

# Pandora's Box

a *Real Ghostbusters* Novella by

Mary Jean Holmes

*in memory of D. LaVerne Miller, my mother*

originally printed in *Shadowstar* #27, published Spring 1988  
original version written November 1987; rewritten January 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.

---

In September of 1986, two very different and unrelated things happened in my life: ABC started airing an entertaining animated series called *The Real Ghostbusters*, and my mother began a slow and painful death from cancer. It was somehow both strange and fitting that, when Mom's condition took a turn for the worst in October of 1987, I turned toward writing RGB fanfic to keep myself sane during those dreadful days. I began this particular story, "Pandora's Box," almost on the day when she was taken to the hospital, no longer able to be cared for at home; I finished it on November 6, three days before she died. I will never again be able to look at it without thinking of her; even now, ten years later, I look at it and understand why, of everything I could have written at the time, this is what came from my mind. Although the original RGB genre has a light-hearted bent, this story is essentially a reaffirmation of human strength and human foibles winning out over inhuman odds. Through most of her life, Mom did just that, and her strength lives on in her children, and in what we do. With love, this story remains dedicated to her and to her memory.

---

Being the residence of four unmarried males whose minds, for the most part, were preoccupied with anything but house cleaning, the firehouse/headquarters of the Ghostbusters was seldom immaculate, but on the morning in question, it was far less so than usual.

Returning from an early call with expectations of doing no more than finding clean clothes and an over-delayed breakfast, the quartet of paranormal eliminators pulled into the garage only to find their reception area (usually the most well-maintained part of the place; one had to keep up appearances for the paying public, after all) buried amid a sea of clutter: boxes, bags, crates, bundles, and piles of oddments, in the midst of which sat their receptionist, Janine Melnitz, stranded at her desk like a castaway on a desert island. From the expression on her face — both forlorn and annoyed — she was anything but happy with the mess surrounding her.

"What happened here?" Winston asked diplomatically as he climbed out from behind the wheel of Ecto-1 and saw the carnage. By and large, Zeddemore was an easy-going person, perhaps the most "normal" of the Ghostbusters (relatively speaking), but he was also the one with the lowest tolerance for sloppy living conditions. The sight before him pushed the word *messy* to new heights of decadence. "Did someone turn this place into a kitsch museum, or did we become a collection point for Goodwill when I wasn't looking?"

"Nah, she probably decided this'd be the ideal spot to hold a rummage sale," came Peter's sarcastically-voiced opinion from the opposite side of the car. No one thought anything of it. Venkman was notorious for passing negative judgment on a moment's notice, whether or not he had the vaguest familiarity with what he was judging. To justify his attitude, however, he peered into the box closest to Ecto-1's rear bumper and was gifted with the sight of an ugly statue depicting what looked to be a gargoyle with several clocks in its warty stomach. "Yeech," he said, backing off with a grimace of disgust and nearly colliding with Egon and Ray, who were trying to get out of the converted ambulance and past him. I never knew you had such lousy taste, Janine. Then again," he absently corrected himself, "maybe I should've *suspected* it, considering your questionable taste in men...." He whimsically rolled his eyes toward the blond-haired Spengler, who appeared vastly more interested in adjusting a persnickety PKE meter than in any discourse concerning him.

She stuck out her tongue at the psychologist. "I've got perfectly good taste. And this junk isn't mine, Doctor Venkman. It's *yours*."

Peter couldn't have looked more horrified if he'd tried. "*Mine*?" he echoed, determined to take neither full blame for nor sole possession of the eye-aching clutter.

"The Ghostbusters'," she corrected, almost sorry she had when he responded with a huge sigh of relief. She waved the delivery invoice over her head as proof. "They dumped it all here while you were gone."

"And you should've told 'em they were lost and given 'em directions to the city dump. Where the heck did all this stuff come from?"

"T. J. Robertson."

Ray, who had managed to squeak past Venkman and had been examining the contents of one of the larger crates, looked up, surprised. "T. J. Robertson, the wealthy industrialist?"

"No, T. J. Robertson III, his wealthy heir," she clarified, producing the letter which apparently explained the entire situation, including the current state of their garage. It seems the old guy died a couple of months back and left everything he had to his grandson. But he was a real packrat, collected a lot of junk over the years — and he had an obsession with the occult. When the kid inherited the family estate, he found all this in his grandfather's private study and closets. He didn't want it and couldn't sell it, so he decided to give it to you guys, thinking maybe you could find something to do with it." She glanced at the piles around her, a crooked smile pinching her face. "Doesn't it just make you feel so lucky, being on the receiving end of all this generosity?"

"Leave the sarcasm to me, Janine," Venkman suggested, having found another boxful of truly hideous *objects d'art*. "I wonder if we could use this as a tax deduction? Taking this much junk off someone's hands has *got* to be a major act of charity...."

"I doubt the IRS would agree. Anyway, it's the thought that counts," Winston pointed out as he flipped through a dog-eared old tabloid on the paranormal that was but one of many in a very large stack. Its cover showed a gruesome artist's rendition of a half-demon child, supposedly born to a teenage runaway who had been reputedly kidnaped by UFOs while out searching for Bigfoot. "Maybe this stuff's worth something to someone, somewhere...."

Peter sniffed critically. "Yeah, as bonfire material, or maybe at a rummage sale." His green eyes lit with inspiration. "Hey, maybe that's not such a bad idea, after all. We could clean out the basement and the closets and get rid of this stuff, too, and make a few bucks in the process. I wonder how much we could get for it...?"

"A dollar ninety-eight for the lot of it, if you're lucky," Egon opined drily, having finished his adjustments to meter and given the entire mess a brief appraisal with his bespectacled blue eyes. "Robertson may have had an obsession with the occult, but he obviously didn't know the difference between genuinely valuable artifacts and useless junk." He opened a box, saw yet another hideous gargoyle statue — this with a thermometer in its belly, a barometer in its nose, and a weather-vane atop its head — and closed the lid again, quickly, shuddering in revulsion. "I don't know what he saw in this stuff, but it certainly hasn't any genuine paranormal value."

"Oh, I dunno," Ray piped up from where he stood, bent halfway into the largest of the crates. "He's got some interesting books, here." He straightened, several ancient volumes in hand. "*How to Name Nameless Horrors, Identifying Witches, So You Want to Be a Warlock, Gwyllim's Guide to Ancient Evils*... I've never even *heard* of some of these."

"Probably with good reason. If you're interested in collecting phony occultist trash, I suppose this might be very fascinating, but frankly, I don't see that Robertson had the slightest idea of what he was doing — or buying." Spengler wrinkled his nose at the assortment of painted-plaster demons Janine was unpacking from a box and setting atop her desk. "It isn't even worth much from a purely aesthetic point of view."

"Maybe most of it isn't," she agreed readily, "but it isn't all so bad." As proof, she reached down into the bottom of her crate and drew forth a small but intricate wooden box, made of dark, highly polished wood and carved with a fascinating network of knotwork and runic patterns. "This is really kinda pretty," she observed, turning it over in her hands to examine it from different angles. After a moment, she frowned. "There's no latch."

"Maybe it's just a solid block," Winston suggested. "You know, sort of an old-fashioned toy or paperweight."

But Janine felt otherwise. "No, it isn't heavy enough for that. It's gotta be hollow inside — but I can't find any way to open it."

"And you aren't supposed to," Egon informed her, having moved close enough to take a long look at the thing and recognize it for what it was. "It's a puzzle box."

"A what?"

"A puzzle box. It's a sort of primitive safety-deposit vault. The whole point was to make them impossible to open without knowing the tricks the designer built into them. It was an intelligent man's security system, safer than any lock. It can't be picked or gotten into unless you're clever enough to solve its three-d puzzle."

"Or smash the thing to smithereens," Peter quipped wryly. "And haven't I seen this sort of thing down in Chinatown? They sell 'em as cheap kid's toys, not adult lock-boxes."

"Most of the ones in Chinatown *are* just cheap toys, Pete," Stantz said, joining the others at the desk to see the item in question. "This looks a lot more sophisticated. And if you just smash a puzzle box to get at what's inside, you run the risk of destroying what's in it, too."

Both he and Egon reached for the thing, wanting to study it more closely, but Janine stubbornly kept hold of it, her attempt to lay claim to what was, thus far, the only decent looking item in the lot. "Oh, no, I found it — this is mine. What's all this stuff carved onto it?" she asked, one finger tracing the runic designs. "Writing?"

The physicist peered over her shoulder to get at a better look at the markings while the occultist leaned across the desk. "Of a sort," Ray answered first. "Ancient Cymric runes, I think."

Her blue eyes blinked. "Cymric? Is that anything like Celtic?"

She pronounced the last word with an initial *s*, causing Spengler to wince slightly. "The Celts," he said, imitating her enunciation, "are a basketball team. The Celts," he corrected, using the proper initial *k* sound, "are the peoples descended from the ancients Gauls and Britons — the Scots, the Irish, the Welsh, and the Bretons. Cymric refers specifically to things of Welsh extraction, so yes, I suppose it *is* something like Celtic." He adjusted his glasses to examine the carvings in more detail. "These aren't exactly common Cymric runes, however. From the look of them, I'd say they're specifically Druidic in nature, and dating back to... mmm, the First or Second Century, at the very latest. Wouldn't you agree, Ray?"

"Oh, absolutely," the auburn-haired occultist concurred, head nodding vigorously.

Zeddemore whistled softly, intrigued. "Not bad for being part of a junk collection."

Egon, however, wasn't particularly impressed. "Age alone doesn't make an artifact valuable, Winston. Besides, just because the thing is carved in the ancient Druidic style doesn't mean it was actually constructed then. Moreover, I've never heard any references to Druids using puzzle boxes for any purposes; it was more of a Far Eastern avocation. This could be nothing but a cheap replica, made during the surge of interest in the occult and Oriental goods around the turn of the century. Judging from the box's condition, it probably isn't more than fifty years old — a hundred, at the outside."

"That'd still qualify it as an antique," Peter noted, an avaricious gleam in his eyes. "We might be able to get a few hundred bucks for it — maybe a few thousand, from the right dealer...."

He reached for it, much as Stantz and Spengler had, and was similarly thwarted. "I found it first," Janine declared airily, determined to keep it away from her greedy employer. "What does it say, anyway?" she wanted to know, having studied the strange letters to no avail.

"Sell me," was Peter's suggestion, completely ignored by the others.

This time, the receptionist allowed Egon to take the box, so that he could examine the thing more closely. "A name," he eventually announced. "*Kathuurax*, I think."

Ray, who had gone back to perusing the oddly-titled books, glanced up, thoughtful puzzlement in his brown eyes. "That doesn't sound very Celtic," was his expert opinion.

The blond scientist shrugged. "Which further supports my theory concerning its recent origin. Even if it *is* a genuinely ancient artifact, it may not *be* Celtic. There was a significant incursion of invading armies into Briton, back then — the Romans, most notably. If this box was made two thousand years ago, it may not have been owned by a Celt, merely carved by one."

"Is that what you think the inscription is, then, the name of the owner?" Winston asked.

"Quite possibly."

Stantz, however, wasn't so well-convinced. "I dunno, there's something very familiar about that name, like I've heard it somewhere before. You don't suppose that thing could really be some sort of genuine occult artifact, do you, Egon?"

"I doubt it," was the physicist's opinion, but in the spirit of cooperation, he brought out his PKE meter to confirm it.

To his surprise, the box produced a reading — small, but quite definite.

"What was that you were saying about it being a cheap replica, Egon?" Peter grinned, unable to avoid the delicious opportunity to razz his more intellectual colleague.

Spengler was not about to admit defeat. "It's obviously insignificant," he insisted, "probably just residual energy it picked up from sitting next to a stronger source. It doesn't even register half as much power as a Class One Vapor."

Janine swallowed uneasily. "A stronger source?" she echoed nervously. "Not something in this pile...?"

"Unlikely," she was assured. "Chances are, the box was purchased relatively recently, and was collecting dust in some halfway-legitimate occult shop until Robertson bought it. Years of being in close proximity to something genuinely active — a copy of the *Necronomicon*, for instance — could cause that."

"Or maybe there's something inside it," Ray speculated. "I know if I had a valuable occult artifact to hide, I'd try to stick it somewhere that no one else could get at it, and a puzzle box'd be a perfect place. A supernaturally active object inside might explain the readings."

"Perhaps. But—" Egon held the box close to one ear and shook it carefully, listening. "—it appears to be empty. I wonder...." He stared at the thing intently, as if through an act of will alone he might be able to see what the wood concealed.

"Can you figure out how to open it?" Winston asked, caught up in the interest over this intriguing item.

The fairest of the four men held no especial doubts on that account. "Given enough time, yes, I'm sure I could."

Venkman snorted. "Don't you find such modesty simply overwhelming?" he asked of no one in particular. Janine made a sour face at him; the others ignored him.

"These things were all designed along similar lines," Egon reflected aloud. "The lock patterns of a necessity are very logical, very geometric. Given the size and shape of the box, the established progression of movement in such devices, and the limited design permutations available...." Still muttering to himself, he headed for the stairs to the second level, box in hand, obviously intending to take himself off to where he could examine it in greater depth, and in peace.

"Just make sure you're careful with that thing," Janine called after him, slightly miffed to have lost the one attractive item in their unexpected endowment — but only slightly. "Remember what happened to Pandora!"

