

The Root of All Evil

(Or: There's No Such Thing As a Free Lunch)

a *Real Ghostbusters* novella by

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The love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs.

1 Timothy 6:10

*For Carol, who asked for a romance.
Right now, this is as close as I'm getting in this genre. Be patient.*

I

Women are like pictures of no value in the hands of a fool til he hears men of sense bid high for the purchase.

The Beaux Stratagem, Act ii, Scene I

If, as Francis Bacon philosophized back in the Sixteenth Century, constancy is indeed the foundation of virtue, it should come as a wonder to no one that, in the inconstant environs of the late Twentieth Century, those who found the greatest need to change in order to keep up with the times were the minions of Evil Itself. Whereas in bygone years the various underlings of the Underworld were able to establish routines that would reliably result in the corruption and fall of innocent souls, the changing times brought with them changing values and mores, rendering the tried-and-true rituals of demonic soul collection quite useless. Thus, as certain supernatural lifeforms died out for lack of interest, others were forced to adopt new methods in order to maintain their quotas for their demonic Masters.

A pair of such minions happened to live in the trendier regions of midtown Manhattan, two employees of Evil who, in earlier times, would have been called a succubus and an incubus. They were of a kind that had nearly gone extinct in the late 1960's and '70's; their ancient method of sapping human strength and buying human souls had become thoroughly ineffectual with the onset of the so-called Sexual Revolution. What they'd traditionally offered victims as bait to snare their souls — depending on the target, sex or romance, but usually sex — suddenly became easier (and cheaper) to find in any singles' bar. In a quandary, they assessed their situation, studied their options, and devised a new method of approach. Rather than rely on seduction of a purely physical nature, they opted to win their needed souls through another human failing that had become oddly fashionable in that recently-flourishing human subspecies known as the Yuppie: greed.

The pair of demons in question worked out of an office that looked like any other small but stylishly profitable business office in the more successful parts of New York. The sign engraved on their glass door proclaimed them to be UBIS, Inc.: *Unified Brokerage and Investment Services, Incorporated, Adrian Doyle and Melanie Colton, Counselors*. The place never seemed exceptionally busy, but the well-appointed furnishings and tastefully expensive decorations bespoke a high degree of success, and the extraordinarily beautiful and charming appearances of the counselors themselves were enough to convince potential clients that anything either of these two people touched would instantly turn to gold.

That was, perhaps, a genuine possibility, given their supernatural abilities, but these devilish minions took great care to keep their less (or perhaps more) than human aspects well hidden. It was an ideal cover: Victims came to them of their own free wills, eliminating the need to go prowling the streets in search of corruptible souls, and their success rate was higher than it had ever been under the Old System. This pleased Melanie, the junior of the two — though one could not say the same for her partner.

"Now I understand what they mean when they say all the romance has gone out of the world," Adrian — who, in the world of mortals, wore the guise of a painfully attractive black-haired, silver-eyed man in, at most, his early thirties — was fond of telling his similarly colored and equally beautiful female partner. "Here we are, two of what are supposed to be the most captivating creatures ever to set foot on this planet, and how do we spend our days and nights? Seducing our victims with promises of profit, not promises of love. It's indecent, I tell you, absolutely indecent!"

Melanie, whose growing impatience with her senior co-worker took on the appearance of extreme boredom, looked up from where she was examining client files to toss him a blandly disdainful glance. "Don't knock it," she suggested. "At least it works. According to Home Office figures, our aggregate efficiency and effectiveness rates have gone up over sixty-five percent since the New Methods were introduced."

Doyle snorted. "Efficiency," he scoffed, casually propping his feet on his partner's desk and plucking a tissue from a nearby box to scrupulously polish the flat crystal pendant he habitually wore around his neck. "We may be more systematic, but we're certainly not as interesting as we used to be. Corrupting the souls of money-hungry yuppies through stock manipulation and insider trading may look very effective in the numbers department, but it's positively *boring*." He drawled the last word with total and unrelenting disapproval.

Melanie's gorgeous button of a nose wrinkled quite aesthetically. "No one ever said you were supposed to enjoy your work," she reminded him. "All the Boss wants are souls signed up for his Afterlife in the Underworld program, as many as he can get as often as he can get them, and whether or not we have fun in the process is totally irrelevant."

But Adrian wasn't listening, as usual; his mind was off amid daydream memories of bygone eras. He held the crystal up to the light, looking for any smudges he might have missed, and sighed. "Ah, for the good old days, when an incubus could look forward to a few pleasant days and nights romancing the lady of his choice until she was his, body and soul, instead of talking her into signing on the dotted line...! It's ever so much more appealing, watching a woman's heart flutter from the thrill of rising passion, not the thrill of a rising market." Finding no flaws in his handiwork — precisely as he'd anticipated — he tossed the tissue into the room's wastebasket with the flair and accuracy of a basketball star. He tucked the pendant beneath his shirt, then buttoned his collar and tightened his tie, once again the very picture of Yuppie success. "It's such a loss, such a terrible, terrible loss."

Melanie sighed, almost gagging on his excessive melodrama. "That's not the way the Boss sees it. We're running a business, not a matchmaking or escort service. Besides," she added, straightening her papers before putting them back into the filing cabinet, "if you want my opinion, you're much better at winning souls by whispering insider trading tips into the ladies' ears than you ever were by whispering sweet nothings."

The face the incubus turned on her was handsome, even if it was puckeringly sour. "You're only saying that because you're jealous. You were just a child before the New Methods came along; you never had a chance to get any good at the Old. The only people you ever managed to woo successfully, my dear Miss Colton, were desperate adolescents who would have sold their souls for a glimpse at back issues of *National Geographic*. Even if I *have* lost it — which I haven't, I assure you — I'm still better off than someone like you, who never had it in the first place."

The succubus favored him with an arctically frosty glance. "Is that a fact?" she asked tightly.

"It is," he preened.

"Then would you be willing to put a wager on it?"

His interest was piqued. "What sort of wager?"

"A simple one: You want to prove that the Old Ways are better than the New? Fine. The next woman who walks through that door is all yours. If you can get her soul signed, sealed, and delivered inside three days using the Old Method, then I'll be more than happy to go with you to the Boss and try to convince him we should trash this investment business and return to the traditional seduction methods. If you can't, you stop all this reminiscing and complaining and do things the way we're told. Deal?"

He thought it over briefly, then nodded. "Deal," he agreed, almost gloating. He had no doubt that he would succeed, but win or lose, this at least promised to be fun, for a change.

No matter how frequently it happened, it often amazed Janine Melnitz that, at times, her work as the Ghostbusters' secretary/office manager could be simultaneously hectic and boring. Having spent the entire morning up to her neck in the once-yearly update of their client and advertising files, she found herself ready to fall asleep from boredom, not exhaustion, and looking forward to an afternoon of the same with nothing even remotely akin to anticipation. She hadn't even been able to corral one of her employers to help out, as they were sometimes willing to do. Their own mornings had been filled with three calls (one genuine, if supremely simple and hence low-paying, and two false alarms) as well as a variety of other necessary tasks, so she'd been doomed to complete the job on her own. When she finished her physical sorting of the client files and glanced at the clock, she was unusually glad to see that it was almost noon. Anticipation of her lunch break had taken on attractions of truly phenomenal proportions. Not that she didn't have less than ideal plans on how to spend it, but, even with a promised errand cutting into it, any time away from those blasted, blighted, boring files seemed as desirable as a long vacation in Tahiti.

