certainly seemed a more mature plan of action than lowering accusations of practical joking against Peter in front of their guests, so, after tightening the fixtures and wiping off his face, that was exactly what he did.

While Ray was investigating the water problem, Janine left Peter and Winston to hold the fort at the party and went up to rouse their absent fourth partner. Egon was still thoroughly asleep when she arrived, curled up on his bed with a blanket half pulled over him and his glasses tangled loosely in the fingers of one hand, as if he'd already been mostly asleep when he'd taken them off and hadn't had the strength to put them where they belonged on the nightstand. She stood there staring at him for more than a full minute, reluctant to disturb him. He'd looked pretty exhausted when he'd come up to take his medicines, and she'd been able to hear distant bouts of coughing that had nothing to do with Elanor all afternoon. He really needed to rest more than he needed to party — but as Ray had said, this was his business as well as his partners'. She remembered Elanor and how very sickly she'd sounded and, with a sigh, did what had to be done.

"Egon," she said, not very loudly, poking his shoulder gently to waken him. The method was ineffectual; not only did he continue sleeping, he showed not the slightest reaction.

"Egon," she repeated, raising the volume of her voice and the strength of her prod by a notch. This time, he muttered incoherently, coughed slightly, wrapped himself more tightly in the blanket, and turned over so that he was now facing away from her.

Frustrated, Janine frowned at him for a moment or two, then grabbed the top hem of the coverlet and, tossing aside any considerations of loving gentility, ripped it off him, shook him — hard — and fairly bellowed, "Egon! Did you hear me? *WAKE UP!*"

Her shout could have roused sound sleepers in California. Being significantly closer, the physicist sat bolt upright, startling the receptionist and inadvertently sending his glasses flying. The latter hit the polished wooden floor and skidded for some distance until they came to rest under Winston's bed. "Wha—what is it?" he asked, disoriented as he squinted into the faintly lit room about him. "What's going on?"

Her wits back under control, Janine went to retrieve the lost spectacles, then returned them to their owner. "Y'know," she observed, tongue clicking, "for someone who didn't think he needed the rest, you were sure out of it. Waking the dead would've been as easy — easier."

He slipped the glasses onto his nose without even thinking about it, then immediately took them off again, noticing even in the dimness that they were smudged. "Is that all you woke me up for, to criticize my sleep habits?" He sounded ever so slightly grumpy.

Between his unexpectedly rude awakening and his illness, she couldn't blame him for being less than perfectly pleased, so she relented. "No, and I'm sorry I yelled. If it were up to me, I wouldn't've made you wake up until you were good and ready, but Winston needs you downstairs right away. There's trouble with Elanor."

He sniffled softly, wiping the lenses with a corner of the topsheet. "Did she start undecorating things again?"

"Not quite. Mrs. Arbogast heard the tree wheezing, and Winston thinks it might be Elanor—"

"Mrs. Arbogast?" the scientist interrupted. "Don't tell me the guests've started arriving."

She shrugged cooperatively. "Okay, I won't, if that's what you want. They've all been here for over two hours, anyway."

"They've *what?*" He held his half-cleaned glasses in front of his eyes so that he could squint at the illuminated clock on Peter's nightstand. When he saw the time, he made a quietly surprised sound. "Have I really been asleep all this time?"

"You bet. And I would've let you sleep straight through the night, but it *is* your party, too, so you really ought to be there for at least a few minutes. Some of the guests have been asking where you are."

He returned his spectacles to their usual perch on his long nose, which was currently a major participant in his thoughtful frown. "Can't the other guys handle it without me?" he asked rather plaintively around a series of deep coughs. "They enjoy these things a lot more than I do...."

"Maybe, but those clients down there aren't just theirs, y'know. The invitations they got were from the *Ghostbusters*, not from Venkman, Stantz, and Zeddemore. You've got obligations, and—" She waggled a finger at him. "—it won't hurt you to do things like the rest of us, once in a while."

There was distinct skepticism in the way he raised an eyebrow at her. "I thought you were the one who's been telling me all day that I'm too sick to get out of bed."

She harrumphed softly, deftly avoiding the guilt trap he was laying for her. "I *still* think so — you sound terrible, and you look like you're still running a fever — but if you're well enough to put up this much of a fight to get out of going to the party, you're well enough to come down and at least put in a token appearance. Besides, it's not just a social thing. Winston needs you."

"Why, what happened?" he asked, still not quite willing to concede the argument, but sufficiently interested in the situation to ask. "Has Elanor been misbehaving in front of the guests?"

Her inflections and expression both turned somber. "Worse than that. We think the wheezing Mrs. Arbogast heard was her. She sounds real sick, Egon, and Winston's worried that she's dying. Would you mind coming down and taking a few discreet readings, just to be sure?"

Spengler weighed his personal curiosity about the dryad and her condition versus his general disinclination toward attending parties and the heavy congestion in his head and chest. "Why don't you ask Ray?" he ventured as an alternative. "He's perfectly capable."

"True, but he's busy trying to fix a glitch with the downstairs plumbing. It's been giving us trouble all afternoon. And before you even think it, don't suggest that we ask Peter to do it. He wouldn't know the meaning of the word *discreet* if the ghost of Daniel Webster came and hit him over the head with a twenty-ton dictionary."

"I wasn't about to," he assured her. He contemplated things a bit more, then sighed in surrender. "All right, I suppose I could come, at least long enough to take some readings. Give me a few minutes to clean up and get dressed first."

She was willing to allow him that much of a delay. "Need any help?"

The question won her the single most arch look she had ever had the privilege of seeing, even in her years of working with the terminally puckish Venkman; the tone of the accompanying remark matched it flawlessly. "I may be sick, Janine, but I'm *not* invalid. I've been dressing myself for years now, thank you, and I don't think a few days of the flu is quite enough to make me forget how it's done. I'll be there as soon as I'm done, I promise."

She flushed bright red with embarrassment. "Sorry," was her brief and uncomfortable apology. "I'll see you downstairs, then." And with that, she fled, before she could find new and more exciting ways of putting her foot in her mouth.

After puttering around in the basement for a good fifteen to twenty minutes with no success whatsoever, Ray finally reached the conclusion that, whatever the actual problem, it was either beyond his amateur plumber's ability to spot, or was being caused by something outside the firehouse — a fluke in the local water pressure, perhaps due to a fire in the area or the break of a main pipe. He was, in fact, disposed to believe that it might even have something to do with cold weather influencing that blasted leaky hydrant. In any case, he reasoned that it was nothing within his power to correct, so he gave up the quest and headed back to the party.

While he was in the process of closing up his plumber's shop for the evening, on the third floor, Egon had elected to shower before exposing himself to the scrutiny of their guests. More than three days spent in bed with both a fever and a dripping nose was enough to make anyone feel terminally grungy and socially unacceptable, and he was more fastidious than most. Leaving the water to run and hopefully reach a more comfortable temperature than the ice water that had first come out of the tap, he went to fetch a towel from the linen closet. He could hear the familiar noise of running water singing against porcelain all the way down the corridor, but as he headed back, the sound stopped.

He found this unexpected turn of events singularly puzzling. Someone couldn't have shut it off during his brief absence; the corridor being as short as it was, he could have seen if anyone had entered the bathroom. Then, he recalled Janine's mention of plumbing difficulties; perhaps this was somehow connected. If Ray had shut off the main water to fix a broken pipe.... But then again, Stantz was too polite to do something like that without warning people, and he was even less likely to launch into such an involved project right in the middle of a party, with guests in the house.

All these conclusions were perfectly logical; they also left the physicist with no obvious explanation for what had happened.

Mildly annoyed — he hated being caught without *some* sort of hypothesis to explain even such a mundanely trivial event — he did the only thing left to do: He investigated.