If Egon heard her warning, he made no indication, for he continued on up the stairs, unhesitant.

Winston, on the other hand, favored the woman with a frown of puzzlement. "Who?" he inquired, perplexed.

"Pandora," Ray provided. "According to Greek mythology, when Zeus got angry with Prometheus for stealing fire and giving it to the humans, he got even by sending 'em Pandora."

The dark man's eyes narrowed, his confusion not lessened by one whit. "And that's supposed to be revenge? Seems pretty wimpy, if you ask me."

Stantz laughed. "Not with Pandora. You've heard the cliché, 'curiosity killed the cat?' They could've invented it for her. Zeus sent her down to Earth with a box that she wasn't supposed to open — but he knew she wouldn't be able to help herself, and sooner or later, she'd look inside. When she opened it, she released all the pain and suffering that hadn't been around before then. That was the ancient Greek explanation for why people get sick and die. Pandora couldn't keep her nose out of the forbidden box, so from then on, the rest of humanity suffered for it."

Winston shuddered, finding the implications of Janine's analogy singularly disturbing. He glanced up at the now-empty stairs. "You don't really think that's Pandora's Box, do you?"

Peter, pausing in his study of a particularly lascivious little wood-carving, snorted indelicately. "Sure, and that thing's really Father Time." He pointed to the grotesquely tasteless clock-bellied gargoyle.

Zeddemore wasn't reassured. "Maybe it isn't, but that thing's not giving off residual readings, either."

Venkman refused to take a negative viewpoint. "Lighten up, Winston. We get stronger PKE readings off the puddles Slimmer leaves on the floor. Be reasonable. How could some stupid little toy box make that kind of trouble?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Upon reaching the third floor and their private quarters, Egon temporarily set both box and PKE meter on the table before the large window in their communal bedroom while he went to get rid of his uniform and the inevitable residue-grime left by their morning's employment. When he finally returned to the puzzle, now clean, in civvies, and in a much better frame of mind for dealing with such trivial frustrations, he went about the project with such single-minded intensity, he scarcely noticed the clamor of his partners going through their similar post-job ablutions. His concentration was momentarily broken when the others decided it was time to seek out a real breakfast — but only momentarily.

"You sure you don't want to come?" Winston asked before ducking out the door and heading downstairs. "You know you've gotta eat once in a while. Man cannot live on science alone."

"I'm not hungry, thank you," he was told, an assurance the darker man did not find particularly reassuring.

But Winston had also been taught to mind his own business. "Okay," he shrugged equably, "but I'll try to save you something, just in case you change your mind."

The inarticulate mumble he was given was all the response he honestly expected.

When Zeddemore was gone, Egon returned that small part of his thoughts which had been half-diverted in the man's direction back to the problem of the puzzle box. Personally, he was annoyed with himself for not having found the correct solution on his first try, but he recognized that as a petty ego-trip unworthy of one of his scientific stature and dismissed it so that he could give the problem his undivided attention. He'd opened puzzle boxes before — the real kind, not the toys — and was frankly surprised by the complexity of this particular example. Whoever had constructed it was a certifiable genius, which made the challenge of solving the riddle all the more inviting.

"The key has to be something here," he muttered to himself as he fingered a particular curve of wood fitted into the box's right side. "If this piece here is curved and moves enough to create an interior slot there," he murmured as he twisted and turned and pushed and prodded the various puzzle segments, "then the motion should logically continue from here to here to — ah!"

With a musical little *ping!*, something inside the box released; with a touch of the curved side-panel, the contraption's cleverly concealed lid cracked open.

And the moment it did, the forgotten PKE meter near the physicist's left elbow came to abundantly active life.

Intrigued, Egon glanced at it for a moment, noticed the strong reading it was registering, then turned back to the box. "Hmm, perhaps Ray was right and there *is* something of interest inside...."

Curious, he lifted the lid, idly noticing that the meter's reading increased in strength as he did so. The box itself held the vast bulk of his attention, for, with the latch released, he could now see the unprecedentedly brilliant glow of whatever lay within. As the lid fell back and he peered into the brightness, he could see nothing, so blinding was the light. With a wince, he closed his eyes and leaned back; when he opened them again a second or two later, the light was gone.

The box, he saw, was empty.

But the PKE meter continued to insist that something powerfully paranormal was in the vicinity.

And that was when Egon noticed the sensation of someone — or *something* — breathing down his neck, a breath that simultaneously seared and froze.

"Oh, no," he whispered hoarsely, realizing what he had just done, albeit unwittingly.

Startled — and suddenly very, *very* worried — the scientist spun about, only to be greeted by the sight of a distinctly demonic form fully twice his height and more than thrice his breadth. A huge and clearly powerful creature with near-black hide and a face vaguely reminiscent of a terror dog's (only more human and vastly more intelligent), it straightened to its full height as it coalesced behind the unfortunate physicist, like someone stretching as they roused from the stiffness of a long and cramped sleep. Its twisted ivory-white horns brushed the high ceiling for a brief moment before the creature bent forward, one man-sized, three-clawed hand reaching for its prey.

All it took was the one glance for Spengler to abruptly remember why Ray had found the name on the box so familiar. "Kathuurax," he breathed, sparing one long and uneasy moment to stare at the thing before exercising the better part of valor in an attempt to run and avoid the claws stretching out toward him.

The demon, unfortunately, was faster. "Don't go, little one," it said in an obscenely beautiful voice that was a full two octaves below Egon's own deep voice; an unpleasant parody of a smile crossed its ivory-fanged face. Its blank eyes — irisless slits of glowing ruby red — nonetheless managed to communicate immense satisfaction. "What have you to fear from me? You have released me from my age-long prison, have you not? Do you not think I would be grateful for such a service?"

Egon, however, may have been inquisitive enough to occasionally do something stupid, but he was not stupid enough to do something totally irrational. As the thing's dagger-tipped fingers closed around him, he struggled, one arm colliding with the open box and sending it flying as he almost — *almost* — managed to wrest himself free.

"Gently, gently, little one," the demon soothed. "No need to resist me. I only wish to give you a...reward for your services."

The physicist wasn't about to believe it; he remembered what Kathuurax was, now, and knew the sort of reward such a creature would have in store for him. He opened his mouth and started to shout for help, but he'd gotten out no more than a strangled, "Guys!" before a single piercing glance from his captor robbed him of his voice.

"That's right," the demon soothed unctuously as it studied the man as a zoologist might study a new and promising discovery; it lightly traced the foreclaw of its free hand along the line of its captive's cheek and jaw. Egon shivered at the cold and disturbingly intimate contact; the gesture felt unnervingly akin to a caress. "Yes," it purred, obviously pleased with something it saw in him. "Oh, yes, little one. You'll do. You'll do quite nicely, indeed. Now just relax, my pet, and it will all be over, very, very soon."

As the thing fixed him in its baleful gaze, the scientist found himself losing the ability to resist it — losing, in fact, the very desire to resist, to even *try* to fight it. The mesmerizing fog of calm that was leeching him of both emotion and will also appeared to make the concept of what was happening to him seem somehow attractive, too appealing to refuse. His first reaction to the situation was purely intellectual, an observation of how similar this sensation was to reports of vampiric mind control. However, his last thought before the fog closed in around him and made him the demon's own was one of wholly human regret: *Sorry guys — I've really gone and done it this time.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Passing near the staircase on the floor below, Winston happened to hear Spengler's one-syllable outcry and went running to see what was wrong. From the particular timbre of the physicist's shout, he fully expected to find him lying there half-dead, the box exploded, having revealed itself to be some sort of cleverly conceived — and astonishingly silent — mail-bomb. What he found, however, was a perfectly calm and unharmed Egon coming out of the bedroom as he was coming in, the room beyond the threshold as unoccupied and untouched as before.

"Were you calling for us?" Zeddemore asked, perplexed by this contradiction.

The blond head shook. "No," he replied placidly, his demeanor certainly not that of one who'd supposedly been crying for help only moments before. "You must've been hearing things."

That wasn't Winston's number one choice as an explanation, but he apparently was to be offered no other. "Uh...yeah, I guess I must've. Hey, man, are you all right? You're looking a little pale."

"I'm fine, Winston," he was assured in identically bland tones. "But thanks for asking."

Egon seemed so perfectly unruffled and unaware that anything might be wrong with him, Zeddemore couldn't help but assume that all was indeed right with the world — except, perhaps, for his hearing, which he would have to get checked as soon as possible. With a sigh and a shake of his head, the dark man headed back down the stairs as Egon headed for the lab across the hall, the former muttering to himself about echoey old buildings and the way they can make sound play tricks on one's ears.

On the threshold to the lab, Egon paused to watch Winston move out of sight, then smiled to himself, stepped inside, and shut the door.

For an instant, as he watched Zeddemore's retreating back, his blue eyes had glowed a bright and unnatural red.

\*\*\*\*\*

Later in the day, several hours after lunch, another call came in. "Class Two repeater at the Museum of Modern Art," Janine announced as three of her four employers arrived in answer to the alarm. "Nothing spectacular."

"Museum of Modern Art, huh?" Peter drawled, his eye taking in the still cluttered garage. "Jeeze, with all this ugly junk around, I thought they'd moved it here. Does this mean we finally get to bust the Spud?"

Slimer, who had been hovering over the file cabinets behind the reception desk, shrieked at the implied threat and took off through the ceiling. Janine threw a scolding glare at the offending party. "Hardly. Better get moving, though. They sounded pretty spooked."

Venkman groaned. "I *told* you to lay off the puns, Janine. That's *my* department."

"Let's get going, then," Ray suggested to forestall the argument. "Hey, where's Egon?"

The others glanced around and only then noticed that the physicist hadn't joined them. "He was in his lab, last time I saw him," Winston supplied. "That was just after breakfast, but he didn't come down for lunch, either. You suppose he's still up there?"

"Probably, if he's in the middle of a project. Okay, you and Peter load up. I'll go get him."

When Ray arrived at the third floor laboratory, he found that Spengler was indeed in the midst of something rather major, if the outer appearance of the device he was constructing was a reliable indication. But there were no other clues to tell the occultist what it was, and time was pressing, so he didn't waste his breath asking questions he could just as easily save for later. "C'mon, Egon," he urged, tapping his partner's shoulder to get his attention. "We've got a call."

The physicist shrugged him off, not even pausing to look up from the circuit board he was wiring. "I'm busy," he said flatly, as if that alone should have been all the reason Ray needed to leave.

Stantz was not so easily persuaded. "I know, but you'll have to get back to it later. They've got a Class Two repeater at the Museum of Modern Art, and you know how tricky those little devils can be to corner."

That, however, seemed to make no impression whatsoever on Egon. "Take care of it yourselves. I can't leave, now."

Ray frowned. "Why not?" he asked, disturbed by the uncharacteristically rude inflections in his usually well-mannered friend's voice. "I mean, this is all really fascinating — whatever it is — but I don't see that it's anything so important that you can't let it wait a few minutes while you do your job—"

This time, the physicist looked up at him, glancing over one shoulder with an atypically frigid, one might almost say arctically angry expression. "I said *NO!*" he repeated adamantly, the last word literally making the window panes rattle.

Ray withdrew a step on pure reflex, startled by the unexpected force behind his friend's deeper-than-usual voice, and even more by the red glow he could've sworn he'd seen, briefly, in his eyes. "Uh... okay," he surrendered as amiably as possible, backing toward the door in a strategic retreat. He wasn't at all sure of how to deal with Egon in this sort of mood

since he'd never *seen* him in this sort of mood, not in all the years they'd known one another. "We'll handle it without you, if that's what you want — no trouble. No trouble at all." As soon as he made it into the hallway, he slammed the door shut and ran down the stairs in sheer panic.

By the time he reached the bottom of the spiral staircase to the second floor, however, he'd decided that he was letting his imagination get the better of him. People's eyes didn't *really* glow red when they were angry, and maybe the physicist's voice was sounding deeper than usual because he was coming down with a cold — wouldn't be unusual. Besides, Egon was right: he and Winston and Peter *could* handle a simple Class Two by themselves, no problem. He was just being selfish, wanting to make his own job easier by dividing up what little work there was four ways. He knew how much he hated getting interrupted in the middle of a project, so if whatever Egon was working on was really that important to him — and Ray couldn't see any reason he would be so stubborn if it wasn't — it wouldn't hurt for the rest of them to go on a job without him, this once. Having considered all this in his headlong flight between the third and second floors, he arrived back on the first in a considerably less agitated state than he'd been in when he'd started down.

"Well, is he coming?" Venkman asked from where he lounged against Ecto-1's open front passenger door, waiting.

"No," Ray answered, a touch hesitantly. "I think we'll have to manage this one on our own. He's right in the middle of something. It looks pretty important, and I didn't have the heart to drag him away." He deliberately failed to mention that he didn't have the *nerve*, either. "Besides, it sounds to me like he's coming down with something."

Peter dismissed the announcement with the ease of the congenitally insouciant. "Then let him stay," he shrugged as they climbed into the car. "Last thing I need is Egon coughing up some new mutant virus so we can all catch it at the same time. But," he added, wagging one finger in promised warning, "if he's faking just to sneak in more fun time in the lab, I swear I'm gonna remind him of this next time he asks for extra spending money!"

\*\*\*\*\*

It was quite some time later when they finally returned, the corner and capture of the "simple" Class Two taking a full three hours longer than they'd anticipated. All three Ghostbusters were tired and hungry by the time Ecto-1 pulled into its garage, only an hour or so before sunset.