Winston Zeddemore — who was in the garage fixing one of Ecto-1's headlamps that had gotten damaged during their last assignment of the morning — noticed her most recent wistful glance at the clock and grinned. "Big plans for lunch?" he asked, taking a momentary break from his work.

"Not really," she admitted as she hurried to finish the last of the sorting. "I promised to drop off some papers with a broker as a favor to one of my neighbors, since she was nice enough to give me a ride to work last week when my car was in the shop. It's uptown, so I'll probably have to catch lunch on the run, but at least it'll get me away from all this dull paperwork for a while, give me some time alone to clear my head."

Winston understood completely. "Yeah, you've been going at it pretty hard all day. Look, it's almost noon, anyway. Why don't you cut out early, get a head start on the lunch crowd?"

It was a kindly gesture; Janine didn't fail to appreciate it. "Are you sure? Doctor Venkman's been going through one of his 'hard-nosed-boss' phases, lately. He yells like I'm running 'im bankrupt whenever I take a few extra minutes."

"He isn't here," Zeddemore pointed out, "and what Pete doesn't know won't hurt him. Go ahead. If he finds out, I'll tell him you're out on company business. Deal?"

She grinned. "Deal," she agreed instantly, and wasted no time abandoning the files to fetch her coat and purse. "Thanks, Winston."

She was just about to head for the door and freedom when a call of, "Janine, wait!" from the back of the hall stopped her.

Briefly, she expected it to be Peter, ready to chew her out for trying to extend her lunch period by a mere ten minutes, but, recognizing the deep voice of Egon Spengler rather than Venkman's oft-whiny tenor, she stopped and turned, hoping this wouldn't take long. "Make it quick, Egon," she suggested without malice, since this was one employer she wanted desperately to avoid offending. "I'm just on my way out for lunch."

"I know," the physicist replied a little breathlessly, as he'd run up the stairs from the basement in an attempt to catch her before she left. "I wanted you to take this with you." "This" was a small specimen container, featureless except for some chemical symbol markings Janine didn't understand and could barely read, they were so small.

Even though she couldn't decipher the cramped markings, she nonetheless recognized what it was. "Don't tell me: You want me to take this to your friend's lab in Red Hook, right?" He didn't need to answer; she sighed. "This is the third time this week, Egon, and it's only Wednesday...."

"But it's very important," the blond scientist cajoled. "I'm right in the middle of a project, and he's the only person I know with the facilities I need who's willing to do the work without charging an arm and a leg."

She made an odd face, somewhere between regret and annoyance. "Can't it wait 'til later? I've already got another errand I have to run during lunch, and Red Hook's in the opposite direction. I won't get a chance to eat if I do both."

She wasn't really surprised when he said, "No, I've already put this off while we went out on those jobs this morning. If I wait much longer, I'll have to start this phase of the experiment all over again, and that'll be two days' work down the drain."

Missing lunch was not one of Janine's favorite pastimes, especially considering how hard she worked for so little pay, but neither could she stand around and watch Egon's scientific research ruined. Sighing again (and more heavily), she took the container and surrendered. "All right, since it's for the good of the business. Maybe I can catch something to eat at one of the subway stops." She gave the thing a quick and slightly disdainful eye. "What *is* this project, anyway? More research stuff for your encyclopedia of ectoplasmology?"

The fair-haired head shook. "It's for a project I'm doing to study the effects of gamma radiation in accelerating the mutation patterns of *Ceratiomyxa fruticulosa*."

Both Janine and Winston blinked. "What?"

"*Ceratiomyxa fruticulosa*," Spengler repeated. "The common Coral slime-mold. It's a fascinating study...."

The redhead stopped before he could launch into an impromptu lecture. "Slime-mold?" she echoed with a trace of disgust. "Isn't that that horrible fungus stuff that crawls around on its own?"

"Well, after a fashion," he admitted, "though the entire nature of the phylum Myxophyta isn't properly understood, quite yet, which is why I've been experimenting with it...."

"Then you're telling me I've been spending my lunch hours all week running errands that don't have a thing to do with the business? That this has all been personal stuff?"

It was Egon's turn to blink back, though he did so much more ingenuously. "I suppose it is, but you never seemed to consider it an imposition."

She ground her teeth, thinking back to the last few afternoons which she'd spent with sore feet and a painfully growling stomach. "Looks aren't everything," she muttered under her breath. Winston heard her, but Egon didn't.

"It really *is* very important to my project," the scientist insisted. "If the lab doesn't get it before two, they won't have time to complete the next step today, the specimen will be ruined, and I'll have to start all over again. I'd do it myself but—"

Janine held up one hand, stopping him from giving the explanation she already knew by heart. "But you're right in the middle of something else and can't get away." She shook her head, hesitating. "I really shouldn't. I promised Gwendolyn I'd get these papers to her broker, and he has to have 'em today, too...."

"But his timing isn't so crucial, is it?" Egon observed (accurately, she was sorry to admit). "It doesn't matter *when* he gets them, does it?"

"Well, I don't think so, but—"

"This is for *science*, Janine."

She cringed. Lord, but she hated it when he did this to her, not because he always came up with arguments she couldn't fight — which, dam it, he did anyway, as reliably as clockwork — but because she couldn't stand the way he looked whenever he was facing professional failure: unintentionally pathetic. Inside, she moaned with the knowledge that she was doomed. She was a sucker for Egon, plain and simple, always willing to give in just because she couldn't bring herself to disappoint him — as she couldn't disappoint him now, even if it did mean missing her lunch, running all over town, and getting docked by Tightwad Venkman for coming back late. All he needed to do was give her that inadvertent "my work is about to be ruined" look with those nearsighted baby blues, and she knew she'd had it.

Still, she wished that once, just once, she could look forward to getting more in return than a simple thank you.

"Okay, okay," she caved in. "I'll go. But this is the last time, Egon. And if Doctor Venkman chews me out for being late again, I'm sending him to yell at you, understand?"

The expression of relief that crossed his face was almost worth any imposition. "Perfectly. Thank you, Janine. I appreciate it."

"I'll bet," she breathed, though she didn't mean it. She knew that the physicist's gratitude was at the very least sincere, when he remembered to offer it, and he'd gotten much better at that than he had been back when she'd first come to work for them. On the other hand, she was never quite sure when Venkman was sincere about anything, be it appreciation or carping, and he was the one most inclined to ask for personal favors from their secretary as if it were part of her job description. Shaking her head in resignation to her fate, she tucked the small specimen container into her coat pocket and hurried out before Peter could show up and either catch her leaving early or add a request of his own to her already overfull schedule of errands.

Winston, having listened to the entire conversation with quiet interest, watched her go, then clicked his tongue. "You'd better watch it, m'man," he advised Spengler, who had started back to the basement lab.

At the top of the stairs, Egon paused to regard Zeddemore with consummate puzzlement. "Why?" he wanted to know, genuinely at a loss.

The black man merely *tsked* him all the more firmly. "'Cause one of these fine days, that lady's gonna stop putting up with the way you take her for granted, she's gonna find someone who knows how to appreciate her the way she deserves, and she'll tell you just where to take a hike. An' then, who'll do all these little favors for you?"

"Ridiculous," came the immediate and utterly certain reply. "Janine knows I appreciate her help — which I do *not* take for granted. And if you're implying that she might become involved with someone else in a romantic relationship, it wouldn't trouble me in the least. We're just friends, Winston, nothing more." With that reality clearly stated, Egon resumed his trip down the stairs, unconcerned.