The tub, he found, was full almost to overflowing, in spite of the fact that he hadn't capped the drain before leaving. In fact, he could see for himself that the drain was still open — yet the water wasn't escaping through it. His

first suspicion was that it had become clogged and whoever had been responsible hadn't mentioned it to anyone else, but that still didn't explain how or why the water had stopped running — especially when he noticed that the knobs were just as he'd left them. Now quite curious indeed, the scientist leaned over the tub, on knee bent to steady himself on the rim; watching the spout for any sign of change, he reached out to turn one of the valves—

—and in the next second found himself underwater, face-first and sprawled lengthwise in the over-full tub. And not through his own clumsiness, either. He had definitely felt someone push him at the small of his back.

Coughing, sputtering, and hampered by the weight of his now-wet nightshirt, Egon fought his way up and into a position in which he could breathe again. Still in the tub, he turned over, furious, to confront the wiseacre who'd done it. "Very funny, whoever you are." He coughed out the words along with the liquid he'd accidentally inhaled. He blinked the excess dampness from his eyes so that he could identify his harasser. His eyes focused, though blurrily, since his glasses were wet. "What do you think you're—" He choked — but this time, not on water.

Less than six inches from his nose was a sliver of something metal, long and pointed with a wickedly serrated edge — and clearly aimed at him. Beyond it lay its wielder's eyes: huge, blue, inhuman, glowing, and narrowed with an anger as obviously meant for him as the unspoken threat in the blade.

"Mrrgraacch," it snarled.

About the time Ray came up from the basement ready to report his failure, Peter briefly left the blonde object of his fascination and approached him with news that rendered it inconsequential. The facilities, it seemed, had stopped acting up. Not a single fluke in the plumbing had been noticed while Ray was tinkering in the basement; whatever unknown agent had caused it had apparently corrected itself, so all was once again right with the world. The occultist wasn't quite convinced that life could be this simple, not to mention this kind, but after contemplating the alternative — finding a real plumber on Christmas Eve — he was perfectly willing to accept the possibility of such great good fortune.

"How's Elanor doing?" he asked Winston after his short chat with Venkman, having kept tabs on that sticky situation from the first.

Zeddemore shrugged, casting the tree a worried look. "Not good. I really wish I knew what's wrong with her. I've had trucks with healthier sounding carburetors, and none of them lasted long, either."

Stantz studied the tree, but it looked no different now than it had before. "Have you tried taking readings? That could tell you a lot, if her PKE flux is off."

The dark head shook. "I wouldn't know what to look for. Egon was supposed to come down and take a shot at it, but I haven't seen hide nor hair of him since Janine went to wake him up."

The receptionist, who'd been listening to them surreptitiously while collecting discarded paper cups, sniffed. "He promised he'd be down after he got cleaned up," she informed them. "You've just gotta give him a little time."

Winston's expression twisted with doubt. "That was half an hour ago. If he was Peter, I wouldn't expect him down for another twenty minutes at least, but...."

"He promised," she insisted.

"Maybe," Ray agreed, "but did you make sure he was actually out of the bed before you left?"

She blinked, perplexed. "Well... no...."

He laughed softly. "Then I'll lay you odds he caved in and went right back to sleep. Oh, don't bother going after him," he told the woman when she looked ready to march back up the stairs and drag the physicist down by his heels. "He doesn't usually ignore his promises, either, so if he *did* fall asleep again, chances are he really needs it. Let 'im rest. I can take care of it."

"Just make sure you do it quietly," Winston suggested, deliberately keeping his voice low so that it wouldn't carry to any of their guests. "Mrs. Arbogast nearly threw a fit, thinking we did this on purpose, and if I hadn't caught it in time, she would've gotten an ornament smack in the face, courtesy of our little friend in there."

The occultist chuckled, finding the image of the stuffy society matron getting beamed by a lovesick dryad perversely amusing. "Well, at least we know she's got enough energy left to defend herself."

"*Had* enough energy," Zeddemore corrected, worried. "That was forty-five minutes ago, and she's been sounding worse every second."

When he managed to slip behind the tree with a PKE meter, unnoticed, Ray discovered that his black colleague was not exaggerating. The sounds that had been only vague impressions of wheezing a while back were now distinctly audible, an unhealthy rasping that rivaled the worst nights of Egon's current bout with the flu. He took the readings once, took them again, then took them a third time just to be sure he hadn't made any mistakes. The information he received was the same each time, and it was far from reassuring.

"I don't know if you can really call it 'dying,'" he informed Winston when he was done, having drawn him into the marginal privacy of Peter's office. "Supernatural creatures like Elanor don't really 'live,' at least not by our definitions. But her energy levels *are* fading, and fading fast."

"Why?" Zeddemore wanted to know, his concern showing more than ever. "Or couldn't the meter tell you that?"

"Not specifically," Ray admitted, "but it's..." He hesitated, thinking. "Remember how I told you dryads communicate by emotions, how they're highly empathic?"

"Yeah...."

"Well, I think the reason she's fading so quickly is because of all these people in here." He made an expansive gesture with one hand, indicating their guests. "Negative emotions tend to weaken empaths, and I'm sure not all the emotions flying around in here are positive ones. Just look at Mrs. Arbogast. She's pretty sour even under the best of circumstances, and even *I* can feel how cranky she is right now, all the way across the room. Blocking out the bad emotions is probably sapping Elanor's strength faster'n she can replace it without a living tree to sustain her."

Winston's eyes widened with horror. "Do you mean... our *party* here is responsible for Elanor gettin' sick?"

Stantz nodded. "You've got it."

For a long minute, the dark Ghostbuster simply stared at his friend, speechless; then, he shook his head in awful wonder. "Man, I've heard of killer parties before, but this is ridiculous! Isn't there anything we can do?"

"Yes," Ray was certain. "At the worst, we can tell everyone to leave, and that'd probably stop her deterioration, or slow it down a lot. The *best* scenario would be to get her out of here, convince her to go back to her linden. But," he added, sighing, "since none of us know how to *do* that, and we can't very well kick out our *clients*, not after we went and invited them, we'll just have to wait 'til they're gone and hope for the best. Just keep Mrs. Arbogast and anyone else with an attitude away from the tree, and try to think lots of positive thoughts. It should help."

Winston found their options no more appealing than Ray, but he, too, recognized the occultist's suggestions as the only viable course of action they could pursue.

While Zeddemore was cursing the lack of choices offered by their current situation, up in the third floor bath, Egon was studying the creature holding him at knife-point. It was an attractive thing, humanoid in shape, fair of face, platinum haired, with four fingers, immense blue eyes, and sharply pointed ears. It was dressed in a short toga-like affair of supple blue and silver scales, and its gender — male — was not in question, even though it stood less than two feet high. How it had managed to topple the physicist, who was easily more than three times its height, was an object lesson in applied gravitics. It now stood on the rim of the tub, holding its weapon — which Egon recognized as

one of their own kitchen knives — in such an aggressive manner, Spengler had no doubt it would not hesitate to use it on him, if prompted.

"Aangrrareetookh," it said menacingly, poking the blade at its captive.

The scientist's eyes nearly crossed, trying to follow the knife's tip. "I don't suppose it would do any good to ask you to point that thing elsewhere," he said drolly. In answer, the creature snarled and bared its teeth at him, but the knife did not waver. Egon sighed. "No, I didn't think it would."

His captor tilted its head forward slightly, peering at the human, then rattled out another string of seeming gibberish, which Egon understood no better than it appeared to understand English. When it was done with its tirade, they remained as they were for several minutes, a frozen tableau — until the physicist started to sneeze.

The creature took this outburst as some sort of threat and began chattering furiously, brandishing its weapon as it berated the man. Its threats and scoldings were useless. The water in the tub had been cool to begin with, and sitting chest-deep in it in soaked clothing was doing Egon's already poor condition no good whatsoever. He continued sneezing and coughing, the creature continued snarling, and when the fit had passed, the human decided that enough was enough. If he couldn't get the better of a twenty-inch-high whatever-it-was without getting himself seriously injured or killed, he'd deserve whatever he got.