"Now I know how the guy who finishes last in the Boston Marathon feels," Venkman announced to any and all listeners as he dragged himself up from his sprawl on the car's back seat. "I don't think my legs are going to let me run, ever again."

"It could've been worse," Ray felt compelled to point out, too cheerful by far to suit Peter's sullen mood. "Repeaters like that one usually come in threes — and at least you didn't get slimed, for a change."

"Thank goodness for small favors."

"Hey, it wasn't that bad. And Egon was right: we really *didn't* need all four of us for a little job like this.

"Don't mention that traitor's name to me," the psychologist grumped. "We hired on a fourth to make these things easier, not so he could spend more time in his lab playing mad scientist while the rest of us do all the real work." He shoved himself out of the car and ambled toward the reception area. "Hi, honey, we're home," he called to Janine, who had just settled down with her Chinese carry-out dinner. "What's for supper?"

She swatted him away with her chopsticks as he leaned across her desk to sniff hungrily at her food. "Whatever you put together or call out for," was her prim reply. "I was hired to run your office, not your kitchen."

"I bet you wouldn't say that if I were Egon. Where is the little turncoat, anyway? Still playing Doctor Frankenstein up in his laboratory?"

"As far as I know. I haven't heard a peep from upstairs since you left. And you really ought to show him a little more appreciation, Doctor Venkman. He's a very valuable part of your business...."

He sniffed expressively. "I know, and did I ever say I didn't appreciate him? He just has the lousiest timing in the universe. Take Ecto-1. She's important to the business, too, but I don't see her cutting out on us and taking an unscheduled day off just 'cause she *thinks* she's doing something too important to waste her time on trivial little things, like her job."



"C'mon, Pete, give it a rest," Winston suggested, having clearly heard more than enough discussion of this subject while out on the call. "It wasn't that big a deal."

"Yeah," Ray piped up, taking his side. "And what's done is done. Let's just get this spud into containment and find something to eat. I'm hungry."

"Are you gonna remember to call Egon down for supper?" Janine asked, rightly suspicious of Venkman's current mood.

He didn't abuse her faith in him. "Why? If he's too busy to work, he's too busy to eat."

The woman wrinkled her nose at his back as he and the others moved up the stairs. "Right," she muttered, having heard precisely what she'd expected. "Never mind, then," she called after them. "I'll take care of it."

\*\*\*\*\*

Before coming to work for the Ghostbusters, Janine had never been terrible fond of Hun Yin Gai Ding — Oriental chicken with almonds and mushrooms — but her discovery that it was one of Egon's favorite Cantonese dishes had spurred her to develop a fondness — indeed, one might even call it a passion — for the stuff. When the three men were gone, she glanced over the selections she had ordered from the local carry-out, decided to save the egg rolls and wonton soup for herself, carefully locked them into a file drawer (where, hopefully, their voracious resident ghost wouldn't find them before she could return), and took both the chopsticks and almond chicken up to the third floor lab. Just because Peter was in a snit over Egon's temporary defection and had the others bullied into remaining neutral, at best, didn't mean she couldn't make sacrifices of her own in support of the man she loved.

Besides, providing him with one of his favorite foods, unsolicited, when he hadn't eaten all day might be one more tiny mark in her favor come that much hoped-for day on which he would finally wake up and notice that she was worth at least some small part of his interest outside of contributions in the workplace.

She attempted to sneak up the stairs as noiselessly as possible, so as not to arouse any unwanted attention from those on the second floor, but she didn't quite make it. "I wouldn't bother if I were you, Janine," she heard Peter call to her from the archway into the kitchen. "If he can't trouble himself to come and eat with the rest of us, why cater to 'im?"

"Because I'm *not* you," she snapped in rebuttal, "and because I happen to think he might appreciate it. Egon does a lot around here, Doctor V, and it won't hurt the rest of us to help him once in a while when he gets tied up with an important project. It's for the good of the business."

"Ah, you're just doing it for the good of yourself, not the business," the psychologist noted, surprisingly without rancor. "But go ahead, take it to him. Just don't come crying to me if he throws it in your face."

Irrked, and quite unable to understand why he was harboring such a negative attitude toward someone he usually called his friend, Janine stuck her tongue out at him, then continued on up the stairs. Once outside the lab doors, however, she hesitated, momentarily torn by Venkman's words. Her inability to decide whether or not to go in lasted only until she considered the source of her indecision. Resolute, she turned the knob and quietly stepped inside.

Briefly, she perused the confusing complex of electronic gadgetry Spengler had built since that morning, a truly incomprehensible arrangement that was now twice the size it had been when Ray had last seen it. Janine regarded it with awe, even though she hadn't the slightest idea what it was or what it was for — it simply *looked* impressive. Then, she tore her eyes away, remembering why she was here.

"I've brought you supper, Egon," she announced to the physicist, whose back was to her as he bent over one of the more convoluted and unfathomable portions of the device on which he was laboring.

He offered but three blunt words in response: "I'm not hungry."

She didn't accept that answer. "Come on, the guys said you didn't have either breakfast or lunch...."

His revised answer was no more polite; his voice, Janine noted, was at least half an octave lower than usual, but held none of the rasp of someone harboring a nascent cold. "I wasn't hungry then, and I'm not hungry now."

Her reaction was similarly adamant. "I don't buy that. Even scientists have to eat...."

"Not now. I'm busy."

"But it's your favorite, Hun Yin Gai Ding—"

His head came up and snapped in her direction so suddenly, Janine started and literally leaped backwards a full step. "I said I don't want it," he said so icily, one could almost see the frosted vapor of his breath. "Are you deaf, or is it just that you can't scrape together enough living brain cells in that empty head of yours to understand the word *NO*?"

She was so shocked by his wholly unprecedented reaction, she stood there with her mouth hanging open for a full ten seconds, unable to make a sound. Only when he turned back to his machine was she able to find her tongue again. "Have it your way," she finally managed to croak, her tones at variance with the sharpness of her words. "I was only trying to help. I guess Peter's right and you don't deserve it, but I'll just leave this here, in case you change your mind—"

She had no sooner set the white paper carton on the nearest available flat surface than it was picked up and, with considerable force, hurled in her direction without a hand having ever been laid upon it. The redhead was just barely able to dodge it in time to avoid getting a faceful of almond chicken; instead, it smashed against the closed half of the double-doors, bursting open upon impact and leaving behind a sloppy brown-and-white mess that slowly slithered to the floor. The chopsticks followed a half-second later, impaling themselves on the door like arrows on the side of a tree.

Janine was so completely unprepared for a physical attack, she didn't know what to do but stare in dismayed horror, first at the disgusting smear on the door, then at the usually gentle-mannered scientist she thought she'd gotten to know so well. It was the sight of his eyes — blank, red, unblinking, and glowing so brightly, they caused reflections off the inside of his glasses — that told her exactly what to do, even before he said it.

"*GET OUT!*"

She ran.

\*\*\*\*\*

When Janine came flying into the kitchen less than a minute later, she found the three remaining ecto-eliminators settled around the table and preparing to eat. Peter, who was facing the door and hence the stairs, saw her as she came running up, wide-eyed and breathless.

"Well, what happened?" he asked drolly, already more than half-certain of her answer. "Did you actually get him to eat it?"

Head shaking, the woman grabbed the back of the empty chair opposite Venkman's and leaned against it for support as she tried to catch a decent breath. "He — he threw it at me," she sputtered, half-unable and half-unwilling to believe it.

Peter had no such problem. "Told you so," was his smug reply.

Winston and Ray, however, were not so placidly complacent. "He *what*?" Stantz said with incredulous surprise.

"That doesn't sound like Egon," Zeddemore agreed.

"It does today," Peter opined. "Remember, I had the dubious pleasure of trying to get him down for lunch — even tried pretending I was interested in that new gizmo of his so he'd come out and eat just for a chance to talk about it. He pretty much told me I had the brains of newt and couldn't even begin to understand something so astronomically above my primitive comprehension, so I figured, let him starve, if that's what makes him happy. When he cut out on us for the afternoon job, too, I decided he can stay up there for the rest of the year, for all I care."

"That *really* doesn't sound like Egon," Winston said, now worried.

But Venkman was unconvinced. "Sure it does, when he's deep into his mad scientist shtick. It's just that today, Egon's gone in too deep, and decided that there's no difference between *anti-social* and *rude*."

"Maybe," Ray was only vaguely willing to concede, "but he knows the difference between *rude* and *violent*. Throwing things around — and especially *at* people — isn't like him at all, no matter how wrapped up he gets in a project."

"It's *not* him," Janine was finally able to blurt out, her breath regained.

This time, all three men regarded her with startled skepticism. "Say what?" Winston requested politely.

She was willing to oblige. "I said, whoever that is up in the lab, it isn't Egon. I'm sure of it."

Peter snorted loudly in preparation to making a snide comment, but he wasn't able to get it out fast enough to prevent Ray from speaking first. "What makes you think that?" the occultist wanted to know, his curiosity piqued.

The redhead took a deep breath. "Well, like you guys said, being violent isn't like him — and I don't care what kind of mood he's in: Egon can't throw things around without touching 'em, and he *doesn't* have glowing red eyes."

All three men blinked simultaneously, an almost comic reaction. "You sure you weren't seeing things?" Zeddemore asked, a trace of amused disbelief creeping into his expression, prompted by her patently ridiculous statement.

But Janine saw nothing ridiculous about it. "Don't patronize me, Winston," she bristled, her ire rising. "I *know* what I saw. Egon — or whatever it is — was staring right at me when he threw the carton. He never touched the thing, and his eyes were solid red and glowing. I didn't imagine it."

"Maybe she didn't," Ray put in quietly in unexpected support. "I saw something like that when I went to get him for this afternoon's call, but it was only for a second or two, so I thought I had to be seeing things — a reflection off his glasses or something." He paused as he considered this, a network of small frown-furrows creasing his round face. "The big question is, if that isn't Egon up there, who is it — and where's Egon?"

This time, Peter didn't allow anyone to override his contemptuous snort. "Exactly where everyone thinks: sitting up in the lab and being an uncivilized jerk. Come *on*, guys, would you listen to yourselves for a second? I mean, yeah, I had a hard time believing even Egon could be as rude as he was when I asked him down for lunch, but just 'cause he's graduated from absent-minded impolite to outright offensive *doesn't* mean we've got ourselves some kind of inhuman monster up in the lab!"

Janine remained staunchly adamant. "That's *not* Egon," she insisted, utterly convinced.

Venkman was similarly certain of his own position. "Of course it is. You just have to know how to handle him when he gets into one of his 'project moods.'"

She smiled at him, sourly. "Okay, then, if you think you know so much, let's see *you* go on up and talk him into coming down to dinner."

The brown eyebrows arched. "After he already called me a lower life-form when I told him it was time for lunch? No, thanks."

The secretary's smile became one of triumph. "Then I'm right and you don't know what the heck you're talking about."

She was about to turn to Ray for help when Peter shrugged and pushed himself out of his chair. "All right then, no problem," he said, casually confident in his ability to achieve success no matter what circumstances obtained. "After all, I *am* the psychologist around here, aren't I?"

Janine rolled her blue eyes heavenward in exasperation at his arrogance. "This I gotta see," she sniffed. She followed him out of the kitchen and up the stairs, a curious Ray and Winston tagging along behind.

"Go for it, Pete," Zeddemore encouraged when they were all standing outside the closed lab doors.

Venkman demurred for a second or two as he debated what to say once inside, then strolled forward and pulled open the door. A slop of almond chicken on its inner surface and the lab's tiled floor gave proof to Janine's story of earlier events. The sight — especially the pair of bamboo chopsticks impaled in the heavy oak door — gave the psychologist a moment of more concerned pause, but it was quickly swamped beneath a wave of renewed self-assurance and the need to prove himself right. The fact that Janine had struck out in precisely the fashion he'd predicted would only sweeten his eventual success, mostly by giving him something to throw back at her at some convenient future date. He flung open the door and swaggered in as those in the hall peered around the jamb to witness the spectacle.

"Hey, Egon, ol' buddy," he announced by way of a greeting, exuding the epitome of supreme Venkman confidence and charm, "mind if I come in?"

Fifteen feet away, on the opposite side of the lab, the physicist turned, regarded him as one might an annoying gnat, and in a strangely pleasant and emotionless voice said, "Yes."

The next instant, Peter was snatched up by a powerful unseen hand, torn off his feet, and hurled backwards, sending him smashing through the double doors and across the hall to crash into the bedroom doors, hard, while the three onlookers in the corridor watched mutely, dumbfounded.

Inside the lab, the man who appeared to be their research scientist briefly eyed his victim with gelid dispassion, his eyes conversely glowing with all the fire of a bloody sunset. "Leave me alone," he advised — or, rather, *threatened*, the meaning clear even though his words were impersonal. A moment later, the doors, untouched, slammed shut.

For a second or three, those in the hall did nothing but stare at the closed portal. Then, in unison, they said, "That's *not* Egon."

\*\*\*\*\*

The sound of their own voices was enough to break their torpor. Almost as one, the three still on their feet headed for their fallen fourth. "Peter, are you all right?" Winston asked solicitously as he tried to help him up.