Winston, however, watched his blond colleague leave, his own expression most difficult to define, combining as it did elements of both knowing smugness and sadly humored pity. "Uh-huh," he said to himself. "Right. And my mother's the Queen of England." He briefly considered going after the physicist to pursue the discussion, but he knew exactly where that would get him — nowhere — so he decided his mama had been right: People should keep their noses out of other peoples' affair, especially when the affair was an affair, or a lack thereof. He'd already said more than enough, so it was time for him to butt out and return to his work on the car.

Janine, in the meantime, was finding it more and more difficult to believe the truly awful luck that continued to plague her. Traffic on the northbound surface streets near the firehouse had been tied up due to an accident somewhere in the vicinity of Grand Central; below ground in the subways, a breakdown had caused a temporary shutdown of the lines she might have used instead. Left with no choice but to start walking, she decided to head for the broker's first, since it was much closer and easier for her to reach than the Brooklyn neighborhood of Red Hook. She thanked God that it was at least a reasonably nice day for spring; clear though breezy skies and warm temperatures made the prospect of a long walk pleasant rather than forbidding. Unfortunately, she wasn't the only one with the transportation problem and the idea of hoofing it, so the sidewalks were rather more crowded than usual,

especially through Central Park, where she had to keep both eyes open to avoid the hordes of joggers and other athletic types who had chosen to take advantage of the good weather.

It took her most of the hour to make the less than two mile walk from the firehouse to the Park Avenue office. By the time she got there — frazzled and rumpled from the wind and a collision she'd had with a pair of enthusiastically inattentive skateboarders in the park — she was ready to punch out whoever she saw first, Gwendolyn or Egon or Peter, for being such a stingy clockwatcher, for making her rush through what might otherwise have been a very pleasant lunch break. She'd never make it to Red Hook and back to the office before two at the earliest, and piling a certain-to-happen dressing-down by the supercilious Venkman on top of it all just made her bad mood even worse. So it was that she made her way through the park while concocting all manner of devious retribution she knew she'd never inflict on any of her friends (well, maybe on Peter). She finally stepped into the impeccable offices of UBIS, Inc. shortly before one o'clock with a growl in her throat, a gripe in her heart, and a thoroughly unfriendly look on her face, ready to deliver Gwendolyn's papers by shoving them down the throat of whoever was unlucky enough to approach her first.

Melanie was in the process of filling their coffeemaker with water when Janine entered. She looked up, surreptitiously raked the human woman with a critical eye, took in her less than picture-perfect condition, then poked her head into Adrian's office. "This is it," she announced, adding, *sotto voce*, "and good luck. You're going to need it."

"It's not a matter of luck," the incubus assured her as he got up from behind his desk, straightening his coat and tie. "It's skill."

Melanie sniffed doubtfully, but said nothing more. Adrian strode past her to greet their prospective client. The moment he got one look at her disheveled and less-than-stylish condition, he stopped dead in his tracks.

Behind him and out of sight, the succubus grinned wickedly. "A real challenge even for your skills, wouldn't you say, Adrian?" she purred so that only he could hear.

"The mark of a true master," he murmured back. "This will only prove my point all the more effectively." Ignoring Melanie's reiterated sound of doubt, he collected himself and continued forward. "Good afternoon, Miss," he greeted in a baritone so finely modulated, it, too, was beautiful. "May I help you?"

Janine, who up 'til now had been more interested in fishing Gwendolyn's papers from her purse than in studying the office and those in it, glanced up to see who had addressed her. The moment she did, it took a conscious effort on her part to keep her jaw from hitting the floor. She had seen many men in her life — they were difficult to avoid in this crowded city — but never had she ever laid eyes on anyone who, through physical appearance alone, made her react so strongly and so immediately. "Uh..." she began inarticulately, the power of speech momentarily beyond her reach.

Adrian smiled, an expression that exuded friendly and understanding charm on the outside, but glowed with an egocentric "I haven't lost it" satisfaction on the inside. Melanie, watching furtively from just inside the door of her partner's office, grimaced in disgust.

Janine located her voice. "Um... are you... let's see, what was the name she gave me? Adrian Colton?"

"Adrian *Doyle*," the incubus corrected helpfully. "Miss Colton is my associate."

She blinked. "Oh. Gwen must've gotten 'em mixed up. Anyway, she — Gwendolyn Koznowski, my neighbor? — asked me to drop off some papers with you. They're here somewhere...."

Again, Adrian smiled. "Ah, yes, Ms Koznowski. She's one of my newer clients. I hope something unpleasant didn't prevent her from bringing them herself?"

He exhibited such honest concern for Gwen's well-being, Janine couldn't help but be impressed. "Oh, no — well, not unless you consider a dentist's appointment unpleasant, which I do."

"So would I," he agreed, his smile showing teeth that were so perfect, no dentist in the world could find flaw with them. "How nice of her to send such a charming young lady in her place, then."

Melanie, on her way to her own office, made an unpleasant sound that was easily interpreted as, "Give me a break!" Adrian chose to ignore it.

Janine, on the other hand, didn't even hear it. After such a lousy morning, she was willing to listen to *any* compliments, and this Adrian seemed so nice and sincere... and Lord, was he ever *gorgeous*...! She looked up at him and smiled back, then resumed digging through her purse. "I'm sure I brought them with me," she assured him, embarrassed by her inability to locate the papers. "But things were so hectic at the office, I just can't seem to remember where I put them...."

"I understand," he sympathized. "Some days, I'd misplace my head if it wasn't permanently bolted to my neck."

A grumble drifted from Melanie's office, on the order of, "I could remedy *that*." A brief scowl flickered across Adrian's perfect features in response.

"I have an idea," he said, touching Janine's arm to get her attention. "I was just on my way out to lunch. You look as if you've been running non-stop all day; why don't you come with me and give me the papers there?"

The word *lunch* was music to the redhead's ears. She almost said yes on sheer reflex, beguiled by the promise of food and the smile on that stunning face. But, "No, I can't," left her lips instead. "I'm running late as it is. I promised Egon I'd deliver his stuff to the lab, and Doctor V's gonna chew me out when I get back as it is...."

"I'm sure the delivery can wait a few minutes — and you can't be implying that your boss would begrudge you a well-earned meal?"

She sighed. "I'm not implying it, I'm *saying* it."

Adrian dismissed it with a wave of one hand, as if it was a matter too beneath the dignity of any human to be so much as considered. "Nonsense. Why, no employer in his right mind could be so unfair to an obviously hard-working employee such as yourself, Miss...?" He hesitated, prompting her to supply the name.

She did, without reservation. "Melnitz, Janine Melnitz."

He took her seemingly boneless hand and shook it in polite acknowledgment. "Adrian Doyle. Well, now that we've been properly introduced, what do you say? I know a lovely little place where the service is as excellent as the cuisine. I'm sure we could be in and out in plenty of time for you to finish your errands and be back before your boss gets angry."

"You don't know Doctor Venkman," she replied, mostly to herself. She was tempted, very sorely tempted to take him up on it. It had been a lousy week all around, and she was in need of the kind of attention Adrian seemed more than happy to supply, even though she was sure all his flattery was nothing more than a ploy setting her up for the inevitable sales-pitch. But.... "No, I can't. It's almost one, and I promised Egon I'd deliver his package by two. It's very important...."

"Nothing's as important as maintaining proper nutrition," Doyle insisted, radiating all the persuasive charm of his species. "Surely, a little errand like this can wait, can't it, Miss Melnitz?"

She opened her mouth and started to say no, but something stopped her. She didn't know what it was — a case of rebellion sparked by all her thankless work of the last few days, an overly-long suppressed need to have somebody, *anybody*, treat her like a lady worthy of romantic attention, or merely the compelling expression in Adrian's silver-gray eyes — but looking at him, an imp inside her twisted the no on her lips to, "Yes. Yes, it can wait."