"I've had quite enough of this — what?" he began, intending to rise — but the instant he tried to push himself to his feet, he found that he could not. The water, which had seemed so innocuous only moments ago, had suddenly taken on the binding properties of solid rock. Still cold and damp and ever-so-clammy, it nonetheless held him there as securely as set concrete, and, try as he might, he could not move.

His next impulse was to shout for help, but the moment he took the deep breath needed to make his voice carry far enough to be heard on the ground floor, a glob of water detached itself from the pool in the tub and hit him in the face, silencing him into a choking sputter. When he could, he tried again, with the same results.

Very suspicious now, the scientist looked up at his captor, who had withdrawn its weapon and was casually watching him with the smuggest grin in all creation. There was no doubt at all as to who was responsible for Egon's otherwise inexplicable predicament. It snickered.

"Very funny," he told the thing sourly, then sneezed.

It was somewhere in the vicinity of ten o'clock before the last of their guests said goodbye; even Janine's clever tactic of pretending they'd run out of refreshments had had little effect in accelerating the departure of those who had no place better to go on Christmas Eve. Peter's personal interest had waned somewhere around seven, when his blonde lady-of-the-hour had gone home. After spending fifteen minutes or so trying (unsuccessfully) to impress one of the prettier but more stand-offish women still in attendance (and almost getting himself in trouble when her burly date noticed his attentions), he'd decided the time had come to execute a strategic retreat to the privacy of their living quarters, where he'd be safe not only from brutes like her linebacker boyfriend, but also from getting roped into helping the others clean up. He had been in the process of excusing himself when Janine caught him and blocked his retreat, leaving him no option but to stay.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," he said when he'd closed and latched the doors behind the last of their departing guests. "I don't know about you guys, but I think if we decide to do this again next year, we ought to make an effort to find a better grade of clients. If it hadn't been for Lisa, I would've been bored out of my mind."

"You can't go out and pick your customers in a business like this, Peter," Ray pointed out as he dumped an armful of used paper-goods into the trash bag Janine was holding. "Ghosts go where they want, and we'd go bankrupt if we took jobs only from interesting people."

The psychologist harrumphed. "Then maybe next year, we shouldn't invite all of 'em at once. What the heck are you *doing*, Winston?" he asked of his darkest partner, who'd suddenly stuck his head among the spruce branches. "Burying your head like an ostrich won't make this mess go away."

"I'm listening," Zeddemore's voice floated back.

"For what? To hear sleigh bells in the snow?"

"No. I could hear Elanor real clearly, before — but now, I'm not hearing her at all." He pulled back to eye the entire tree, his features set in an expression of deep concern.

Curious, Janine cocked an ear. "He's right," she confirmed. "I'm not hearing anything, either." She paled as a horrible thought occurred to her. "You don't think she's...?"

"One way to find out," Ray answered grimly. He trashed his newest load of empty cups and crumpled napkins and went to get the PKE meter he'd left in a drawer of the reception desk. The moment he turned it on, the others could tell that the signals it was receiving were weak. "She's not dead," he reported, to everyone's relief. "But she'd not doing very well, either." He glanced at the tree, frowning. "There's got to be a way to get her out of there, to make her separate from the host-tree. If we could make her show herself — all of her, not just her eyes — maybe that'd stop the deterioration long enough for us to find a way to convince her that she doesn't belong here."

A faint moaning sound, almost like a shiver, ran the height of tall spruce. "Yeah," Winston agreed, "but first we've gotta coax her into coming out. How the heck do we do *that*?"

"Isn't there anything in one of your books that'd tell you how to do it?" Janine asked helpfully. "They showed you how to talk to trolls; maybe they'd show you how to talk to a dryad."

The three men looked at one another, then shrugged. "It's worth a shot," Ray conceded. "Tobin's'd probably have something, or better still, *The Handbook of Faery*, if we can find it. I haven't seen our copy around in weeks...."

"That big, heavy thing with the picture of naked nymph on the cover?" Peter asked, getting an immediate nod of confirmation. "I've seen it. Egon's been using it to press one of his fungus specimens. It's been sitting in the upstairs lab since Thanksgiving."

"It figures," Janine said, shaking her head.

"No respect for books," Ray affirmed.

"Remember, print is dead, according to Egon," Peter noted with a shrug. "Even if he *does* have one of the biggest libraries in the city."

"Well, don't just sit there, Venkman," Winston admonished. "You know where it is; go get it! The sooner we figure out how to do this, the sooner Elanor'll get better."

The occultist coughed, an uneasy sound. "Uh... y'know, she might not *get* better, Winston. Dryads are pretty delicate creatures. If she's too far gone...."

Zeddemore's stern scowl silenced him. "I don't wanna hear it. It's my fault she's here in the first place, and by God, she's *gonna* get better! Now, are you gonna get movin', Pete, or do I have to drag you up there myself?"

Peter wasn't stupid; he moved.

Rather than risk upsetting Winston even more by dawdling, Venkman sprinted up the stairs to the third floor, huffing and panting by the time he reached the door to their main laboratory. He found the book, removed the flattened cross-section of some strange purple mushroom from beneath it, and was about to head to their bedroom and the fastest way back down — the firepole — when he heard sounds coming from the bathroom that his own heavy breathing had masked, 'til now: coughing and sneezing that sounded worse than Elanor had at the height of the party. He had no doubt who it was, having gotten thoroughly familiar with that particular brand of wheezing over the last few days. Though he was sorely tempted to ignore it, there was a particularly unhealthy quality to the sound that he found almost as worrisome as Winston's concerns for Elanor. Telling himself that he was being a chump, he sighed and changed course for the bathroom.

"Hey, Egon," he called as he approached the open door, "are you all—"

He stepped into the frame and saw the angry little humanoid holding its weapon to the physicist's throat.

"—right?"

The thing heard him, looked up, and snarled. In response, water shot up from the puddles on the floor and rocketed straight toward Venkman.

"Holy—!" the startled psychologist exclaimed, dropping flat on his stomach to avoid the unexpected assault.

"My feelings exactly," Spengler commented drolly after a particularly prodigious sneeze.

A second water-barrage came flying Peter's way; he scrambled to one side of the door, attempting to avoid it. It caught one lagging foot, giving the impudent Ghostbuster a thorough soaker.

"What the heck *is* that thing?" he demanded, ducking once more when an imprudent peek around the jamb prompted a third assault.

Considering that he was trapped in a tubful of cold water which was aggravating his already aggrieved condition, Egon was amazingly calm. "I'm not entirely sure," he replied to his partner's question, able to speak without fear of losing his nose while the creature's attention was focused elsewhere, "but I do have my suspicions. Undoubtedly, what we're dealing with here is some sort of water elemental, though I haven't a clue as to his specific type, nor what he's doing here."

Peter snorted. "I can make a couple of good guesses — like he's been getting his jollies messing up our plumbing all afternoon." The sprite let loose with a string of unintelligible invective, almost as if he'd understood Venkman's deprecating remark. "Better question is, why are you sitting there in a tubful of water with your clothes on?"

"It wasn't my idea, believe me."

Cautiously, the psychologist peered around the jamb; the almost immediate launch of another water-ball convinced him that the creature was still watching him. "Well, he's small; can't you jump the thing while his back's turned?"

Egon sighed. "Unfortunately, no. Aside from his apparent willingness to use that knife he's flailing around, he seems to have certain supernatural controls over water. I can't move my arms or legs. In fact, I'd have an easier time scratching my way out of solid ice with a toothpick — and a more comfortable time of it, too," he added as an unpleasant afterthought.

This time, the psychologist's snort was more closely akin to a laugh. "What'd you do, step on the little critter and get him mad at you?"