Venkman continued to droop like an empty sack, half-slumped against the bedroom doors, unfocused eyes aimed toward the ceiling. "I take it all back," he mumbled to no one in particular. "There's something seriously wrong with that man in there."

Janine smiled wryly. "I hate to say 'I told you so,'" she quipped, the sentiment genuine due to all the truly awful things her rightness implied.

Ray squatted down beside his usually obstinate partner and passed one hand in front of his face. Peter smiled soppily and asked, "Are we back in Kansas yet, Toto?"

Stantz grinned. "I think he's just dazed. C'mon, Winston, take his other arm and help me get him onto his bed. A few minutes of rest oughta bring him around again."

When they had done so, closing the doors behind them, those who had sufficient presence of mind to do so glanced at one another, profoundly dismayed by what they had just witnessed, and what appeared to be going on in their own house. "What could've happened to him?" Janine asked as she took a seat on the edge of Egon's bed. "Nothing strange happened during that job you had this morning, did it?"

Ray, who had taken up pacing the length of the room, shook his head. "Not that I noticed. It was a textbook operation, went even easier than the job we had this afternoon."

"Could something have gotten to him while you weren't looking?"

"Maybe, but I was with him the entire time. If he'd gotten into trouble or ghostnapped, I would've noticed it. And any shape-changer powerful enough to toss Peter across the hall just by *looking* at him would've registered on our PKE meters. There wasn't even a hint of anything that strong in the area. And if what we brought back wasn't really Egon, he couldn't've used a meter on that puzzle box without it registering his PKE, too. And it didn't."

"Maybe he's just gone off the deep end, finally turned crackers on us after all these years," Peter suggested woozily from where he sprawled on his bed. "Egon's always taken too many chances with some of these experiments of his. I always worried that sooner or later, one of 'em would go haywire on him and fry him." Though he spoke flippantly, there was an undercurrent of real concern in the psychologist's tenor. "Maybe instead of killing him, his little project's turned our boygenius into Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde...."

"Yeah, but Mr. Hyde *wasn't* a world champion telekinetic shot-putter," Ray pointed out. "Tell me that you really believe Egon could've done that, and maybe I'll buy that theory."

The expression on Venkman's face was not a happy one. "Right now, I don't know *what* I believe, Ray. I don't *want* to believe that whatever's happened is something Egon did to himself, but you know some of the weird experiments he's tried over the years — and sometimes using himself as the guinea pig. Maybe he's finally found a way to tap into people's psi abilities and turn 'em on, with the nasty little downside being what's left isn't human, any more."

Janine gasped, horrified by what she was hearing; Winston shook his head and sighed. "I don't know, guys, you've both got points. Maybe Egon's no TK professional, but I don't see why a shape-changer would've gone after him either, just to lock himself in his lab. And like you said, Ray, you were with him the entire time...." As he spoke, he ambled toward the near-empty table in front of the arched window and dropped heavily into the chair beside it. Settling into a more comfortable position, he swivelled one leg to fit it behind the table's and in the process accidentally kicked something he hadn't seen in the shadows beneath. Idly curious, he bent over to fetch it.

"That may be so," Janine was saying in the meantime, "but there's got to be a better explanation. Even if he'd tried some new experiment on himself and it let him throw things around without touching 'em, I *know* Egon wouldn't've thrown Peter out of the room like that, and he certainly wouldn't've thrown things at me."

"I wouldn't count on that," Venkman drawled impudently.

Janine glared at him, wishing she could chuck him out the window. "Even if you're right," she said, grinding her teeth together to keep from yelling, "you still haven't explained one thing: why are his eyes glowing red?"

"Good point," Ray commended. "There has to be a logical explanation for all this. People don't change just like that for no good reason. Egon hasn't worked on any of his psi experiments for almost a year, and even if he *did* go off the deep end, I just don't think he's the sort who'd get violent. And Janine's right: going crazy doesn't explain why his eyes have suddenly started glowing... are you all right, Winston?"

Zeddemore, after having some difficulty in setting hand on the thing he'd kicked, had finally cornered the object. As he'd come out with it from under the table, he'd smacked his head soundly, drawing everyone's attention. "Yeah, I'm fine," he assured them. "It looks like Egon finally figured out how to open that puzzle box Janine found." He held the thing up into the light for all to see.

Sitting up, Peter offered a pithy, "Doesn't surprise me. Even Slimer could've figured it out if he'd spent half the morning playing with it."

Janine was about to unleash a stinging reply when Winston, in the process of reseating himself, set the box on the table, an action that unwittingly brought to life the nearby PKE meter, which Egon had left behind.

He blinked, puzzled. "What the—?"

Ray was there almost instantly. "Look at the readings on this thing!" he whistled softly, picking up the meter and holding it closer to the open box. "They're almost off the scale!"

"From an empty box?" Winston had trouble believing it, but the data displayed by the meter was clear.

"It's coming from the box, all right," Ray confirmed after checking to make certain the instrument was functioning properly. "Residual readings of a major supernatural manifestation. There may be nothing in it now, but something powerful was in it, and not that long ago."

"The shape-changer?" Janine asked.

"Could be. I've heard of boxes like these being used as sort of 'spirit bottles' before. Check the thing for other inscriptions, Winston. Maybe there's something inside that might give us a clue on what was in it."

Zeddemore turned the thing this way and that, squinting hard to find even the vaguest hint of a lead, without success. "Nothing," he reported, frustrated. "Just these same runes we saw before, the ones with the owner's name."

Ray frowned, taking the box to have a look at it himself. "I'm not so sure that's what they really are," he reflected aloud after a minute's examination. "I *know* I've heard the name Kathuurax before — I just can't remember where."

Peter, who was now up and sitting on the edge of his bed, made a soft sound of feigned disgruntlement. "I hate to admit it, but it sounds familiar to me, too. You don't suppose that's the name of that lady insurance agent I met last week, the one who wouldn't go out with me unless we bought flood coverage from her?"

Ray shook his head as he ambled toward the bedroom doors. As he neared them, the meter warned of the increasingly close proximity of a major entity, shrieking shrilly until it literally burned itself out by the time he reached the doors. With a shudder, he moved back to the table and set down the now-useless and smoking instrument. "I doubt it. No,

I'm sure it's something more important — as a matter of fact, I think I might've seen it while I was paging through Robertson's books. If I could only remember which one it was...."

His remark gave Venkman an idea. While the others fixed their attention on the open box, the strange runes, and the slagged meter, he moved to the shelf above Egon's bed, scanned the books, selected one, and started flipping through it.

"How important is 'more important?'" Janine wanted to know.

"Enough to be worth getting *real* worried about," Ray confessed. "I mean, if the empty box alone can produce *residual* readings of 7.9 hours after releasing whatever was in it, then the thing that was inside has to be stronger by... oh, at least a couple of orders of magnitude. I just wish I knew what it was."

"No, you don't, Ray," Peter announced ominously.

The others looked up and saw that he was holding one of their copies of Tobin's *Spirit Guide*. "Did you find something?" Zeddemore asked.

The psychologist nodded. "And I don't think you're gonna like it."

"How bad can it be?" Ray offered in an attempt to maintain some degree of optimism.

"You tell me. Listen:

"Kathuurax was a Sumerian demi-god worshiped in several early societies under different names, but always portrayed as a harbinger of destruction. Although his most common depiction was that of a horned demon, Kathuurax was most often noted for his ability to infiltrate the human world undetected by usurping the bodies of useful, often prominent individuals."

"Usurping the bodies?" Winston repeated, not at all liking the sound of it. "Just what exactly does that mean?"

"It means we've got trouble right here in New York City," Peter replied, one thumb indicating the lab across the hall, and by inference the person — *creature* — inside it whose presence had shorted out Ray's meter. "With a capital E and that rhymes with P and that stands for Possessed."

Ray agreed. "If it really was Kathuurax trapped inside that box, he undoubtedly got Egon the moment he figured out how to open it, and accidentally released him."

"You mean that... *thing* in the lab really *is* Egon, and not a shape-changer?" Janine found the very thought appalling.

"Not exactly," was the occultist's semi-comforting reply. "It's his body, yes, but he isn't controlling it. It's probably Kathuurax doing and saying everything, not Egon. Just like Dana Barrett was controlled by Zuul when it wanted to enter our dimension."

The redhead found that not at all comforting. "Oh, god, does that mean he's gonna change into one of those ugly terror dogs you guys told me about?" The very thought made Janine glad she hadn't had time to eat her supper.

"Not necessarily. Sometimes, creatures from other planes can't enter ours without a human host to carry them; other times, it's the most expedient way for them to do what they want to get done. From what Peter read, Kathuurax must've found something useful about Egon, or he would've just slipped out and found a better or more prominent person to possess."

Winston grunted softly. "Well, he's sure making use of Egon's talents," was his grim observation. "I don't know what the heck he's building in there, but if that demon's in charge of the project, I'm willing to bet anything that it won't be something we'll like."

Stantz nodded. "Yeah, I'd sure like to know just what he's up to — without taking my life in my hands, that is."

"I think I might have an idea," Peter piped up, having continued his reading in silence while the others debated. He went on aloud: "In his most prominent incarnation, Kathuurax was the lieutenant of the Sumerian god Gozer, master of his lesser minions and charged with the responsibility of facilitating Gozer's conquests by infiltrating and destabilizing target societies, thus arranging the circumstances necessary to permit the Traveler's entry into the world of mortals."

As he read, horror touched the faces of all three listeners. "Gozer," Janine was first to breathe. "We aren't going to have to deal with *her* again, are we?"

"It sure looks that way," Ray answered unhappily. "Gosh, I didn't know I was hitting so close to the mark when I mentioned Zuul. But *that's* why the name sounded so familiar! I remember coming across it when we were doing research on Dana Barrett's case."

"Wait a second," Winston interrupted, making the hand signal for time out. "Are you sure we're talking about the same Gozer, here? From what I remember, the minions he sent out ahead of him, Zuul and Vinz-What's's's name, were nothing but a couple of nerdy creeps, nowhere near as efficient as this Kathuurax dude seems to be. If he's supposed to be the boss of all the Goz's armies, then why wasn't he here for us to mess with last time?"

"Probably because he wasn't around for Gozer to send, last time," Peter supplied, holding up the book before reading again from the book. "In the Cymric version of the myth, Kathuurax was subdued and imprisoned by the wizard Myrddin in the Second Century AD. Although Myrddin's Box was never found, the disappearance of Kathuurax from Gozerian cult worship dates back to that time, and the Traveler's employment of lesser minions as advance scouts in more recent incursion attempts seems to indicate some degree of factuality to the legend."

He stopped reading, paused for a moment, then looked up, his green eyes uncharacteristically somber. "You know, if this is all true and it really is this Kathuurax demon possessing Egon, then that thing he's building can only be for one purpose."

They all knew what he was implying, but Ray was the only one with the nerve to say it aloud. "A dimensional gate generator, to open the way for Gozer's return — and his revenge."

\*\*\*\*\*

There were two access points to the firehouse roof on the third floor. One was a steep set of steps in what looked to be a closet off the central stairwell, and the other, a much larger skylight, was over the main lab. Through the former, the four concerned colleagues climbed up to the roof to observe their possessed partner through the latter, in hopes of seeing something that might give them even the smallest clue on how to proceed. As they peered down and watched the demon/physicist at work on the device — which was visibly nearing completion before their very eyes, such was the unnatural speed gifted by Kathuurax's presence and arcane abilities — Peter shook his head and sighed.

"I dunno, guys," he quipped, "but if this demon's as powerful a demi-god as the *Guide* says, don't you think he *knows* we're watching him?"

"Probably," Ray confessed almost cheerfully. "But he sure doesn't seem to care, so long as we don't bother him or get too close, so why not take advantage of it? We won't come up with an answer hiding under our beds, y'know."

"Is that thing he's building really what you think it is?" Winston asked with a good deal of worry. "A dimensional gate generator?"

He'd been hoping for a no, or at least an indecisive maybe, but there was nothing but grim certainty in Stantz's reply. "Yes. And if I'm seeing everything I think I'm seeing, he's even designed it using the same basic principles he — Egon — used to construct the containment unit. I'll bet that's where he got the idea, from Egon. It's really a fantastic engineering achievement, especially considering how fast he's built it...."

"Bottom line, Ray," Venkman interrupted before the occultist could rhapsodize further with scientific enthusiasm. "How long before it's finished, and he lets the Goz in to turn us all into little marshmallow cinders?"

Ray contemplated the question briefly before answering. "Half an hour, maybe an hour, at the rate he's going. But you've gotta understand, even once he *does* get it up and running, it's going to take another hour or so before the gate opens wide enough to let in anything from the Other Side."

Janine frowned, perplexed. Her eyes never wavered from watching the possessed physicist, whose own were now constantly glowing that unnerving, unhealthy red. "It didn't take that long the last time — did it?"

The auburn head shook. "No, at least not once Zuul and Vinz-Klortho got to the temple and the conditions were right. But that time, we knew *days* ahead of time that something big was about to happen — Egon's Big Twinkie, remember? There

was a huge concentration of wild PKE in the area, weakening the fabric of the local space-time continuum. Without that, opening a gate'll be tougher, and it'll take longer."

"So why doesn't he just shut down the containment unit?" Winston wanted to know. "If he's as powerful as you say, he must know everything Egon knows about it, that releasing all those ghosts'd give him all the wild PKE he needs to make his job easier."