Her conscience spasmed briefly with an outcry of, *What are you doing?! You've just met this guy — you don't know anything about him!* But the same imp that had twisted her words slapped her common sense into silence when Adrian beamed his approval. *Then again*, the unbidden thought crept into her mind, *no one else ever offers to take me to lunch, so why shouldn't I go?*

Adrian could see the change of heart in her expression and inwardly congratulated himself for having made such quick and success-bound progress toward controlling the woman's mind. Once that was done, it would be simplicity itself to take control of her soul. *I'm on a roll*, he thought smugly as he fetched his coat.

I think I'm in trouble, was Melanie's worry as she watched them go.

As they left the building and Adrian somehow managed to hail a cab despite the thick midday traffic, Janine started having second thoughts about her impulsive decision to accept the broker's invitation. There were all of two minutes left on her official lunch hour, and she knew that by the time they got to a restaurant — *any* restaurant, even the fastest of the fast food joints — ordered their food, were served, and ate it, there certainly wouldn't be enough time left for her to reach the lab before the two o'clock deadline. She couldn't just blithely ignore that fact, no matter how miffed she might be with Egon for filling her unpaid lunch hours with his errands for three days running. It really wasn't that big a deal to her, when all was said and done, and now that she'd stopped to think about it, she honestly didn't mind doing him the favor. She was considerably more concerned about disappointing him than she was worried about Peter chewing her out, something she had long since learned to endure and ignore.

Having several moments to herself for silent and uninfluenced reflection while Adrian flagged down the cab, this matter was very much on Janine's mind when he finally met with success and gestured for her to join him. At the curb, she started to tell him that she couldn't go through with this with a clear conscience, but the broker, who was holding the door for her, smiled her a smile that was enough to melt any mortal resolve. With a lack of hesitance she still didn't feel, the receptionist climbed inside. Adrian leaned toward the cabbie's window and gave him instructions Janine couldn't quite hear, then climbed in beside her and shut the door.

She swallowed to clear her throat, which seemed as dry as the Sahara. "It's really very nice of you, offering to take me to lunch, Mister Doyle...."

"Adrian," he insisted ever so suavely.

"Adrian," she echoed. "But I've been thinking about it, and I really shouldn't. I told you, I still have another important errand to run. There's a deadline, and I'll never make it to Brooklyn in time if I stop to eat first."

Yet again, Adrian smiled at her, and she had the bad fortune to look up at him. There was something strangely compelling about that expression, something at once akin to but powerfully different from the merely human cajoling Egon had used to persuade her to do his legwork for him. For the briefest of instants, Janine began to recognize the true nature of the broker's coercion, but long before that realization even began to tickle her outer reaches of conscious thought, he chuckled softly, and ripples of arcane energy blended with the sound to wash away any traces of recognition that might have worked against him.

"Is it really that important?" he asked. The question seemed innocuous enough, but oddly, it struck Janine in such a fashion that only negative reactions surfaced in her thoughts — just as Adrian had intended.

After considering it, she harrumphed softly. "Well, no, I don't think it is — but I did promise."

The broker nodded. "Of course. Well, perhaps we can compromise. I'll do everything I can to see to it that we get served quickly, and then we can take care of your errand after we're done. Does that sound fair?"

There was no superhuman subterfuge in this question; hence, a strong natural reaction came first into the woman's thoughts, comprehension that any answer but no would keep her from delivering the sample on time and thus would destroy Egon's experiment. Business related or not, she couldn't bring herself to do that so deliberately, especially not to him.

But the controls Adrian had been planting in her subconscious were also responding, stirring the notion that it would serve him right if she *did* ruin the physicist's project, seeing how rude he'd been by making demands on her time and getting her in trouble with Venkman without even bothering to tell her she wasn't doing it in the line of work. As that thought collided with the first, confusion resulted. Not quite sure what to say, she looked up at Adrian, who, having sensed her quandary, gently prodded her subconscious to a decision in his favor.

"Perfectly fair," she agreed, then smiled in return. The incubus was, of course, pleased.

Two o'clock came and went back at the firehouse without Janine's return. Winston, in the process of fixing the headlight, had found another glitch in Ecto-1's systems, which he and Ray had set about repairing. Egon was still wrapped up in his projects, so that left Peter to answer the phone, which he did amid considerable gripes and grumbles, especially once he realized how many of the calls Janine fielded were from cranks, loons, angry creditors, or people trying to sell them something they didn't need.

"I swear," he complained during a lull shortly after three, "that if Janine shows her face around here again, I'm gonna fire her."

"Now, now, Peter," Ray chided from under the ambulance's rear bumper, "she doesn't do this very often, and she's got plenty of vacation time coming. Cut her a little slack. It's the first really nice day we've had in months."

"Yeah," Winston agreed, "and she had a lot of errands to run. You can't expect her to get everything done in an hour."

The psychologist grunted. "I can if she isn't doing what we're paying her to do."

Ray laughed. "Yeah, well, considering what we pay her, I think we're lucky she hasn't already quit on us."

"No one could be that lucky. I'll bet she's doing her weekly shopping on *our* time."

"Not quite," Egon's voice corrected from Peter's office, where he was perusing his partner's seldom-touched encyclopedias, which Venkman had put there largely for show, not to be used. "She was going to take my latest sample to Enderthorn's lab for bombardment, and then had to see a broker or banker or something."

"Broker," Winston confirmed. "So don't knock it, Pete. Maybe she's looking into ways to make the business more profitable."

"I doubt it," Venkman snorted, unable to say more as the phone rang yet again.

Just as he was hanging up on yet another obnoxious sales-pitch, Janine returned, looking vastly more pleased with life and the whole wide world than she had before leaving the office.

"Good lunch?" Zeddemore asked amiably in hopes of setting a positive tone before Peter noticed her and flew off the handle.

"Wonderful lunch," she said, needing no greater elaboration than the blissful way in which she'd said "wonderful."

"It's about time you showed up," Venkman growled, slamming the receiver back onto its hook. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"No," she replied so honestly, she startled Peter's planned tirade right out of him. Made curious by this very strange behavior, Ray and Winston paused in their work on the car to see if, perhaps, Janine was drunk.

She *did* appear to be walking a few feet above the ground, but nothing else in her manner indicated the clumsiness of one under the influence. She fairly floated across the garage back to her desk, stopping to hang up her coat along the way.

"Are you okay, Janine?" Ray asked after trading glances with Winston.

"I'm wonderful," she assured them. "Absolutely wonderful. I couldn't've had a better lunch if I'd tried."

"Or a longer one," Peter grumped. "I'm a reasonable guy, Janine. I don't mind you taking a few extra minutes once in a while, but *two hours* is ridiculous! I oughta dock you—"

She giggled. "I told Adrian you'd say that."

All three men frowned. "Adrian?" Winston repeated. "Who's Adrian?"

"Adrian Doyle, the investment counselor from Gwen's brokerage," the secretary explained, calmly pushing Peter aside to reach her usual seat. "When I went to drop off her papers, he asked me to go to lunch, and we had a wonderful time."

There was that word again. The glances Ray and Winston exchanged this time were definitely puzzled, bordering on worried. "You don't think she's high on something, do you?" the occultist whispered to his black colleague.

Zeddemore shook his head. "Not Janine. Looks more like she's high on *someone*."

Stantz winced. "That's what I was afraid of."