If he'd been the sort, the physicist would've been tempted to stick out his tongue at his beyond-sight colleague. "As far as I know, I didn't do *anything*. He pushed me into the water, stuck that knife in my face, and has been keeping me here for the last four hours."

"Yeah, but why?" Peter asked — logically, he thought.

"I can't say for certain," Egon admitted after a moment's hesitation to consider his answer (and sneeze), "but I do believe our little friend here is trying to hold me hostage."

Surprised, Venkman took another quick look around the jamb, dodged still another water-missile, then blinked. "Why?"

His partner's sigh was more than slightly exasperated. "I've already told you, I don't know. And if you'd be good enough to quit standing there asking questions like a two-year-old, perhaps we can find an answer."

Peter grimaced at the crack about two-year-olds, but made no greater issue of it. "Do you want me to go get Ray and Winston? We could always get our equipment and try blasting the sucker—"

"Not with me trapped in here, you won't! Just go tell them what's happened, and see if you can find something in one of our texts to pinpoint what this fellow is. Once we know that, maybe we can find a way to communicate with him."

"Communicate," Peter grumbled with a shake of his head, having heard much the same story downstairs. "If you ask me, I say the best way to communicate with these little pests is with the business end of a proton pack."

"No one asked you," Spengler replied bluntly, coughing. "Just do it, before I die of pneumonia!"

Peter did as asked, but it wasn't enough to convince Winston to leave the ground floor.

"What about Elanor?" he demanded, not unexpectedly. "We can't leave her to die just 'cause some other supernatural nuisance has moved into our plumbing!"

Peter was willing to humor him. "Okay," he said puckishly while Ray dove into the book he'd brought. "You go tell that to Egon. I'm sure he won't mind sitting in all that cold water with a knife at his throat until we get this other little problem cleared up. But if he has a relapse or something, I'm not taking the blame!"

His remark had the desired effect; Zeddemore relented.

"I think I've got it identified," Ray told his captive friend once they'd adjourned to the third floor, all keeping to the corridor walls so as to avoid the belligerent water sprite's wrath. "It's a *fossegrim*, a spirit that inhabits waterfalls and running streams, at least according to old Scandinavian legends."

"Waterfalls?" Winston echoed, perplexed. "There aren't any waterfalls around here...."

"No," Peter granted, "but there's plenty of running water. The local main runs right down the middle of the street, remember?"

"He's kinda cute, but — hey, that's the knife I was looking for earlier!" Janine interjected, having managed a quick glance into the bathroom without retaliation. "Are those things supposed to be thieves, too?"

Venkman's nose wrinkled. "Wouldn't surprise me."

Sudden inspiration hit Ray. "Hey, Egon," he called, ignoring the irrelevant conversation, "isn't your family Scandinavian?"

"My mother's side, yes," the hostage scientist confirmed around a series of lung-wrenching coughs. "Why?"

"Well, I was thinking maybe this *fossegrim*'d understand one of the Scandinavian languages, seeing how his people originally came from that part of the world. Don't you speak Finnish or Norwegian or something?"

"Norwegian and Swedish. But I'm not sure that would work. Whatever he's talking doesn't sound like anything I've ever heard before."

"What've you got to lose?" Peter put in quite reasonably. "Cept your good health, if you keep sitting in that ice water bath much longer...."

His point was well taken. After Egon made several failed attempts to get the sprite's attention using Swedish, he switched to Norwegian and finally received a response. The creature turned away from his single-minded observation of the door to regard his near-forgotten captive with wary curiosity. He appeared to be listening to whatever Spengler was saying, though from his lack of reply, it was difficult to tell if the critter actually understood him.

"That's a step in the right direction, anyway," Ray approved, now able to peer into the washroom without fear of instant inundation. "Why don't you ask him why the heck he's been playing games with our plumbing?"

Egon relayed the requested query, and the *fossegrim* finally answered, using words distinctly different from the tongue in which he'd been snarling at them. After a number of back-and-forth exchanges, the physicist glanced at his colleagues, frowning faintly. "I'm not really sure I'm understanding this correctly," he confessed. "He's speaking in a very old dialect with other, stranger words thrown in, too. But as near as I can figure, he says he's from the little falling water, and is accusing *me* of stealing something from him."

Venkman clicked his tongue. "For shame, Egon," he scolded, head shaking but grinning. "Didn't your mother ever teach you that stealing's a no-no?"

Spengler's frown became more pronounced, not at all in the mood for teasing, however amiable. "Very funny. For your information, I haven't the slightest idea what he's talking about."

"What does he think you stole?" Winston asked, curious in spite of himself.

Egon shrugged as best he could. "I'm not sure. That's one of the strange words I can't understand, and he doesn't seem inclined to provide any clearer illumination."

"Great," Ray groaned. "Maybe you *should* let us use the accelerators on him. Even if we can't trap him, we might at least let him know we can be threatening, too."

"You can't!" Janine objected without hesitation. "In a room that small, one wrong shot could fry both of them!"

"She's got a point," Winston confessed. "Are you *sure* you don't know what he wants, Egon? Maybe it's got something to do with a job we had weeks ago — like catching that sea-monster spook in the Croton Reservoir, back around Hallowe'en. This little guy could've been its relative or something."

"I doubt it," the physicist sniffled, but asked the creature anyway. It responded with a blistering string of what were clearly expletives.

Egon winced. "I think he doesn't consider the matter open for discussion."

"No kidding," Janine breathed. "Maybe if we knew more about him, where he came from an' all that, we could figure out what it is he thinks we've got."

"I've already asked him that, and he said—"

"Little running water," Peter interrupted, suddenly thoughtful. "Ask him to describe it."

Spengler's expression twisted with exasperation, blue eyes cast heavenward. "But I've already—"

"Just humor me," the psychologist insisted.

Winston fairly exploded. "Why?" he wanted to know. "Come on, man, we're just wasting time, here. Elanor's downstairs dying, an' you wanna play Twenty Questions with some JD water-nymph?"

"*Fossegrim*," Ray corrected.

"Whatever," his black friend snarled, impatient.

"Just trust me," Venkman told him soothingly, undisturbed.

Stantz favored Peter with a curious sidelong glance while their fair-haired partner did as requested. "You have an idea?" he asked.

Peter shrugged. "Just a hunch — and a long shot, at that. But I figure nothing else has worked so far, so why not give it a try?"

Winston could think of several reasons; he muttered them under his breath while the irritated sprite chattered something long and emphatic at Egon.

At length, the physicist provided a loose translation. "I *think* he's saying that his home is a great river, in a world apart from the world of Man, and he enters the here-and-now through one of their Temple Gates. And he insists that I stole his whatever-it-is from his Temple's precincts. Does that answer any of your questions, Peter?"

From the grin on the psychologist's face, it did indeed. "In spades," he confirmed. "Put away the accelerators, guys; I don't think we're gonna need 'em."

All three of his hallway companions blinked at him, surprised. "We won't?" they said as one.

But Peter remained confident. "We won't. Egon, tell our little friend there that if he puts away his knife and lets you go, we'll take him to his — ah — property."

Now Ray frowned at him, totally at a loss. "You know what he's after?"

"Not for sure," Venkman had to admit. "But even if this doesn't work in the end, at least it'll've gotten Egon out of cold water."

"I don't think this is going to work," Spengler announced after relaying Peter's statement. "He doesn't trust us — he thinks this is some sort of trick."

"Smart little fella, isn't he?" Janine quipped wryly.

"Trick?" Ray echoed. "How could we trick him?"

Winston's expression puckered. "If *you* were less'n two feet high and surrounded by a mess of giants, wouldn't *you* worry about being tricked?"

"So tell him he can keep his hostage, if it'll make him feel better," Venkman suggested.

"Peter!" It was difficult to tell which of the others had spoken, since none of them found his remark to be at all noble.