This time, Peter answered before Ray could do more than open his mouth. "Maybe, but why should he bother? Just look at him, Winston." He gestured to the figure in the lab below, who had just picked up a visibly live high-power electrical conduit in his bare hand, without adverse effect, and was casually, even leisurely, connecting it to one of the main energy input terminals, oblivious to the crackles and sparks of raw energy harmlessly spitting into his face and spilling over his exposed flesh. "I know more about arrogance than the rest of you put together, and this Kathuurax makes me look like Casper Milquetoast on a really bad day. He obviously isn't in any big rush — why should he be? He's damn sure there's nothing we can do to stop him — and I hate to say it, but I think he may be right."

"We can't give up without *trying*, Doctor V," Janine snapped, upset by the apparent nonchalance with which he seemed willing to surrender the lives of the entire world, Egon's in particular. "There must be *something* we can do!"

"She's right," Ray agreed. "We've gotta at least try. If we let Kathuurax finish that thing, you *know* whose throats Gozer'll be hunting for the second he comes through. It won't be any blasé primal god coming to pay a visit, this time; it'll be an angry Destructor out for blood — specifically *ours*."

"Hey, calm down!" Peter advised amiably, holding up his hands in a gesture begging peace. "I never said we should throw in the towel, just yet."

"Do you have any ideas?" Winston asked, at a loss.

To their relief, Venkman nodded. "First off, Ray's right: we can't let him finish that thing and get it up and running. So here's what I think we should do: you and I can try to throw a wrench into the works down there—" He motioned to the lab. "—slow him down while Ray and Janine go through Robertson's stuff and see if they can find that book Ray thought mentioned Kathuurax."

The powder-puff role he was suggesting for her didn't sit well with Janine, who was more inclined to pursue an active part to help rescue her light of love. "Why? What good will that do?"

"I'm thinking that maybe if Robertson managed to get his hands on the real box, he might've gotten some sort of journal or log to go with it — you know, written by the guy who made the box in the first place."

"And if there is, it might have something in it on how to defeat him. That's not a bad idea," Ray approved, liking the psychologist's abnormally sound logic. "And since we don't seem to have any other ideas, it's at least worth the shot."

"So what're we waiting for?" Winston asked, rising. "Let's get to it. We sure don't have much time to waste."

\*\*\*\*\*

Three minutes later, Venkman and Zeddemore were in the basement and heading for the firehall's main switch-box. "Do you really think this'll work?" the latter queried, somewhat doubtfully. "It seems too easy to be possible."

"I've always believed in trying the easiest ways first," was Peter's flip response.

"Yeah, and how often do they work?"

"Lighten up, Winston," the psychologist suggested rather than give a direct (and incriminating) answer. "If it doesn't, we'll have plenty of time to try something else. Now c'mon, bring that flashlight over here and help me find the circuit-breakers for the third floor."

Fortunately, all the switches were clearly labeled, so it took only a matter of seconds for them to throw the proper ones to cut off all power to the electrical lines in the lab.

Before their eyes, the switches snapped back to the "on" position.



Peter flipped them again.

They answered in kind.

Growling under his breath, Venkman again turned them off, this time holding them firmly in the position he wanted. They stayed that way for all of perhaps five seconds before he suddenly let out a yelp of pain and jumped back.

"Did it shock you?" Winston asked, concerned.

The psychologist shook his head. "No, it burned, and — oh, jeeze, look!"

The switches, which had promptly returned to "open" were melting even as they watched, so that even had they wanted to try again, the attempt would be futile.

Zeddemore let out a whistly breath. "This Kathuurax is one clever cookie," he grudgingly admitted. "I don't suppose we can just call up Con Ed and have them cut all power to the fire house."

"Not without having 'em cut the main power to the containment unit — and I'll bet you dollars to little pink ponies that our demon friend upstairs has got a tap put into the backup generator, too, just so we can't shut him down without shutting off every supply we've got to the protection grid." There were many things about which Peter had a very devil-may-care attitude, but blowing the containment unit again was not one of them.

Winston conceded that possibility with an unhappy grunt. "Man, I *hate* it when these critters we run up against are always three steps ahead of us! Any other ideas?"

Venkman thought hard, then nodded. "If we can't shut off his power, then we'll just have to throw a wrench into the works — literally."

"And just how do you plan to do that?"

The psychologist grinned impishly. "I have a perfect idea. Come on, I'll show you...."

Within minutes, they were standing outside the lab, this time armed with fully-charged proton packs. They took up positions on either side of the closed doors, like members of a SWAT team preparing to storm in for a raid. "Shoot at anything that looks important," was Peter's advice. "Set for full stream? Okay, then — *NOW!*"

As one, they kicked open the double-doors and immediately opened fire on whatever portion of the complex machinery that first entered their sights. Standing between the coruscating lines of deadly fire, Kathuurax/Egon turned, faced them, and, with a totally impassive expression, watched the two Ghostbusters wreak havoc upon his creation. Then, when he presumably felt he had allowed this to continue long enough, the demon/human made the smallest of gestures. In response, the proton blasters were torn from both assailants' hands.

"Hey!" Winston protested, trying to snatch it back without success.

"No fair!" Peter added, meeting with similar failure. "We were just getting started!"

Kathuurax was not impressed. "Hmph," he said softly, and, with an equally tiny gesture, sent both men flying back into the hall amid Peter's plaintively wailed, "Not again!"

As the two paranormalogists struggled to sit up, they saw their possessed partner turn to regard the carnage visited upon his apparatus. The damaged areas began to glow faintly as, before their startled eyes, the machine repaired itself.

The doors closed.

"Okay," Venkman drawled as he caught his breath. "So it *wasn't* a perfect idea."

"It sure didn't work," Winston agreed, quite unhappily.

"Tell me about it. Three strikes and I'm out. What've *you* got, Winston?"

Zeddemore pondered the matter deeply before responding. "Only one thing," he finally sighed, "and I don't think you're gonna like it any more'n I do."

The psychologist pursed his lips, as if he'd just bitten into something extremely sour. "Blast *him*?" he ventured as blandly as possible.

The darker head nodded. "I don't see what else we can do — but I have no idea what it'll do to Egon. Do we dare take the chance of hurting him?"

"*Hurting him*?" Peter sniffed with rather gallowsish humor. "If handling a live high-voltage line with his bare hands didn't singe him, I don't think we'll have much to worry about — 'cept whether or not Kathuurax'll give enough of a damn to stop working on that thing."

Winston's sigh was heavy. "I see what you mean. Okay, then, let's do it, before I lose my nerve." He climbed to his feet and offered Peter a hand up. They both then squared their shoulders and marched back to the doors. "On three," Zeddemore commanded. "One... two... *three!*"

Once again, they kicked back the doors and opened fire, this time directly targeting Kathuurax himself. Their aim was accurate; both streams struck him on the first attempt.

The demon, however, was singularly undisturbed by the assault, thus negating Winston's fears and proving Peter's. As he turned to face them, he appeared to be no more affected by the proton streams than he might have been by a moderate breeze. The usurped scientist's pale blond hair was ruffled by the energy-release wind, and his clothes were slightly scorched, but that was all. Kathuurax studied this new development with vague curiosity; he then laughed softly, and totally without emotion.

Zeddemore gulped. "I don't think this is working," he noted.

"What makes you say that?" Peter asked puckishly. "Just 'cause he's shrugging off full-force proton streams like they're spring showers, you think it isn't working? You really should learn to be a little more optimistic, Winston...."

But Kathuurax was not inclined to give him the opportunity. Raising one hand, he aimed the forefinger at his assailants. For only a fraction of a second, the tip of it glowed brightly; then, with searing abruptness, all the energy with which they'd been bombarding him lashed back toward them, amplified by a factor neither eliminator cared to calculate. It struck the floor mere inches in front of them, burning a large hole in a throw rug and knocking both men back. A second such blast sent them scurrying into the corridor in hasty retreat; a third ripped the lab doors right off their hinges and bumed them to cinders in less than an instant.

"I think we just made a *major* miscalculation," Winston muttered as he scrambled to get out of the line of fire.

"That's putting it mildly," Venkman agreed, cringing against the wall opposite the lab in anticipation of another assault.

It didn't come. Instead, Kathuurax stepped into the smoldering doorway and merely stood there studying them. The dark smoke from the still-burning rug and vaporized wood rose about him like a billowing black cloak, contrasting starkly with his victim/host's pale coloring and lending his normally benign features a definite aura of *Evil*. "Such pitiful fools," he said in tongue-clicking sympathy, the unthreatening melliflence of his deepened voice as unsettling as his inhumanly impassive expression. "And a foolish effort. Did you truly think *you* could present any genuine interference to my plans?"

"Well, we thought what the heck, it's worth a try," Peter couldn't help but wisecrack.

Rather than take insult, the demon laughed, a terrible sound, since it expressed no emotion whatsoever. "A waste of energy, then. But I'm not an unreasonable sort. Stay, if you wish, and see firsthand what is to come of your failure. I think it will be most... interesting to see how my Master chooses to reward you for your past services."

As he pivoted gracefully on one heel and headed back to his waiting device, the sound of footsteps running up the staircase announced the impending arrival of Ray and Janine. "We heard what sounded like explosions," Stantz said, panting as they came around the final curve. "Did anything—"

Winston's gesture toward the lab turned their attention in the proper direction, just in time to see Kathuurax/Egon close the final connection to bring the machine to life. In response to the influx of energy, a triangle of livid purple light formed

above the main apparatus, an equilateral figure fully ten feet on a side. Before long, a formless mist began to gather within those boundaries, rendering it opaque. Those watching knew that, though it now held the appearance of an oil slick over seething molten slag, it would all too soon coalesce into the very real shape of an angry and unforgiving Gozer.

"Lady and gentlemen," Peter breathed, the usual irreverent edge gone from his voice, "I think we're in *serious* trouble."

\*\*\*\*\*

Horrified though they were by the knowledge of what had just occurred, none of the remaining Ghostbusters had totally lost their common sense. Rather than sit in the hall and stare mutely at Kathuurax and his slowly opening gate, waiting for doom to come to them, they executed a strategic retreat into the bedroom to gather their scattered wits and attempt to formulate a new plan of action.

"I guess he was closer to being finished than I thought," Ray mused as he closed the doors behind them. "I take it this means nothing you tried worked?"

Peter and Winston shook their heads in such well-timed unison, it almost looked rehearsed. "We might as well've tried bombarding him with marshmallows, for all the good it did," Venkman opined.

Zeddemore shuddered. "Don't mention marshmallows! The Big K was right: I hate to think what Gozer's gonna do to us, once that gate's open — probably slow-roast us over a campfire. We may as well kiss it all goodbye right now."

His atypical aura of defeat caused similar reactions in his companions — except for Ray, who, rather than frown, was actually grinning. "Maybe not, Winston. I think I've found something that could help us prevent it." He held up a large book with a very battered leather cover and pages so yellowed, they might have been parchment rather than paper.

"Robertson *did* have a manual to go with the box?" Peter found that almost too far-fetched to believe, but at this point, he was willing to grasp at any potential solution.

But Ray shook his head. "Not exactly, but I did find more specific references to Kathuurax in one of his other books, Gwyllim's *Guide to Ancient Evils*."

"Well, then, what're you waiting for, Ray? Let's hear it!"

Stantz hedged. "Ah... it might not be the solution we really *want*, Peter," he warned. "There's good news and there's bad news."

"Isn't there always?" Winston sighed wearily.

"Let's hear the good news first," was Janine's advice.

Ray obliged; they all settled around the window-table to listen. "According to Gwyllim, while some supernatural entities — the Bogeyman, for instance — thrive in the presence of specific strong human emotions, there exists a small but significant group of beings, mostly demi-gods and very powerful lesser demons, who thrive in the presence of strong human *intellect*. And Kathuurax is one of 'em."

Winston's eyes went round. "That's the *good* news? You might as well've told us this creep lives on thin air, for all the good that does us, Ray. Egon's practically nothin' *but* intellect...."

"Wait," the stocky occultist admonished, obviously intrigued by something he had yet to report. "You didn't let me finish. Kathuurax feeds off human intellect, all right, but where critters like the Bogeyman weaken only in the *absence* of their required emotion, Kathuurax weakens in the *presence* of *any* human emotion. That's why he sort of has to hypnotize his victims before he can possess 'em. He needs to numb them into total impassivity before he can even start to move in."

"Sounds kinda like Dracula," Peter noted drily. "That would explain why it took us so long to figure out something had happened, though. With the way Egon normally tries to keep little things like his feelings under lock and key, Kathuurax probably didn't have to do much more'n bat an eyelash at him to suck him in. And you found all this stuff in that book of Robertson's?"

Ray nodded. "There's more, too. Apparently, when he's inside a host body, the more emotional agitation he's subjected to — especially via his victim — the weaker Kathuurax becomes."

"Sounds a little like that Vigo nasty we stopped a few months back," Winston reflected.

"In the same general ballpark," the occultist agreed. "Though with Kathuurax, it doesn't matter if the emotion's positive or negative. That's how Myrddin managed to capture him in the first place: He got a man who had recently been possessed so angry, the Big K couldn't hang on to him any more, and when he was driven out, Myrddin magicked him into his box. When Kathuurax was inside, he supposedly sealed it into a solid block with the warning runes carved on the outside, but... well, not every source is gonna be a hundred percent accurate two thousand years after the story happened."