"What'd he do," Peter asked of her, oblivious to his friends' conversation, "take you to the Café des Artistes, his treat?"

He had been exaggerating; she wasn't. "Yes," she said simply.

That was enough to prompt him to join in the glance-exchange going on between his mechanically-inclined partners. "This sounds serious," he muttered, getting nods of agreement in response.

Egon, who hadn't really been paying the least bit of attention to the discussion, stepped out from behind the rail that separated Peter's office from the rest of the room, and only then noticed that Janine had returned. "Did you get the sample to the lab in time?" he asked, quite evidently expediting a prompt affirmative.

Instead, he received a thoroughly perplexed stare. "The sample...? Oh, that," she said, as if only now remembering its existence. "Well, I... no, I guess I didn't. I completely forgot about it."

Spengler paled. "You *what*?"

"I said, I forgot about it." She giggled again, but not from anything even remotely related to remorse. "I'm sorry, Egon, really. Adrian *did* say I'd have enough time to make the delivery after lunch, but when I saw that it was almost two-thirty and we were just leaving the restaurant, I figured I'd better get back here right away, before Doctor Venkman started looking for a tree to hang me from."

"Doesn't sound like a bad idea, at that," Peter drawled sarcastically.

"It's still in my coat pocket," she told the physicist. "I could get it for you, if you want...." She started to rise.

Egon stopped her with a shake of his head that seemed more brisk than usual. "No, it's already too — I mean, it's all right, it wasn't that important. Nothing I can't do again."

"Oh." She blinked, then smiled, but not really at him. "Okay, then. Gee, I guess Adrian was right when he said I didn't have to worry about it." She plopped back down into her chair and promptly went to work on the files scattered atop the desk, paying no attention whatsoever to her employers, all of whom were staring at her.

The two nearer her desk backed off to join the two at the car. "Is it just me," Peter asked softly so that Janine couldn't hear, "or does she seem to be acting just a little weird to you guys?"

"Not exactly weird," Winston replied, also quietly. "I think our Miss Melnitz has got a crush on this Adrian she keeps talking about."

"You can say that again," Ray agreed, having already reached the same conclusion. "Who the heck *is* this guy, anyway?"

"Some sort of stock broker, I imagine," Egon said, shrugging. "He seems to have made quite an impression on her."

"Yeah, like getting caught under a twenty-ton engraving plate," Peter observed dryly. He gave the tallest of his partners an impish sidelong glance. "Better look out, Egon. Sounds to me like you've got some serious competition."

The blue eyes considered him with an expression of pure blandness. "For what?" he asked. If he wasn't genuinely puzzled by the question, he was presenting a performance worthy of a dozen Oscars.

"Never mind." Venkman knew better than to continue a line of teasing that obviously wasn't having the desired effect.

"I don't know," Ray reflected, scratching the back of his head as he watched their receptionist go about her work more cheerfully than any mortal had the right. "Maybe we oughta be at least a little bit worried. Janine isn't usually this irresponsible, taking three hours for lunch and forgetting to deliver lab samples. If something's wrong...."

"Don't be absurd," his blond cohort-in-science suggested. "What could possibly be wrong? She's been doing that file update all week, and when she hasn't been working on that, we've kept her busy running other errands and answering the phones. Do you blame her for taking a chance to have a free lunch at an expensive restaurant when it came along?"

"No," Stantz had to admit, "but not getting that sample to the lab ruined your whole experiment, didn't it?"

Egon didn't seem concerned. "Yes, but I wasn't really satisfied with the way the earlier test results were going, anyway. If I do it over again, I can change the conditions of the experiment, so there's no real harm done."

In spite of his determination not to, Winston couldn't stop himself from grinning. "You mean you don't mind that she's taken up with another guy?"

He had to admit, he'd never before gotten quite so placid a response from the phlegmatic physicist. "Why should I? I told you, Winston, we're just friends. If she's met someone she happens to like, it's really no concern of mine. I couldn't be happier for her." On that sublimely mature and rational note, he turned on his heel and headed back to the lab.

Winston looked at Ray, who looked at Peter, who was watching Egon's exit with a thoroughly skeptical eye.

"Do you believe that?" Venkman asked his remaining colleagues.

In flawless unison, they shook their heads. "Not a chance," they said, and Peter had to agree. He didn't believe it either, any more than he wanted to believe that Janine was actually whistling while she worked.

For many, the sound of his voice alone was enough to hold them enthralled, but for those whom it conquered, the spell endured when they were far away, and ever they heard that soft voice whispering and urging them.

The Two Towers, chapter 10

Although Janine usually came into the office somewhere between eight and nine, her employers weren't around the next morning to see whether or not she arrived on time, having been called out on a job around seven-thirty. The specter they'd been hired to capture wasn't especially powerful, but it was annoyingly elusive, requiring all their cleverness and two full hours of pursuit to contain. To make matters worse, the woman who'd hired them refused to pay more than half the bill afterwards when she saw the wreck in which they'd left her house. By the time they headed home, none of the four were in the best of spirits, Peter's mood being by far and away the worst, as he always hated getting stiffed by unreasonable clients. It deteriorated even more when they arrived at the firehouse around ten-thirty and found that Janine still hadn't showed up for work.

"I wonder if maybe she's sick," Winston speculated charitably, willing to believe the best of their receptionist's unprecedented absence.

"She'd better be," Venkman grumbled as he dragged himself out of Ecto-1, "or she can start looking for another job. We don't need a secretary who can't be relied on to do what she's paid for."

Ray laughed. "Maybe," he conceded, "but considering that we don't always pay her on time, either, she'd be able to argue justifiable cause."

Peter scowled at him. "Okay, then, *you* can answer the phones 'til she shows up. I'm going back to bed." He headed upstairs without waiting for a reply; Ray was in a sufficiently good mood to humor him.

He was sitting at the reception desk, doing just what Peter had suggested when Janine finally arrived, fifteen minutes later.

"I'd steer clear of Peter, if I were you," Stantz recommended while the woman hung up her coat. "He's ready to give you your walking papers for being late yesterday and today."

"Sorry," she half-gasped, having run from the subway stop to the firehouse. "I really didn't mean to do it, but I didn't even hear my alarm go off this morning."

The occultist sympathized, especially since his own rest had been ruined that very morning by just such a hellish device. "I know what you mean. Rough night last night? You look kinda tired."

She flinched slightly, not having realized that it showed; then, she smiled. "Yeah, I *am* pretty tired, at that. I didn't get to bed until... oh, gosh, I'm not even sure how late it was. Last time I looked at the clock, I think it said three...."

"That *is* late. What were you doing, your tax returns?"

"Are you kidding? With what you guys pay me, that takes about ten minutes, tops. No, Adrian took me out to dinner at the Rainbow Room, and I guess we lost track of the time."

The expression on Ray's face was difficult to interpret, but it was definitely wry. "Adrian again, huh? I guess you really like this guy, don't you?"

She looked at him, puzzled, as they traded places. "What makes you say that?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I dunno. Maybe I'm just misinterpreting the signals. Could be he's the one who really likes you, taking you to places like the Café des Artistes and the Rainbow Room on the same day. How long have you known him, anyway?"

"Just since yesterday — though it's funny, I feel like I've known him a lot longer." For a moment or two, she stared off into space, her eyes unfocused as they contemplated something only she could know. Watching her, Ray got the distinct impression — absurd, he thought — that she seemed far more tired than one night's lost sleep could have explained. He was about to mention this observation when she blinked, returned to the here and now, and smiled at him. "Anyway, I would've been here sooner, but my car wouldn't start. I'd better get finished with these files if I want to have them done by lunchtime. Adrian promised to stop by, then, and I don't want Doctor V hassling me in front of him 'cause I didn't get my work done."