He leapt to his own defense. "Hey, does anyone have a better idea? Let him think he's still in control of the situation, if that'll make him cooperate, Egon. He won't be able to keep you pinned there, anyway, not if he wants you to show him where his property is."

"But I don't *know* where it is!" the waterlogged scientist pointed out, rapidly losing his patience. "I don't even know *what* it is!"

"Yeah, but *he* doesn't know that. Just tell him."

Egon hesitated, still not convinced. "I don't think this is going to work...."

"*Tell* him."

With a sigh and yet another sneeze, the physicist gave up and complied. The *fossegrim* listened intently; when the scientist had finished offering his — or, rather, Peter's — proposal, the sprite stood motionless for a bit, his face set in a grim expression of deep thought. At length, he barked a short one-syllable word that seemed to be an affirmative. With a motion of his purloined knife and a slight narrowing of his wide eyes, the creature relinquished his control over the water. Egon hadn't even realized how much he'd been straining against its hold until the *fossegrim*'s spell was broken; he practically flew out of the tub the moment he was released.

"Told you it'd work," Venkman preened.

Janine started to move to help the scientist to his feet as soon as he was out of the water, but a pointed snarl from the sprite stopped her. Before Egon could get off his knees, the *fossegrim* was straddling his neck like a baby

riding on an uncle's shoulders, knife ready to lop off the man's left ear at the first sign of treachery. When the human rose to his feet, the water-sprite stayed in place, clearly disinclined to let his hostage do anything but carry out Venkman's promise.

"Wonderful," Egon sighed, feeling the uncomfortable chill of cold water as it slithered under his dripping nightshirt and pooled around his feet. "I hope this plan of yours works — and works quickly, Peter, or you're going to pay my medical bills."

The psychologist remained supremely confident. "Trust me, it'll work like a charm. C'mon."

"Now wait just one second," Winston protested as Peter led them toward the staircase. "I know we've gotta do something about this little beggar's gripe, but can't it wait 'til after we've done something to help Elanor? He may be ticked off, but she's dying!"

"A sensation with which I'm becoming increasingly familiar," Spengler said so very sarcastically after a spasm of deep lung-wrenching coughs, Winston almost regretted having spoken up. The angry chattering from the *fossegrim* merely sharpened his regrets.

Peter, however, intervened before the sprite started chopping away at the physicist; his grin was amiable. "Don't worry, Winston," he fairly purred. "If I'm right about this, we can kill two birds with one stone."

Zeddemore scowled; Janine sniffed. "Bad choice of words, Doctor V," she chided, tongue clicking.

Venkman stuck out his tongue at her. "You know what I mean. Just give it a chance, Winston, and everything'll be fine."

"But what if it isn't?" the dark man wanted to know, his doubts far from assuaged.

"Then you can shoot me," Peter replied with the complete, unworried aplomb characteristic of the utterly confident — or the recklessly insane. He crooked a finger and turned back toward the stairs, beckoning the others to follow.

"I hope this plan of yours is better than the one you came up with last week to flush out that spud in Mrs. Dumbrowski's stereo," Winston grumbled as they arrived on the ground floor, having left a trail of cold water and heated *fossegrim* babbling behind them. "Playing punk rock at it for two hours was *not* my idea of an efficient strategy — and I don't think Elanor's got enough life left in her to wait that long."

"Probably not," Ray agreed as Venkman led them across the room. "Are you sure we couldn't wait long enough to figure out a way to help her first, Peter?"

"We won't need to," the psychologist insisted, coming to a halt near the foot of the Christmas tree. He pointed to it. "Okay, Winston, this next part's up to you. You've gotta talk to her, get Elanor to come out of there so we can see her."

The black man stared at him blankly, now totally confused. "Why? I mean, yeah, we know that gettin' away from this tree might help her hang on longer...."

"And isn't that what you want?"

"Sure, but what's that got to do with getting that little whatever-it-is with the knife off Egon's back?"

"I'm curious to know the answer to that, too," the physicist agreed, winning himself a snarl and a tugged ear from his captor.

"I'll explain later," Peter assured them. "Just do it, Winston, before it starts sharpening that thing on Egon's nose."

Zeddemore hesitated, reluctant to proceed before having at least some vague understanding of what he was doing and why, but Peter maintained his reticence, leaving him with no choice. He moved closer to the tree, looked up at it, took a deep breath, then released it in a sigh.

"Elanor?" he called, trying to spot the glowing green eyes. "It's me again. Are you all right, sweetheart?"

A faint but definite wheezing came in response, a high and delicate sound compared to the deep bass of Egon's coughing; several of the lower branches rustled. Figuring that this was where she was hiding, Winston concentrated his attention there. "Listen, Elanor," he went on, ignoring the five pair of eyes watching him intently from behind, "I know you're not feeling too good, right now, but you've gotta pay attention to me. You have to come out from there, sweetheart. It's important."

A flicker of gold-green light among the branches let him know that she was now watching him, but that and a softly reluctant whimper was all the answer he was given.

The dark Ghostbuster winced. "Please, Elanor," he pleaded, letting all his genuine concern for her show in his voice. "You've got to do it. It's for your own good."

Another sigh wafted through the boughs, breathy and unhealthy, but again, that was all.

Winston licked his lips, which seemed unusually dry. "I don't think she's buying it," he muttered to Venkman. "How can I get her out if she doesn't even care about her own health?"

The *fossegrim*, who had been watching with as much single-minded interest as the others, hissed sharply into Spengler's ear. "I don't think he appreciates this delay, Peter," the soggy scientist informed his partner with the plan. "Perhaps a different approach might be better...."

But Venkman shook his head. "No, this'll work — I'm sure of it. Try harder, Winston."

"Try harder? *How?*"

"You know how to be charming. Give her all you've got."

Zeddemore had doubts as to the wisdom of using that particular tactic on an inhuman creature who already had a crush on him, but it was plain that addressing the matter of her own well-being was doomed to be spectacularly unsuccessful. He pursed his lips briefly, then turned back to the tree.

"Y'know, Elanor," he resumed, adopting a considerably more beguiling tone, "I understand how you feel about me an' everything, but I've gotta admit, I'm hurt."

The sigh of dismay that wafted through the needles perfectly suited the sad expression that touched the dimming green eyes.

He pressed on. "That's right. Here you are, hiding in that tree, watching every move I make — and you haven't once let me see what *you* look like. That isn't fair now, is it? If I'm gonna have the prettiest dryad around living in my own house, don't you think I should at least get to see her?"

From the sound of joy that shivered weakly through the tree, his flattery had apparently worked — on Elanor, at least; the *fossegrim* continued to protest loudly, seemingly quite disturbed by these pointless delays. It did not, however, convince her to come out from the protective cover of the spruce. Winston could see her eyes flicking around the room, from one to the other of the humans gathered behind him.

Comprehending her reluctance, he smiled. "That's all right, sweetheart," he cajoled and soothed, "you don't have to worry about them. They're all my friends; they won't hurt you. They just want to see if I'm right, if we really *do* have the prettiest dryad in the world right here under our roof. You don't want to keep hiding and make them think we *don't*, now, do you?"

For a moment, there was no response. Then, just as they were all beginning to suspect that his blandishments had failed, that Elanor was not about to give up her new home for any reason, even to save her own life, the entire tree shuddered from top to bottom, as if shaken by a strong hand — or by the last throes of death.

Winston gulped, suddenly very worried. Janine knew exactly how he felt. "You don't think she just—" she began, unable to say the word. She shivered.

But just as belief in that fate was about to set in, the lower branches quivered. A few needles fell to the floor, and Elanor stepped out from hiding.