He closed the book and set it down on the table. "That's the answer, guys. It isn't Kathuurax we need to deal with, here; it's *Egon*. And if we can get him mad enough — or whatever enough — to make Kathuurax good an' uncomfortable, he ought to leave Egon and come out sufficiently weakened for our equipment to handle. It's really very simple."

Venkman groaned. "Yeah, about as simple as getting blood from a turnip. Like I said, Ray, Egon's not exactly the most emotional person around, and you know it. How the heck are we supposed to get him to feel *anything* if this demon's got him hypnotized into some sort of la-la land, much less make him feel it strong enough to give this jerk the boot?"

Janine scowled at him. "The same way you'd do it if it was anyone else," she snapped, infuriated by his presumptuous attitude. "No matter what you think, he's still a human being, Doctor Venkman—"

Peter rolled his eyes. "Yeah, like Mr. Spock's human...."

The redhead's scowl became a glare; she used it to pin the psychologist with such vehemence, he leaned back in genuine surprise. "He's got feelings like anyone else, and you know it!"

Taken aback by her response, Venkman threw up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay, Janine, you've made your point! I've known Egon a lot longer'n you have, and I understand what you're saying." His tone both softened and became more firm at the same time. "But you know what I'm saying, too. If this demon had gone after any one of *us*, breaking the possession wouldn't be hard — heck, with Ray, all we'd have to do is sing him a couple of lines of that song out of *Dumbo* and ol' Kathuurax would be heading for the hills. But with Egon it's just not that easy. Sure, I know he has the same sort of emotions the rest of us do — I wouldn't be his friend if I didn't — but his aren't as accessible as most people's — sometimes, I think, not even to him. I'm a psychologist, I've been his friend for almost fifteen years, and even I'm not sure what buttons I could push to get a rise out of him, not the kind we need this time."

That admission of inadequacy came as such a surprise to the receptionist, she found herself with nothing to say. Winston, having listened quietly, broke the ensuing silence. "I'm almost afraid to ask, Ray, but if this was the good news, then what's the bad?"

The occultist cleared his throat. "Ah... you're not gonna like it."

"Of *course* we're not gonna like it," Peter said, green eyes rolling in perfect exasperation, his typical mood restored. "We *never* like it. So tell us anyway."

"Okay," Stantz continued, nonetheless reluctant. "There's one more big problem: According to Gwyllim, as Kathuurax feeds off a victim's intellect, he also undermines its soul, driving it out of its own body until it's entirely destroyed. It doesn't happen right away, but the longer Kathuurax remains in control, the less and less likely it becomes that the victim will be able to break free of the trance and evict him. Eventually, the possession bond'll become permanent, and once that happens, there's nothing anyone can do to prevent the soul's destruction, not even the host itself."

The others stared at him, aghast. At length, Winston swallowed his horror and spoke. "So what you're sayin'," he ventured slowly, sorting his thoughts as he voiced them, "is that if we don't do something, and pretty darn soon, there won't be no Egon left for us to rescue."

The auburn head nodded slowly, heavily. "That's right. And even worse, being inside a human body insulates Kathuurax from physical attack. If we're already too late to save Egon, then we're going to have to destroy what's left of him and hope that'll be enough to weaken Kathuurax to the point where we can trap him."

"Which won't be easy," Peter told his shorter partner. "From what Winston and I saw, the protection works both ways. We already tried hitting him with a couple of full-strength streams, and the only damage it did was mussed Egon's hair a little."

"Are you listening to yourselves?!" The sharp cry came from Janine, who had suddenly jumped to her feet in horrified protest the moment she fully realized what was actually being said. "You're talking about *killing* Egon!"

"Not Egon," Ray clarified uneasily. "Just his body."

As anticipated, that elaboration did nothing to placate the woman. "It's the same thing! You can't do it, Ray! You can't kill Egon—!"

"We may not have any other choice," Peter pointed out, doing his best to maintain an appropriately sober demeanor so she'd know that for once, he wasn't joking, not in the least. "We can't let Kathuurax open the way for Gozer, either. We got lucky, sending him back the last time; we may never get that lucky again."

His reasonable explanation was no more successful in calming her than Ray's had been. "So then think of something else!" she commanded, unwilling to accept this scenario as inevitable.

Zeddemore shook his head. "Easier said than done...."

But she remained adamant. "There's almost always more than one answer to any problem— Egon told me that. And there *has* to be another way to stop that demon!" She turned her glare on Stantz. "Egon's your best friend, Ray. How can you even *think* of killing him?"

"Because he *is* my best friend," was the quietly unhappy answer. "I know exactly how you feel, Janine. We're all Egon's friends; none of us want to do anything that'll hurt him."

To her astonishment, Peter added his support. "That's right. Okay, I know it looks like I pick on Egon more'n I should, but you should know me well enough by now to know that half the time, I do it just to get a rise out of you, Janine, or him. But kidding around a lot doesn't mean I don't care and know when to draw the line, especially when one of you gets in trouble. When we go out together on a bust, we have to do it knowing that we can trust one another to cover each other's back — and if that doesn't include doing whatever we can to help when one of us gets possessed, I don't know what does. But when we put together this crazy business, we also took on an even bigger responsibility, and if the choice comes down to saving our own hides or saving the world, then we've got to be ready to lay it all on the line and not look back. We know it—" His gesture included himself, Ray, and Winston. "—and Egon knows it, too."

"You've got to understand," Stantz continued gently, putting a hand on the receptionist's shoulder, his brown eyes compassionate, "he may already be beyond our capacity to help. If Kathuurax *is* completely in control — if nothing we can do can get a response to show that Egon's still with us — then the things that make him the Egon we all know — his mind, his personality, his soul — are already dead, and that... *thing* you're seeing walking around in the lab is nothing but an empty shell Kathuurax is using for his own purposes. I know how you feel about Egon, Janine, and I don't like this idea any better than you do, but don't you think it'd be a pretty cruel memorial for us to spare a collection of cells that looks like our friend when we know that our *real* friend's gone and the demon inside his body plans to use it to lay waste to the rest of the world?"

As she listened, Janine found herself comprehending the existential complexities of the situation quite against her will, but mere understanding couldn't rid her of an increasingly strong desire to cry. Rather than further embarrass herself in front of Venkman (who would doubtless memorize the entire scene for future blackmail), she nodded briskly and, on impulse, threw her arms around Ray's neck to hug him, hard. "Yeah, I see what you mean," she admitted as she blinked back the unshed tears. "Just promise me you won't do it unless there's no other choice."

Stantz's response was both fervent and unhesitant. "You've got my word."

That was all the more maudlin indulgence she would permit herself. Standing straight again, she swallowed her misgivings, pulled back her shoulders, and lifted her chin, once more ready to face whatever Fate had in store. "So why the heck are we still sitting here talking?" she demanded imperiously. "If time's of the essence, then we'd better quit wasting it, or we'll be handing this creep his victory on a silver platter!"

"You said it," Peter concurred, relieved to have the matter settled so easily. "Come on, guys, let's move it!"

\*\*\*\*\*

They moved; trouble was, they still had no idea what to do once they got there.

"Now what?" Winston asked as they gathered in the hall outside the broken lab doors and watched the undulating mists within the triangle of purple fire come closer and closer to forming a viable gate. Kathuurax was watching it, too, from where he was indolently lounging against a computer table off to the left of the entrance. He appeared singularly unmoved by the spectacle (which surpassed the best special effects known to man), although his crimson eyes continued to burn with the same weirdly passionate dispassion as before. Zeddemore didn't find the sight at all comforting; all too often, inaction on the part of their more powerful opponents merely meant that they were spending a quiet moment devising a truly devastating attack. "You don't suppose we could get a big enough reaction out of him just by telling a mess of bad jokes, do you?" he speculated, his humor weak.

"Nah," Peter sighed regretfully. "I've given the big guy some of my best sure-fire routines and he barely cracked a smile. You've heard the kind of stuff he laughs at. You need an IQ of at least 200 just to understand what he's saying."

Ray looked at the creature who until recently had been his friend. With the sun long gone beyond the horizon and all the lab's power being sucked in to feed the device, the only source of light left in the room was the sickly purple radiance given off by the gate. It lent the motionless not-demon an otherworldly complexion, enhanced by the red glow of his eyes; the sight made the occultist shudder. "I don't think the twenty best comedians ever born could get a reaction out of him — or not the kind we want," he was certain. "We need a better approach. Anyone got any ideas?"

There followed a moment of silence. Then, unexpectedly, Peter stepped forward. "Just leave it to me," he said, completely confident. "I know exactly what to do."

Janine had definite doubts. "Yeah? Since when do you ever know exactly what to do? If you ask me, Doctor V, your only *real* talent is for offending people...."

"Exactly. And that's just what we need." Without further explanation, he strode forward through the charred portal and into the room, stepping gingerly over the ash heaps that had once been the doors. The others followed less aggressively, hanging back to flee or provide cover, if either became necessary. "Hey, Egon!" Peter called, sounding for all the world as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened that day.

His incredible nonchalance ignited some small amount of interest in Kathuurax. He tilted his head to regard the psychologist as he might a bug which had had the audacity to attempt biting him. "You surprise me, subcreature," the demon admitted, rather graciously, all things considered. "I had thought you would have ascertained the truth of the situation, by now."

Venkman was not put off by the remark, nor rendered one whit less insouciant. "Yeah, yeah, we know all about you, Kathuurax, and how you think you're running the whole show. But I'm not interested in you, right now. I want to talk to Egon."

The demon's low chuckle could only be called good-humored under a very broad definition of the term, since it held about as much emotion and warmth as ice water running over stone. "Talk all you wish — but there is no Egon, only Kathuurax."

This thoroughly complacent announcement elicited a sharp gasp of dismay from Janine and similar softer sounds from Ray and Winston. But Peter had lived through an encounter with the Zuul-possessed Dana Barrett, and remained arrogantly self-assured. "And I've heard *that* before, too," he replied, airily brushing aside the statement as he would one of absolutely no consequence.

Kathuurax was likewise unimpressed. "Have you? Then stay, by all means. If you truly want to be the first to die when the Traveler comes, that is, of course, your affair. Far be it from me to deny you such a suitable last wish." He then turned his face back toward the gate — through which distinct shapes were now becoming visible — and ignored them utterly.

As he looked into the grotesque miasma of the coalescing portal, Ray abruptly realized that, unlike his remaining partners, he was unarmed. Acutely aware of his personal vulnerability, he coughed nervously. "Uh... Peter, if you really do have some plan in mind, I think you'd better start using it — now!" Within the triangle, a sudden flare that appeared to be fire momentarily settled into the face of a rabid terror dog, then just as suddenly vanished.

"No problem," Venkman promised, having seen the warning as well as Ray. "In case you're listening, Egon," he continued in a stronger voice, "I just wanted you to know that we're doing really great without you. As a matter of fact, we started out thinking of running an ad to hire someone to replace you — you know, since it looks like we won't be seeing much of you any more, seein' how you've gone and achieved godhood an' all that — but Winston closed up that little puzzle box

of yours and gave it to Slimer, and guess what? The spud had it open in fifty seconds flat! Since it took you over an hour, we figure that means he's got to be at *least* as smart as you, so it looks like he'll be taking your place on the team."

If his comments were producing any reaction at all, it wasn't visible. Winston sighed. "Keep trying, Pete. I think you've got the right idea."

"Yeah, but not the right approach," the psychologist muttered back. He pondered the matter briefly. If a backhanded slur against the physicist's extraordinarily high intelligence wasn't enough to get a rise out of him, Peter wasn't quite sure what was. Of course, comparing Spengler's intelligence to the Spud's was like comparing the feeble flicker of a firefly to the brilliance of a supernova — then, it hit him. With renewed confidence, Peter cleared his throat and again addressed the demon/scientist. "Anyway, I thought you'd like to know the really big news: Ray says he can't handle all the scientific stuff on his own — maintaining all the equipment, updating it, designing new gadgets — so he made a couple of calls, and guess what? Remember John Stassen — ol' 'Stickyfingers' Stassen from grad school, the one who stole your chemistry Master's project while you weren't looking and forced you to write a whole new thesis in less than a week? Well, he said he'd be happy to work for us and take over where you left off, so starting tomorrow, he'll be coming down to take charge of your lab, at twice what we're paying Winston."

This time, his remarks were met with a response: Kathuurax/Egon pushed himself away from the desk, moved to stand directly in front of the gate, and turned his back on them.

Venkman took this as a sign that he was getting close to striking paydirt, as he'd expected. In his experience, anger was the single most easily incited emotion, and he'd realized that an attack against Egon's work would infuriate the physicist more reliably than any personal attack against Egon himself. "As a matter of fact," he went on, his tones betraying a deliberately casual "who cares?" attitude, "Janine says she's got an uncle who's a patent lawyer, and he thinks they can have the names changed on the forms before they finish processing 'em in Washington, so when the patents *finally* come through on your particle throwers and grid generators and all those other nifty little gizmos you've been designing for the business, it'll be Stassen's name on 'em, not yours."

For a moment, he thought he saw the not-demon's broad shoulders tighten; encouraged, he piled on his *pièce de résistance*. "So trust me, Egon: You don't have to worry one bit about leaving behind a bad reputation just 'cause you went out as a demon who planned to destroy the world. Heck, once we're finished messing up your name, John'll get the credit for all the good stuff, and no one'll remember you ever *existed*, or even *want* to...."