She then plunged back into the project with such single-minded dedication, she was oblivious to anything else. Figuring that he wasn't going to get anything more out of her on the subject of this mysterious — and apparently very well-off — Adrian person, Ray left her to work in peace and headed up to the lab to start his own.

When he reached the third floor, he found Egon and Winston working on a broken part of the spectrum differentializer, to Peter's symphony of complaints that they were making too much noise and disturbing his sleep. Venkman temporarily halted his diatribe when he noticed Ray's return from the reception desk. "Well, did Janine finally deign to grace us with her presence?" the psychologist drawled, more sarcastically than usual. He was *not* a morning person, and was always cranky when work forced him out of bed at what he considered an indecent hour. "Or did you decide to let the phone ring itself off the hook?" After his stint at the front desk yesterday, he would've understood if Stantz had admitted to the latter.

"She's here," the occultist replied, unbothered by his friend's attitude.

Peter stared at him; he'd expected a more elaborate answer. "Well?" he prompted.

Ray blinked back. "Well what?"

"Well, why the heck was she so late? Don't tell me you didn't ask...."

"No, I asked. She overslept, that's all."

The green eyes widened, then narrowed. "Overslept? You mean she showed up three hours late just 'cause she *overslept*?" He found it impossible to believe.

"Yeah, that's what I mean," Ray said agreeably. "And you should talk, Pete. You'd sleep 'til noon every day, if we let you. Besides, you're exaggerating. She was really only two hours late."

"Oh, pardon me, my mistake." The apology was histrionically overstated. "I know Janine doesn't have the world's greatest imagination, but I would've expected even her to come up with a better alibi than *that*."

Stantz shrugged as he ambled across the room to peer over his other friends' shoulders. "Well, her car's out of commission again, too, if that helps. And if you want to hear *details*.... She said she slept late 'cause she didn't hear her alarm go off, and she didn't hear it 'cause she was up past three in the morning."

"Why? Wait, don't tell me — she couldn't sleep 'cause her conscience was bothering her about that stunt she pulled yesterday."

The auburn head shook. "No. She couldn't sleep 'cause she was out on a big date with Adrian."

That comment caused Peter's eyebrows to arch in surprise, and brought a crooked smile to Winston's face; it did nothing visible to Egon, who continued tinkering with the broken device. "There's that name again," Zeddemore said, chuckling faintly. "Two dates on the same day — sounds pretty serious to me."

"That, or they just like to eat a lot," Venkman quipped.

"Could be both," Ray speculated. "Though he took her to the Rainbow Room, so I'd wager there's something more than just food involved. But he *has* asked her out to lunch again today."

This time, Winston's eyes widened and Peter burst out with a stem, "No way! Uh-uh! Not after that three hour vacation she took yesterday, she's not! I don't pay my secretaries to make a career out of Going to Lunch."

"This *is* sounding serious," the black man said more quietly. "And pretty suspicious, too. This character's flinging around an awful lot of money on someone he just met."

"You can say that again," Stantz sighed. "I've seen people with heavy-duty crushes before, but none of 'em ever made their moves quite this fast — not even Peter, and he's a world-class player."

Venkman wrinkled his nose at him; Winston's expression turned grim. "You don't suppose this guy's some sort of con-man, setting up Janine just to rip her off?"

Ray made a gesture of uncertainty. "Could be. And he could also be setting her up to try and rip *us* off. It wouldn't be the first time a secretary was used to get at her bosses. Adrian's an investment counselor, isn't he? Maybe he figures he can get our business if he charms Janine into sticking up for him."

Winston agreed. "Maybe we should do a little PI work, check this guy out. For all we know, he's a real scudzoid with a police record a mile long, one of the type who goes in for investment fraud...."

Egon, who had been ostensibly preoccupied throughout the entire conversation, made a small sound that was thoroughly dubious, proving that he'd been listening surreptitiously all along. "I think you've been watching too much television," he opined, not even looking up from his work. "Why is it so hard for you to believe that this fellow's exactly what he appears to be: a charismatic broker who has a momentary fascination with our office manager?"

Peter's attempt to stifle an inadvertent laugh was only partially successful. "Looks to me like *she's* the one with the fascination...."

"Whatever. The point is, things like this *do* happen, and there's no reason we should start getting overly protective, suspecting him of criminal intent when his interests may be totally innocent."

This time, Peter's laughter went unchecked. "Innocent? Two big-ticket dates in one day doesn't spell innocent in my book. You're an adult, Egon. I thought you learned all about this boy/girl stuff back in high school. Or didn't your folks ever sit you down and give you the Big Talk?"

The physicist interrupted his work just long enough to favor Venkman with an exasperated frown. "Just because your motives toward women aren't exactly noble doesn't mean that everyone else on this planet shares the same gutter with you."

Peter pretended to be cut to the quick; Winston was curious. "Do you know something about this guy that we don't, Egon?"

But Spengler indicated the negative with a shake of his head. "No. I'm merely saying that until we see him do something that says otherwise, we shouldn't assume he's dishonest simply because of his profession. Innocent until proven guilty. We should at least try to give him the benefit of the doubt, for Janine's sake."

That sounded quite reasonable, as far as Winston and Ray were concerned, but it wasn't in Peter's makeup to let go of such a promising topic so easily. "You mean, you don't care that she's going after someone else, all of a sudden?" It seemed too fantastic to credit, at least to someone with Peter's personal outlook on life.

"Why should I?" was the physicist's blunt answer. "She's a grown woman, capable of making her own decisions."

"And you're not the least bit jealous?"

Egon stopped what he was doing, sat up straight, and turned toward his insouciant partner, a patient sort of annoyance shadowing his features. A faint sigh escaped him, a parent answering the same question for the umpteenth time. "We've already gone through this, Peter. I'm a scientist; I don't have time to go wallowing around in pointless, unproductive sentimentality. If Janine likes this Adrian fellow, that's her business, not mine, and I wish her luck in the relationship." Confident that he'd made himself clearly understood, the physicist returned to his task, just as clearly dismissing any further discussion.

Venkman, who considered himself an expert on *affaires de coeur*, had his own opinions on the matter, but needling someone who refused to acknowledge so much as the necessity to fight back was no fun at all, so he made an amiably childish face at Spengler's back, rolled his eyes at his other, grinning colleagues, and kept his mouth shut — for the time being.

He was given an opportunity to open it again a short while later, when Adrian showed up in their reception area. Peter was in his office at the time; Ray and Winston were checking out the repairs they had done on Ecto-1 the day before, and Egon was puttering with the guts of the computer on Janine's desk, which had started acting up for no apparent reason shortly before noon. When Peter heard Doyle introduce himself to Ray, who'd answered the door, he stepped out of his office to have a look at the man who in such short order had managed to wreak total havoc with their normally efficient secretary.

"Jeeze," he breathed after taking one look at the impeccably groomed broker, "he looks like he just walked off the cover of GQ." He directed the comment at Egon, who was the only one of his partners close enough to hear. The physicist's sole reaction was a quiet, inarticulate, and thoroughly ambiguous monosyllabic mutter. Janine got up the moment Adrian came in and didn't hear a word of Venkman's remark. She smiled as Doyle approached the reception desk.

"I didn't realize this was where you worked," Adrian told her most sunnily, his manner showing signs of one impressed not so much by the firm itself but rather by its celebrity status. "Why didn't you mention it before?"