Whatever else any of them had thought she might look like, none of them had expected her to be quite so small. Scarcely coming up to Winston's knee, she was a delicate creature of ethereal beauty. Her fine hair — which was the exact color of linden blossoms, a pale yellow — fell in waves to her ankles; her skin was the color of linden wood, a cream so light it was almost white; her clothing was a simple shift of gray, the hue of linden bark; and her eyes were the same large and glowing green, the color of spring leaves, that they'd been glimpsing in the spruce branches all along. All in all, she was a very attractive little creature, but hardly a suitable match for a fully grown human.

"So that's a dryad," Peter reflected aloud, his tone definitely on the impish side. "I've gotta admit, I've dated women who looked a whole lot worse..." He was shushed from several sources, not the least of which was the sibilantly hissing *fossegrim*, who was now quite agitated.

Elanor lingered near the tips of the lowest spruce boughs, clearly shy of exposing herself to the world at large. Trying not to seem aggressive or threatening, Winston crouched down before her. "That was no lie, was it?" he said, more to himself than to her. "You sure are a pretty little thing." She smiled back at him, the expression glowing but visibly weak from fatigue. In fact, she seemed to be clutching at the branch-tips as much to keep herself erect as for the promise of shelter they provided.

Zeddmore glanced up at Ray, who nodded back, having also noticed this physical evidence of what their meters had told them about her condition. Winston then glanced at Peter. "What now?" he asked, expecting new instructions.

Venkman, however, shrugged. "Well, I'm not really sure...."

Sounds of exasperation and/or anger came at him from all sides. "Whaddaya mean, you're not sure?" Winston demanded, his exclamation the loudest and most upset, causing Elanor to shy away slightly. "This was *your* plan!"

"Yeah, but...."

Before the psychologist could give any more elaborate excuse, the *fossegrim* suddenly stood up on Egon's shoulder and, with a piercing cry that nearly deafened his hostage, jumped to the floor. Elanor — who had been able to see nothing of the creature, hidden as he'd been behind his captive's head — saw him now and abruptly stepped back into the cover of the branches. There was no denying the expression of fear on her tiny face, nor the palpable waves of fright she emanated on a strictly empathic level.

Feeling protective toward her since she seemed to consider herself *his* dryad, Winston shifted position so that he blocked the path between the two supernatural creatures. "Peter!" he snapped, not knowing who else to blame for this apparent threat.

Ray, however, had a more immediate plan of action than Venkman. The moment the water sprite hit the floor and started moving forward toward Winston and Elanor, he acted quickly, slapping the knife out of the *fossegrim's* hands and tangling him in one of the cleaning towels that had been left behind when Peter had called them all up to the third floor. Furious, it snarled and hissed and snapped its teeth as it attempted to break free, but Stantz was much bigger and stronger and, without a nearby source of water to use as a weapon against him, the *fossegrim* was defenseless.

"Gotcha!" the occultist exulted as he picked up the sprite, whose head was free but whose arms and legs were thoroughly immobilized by the cloth wrapped around them.

"Good move, Ray!" Janine applauded, glad to see the thing that had presumed to capture the object of her affections himself now held captive.

"Couldn't've done it better myself," Peter added, as if he'd planned to do the same all along.

Winston, however, was more interested in the frightened Elanor. "It's okay," he soothed the shivering little dryad as she cringed in the tree's shadows. "He can't hurt you, now."

"I wonder if that's what she was actually worried about," Egon reflected, studying both sprites with such intense curiosity, he no longer noticed that he was still soaking wet.

"Huh?" Zeddemore said, a frown of puzzlement creasing his face. "That's sure what it looked like to me. You can feel how afraid she is...."

"Yes," the physicist agreed. "But I wonder.... Why would she be afraid of a water spirit? There's no traditional enmity between elementals and lesser nature spirits. In fact, since dryads are tied to their trees and trees need water to survive, I'd think they'd actually be allies, not enemies. She'd have no *reason* to be afraid of him."

"Maybe she was just startled," Janine suggested. "After all, he *did* sorta seem to jump in out of nowhere."

Ray, who was still hanging onto the wriggling and spitting water sprite, looked to the so-called mastermind of this plan. "Pete?" he prompted.

Venkman grinned. "Just keep a grip on him for a few more minutes," he instructed. "Winston, get Elanor to come back out here again."

Janine favored him with a thoroughly bemused look. "What good is that gonna do?" she wanted to know.

Winston agreed. He had no better understanding of this plot than he'd had of Egon's reflections, but seeing no alternative, he complied. "Come on, Elanor," he coaxed in his best tones of reassurance. "He can't come after you, anymore. Come on out and let us talk to you."

The dryad demurred, her eyes repeatedly flicking toward the captive in Ray's arms, but, with a little more persuasion from the one she admired, she cooperated. She took several hesitant steps forward, coming within touching distance of Winston, but would move no farther from the protection of the tree.

"Okay," the black man said when it was apparent this was as far as she would go, "she's out. Now what?"

Peter had an answer ready and waiting. "Now, Ray, put the little guy down."

"What?!" came the exclamation from both Stantz and Zeddemore. "Are you crazy, Pete?" Winston added. "You *know* Elanor's scared of him—!"

"Yeah," the psychologist conceded, "but Egon's right: *Why* is she scared?"

"I think that's really beside the point," his dark colleague growled.

"It sure is," Janine opined. She wrinkled her nose at Peter, who remained blithely unaffected by their negativity. "What if he wants to kill her?"

"I don't think he does," Egon put in, to everyone's surprise. "Look at him."

They did. To their even greater surprise, they saw that the *fossegrim* had stopped struggling and cursing since Winston had cajoled Elanor from hiding again. He was now quite still, watching her intensely, but not making the slightest indication of hostile intent. Not even his expression reflected anger or aggression — more a frustrated... longing.

"Put him down," Peter instructed once more when they'd all fallen silent. Ray complied.

Once freed, the water sprite threw off the confining towel. He took three very hasty steps forward in Elanor's direction, but stopped when the dryad shivered and cowered behind Winston's bent knee. The creatures stood there staring at one another for what seemed an interminably long while; then, unexpectedly, the *fossegrim* turned and started chattering animatedly at his former hostage.

"What's that all about?" Winston asked, his eyes narrowing with his perplexed frown.

Egon gestured for him to stay quiet for a moment; he listened to the sprite's babble and, presently, looked up with a curious expression on his face. "This is rather interesting," the physicist said once the *fossegrim* had stopped nattering at him. "It seems our little friend here considers *Elanor* the property that was stolen from him."

"*Elanor*?" Winston, Janine, and Ray all repeated, incredulous.

"Just what I thought," Peter crowed quite smugly.

Zeddemore looked up at him in disbelief. "You *knew* about this? How?"

Venkman preened. "Hey, I'm a psychologist, aren't I? It's all perfectly clear, if you understand human behavior...."

"Yeah, but he's not human," Ray pointed out, gesturing toward the *fossegrim*. "How did you figure out he was after Elanor?"

Peter opened his mouth to provide an explanation, but the water sprite resumed babbling at Egon before he could make a sound. Again, the physicist listened, then offered his best translation. "He says that he's been observing Elanor from one of their Temples for some time, now, and had even gone so far as to approach her on several occasions — he doesn't say for what purpose — until he came to her tree two days ago and found that she'd disappeared. Since dryads don't generally leave their hosts of their own free will, he assumed that she'd been kidnaped. He was searching the area for her and happened to spot our Christmas tree when the door was open, so he waited until an opportunity presented itself, and then slipped inside."

"But why does he think *you* were the one responsible for kidnaping her?" Janine asked, a question that had occurred to all of them.

Peter offered an answer without hesitation. "'Cause he's the only one of us who even remotely looks like the little guy, that's why. It's a pretty normal cultural bias."

The others found that explanation not in the least bit enlightening. "So?" Ray was first to ask. "Why would that make any difference. If you're talking cultural biases, here, people don't usually want to go around accusing their own people of nasty crimes."