That final touch produced precisely the response for which Peter had been hoping. When the target of his verbal abuse whirled to confront him, it was an angry Egon Spengler facing him, not a smugly diffident Kathuurax. "Peter, how *could* you?!" he demanded, completely furious, his voice back to its normal low but not sub-*profundo* range. "Those are *my* inventions, *my* discoveries! You don't have the right—!"

A small squeak of delight escaped Janine. "Ray!" she exulted, clutching his arm to get his attention and pointing. "Look at his eyes — they're blue again!"

Considering how brilliantly they'd been glowing only a few seconds earlier, the change was unmistakable. "Thank goodness," he agreed with unabashed relief. "That means Egon's still with us, or a part of him, anyway. I wonder if maybe...." Inspired, he started scanning the room in search of a stray PKE meter. He spotted one on the shelf unit just inside the door. He made an accurate grab for it, then quickly recalibrated it to allow for Kathuurax's powerful emanations.

The blond physicist, in the meantime, continued to lay into Peter. "And no matter what the circumstances, how you could even consider giving any sort of serious scientific credit to a lying fraud like Stassen is completely beyond my comprehension—"

Suddenly, his tirade was cut short with a voice-choking gasp, as if he'd just been subjected to an unseen but nonetheless very high-voltage shock. He staggered back, grimacing, to collide blindly with the edge of the gate apparatus. For what seemed like a long minute, he stood there in shivering silence, his eyes sealed shut; when they finally opened, they were once again glowing, brighter and more redly than before.

"Blast!" Winston hissed, frustrated. "We almost had 'im!"

As he straightened, Kathuurax regained his composure — clearly an effort — then glared at those watching him with vivid contempt. Behind him, a solidifying landscape of hideously demonic appearance lent further impact to his disdain. "So," he said softly in that hair-raisingly pleasant, too deep to be human voice, "you know of my weakness." He inclined his head in polite acknowledgment of the fact. "I congratulate you on your ingenuity."

"Thanks," Peter quipped. "It was really nothing."

"Quite true. Since there is nothing you can do to stop me...."

"Don't count on it," Janine retorted hotly.

The demon raked her with one eye, his expression bland. "You suppose that these emotions in which you place so much value will prove stronger," he said, a statement rather than a question. "And, like so many others, you believe that your friend will resist my presence, fight against me until I will be forced to consume his soul so that I may inhabit this body without interference."

"From what we hear, that's been your usual M.O.," Winston growled, not trusting Kathuurax's sudden willingness to talk.

The icy smile returned to the not-scientist's lips. "Has it ever occurred to you that a host may *willingly* accept what I have to offer? Power, immortality, abilities you cannot even begin to imagine?"

"Not Egon." Though Janine said the words first, they came virtually at once from four sets of lips.

"Maybe if it was me you were talking about," Venkman said with startling self-honesty, "but Egon's the last person I know who would trade even as crummy a corner of the world as New York for what you're peddling."

"You're just trying to buy time," was Winston's opinion, "so either that damn gate'll open, or it'll be too late for us to save him."

"That's right," Ray agreed grimly. "You *can* fight it, Egon!" he called out in an attempt to reach whatever was left of his possessed partner. "We've found plenty of sources to prove it. Kathuurax can't tolerate—"

"Enough!" A single peremptory gesture from the demon sent them all stumbling back toward the corridor, pushed by a force they could neither see nor resist. "Your words will not save him. He has been most useful to me, thus far, and I intend to make as much use of him as I can in the little time he has left. And if that means cheating my Master of a moment's pleasure by destroying you myself, now — so be it."

The light in the red eyes flared; in response, a circle of fire shot up from the burnt rug, startling the four colleagues and driving them out into the marginal safety of the hall. Once there, they crouched on either side of the door; when a second, more powerful attack did not immediately follow, they remained alert, half-expecting the worst to happen at any moment, the proverbial lull before the storm.

"What do we do now?" Winston panted, trying to regain the breath that had been stolen from him by the sudden gout of searing heat. "It was a good shot, Pete, but I don't think it's gonna work twice."

"Neither do I," the psychologist reluctantly confessed as he slapped his left arm to extinguish a fold of cloth which had been caught too close to the flames. "Egon's invested a lot of what's really important to him in this business and all its research, and if threatening to take it all away isn't enough to break him free of Kathuurax... well, then, maybe we got the right answer a little too late. But if anyone else has any bright ideas, I'm willing to listen — 'cause if you don't, it's time to use Plan D for Desperate."

"I agree," Ray sighed, not at all happy with the situation. "I've been monitoring Kathuurax's PKE readings since he took control again—" He held up the meter he'd successfully adjusted. "—and if my calculations are correct, a full stream assault made simultaneously from four proton packs should be enough to overload his psychophysical defenses."

"You're beginning to sound just like Egon," Peter groaned, albeit wistfully. "Are you trying to say that if we all hit him at the same time with everything we've got, he won't be able to absorb the blasts and shrug 'em off — that it'll kill him?"

"More or less," Stantz confirmed.

Janine clutched at his arm. "No! Ray, we can't! You promised me we'd do this only if we couldn't break What'sarax's control, if there wasn't anything of Egon left to save. He's still there — you saw it! You can't kill him!"

"Janine, he's going to destroy the world!" Peter pointed out hotly, impatient with her single-minded persistence, even though he felt the same helpless rage. "I gave it my best shot—"



"Maybe you didn't," was her swift comeback. "Maybe threats like that aren't enough 'cause Egon knows you really wouldn't do it!"

"Then what other choice do we have?" Winston intervened, his expression dour but his inflections pragmatic. "If we don't do something quick, we won't get another chance. Look." He gestured to the doorway. Beyond it, the image within the gate was achieving frightening clarity; before long, it would also become porous, allowing the creatures they could now see on the Other Side to come through. Kathuurax had turned to face it again, waiting patiently for his Master's imminent arrival. "Do or die, Janine," Zeddemore said bluntly. "We've gotta decide now."

"Besides," Ray added, offering what little mitigation he could, "there's no guarantee this'll work...."

"Great, Ray," Peter's quip was sourly droll. "That's just what we needed to hear."

Listening to them, the redhead's features hardened into a mask of determination. "Go ahead and get the extra packs, then," she said, "but I'm gonna give it one last try." And, with startling suddenness, she leapt to her feet and ran into the lab, ignoring the dying flames that licked at her ankles as she ran across the smoldering rug.

"Get back here!" Venkman yelled as his attempt to stop her just barely missed latching onto her trailing foot.

"Janine, you don't know what you're doing!" Ray hollered, horrified. "Come back!"

"Cover me," Winston grunted and took off after her.

Five steps ahead of him, Janine headed straight for the demon/scientist, who was making some incomprehensible adjustment to his machine, undoubtedly wishing to hasten Gozer's emergence. Seeing that as a target, she latched onto the arm with which he was manipulating the device and dragged it off the controls, temporarily halting whatever he was doing. "Egon, no!" she cried, anxious. "You've got to stop him — you've got to fight it—!"

Unexpectedly, Kathuurax flinched away from her, as if the touch of an unpossessed mortal was profoundly painful to him. "Get away!" he hissed, the first truly unpleasant sound they'd heard him make. Eyes flickering like the waning supernatural fires on the floor behind him, he shrugged her off forcefully, causing the woman to stumble backwards and fall.

The moment he rid himself of this human pest, however, another locked onto his opposite arm as an angry Winston leapt to her defense. "That's no way to treat a lady," he protested, the physical contact eliciting a second shrill of agony from the demon, this more anguished than the last. Before Winston could do anything more, however, Kathuurax flung him away with considerably greater force than he'd used to deflect Janine. Zeddemore hit the flooring with a loud and painful smack.

Glowering at the black man, Kathuurax raised one hand in a gesture with which Peter was getting all too familiar. Knowing what would happen next if nothing was done, Venkman took aim and fired before the demon could burn Winston into a pile of smoking ash. It caused no physical harm to the creature (though it did leave a few new holes in Egon's clothing), but the blast distracted him long enough to let the downed Ghostbuster scramble to safety.

Cursing and coughing, Winston let Ray help drag him out of the line of fire. "Janine's still in there!" he snarled in frustration, dazed and struggling hard to pull himself together.

"Let me try, this time," Peter started to suggest when a crackling, six-foot wide stream of paranormal energy thundered through the doorway, Kathuurax's version of an angry parting shot. Out of instinct, Venkman fell back, literally, and not quite quickly enough to avoid getting the tip of his nose singed. "On second thought..." he amended as the force of the blast ripped the door frame loose of the wall, shattering the transom and burying them under a shower of broken glass, sharp-edged plaster, and burning wood. Across the hall, the doors to the bedroom were blackened by the fireball, wisps of smoke rising from the charred surface.

"We've gotta do something," Ray coughed as he hauled himself out from under the debris and tried to help his buried partners do the same. "That gate's gonna open any second now!"

Inside the lab, Janine was not as far out of the game as the others had thought. Climbing to her feet, she again latched onto the not-demon's arm to interfere with his assault on those trapped in the hall. "No!" she screamed, somewhere between anger and misery. "Stop it! Egon, you can't do this — you can't let *him* do this! Those are your *friends*—!"

Once more, Kathuurax howled in pain and threw her off; once more, she stubbornly refused to submit. In his repeated reactions to physical contact, she was suddenly able to see a pattern: Kathuurax was so sensitive to the presence

of human emotion, the mere touch of someone in a state of emotional agitation — of any feeling, be it anger, hatred, fear, or even affection — was in itself a weapon against him. Grasping upon that as their only chance to defeat Kathuurax and win Egon's salvation, she concentrated hard on everything she had ever felt for the physicist, from frustration to pride to exasperation to love, then, from her position on the floor, wrapped both arms around his lower legs and hung on with all her might. "You're still in there somewhere," she said with fierce belief. "I know you are. C'mon, Egon, please fight it..!"

Kathuurax, however, was not pleased with this latest attempt. His fury and pain was such that, despite Janine's strong grip, he managed to kick her off, almost as easily as one might kick away some small stray animal begging for food. But the redhead, though frustrated, was not deterred. Doggedly, she pulled herself to her feet and leapt for the demon, determined that this time, she would hang on for as long as it took to get him to release his captive in order to flee the pain, no matter the cost to herself. She sprang...

...and Kathuurax, anticipating the attack, lashed out at her with the back of one hand, as if he was swatting away an annoying wasp. The blow connected mid-leap, slapping her back so hard, it literally lifted Janine off her feet and threw her clear across the wide room, where she crashed into a storage shelf and slid to the floor. As she lay there, a spreading pool of blood appeared on the right side of her head — and this time, she did not get up again, did not move. Even her chest did not appear to rise and fall with breath.

A horrified shout of, "No!" echoed from those in the hall, a furious reaction that made no apparent impression on the demon. Kathuurax simply stood there, studying his most recent victim. Peter, seeing this as a unique opportunity to hit him while he was distracted, scrambled through the wreckage in hopes of finding his buried blaster before the advantageous moment was lost.

The demon then raised one hand for the *coup de grâce*, to make certain the woman was dead. Peter started digging faster...

...as the hand fell, and a single, even more horrified, "*Janine!*" rang through the near-silence of the lab like a shot in the dark. The not-demon doubled over, as if he'd taken a heavy blow to the mid-section, staggered forward one step...

...then straightened and lifted blue eyes free from any hint of red to stare, aghast, at the despicable thing the demon had apparently done. Behind the freed Egon, coalescing in the very spot on which he'd just stood, a huge and ominous black cloud turned from a mass of roiled translucent mist into the solidly opaque manifestation that was Kathuurax's true form. As it stood erect, towering over its merely human-tall victim, it bellowed its fury, outraged at having lost its protection so near to the completion of its goal.

It was all happening very quickly. By the time Peter finally laid hands on his lost weapon, Kathuurax was reaching out to recapture his prey, howling a loud and ear-shattering, "NO! You cannot have him back — he is mine!"

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Venkman grumbled, shaking the dust off his thrower and bringing it to bear on the demon.

"Aim for the head!" Ray suggested as he helped Winston untangle his own weapon from the debris. "It's his most vulnerable spot."

"You got it," Peter obliged, and fired. Light-quick, the proton stream struck dead on target just as Kathuurax's claws were about to close again around Egon, who was too exhausted and disoriented to realize he needed protection. The force of the blast threw the creature back and gave Spengler the moments he needed to grasp what was happening and stagger beyond the reach of Kathuurax's paws. The demon screamed and thrashed against it, giving Peter the struggle of his life. "Not to seem pushy, guys," he drawled as casually as possible, "but would you hurry up and finish digging that thing out an' give me a hand here? This is like trying to hold a whale with a yo-yo string — an' I'm the yo-yo!"

"One second," Winston promised.

One second, however, was more than enough time for Kathuurax to utilize. "You are too late, subcreatures," he thundered, seemingly growing acclimated to the proton stream bath. "The Traveler is upon you — and if I cannot have this man, then neither will you!"

With that, Kathuurax raised both hands, took aim, and unleashed his demonic fury in a massive outpouring of supernatural fire that struck Egon dead on and threatened to consume him. The scientist screamed.

"Winston!" Peter shouted.