The question was enough to elicit guarded looks from Winston and Ray. The same thought — *Here it comes, the wind-up before the pitch* — was plainly going through both their minds.

Janine, however, thought nothing of the broker's query. "You never asked," she noted cheerfully, as though she considered the oversight too silly to be worth a second thought. "Guys," she continued, glancing at the four paranormalologists to make sure she had their attention, "this is the man I've been telling you about, Adrian Doyle. Adrian—"

The counselor stayed her with a gesture. "No need for introductions, Janine. I believe I'm quite familiar with your employers."

"I'll bet he is," Winston muttered to Ray, too quietly to be heard — or so he thought.

Adrian turned toward the black man with the most harmless of amiable and unoffended smiles. His entire demeanor radiated innocent persuasion, like a child trying his very best to make friends with a long-revered idol. "No, really Mister Zeddemore, I've heard a lot about you in the media. Considering the heroic status you've managed to acquire among many people in this city, it would've been more difficult for me to *not* know who you are, wouldn't you say?"

He spoke with such honest admiration, Winston found it impossible to maintain his doubts. As if someone had pushed a button to prompt the change, Zeddemore suddenly found his attitude toward the stranger gone from skeptical to supportive. He could not have known that, in an arcane manipulation of his subconscious, that was precisely what had just happened, all thanks to Adrian and the power of his voice. "Uh... I guess so." He cleared his throat and searched for a more comfortable topic to discuss. "So, you're an investment counselor?"

"Among other things," Doyle supplied without hesitation. "My firm — Unified Brokerage and Investment Services — is committed to doing whatever we can to help people insure financial security. Given how many of our competitors are so... shall we say, *predatory*, I can understand how you might be a bit suspicious of my sudden attentions toward your secretary."

"The thought *did* cross our minds," was Peter's flippant confirmation.

The broker turned the smile on him, gray eyes twinkling. "I would have been disappointed if it hadn't, Doctor Venkman, given your reputations for intelligence and quick thinking. I'm sure that men in your position are constantly approached by business world vultures, looking to make profits off your success."

"Not constantly," Ray said, remembering several of the phone calls he'd fielded earlier, "but fairly often, yeah." He cocked his head like a curious cat, looking for traces of falseness or dissembling about the man. He found none; in sober truth, he couldn't find *anything* to dislike about him. "You wouldn't need our business anyhow, would you? From the look of things, I'd say you've been pretty successful on your own."

Adrian's modest grin was blinding; in its more-than-natural light, Ray's attitude — like Winston's and Janine's — abruptly and unconsciously changed from potentially negative to definitely positive. "In my own small way, perhaps, Doctor Stantz. I do have to confess I have a business partner, though her company isn't half as pleasant as that of your delightful Miss Melnitz."

Peter, who had been leaning toward support of the broker in the first place, a position that had been strengthened with Adrian's remarks about intelligence and quick thinking, wavered for a moment in the wake of that comment. "Well, I guess nobody's got *perfect* taste," he sniffed, unable to pass up the opportunity for the wisecrack.

Janine made her best scornful face at the psychologist, for a moment very much her old self again. "And some people never know a good thing when they see it," she replied sharply, turning her back on him. "Come on, Adrian, let's get out of here before he spoils my good mood."

The counselor clicked his tongue. "I don't honestly believe that's possible," he said charmingly, "but if that's what you want... your wish is my command."

Venkman's sniff became a snort. "Give me a break!" he muttered. Though he didn't know it, he sounded just like Melanie had the day before. "You can't go," he added before she could collect her coat from the closet. "The re-file job isn't done yet, and—"

"And I can't finish it until the computer's fixed," she reminded him, bristling over his interference.

Adrian intervened before open warfare could break out. "I promise we won't be late today, Doctor Venkman," he said calmly, an attempt to still the waters and smooth Peter's ruffled feathers. "Yesterday was an unforgivable breach of courtesy on my part, depriving you of your secretary just to indulge my pleasure in her company. It won't happen again, I assure you."

He projected such genuine apology along with such unmitigated respect for Venkman's authority as her employer, Peter couldn't help but give in, not unless he wanted to come across as the greatest heel since Achilles'. The invisible fingers slipped into his subconscious in that unguarded moment, and he, too, was caught. "Well," he muffled, still resisting. Doyle turned that magnetic smile on him, and like the others so favored, his disposition instantly changed polarity. "Okay, I guess she can go. Just remember, she's still got work to do."

"As do I," Doyle promised, the relief in his expression so profound, the psychologist found himself feeling like Captain Bligh, anyway. Janine didn't notice; in fact, she didn't notice anything but Adrian as they left, arm in arm.

"He seems like a nice enough guy," Ray observed once they'd gone, after spending several moments in silent reflection on what had just happened, able to think somewhat more clearly now that Adrian and his direct psychic influences were gone. He glanced at his friends. "Do you think he was on the level about only being interested in Janine and not in signing us on as clients?"

"Looked like it to me," Winston admitted, his own vague sense of confusion now making itself known. "Though he might've been pulling some clever trick to put us off guard, soften us up before he makes his sales pitch. I've seen it before."

For a moment, Ray, too, seemed faintly confused, but, being basically simple at heart, the feeling didn't last. He always preferred to believe the best in people, and since he'd seen nothing to convince him otherwise, he decided to go along with his first impression. "True — though most cons I've met wouldn't be so obvious...."

"Of *course* he's on the level," Peter assured them, confident that he'd know a fake when he saw it. "Look at the way he was dressed. Most of the geeks and con-men who've come around grubbing for us to hire 'em or trying to make a quick buck look like Louis Tully or my dad, not Pierce Brosnan. If he's making enough to afford all those designer originals he was wearing, he doesn't *need* our two-bit business."

Stantz and Zeddemore considered these observations for a bit, then nodded as one. "I guess you're right," the latter conceded. "Just as well; I wouldn't like to think of Janine dating someone with the wrong kind of ulterior motive. But he seemed like a good person, even if he was a little heavy with the compliments, trying to get on our good side."

"Can you blame him?" Ray asked. "The way we've been overworking her, lately, Janine probably didn't have a lot of positive things to say about us, and he was just being careful. But I really kinda liked the guy. He seemed... I dunno, too nice to be a crook." He paused, drumming his fingers on Ecto's hood while he briefly studied the door through which the broker and the receptionist had left. Presently, he returned his attention to his friends. "What do you think, Egon?"

"Yeah, Egon," Peter chimed in, "you've been awfully quiet through all this, not a peep out of you. What's the matter, did you forget how to talk, or did Mister Fashion Plate scare the voice right out of you?"

"Hardly," the physicist rumbled. Like Ray, he contemplated the front door for a moment; unlike Ray, he then frowned. "I don't like him," he said flatly.

"Ooooh," Venkman whistled, sucking in his breath, "has jealousy finally reared its ugly head?"

Egon's reply was frosty. "Certainly not, and I wish you'd quit harping on it. Just because *you* were taken in doesn't mean *I* was. There's something about him that just isn't right."

Winston's eyebrows arched puckishly. "There is? He looked so absolutely *right* to me, I'd swear he had ever single hair permanently glued into place."

"That's not what I mean. I'm not talking about physical appearance — then again, perhaps I am. Doesn't it strike you as being a little odd that he *does* look so utterly perfect?"

Ray shrugged. "Appearance is important to some people. Look at Peter. He'll spend an hour futsing with himself before a date...."

"I do not!" the psychologist defended.

Ray shrugged again. "Okay," he submitted easily. "Two hours."