Venkman merely grinned. "Not a crime, Ray; *competition*. Don't you get it yet?" he asked, seeing a sea of blank faces in response — except, perhaps, from Egon, on whom daylight was beginning to dawn. "C'mon, Winston, you said it: You can *feel* that she's afraid of him — we all can — but is it the fear you'd feel about someone that's threatening to hurt you?"

Now that his attention was drawn to it, Winston, like the others, examined the empathic emanations Elanor was broadcasting like ripples in a pond. "No," he eventually said, slowly. "It's not. It's more like...." He couldn't put a finger on it. "Like...."

Janine made a small, "Oh!" having suddenly seen what Zeddemore could not. "Like she's afraid of him because he makes her nervous," she said, understanding. "Because she *likes* him."

Ray and Winston both blinked at her as if she'd just said something utterly incomprehensible while Peter kept on grinning; Egon sighed. "Unfortunately, I suspect you may be right. Though I would prefer a conclusion based on more rational scientific reasoning, I'm afraid rationality is a foreign concept to emotion-based creatures of this type."

Winston continued to frown, though the expression was lightening. "But if she likes him, why is she afraid of him?"

Ray shrugged, having had enough time to consider the matter. "She's young. This might be the first time she's ever been in a situation like this. You remember what it was like when you had your first crush, don't you, Winston? Heck, I was scared outta my socks that she'd find out and embarrass me to death. I'll betcha it works the same both ways, for girls as well as boys."

"That'd explain a few things," Zeddemore agreed thoughtfully, glancing from one sprite to the other. "Like why the little guy's been making trouble, and why he thought Egon had to be the competition, if all his people look just like him." He turned his regard toward Venkman. "But where the heck did he come from, anyway? There aren't any water spirit Temples around here that I know of...."

"Sure there are," Peter said happily. "Haven't you figured that out, either? He said he came from the little running water. That's gotta be—"

"—the leaky fire hydrant!" Ray suddenly concluded, having finally seen the connections. "Of course! A vast river world beyond the world of Man, accessed through Temple Gates — that has to be the city's underground water pipes and all the hydrants. And if he's been watching Elanor for a while, now, he must've first showed up when the hydrant started leaking, back in September. In his mind, her linden *has* to be within his temple's precincts!"

Winston listened to his explanation along with the others, though his reactions to it were far grimmer. "But if he saw her first and she was really getting to like him, then my coming along and fixing her branch messed things up, didn't it?"

Janine, who was closest to him, patted his shoulder sympathetically. "You were only trying to help, Winston. It wouldn't've been right to let her suffer; you did what had to be done."

"Then I've gotta do what's right *now*, too," he replied firmly, his mind made up. "She's gonna die if she stays here, and even if she *does* like me, she really belongs with her own kind, not mooning over some human lug who was nice to her once." More than a suggestion of befuddlement touched his features as he looked up at his friends — at Peter in particular, since the plan had been his. "But how do we get her to go? How do you convince a kid that what looks like a great deal isn't really so wonderful, after all? How do you make her want to go without breaking her heart?"

To his own regret, Peter could do nothing but shrug. "I don't know. How do you tell a kid *anything*? It's like trying to shake some of those really tenacious teenage groupies we get. All I do know is that you've got to be the one to do it, Winston. You're the one she's stuck on, and only you're gonna be able to get her to leave of her own free will."

Zeddemore wanted very badly to protest that statement, to say that since she was in a house that belonged to all of them, it was their mutual responsibility — but he knew that for the cowardly evasion it was. Briefly, he glanced at the now quiet *fossegrim*, then at the weakened Elanor; for more than a minute, he stared at the floor, thinking of what Peter had said. Finally, with a heavy sigh, he raised his eyes to the dryad's.

"Elanor," he started, then stopped to clear his dry throat. "Elanor," he began again, only to come to second screeching halt. He just didn't seem to know what to say — so he decided to say whatever seemed right. "Elanor," he tried for a third and more successful time, "I don't know how you're feeling about everything that's been going on around here these last few minutes, but I want you to know I meant what I said. You're the prettiest dryad I've ever set eyes on..."

A sigh of girlish delight sang from her; she seemed to draw strength from the compliment.

"...but I've gotta be honest with you: that's mostly 'cause you're the *only* dryad I've ever set eyes on."

Her coo of pleasure faltered; the big green eyes she turned on him flickered with confusion.

Winston's sigh was anything but delighted. He hated the necessity that was forcing him to do this. "Now, I don't want you to go thinking I've been leading you on or anything, but... look, sweetheart — Elanor — this just isn't gonna work out. I know you want to stay here, how this must look really different and exciting after spending years living in that little tree out on the street, in this crummy neighborhood, but this just isn't the place for you. Can you understand that? You belong with your own kind — people like other dryads, like that little guy over there — not with us humans."

He paused; in the momentary silence, Peter snickered to himself. "Jeeze, do you think we could use this speech on Slimer, get him to go find a nice family of spuds and leave us alone?" Without even bothering to take visual aim, Janine elbowed him in the ribs to shut him up.

Zeddemore continued, trying not to see the sad and puzzled expression on the dryad's face. "I don't want to hurt you," he went on, "but if you stay, I won't be able to stop what's gonna happen to you. And even if I could, sooner or later, you'd see for yourself that it just won't work. It *can't* work. Do you understand?"

From the look in her eyes, he was sure not a bit of what he'd said had reached her. He was about to give up and turn to the others for help when she extended one tiny four-fingered hand and tentatively touched his arm.

Is there another?

The dryad didn't move her lips, and the words seemed to echo inside their heads rather than in their ears — if words they could be called; they were more nearly emotional, not acoustical, resonances — but they were clearly discernable to everyone in the room, and just as clearly came from Elanor. *Is there another?* she repeated.

When he'd had a chance to swallow his surprise over this unexpected turn, Winston answered. "Uh... yes. Yes, as a matter of fact, there is. My girlfriend, Lydia."

Is she pretty?

He coughed. "Well, I suppose that'd depend on your taste, but... yes, I think she is."

A hint of heartbroken upset touched the dryad's face; she seemed to wilt even more. *As pretty as me?*

That was a tricky one; he did his best to be truthful. "That's a hard question to answer, Elanor. It's like asking if I mean as much to you as your tree, or if the sun is prettier than the moon. It's all a matter of choice. Even if Lydia had a face like a terror dog, she'd still be beautiful to me because of the way I feel about her. And I *know* that's something you understand — isn't it?"

For a moment, the dryad shied away, her head drooping; then, she looked up again, seemingly drawing strength from somewhere, her expression calm and resigned. *Yes. You are right; the Feeling is very important — it is everything to my people, even Life. But I have been watching this place for all the seasons I remember. I have seen all of you, heard you sing in my heart, you were so nearby and lived with such joy. If you did not care for me, why did you gift me with the Name? Why did you watch me from your seeing-places, put beautiful decorations upon my new home, and tend my wounds when I was hurt?*

This time, Winston knew exactly what to say. "Because I *do* care about you, Elanor — but it's a different *kind* of caring. It's what you probably feel for the sun and the wind and the birds and maybe even my friends here, but it's *not* what that little fellow there feels for you — or what I think you might feel for him, given half a chance."

When he mentioned the *fossegrim*, the dryad glanced in the watersprite's direction; she blushed (an odd sight, since her cheeks tinted a pale spring green, not red). The *fossegrim* stepped forward to stop at Winston's elbow. He stood very little higher than the man's bent knee; even the tiny Elanor seemed to tower above him. But this almost amusing discrepancy in size deterred the little water creature not in the least. Using a softer, much gentler voice than they had yet heard from him, the *fossegrim* said something to the dryad in his original incomprehensible language. As she listened, she flushed even more brightly and looked away, but she was smiling and somehow looking stronger than before.