And Zeddemore was there beside him, opening fire. The impact of a second particle stream hit Kathuurax hard. Almost instantly, his paranormal attack wavered, faded, and died as his powers were reduced or inhibited by the neutralizing effects of the streams. Released from the hold of the demon's attack, Egon swayed for a moment, then collapsed face-forward like an unstrung puppet, his now-tattered clothing grayed with supernatural soot and faintly smoking from the fortunately short-lived assault.

Kathuurax himself howled and struggled and raged against his attackers, searing the air with OtherSide curses but little else as his power waned. Beyond him, other snarlingly grotesque voices joined in, the chorus of Gozer's minions approaching the at-last opening gate.

"Oh, no!" Ray gasped, realizing what was about to happen. Knowing that something had to be done *now*, he ducked under the sizzling streams and ran for the generator. He arrived just in time to see the first of the Destructor's minions — a particularly hideous terror dog — come racing toward him as it prepared to cross the gate. Since he couldn't reach the controls themselves due to the battle going on inches before them (not that he would have known how to operate them, even if he could), Stantz grabbed the nearest handful of important-looking cables and wires and pulled with all his might. They resisted for an instant, then gave amid a shower of sparks and the sputtering stench of ozone.

Across the face of the device, indicator lights flared so brightly, several popped; then all went dark. The purple outline of the gate wavered; a mist covered its surface, grew thick, then dissipated. The gate vanished.

Ray heaved a considerable sigh of relief.

Almost as if in celebration of the event, Winston chose that moment to throw out the trap, which Peter tripped. An obscenely shrieking Kathuurax tried one last time to resist, to escape, and failed. The trap closed and crackled briefly.

The room was silent.

\*\*\*\*\*

Winston was first to break the stillness with a ponderously happy sigh. "Oh, man!" he breathed as he took a moment to revel in the hard-won victory. "I hope I don't have to live through anything like that ever again!"

"Amen," Peter agreed, quite sincerely. Replacing the business end of his particle thrower on its backpack hook, he stepped carefully over the charred flooring to check on their rescued partner. Winston joined him while Ray went to do the same for Janine. "You all right, Egon?" Venkman asked, crouching to help the man sit up.

It was clear that Spengler was still alive, if rather worse for the wear, for he was blearily squinting about himself, apparently looking for his glasses, which had been thrown off by the impact of Kathuurax's final attack. Peter found them easily and returned them to their owner. "I'm fine," the blond replied hoarsely, an assurance that was belied a moment later when he swayed where he sat and nearly fell flat on his back again, his spine showing all the erectile capacity of an overcooked noodle.

Zeddemore caught him. "Take it easy," he advised sagely. "You're as weak as a kitten. You can't tell me that livin' through all that didn't take anything out of you."

Whether or not that was true currently held very little concern for the physicist, who, for the moment, was considerably more worried over whether or not a creature using his body had just killed someone of his acquaintance. "Janine," he began. "Is she—?" He couldn't bring himself to say the awful word.

He didn't have to. "I'm all right," came her very much alive and strongly-voiced response as she and Ray joined them. Stantz was helping her along, since she was still a bit wobbly on her feet, and she was holding a wad of tissues to her right temple, having already wiped away most of the blood that had run down her cheek. "It looks worse than it really is," she explained, kneeling beside Winston. "You know the way scalp cuts can be. But if you want my advice, Doctor Spengler, you should really spare a few minutes sometime to trim your fingernails, or at least get them registered as deadly weapons...."

Her attempt to maintain a casually good-humored detachment dissolved into failure; she threw her arms around him and hugged him as hard as she could, unutterably relieved. "Oh, Egon, I'm so glad you're all right...!"

"I'm glad you are, too," he said so softly, not even Janine could hear it, but he smiled, hugged her back — and quite promptly fainted.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Well, Doctor Trumbull says you ought to be up and around and as good as new inside a week," Ray announced the next morning after breakfast as they all gathered in the bunkroom at the foot of Egon's bed to share the physician's findings. "But he also gave us strict orders to keep you in bed for at least the next three days, and completely off the job for the rest of the week. It seems that whatever else being possessed by a demon like Kathuurax does to you, it's as hard on your system as suffering exposure for a week without food and water." Stantz grinned. "That's what he sorta thinks happened you, y'know, that and getting singed by the 'explosion that blew up the lab.' I didn't have the heart to scare the poor old guy by telling him what *really* went on."

Janine sniffed softly. "Ah, he's not stupid, Ray. He knows. With the four of you for patients and some of the even weirder things you've brought him in for, I don't think anything you could tell him would really faze him."

"Probably not," Peter agreed. "And I did a little research of my own, Egon, so you'll be glad to know that psycho-feeders like the Big K don't really eat up your brains. The mental disorientation is temporary; give it a day or so, and you'll be back to driving us crazy, as usual."

"I already knew that, Peter," the physicist informed him didactically. "The 'feeding' processes of such entities rely not on a consumption-and-combustion system, but rather on a paranormal osmotic symbiosis — or perhaps more accurately, psychospiritual parasitism — that thrives in the presence of requisite factors, in this case high intelligence, but does not destroy the living tissue in an energy-releasing reaction...."

The psychologist moaned expressively. "I take it all back," he interrupted rather than let the discourse continue. "You're driving us crazy already!"

The others laughed at his exaggeration; even Egon smiled. "Anyway," Ray went on, "we'll try to keep the noise down to a minimum while we fix up the wreck Kathuurax made of the lab and hall, but I thought you'd like to know that I'm leaving his gate-generator up 'til you can have a look at it—"

"NO!" his fair-haired partner cut him short with unusual fervor, surprising all of them. "Thanks for being so considerate, Ray," he explained in a more moderate tone, "but I'd really rather you took it apart as soon as possible."

The occultist blinked back at him, confused; even Peter was puzzled. "Are you sure?" Ray asked. "I thought you might be interested in seeing it first."

"Yeah," Venkman agreed. "This is usually the sort of thing you can't wait to get your hands on."

Egon shuddered. "I've already had my hands on it more than I care to think about — and I've seen enough of it to have the design burned into my mind forever. No, please, Raymond, dismantle it as soon as you can. I'll feel a lot safer, that way."

"I know how you feel," Winston sympathized. "Knowin' that all you'd have to do is plug the thing in again to let out a mess of terror dogs and demons, not to mention the Goz himself...! Brrr!! I get the creepy-crawlies just thinkin' about it."

"Hear, hear," Janine agreed.

Ray looked from one to the other of his friends, then sighed. "Okay, if that's what you want. I just thought it might be nice to study the thing in more detail before we rip it apart, see if there's something in it we could use to help the business."

"I think this is one scientific mystery we're better off leaving unsolved," was Egon's opinion. "Trust me."

"There are some things man was not meant to know," Winston philosophized.

"And this is one of them," Peter concluded.

Seeing that he was in a definite minority, Stantz shrugged equably, and let it go at that.

"You know, I haven't really thanked all of you for getting me out of that mess," Spengler went on before anyone else could bring up a new subject. "Somewhere, in some corner of my mind, I was vaguely aware of what was happening to me, and how Kathuurax was keeping me under his control, but I couldn't think clearly enough to do anything about it. I'm glad you stopped him when you did, or I'm afraid I would've been completely gone before the night was out."

"Gone as in dead, or as in... well, what Kathuurax said," Ray asked, faintly uncomfortable with the thought, especially the latter half. "Y'know, being a willing host."

The physicist's blue eyes unfocused for some moments before he replied. "I'm not sure. It's difficult to imagine *wanting* to allow a demon to use you like that when you're on the outside and all you can see are the horrible aspects of it — which, I admit, I did *not* want to see happen if there was anything I could have done to prevent it. But Kathuurax was more than merely evil; he was very powerful, extremely intelligent, and he knew exactly how to find a host who just might fit all his needs, including potential willingness. Remember how you told me that Gwyllim's *Guide* said the box was supposedly sealed into a solid block after Kathuurax was shut inside?"

Ray nodded. "Yeah, but I figured that was one of the parts of the myth that just wasn't true. Stories change over the years...."

"Not this one. The box was turned into a block of solid wood with the warning runes carved on it, just like the story said. But he was so powerful that over two thousand years, Kathuurax was able to influence his environment enough to change it back into a box — and not just any box. He wanted it to be one that when opened would put him right into the hands of someone he could possess. Not just anyone would do; it had to be someone who would be intelligent enough not to be overwhelmed by fear when he saw the demon, or the fear itself would prevent the possession. Certainly, once open he could have simply left the box and gone off in search of a better host, but outside the PKE saturated environs of his natural home — Gozer's realm — he needed a human body for both strength and protection, and the sooner he found one, the better. Thus, the puzzle box, and a highly complicated one at that."

"Did Kathuurax tell you this?" Peter asked, wondering where Egon had gotten the information, but half-sure he already knew.

He was not disappointed. "After a fashion. His ego was as strong as the rest of him, and I believe he wanted me to know just how clever he'd been, perhaps as some sort of strange attempt to induce me to bond with him willingly."

Winston whistled softly. "He really was one smart customer. But you can't tell me you went along with him of your own free will, Egon — or did you?"

The physicist appeared vaguely uncomfortable, and not from his various aches and pains. "No," he finally said. "But it was tempting."

Peter's green eyes went as round as humanly possible. "You're kidding. *You* were tempted by piddly little things like power and immortality?"

But the blond head shook. "Not that. But seeing the world through those kinds of senses, being able to look at something and understand it down to its molecular structure, just with a glance...!" From the expression on his long face and the gleam in his blue eyes, words were woefully inadequate to describe the full experience. "To a scientist, Peter, such abilities would be invaluable. Eventually, they could eliminate a need for any sort of physical instrumentality...."

The psychologist's astonishment turned to good-natured chiding. "Yeah, well, just remember, Egon, it was that kind of wish come true that destroyed the Krell."

Understanding his reference to the old science fiction movie *Forbidden Planet* and its remarkable aptness — an entire advanced civilization destroyed because it had forgotten in its quest for perfection the potentially violent subconscious imperfections that are a part of all living creatures — Egon conceded the point. "Which was why I never really considered it. We were nothing to him, not even chattel, and any sort of life in a world with him in it was utterly unthinkable. Which makes me all the more grateful you managed to save me before Kathuurax succeeded."

Peter preened over the compliment. "Oh, it was nothing...."

"You're right," Winston agreed, "seeing how it was *Janine's* persistence that did the trick. If it'd been up to the rest of us, Egon'd either be toast, or we'd all be roasting over a slow fire somewhere in Gozerland, right now. She was the one with the faith — and the guts."

"Thanks, Winston," she said in an acknowledgment of praise considerably more gracious than Venkman's. "But I really didn't know what I was doing, not until almost the end."

"It was still very brave of you," Egon was quite willing to admit, "especially considering what you were up against. Kathuurax really *did* intend to kill you, you know."

"I know," she said placidly, nonetheless pleased by his compliment. "But I knew *you* didn't. It was just a question of who was stronger, you or Kathuurax, and I'd bet on you, any time."

Peter snorted. "Kathuurax, definitely. You just got lucky, Janine. If I'd been you, I'd *never*ve gambled my life on that kind of a long shot."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Which is one of so many reasons why I'm glad I'm *not* you."

Ray cleared his throat, interrupting before Peter could hurl the comeback he had prepared and thus begin an all-out war. "I think we'd better get out of here and let you get some rest, Egon," was his excuse for playing peacemaker. "You gonna give us trouble about this and make us lock you in here?"

The blond head shook; there was no hesitation in the reply. "Not at all. For once, I think I'm going to be perfectly happy to just lie here and do nothing for as long as I can get away with it."

"Sure you don't want us to bring you anything?" Winston offered, knowing how bored he himself got whenever bedridden. "Some books, the *Times* crossword puzzle...."

Egon winced. "Don't say that word!"

Venkman was the epitome of innocence. "What word? Not *puzzle*...?"

Janine found the nearest object at hand — the pillow off the psychologist's own unmade bed — and hurled it at him. "Out!" she ordered, her tone brooking no protest. "Before I really get mad an' sic Slimer on you!"

"I'm out!" Peter assured her, laughing at the threat, and suited action to words.

As she herded Ray and Winston after him, the darker man brought up a matter he'd been contemplating all morning. "Y'know," he told Stantz, "while you were in here with Doctor Trumbull, I dug up one of your mythology books and read the story about Pandora — and I've gotta tell you, this whole mess makes what happened to her look like a picnic."

Ray blinked, surprised, part of his attention peering through the half-opened bedroom door where he could see Janine bend over to tuck in the exhausted Egon and place a kiss on his forehead. "Really? Why do you say that?"

"'Cause after she opened that box and let out all the evil, at least she still had that big diamond, Hope, left inside. With this Kathuurax dude, we didn't have nothin' left but trouble and lots of repair bills to be paid."

"Oh, I don't know, Winston," Stantz said reflectively, still watching his friends on the other side of the door, "I wouldn't say that *nothing* good came out of this."

The frown he was given was one of total puzzlement. "Yeah? What diamond do *you* think was left in this Pandora's Box?"

Inside the bunkroom, Ray saw Egon kiss Janine's cheek and say something that the occultist knew had to be a more sincere expression of gratitude than he would have felt comfortable uttering in front of an audience. At the sight of the redhead's glow of pure delight, he suddenly felt that all was very right indeed with the world, with the hope of getting even better.

"Well?" Zeddemore prompted, genuinely curious.

But the only answer he got as Ray ushered him toward the stairwell was a smile.

The End