"Seems to me I'm right about this," Winston remarked, looking from one sprite to the other — especially at Elanor and her visibly improving condition. "If this Feeling stuff is so important to your people, if that's what gives you life, then don't you think you belong with someone who can give you what you want and need — someone who wants to help you live and be happy?"

An inarticulate impression of agreement radiated from the dryad along with a very healthy sort of delight that came when she giggled at the way the *fossegrim* was looking at her. The water sprite took that as a sign of approval. He stepped around the obstructing Zeddemore, then took Elanor's hand and tugged gently, trying to urge her toward the door and out of this human habitation.

His forward manner caused her to pale and hesitate, momentarily indecisive; she glanced up at Winston. *But...* she began, torn between her desire to stay near her benefactor and her desire to go with the water sprite, whose own supernatural emanations drew her like a moth to a flame.

Winston was not about to let her throw away her life over an attraction as temporarily glittering as their Christmas tree. "It's all right, Elanor," he encouraged. "I know it, he knows it— and *you* know it, too. Look inside your heart, and you'll know what to do — what you *should* do."

The dryad still hesitated. She looked at the golden-haired elemental, then at Winston, who smiled and nodded. She glanced once more at the *fossegrim*, felt the glow of renewed empathic strength, then reached a decision. She faced the man briefly and returned his smile. *Thank you*, her not-voice said quietly; then, she turned and shyly followed the water sprite to the exit.

Ray ever so helpfully opened the door for them, figuring they were both too short to do it on their own. Once beyond the threshold, they began to revert to their supernatural forms, figures of blue and green light that rose into the crisp winter air and danced in ecstatic circles around one another as they moved off into the not-quite-dark city night.

The humans watched them for a long time, lesser lights among the flakes that were just beginning to fall. Eventually, they dwindled in the distance and were lost amid the steadily thickening snow. Winston sighed softly, both sorry and glad to see them go; Ray waved goodbye, and even Peter rubbed one supposedly itchy eye.

"Do you think we'll ever see them again?" Stantz wondered aloud, breaking the late night quiet.

"I doubt it," was Peter's ostensibly careless opinion. "It's a big city, and once the DPW gets around to fixing that hydrant, our little Romeo there'd have trouble getting to his Juliet's balcony. There's gotta be someplace Elanor can find a new tree where he won't have to go around breaking fire hydrants every time he wants to see her."

"Which could explain why the hydrant's been leaking for so long," Egon reflected thoughtfully. "The city's usually very good when it comes to keeping them in good repair, since faulty hydrants can present serious trouble in emergencies. It's possible they *have* fixed it, more than once, and the *fossegrim* was responsible for breaking it again and again."

"Which just goes to show you can't stop true love," the psychologist grinned.

Standing just inside the doors, Janine sniffed, touched. "I didn't know you had it in you, Doctor V," she said, still watching the spot where the dancing lights had vanished from sight. "How did you know that the *fossegrim* was in love with Elanor?"

Peter shrugged, though he basked in the redhead's infrequently offered praise. "It didn't take much. You go out with as many women as I have over the years, and you can read the signs from a mile off. It's no big deal."

"Well, I think it was beautiful," she sniffled again.

"And I think it's getting cold in here," Egon opined from behind her, his own snuffles derived from a source less healthy than mere emotion and leading to a much louder sneeze. "Do you think we could close the door now," he asked wistfully, "before I come down with pneumonia?"

Distracted by the more supernatural goings-on, Janine had completely forgotten about the ailing physicist. When his comment prompted her to look in his direction, she noticed that he was standing in a puddle and shivering, his wet nightshirt plastered against him like a second skin. She immediately turned solicitous. "Oh, you poor thing...!"

It wasn't in Venkman's nature to be quite so generous. "Poor thing? If you ask me, he's got absolutely no sense of romance...."

Ray scolded the skeptic with a *tsk*, being in sympathy with his blond friend's less than perfect condition; he willingly obliged him by closing the doors. "Hey, Pete, give the man a break," he suggested. "It's hard to be anything but grumpy after you've just spent hours getting all pruny in a tub full of cold water. Still," he reflected once the doors were shut, "when you look back at the whole thing, you've gotta admit, it really *was* pretty amusing. Though I don't

know which was funnier: being haunted by a lovesick dryad, or getting pestered by her jealous pint-sized would-be boyfriend...."

"Neither," Peter was certain. "That prize goes to Mrs. Arbogast for having kittens over our 'special effects.' We've *got* to remember to invite her over next Hallowe'en. She'll be the life of the party."

Winston laughed softly, amused by the thought. "Yeah, but next time, let's get a *real* Class Five to do the haunting, or at least something with more teeth than Elanor. The way Mrs. Arbogast holds her nose in the air, she's be sure to get it bitten off the first time she poked it where it didn't belong."

"Well, I don't think this is funny at all," was Janine's opinion. "That little monster making a mess of the plumbing and getting the guests angry and taking prisoners — especially not when it meant trapping someone who's already sick in a tub of cold water for hours on end." She studied the damply miserable physicist, who was trying not to cough yet again and failing, and shook her head. "Come on, Egon," she sighed, catching his elbow and heading for the stairs. "You'd better get out of that wet stuff and in to something dry before you *do* catch something even worse. And I'll bet you're 'way overdue for your next dose of medicine, too."

Peter made a chiding sound as they started for the stairs, astonished that for once, Egon was not protesting. "He's a big boy, Janine. I'm sure he can do it himself, unless you're just using this as an excuse to get him alone under the — hey, who put the presents under the tree?" he asked on a sudden tangent, only then noticing the various packages that hadn't been there before, in particular those he recognized as ones he'd purchased and wrapped. "I didn't tell anyone where I had my stuff hidden...."

"Neither did I," Winston joined in, spotting his own handiwork amid the others. "Who—?"

"Who else?" Ray offered, having picked up a package he knew was one he'd wrapped just that morning. One hand came away faintly sticky.

Peter sighed. "Okay, Spud," he called. "You can come out, already. We know you weren't responsible for all the mess."

From somewhere near the ceiling, a familiar burbling voice gave its equivalent of a timid, "Really?"

"Yes, really," Winston confirmed. "We know you didn't do it, and we're all sorry we yelled at you." The glance Peter threw at him bespoke his very strong urge to disagree with the latter part of that statement, but he didn't actually give in to it.

"Yeah," he added instead. "We figure, what the heck, it's Christmas Eve, and if we can forgive a cheeky terrorist water-squirt for almost ruining our party and sending Egon to the hospital, we can forgive you for being an ugly little slime-bucket."

Ray, oblivious to the discussion and the little spook's elation, set down the package he'd been inspecting, and picked up another with his name on it. He shook it gently. "Hey," he noted gleefully, "it's after midnight. Do you think we could open 'em now — or should we wait 'til morning?"

"Are you kidding?" Peter laughed. "Wait? And have you tossing and turning all night? We may as well get it over with now." As he said that with adult disdain, however, he'd found a package marked for him and was surreptitiously trying to figure out what was in it.

"Can it wait 'til we get back?" Janine called from the top of the stairs. "It won't take long."

Peter muffled suggestively. "It'd better not."

"No problem," Ray assured her, ignoring the remark. "I'll give me time to get the leftover eggnog from the kitchen."

"Weren't there some cookies left, too?" the psychologist asked, giving up on his unsuccessful wisecracks for the time being. "I'm getting hungry...."

As the others traipsed up the stairs, Winston, alone, studied the now-empty tree. For a long while, he imagined the glow of gold-green eyes still watching him from within the shadows of the branches; the wind against the firehall's windowpanes made him think he could even hear the rustle of someone moving amid the spruce boughs, but the sound soon passed along with the briefly lingering fantasy, lost amid the closer and more mundane noises of Peter and Ray returning from the kitchen.

He sighed, but not unhappily. "Merry Christmas, Elanor," he said, knowing it would be so for her, then turned away from the glimmering tree to greet his friends with a smile.

The End