Peter bridled. "That's not true — and it's all beside the point, anyway. We're talking about Adrian, not me, and maybe a perfect appearance *is* important to him. Considering how many brokers and accountants and investment counselors there are in Manhattan, looking good can make all the difference between getting a client or losing one.

"Perhaps," Egon was willing to grant, though he sounded not at all convinced. "It's only part of the puzzle, in any case. GQ image or not, there's just something about him that I don't like."

"Yeah, you don't like the fact that he's better at wrapping Janine around his little finger than you are."

The blue eyes slipped sideways to regard the persistent psychologist with a mild reflection of Peter's own omnipresent skepticism. "It would take a one-track mind like yours to reach such a sophomoric conclusion," Spengler said calmly. "What you say would imply intentional manipulation on my part, something I would never do, especially to a friend, any more than I could be jealous of what Janine or anyone else chooses to do as a part of their personal life." Placidly, he turned back to the misbehaving computer, plucked an inobviously bad chip from its slot, tossed it into the wastebasket, and set about replacing it with nary a twitch that might have betrayed some suppressed inner disquiet to refute his statements.

For a change, Peter didn't pursue his argument; he didn't need to. The little piece of electronic circuitry that had left the computer whole but inoperative hit the bottom of the trash can as a mangled mess of crumpled plastic and metal, providing sufficient evidence that the wrong track Egon claimed Peter was stuck on was the right one, after all.

Adrian's promise to get Janine back on time, however, was shattered when one o'clock came and went without the receptionist's return. Inclined to use this as evidence to support his seemingly irrational dislike of the fellow, Egon found himself unable to do so, since he was the only one present to witness the event — or lack thereof — as the others had gone to a game (he didn't know or care which specific sport was involved) for which Winston had gotten tickets. At any rate, the broker's lapse wasn't nearly as bad as it had been the day before. At a quarter of two, the scientist's repair work on the computer was interrupted by the sounds of arrival at the front door; a brief glance showed it to be Adrian and Janine. The physicist was polite enough to keep his attention centered on his work, not on eavesdropping, though their conversation carried quite clearly to the reception desk.

"Six would be just fine," Adrian was saying — purring might have been a better description. "That is, it's fine if you don't mind Lespinasse. It might be difficult getting reservations this late in the day, but I know the *maitre d'*...."

"Mind?" Janine made it sound as if the word wasn't in her vocabulary. "Trust me, Adrian, if I ever start *mind*ing this Cinderella treatment you've been giving me, you'll know because they'll have carted me off to Bellevue in a strait-jacket."

He laughed, a bright, silvery sound that should have inspired pleasant reactions and feelings of trust in those close enough to hear it. It did — with one notable exception. "I suppose that would make me Prince Charming, wouldn't it?" the broker continued, unaware of this minor failure of his usually flawlessly-projected facade.

"That was *Snow White*, not *Cinderella*," Janine corrected with an affable giggle, "but it's close enough — and either way, it's flattering."

"Not half as much as it flatters me, my dear." This time, it was a purr, though to Egon's surreptitiously listening ears, it was the sort of purr a happy tiger makes when it finds and is about to attack an especially delectable meal. A moment of silence followed — during which the scientist resolutely refused to look up and see what was going on — ended by Adrian's, "Six o'clock, then."

"I'll be waiting," Janine sighed, with rather disgusting melodrama, and closed the door behind him.

When he heard her approach the desk, Egon finally looked up. "You know, you're late again," he said, a mere detached observation rather than an accusation.

The redhead favored him with a smile that was both sunny and far away, a look not meant for him at all but for some unexpressed memory going through her head. "Yes, I know," she admitted, "but it couldn't be helped. The taxi got a flat on the other side of Central Park, and when we couldn't get hold of another one, we decided to walk back."

It was a totally plausible explanation, unworthy of suspicion — which was exactly why it bothered Egon when he realized that he was suspicious, anyway. Perhaps, he told himself in search of some rational semi-scientific justification for his unseemly skepticism, it was because of the way she looked: worn out, exhausted, drained, certainly in no condition to make such a long hike without suffering for it. What was so obvious to him must have been equally obvious to Adrian, and he couldn't quite believe that the broker would have been so insensitive to her physical discomfort — at least not without shooting to smithereens all the exhortations he had originally made about innocent motives on Adrian's part. If he wanted to maintain his belief that Doyle's intentions were what passed for honorable in this day and age — and also wanted to avoid getting razed by his partners, especially Peter — then he had to accept the even less palatable likelihood that Janine was lying about why she was late.

Inexplicably (at least to him), Egon found that possibility disturbing.

"Are you sure that was a good idea?" he asked distractedly, the closest a human could come to complete disinterest without a actually *being* disinterested. The computer was still out of its housing, spread across the desk like organs before a medical examiner; he connected several wires so the thing could function, despite its disemboweled appearance.

Janine accepted his question at face value. She shrugged. "Why not? It's not like it was the middle of the night or anything. And even muggers aren't as likely to come after you in broad daylight, if you're with someone."

He tapped several keys to activate a test program. "That isn't what I meant. You look like you haven't slept for a week. Wouldn't it have been better to wait for a cab?"

The question was thoroughly innocent, without the slightest hint of judgmental accusation; even so, Janine began to bristle with irritation. "I already told you, we tried and couldn't find one. And it was only last night, not a week. Can't a person stay up late once in a while without everyone getting on her case?"

The physicist did his best to mask his surprise over this unexpected — and completely unwarranted — reaction. It generally wasn't like Janine to get angry and defensive without good reason, such as one of Peter's verbal assaults. Now, if Venkman had been the one pointing out her tired condition, she would have had cause to stridently defend herself, as he had already had more than enough unpleasant to say about her behavior over the past few days. But Egon hadn't breathed a word about any of it, not even to complain about her failure to deliver his lab sample, and an offhand remark about her clearly exhausted appearance certainly couldn't have been construed as a deliberate attack. "Who's getting on your case?" he asked as inoffensively as possible. "I just said you looked tired...."

She sniffed sourly. "Yeah, but you *meant* I should've made more of an effort to get back on time."

"No, I meant exactly what I said. But if you want to yell at someone on *that* account, wait until Peter returns."

She grumbled. "Oh, sure, I have to sit here and listen to lectures about not doing my work and being punctual while *he* spends the afternoon goofing off! I do most of the real work around here, and what thanks do I get for it? Lousy wages that I hardly ever get on time, a piddly week's paid vacation, no fringe benefits — Adrian's right, I *should* go to work for someone who'd appreciate me more. And believe me, if I didn't know this place'd fall apart in two minutes without me, I would." For emphasis, she picked up the thickest file folder from one corner of her desk and waved it in front of him.

Egon tapped a second series of commands into the mess of components. "I thought you enjoyed working for us, Janine," he said quietly, not looking up.

She grimaced. "I used to think I did, too, until someone finally helped me open my eyes and see what a chump I've been. Adrian knows of at least a dozen places that'd pay me more than twice what I'm making here, with decent benefits and a *lot* more appreciation. He thinks I should go for one of 'em, and I'm beginning to think he's right."

"Perhaps... but don't you think you're swallowing an awful lot of what this Adrian is telling you on nothing but blind faith?" the physicist asked mildly, glancing at her over the rims of his glasses without raising his head. "Can you trust his judgment?"

"As much as I can trust Doctor Venkman's," she answered curtly, "and he's a lot more opinionated than Adrian."

"That may be. But what do you really know about him? You just met him yesterday...."

"I know *he* has enough manners to keep his nose out of places where it doesn't belong."

"But—"

"But what?" she snapped back so furiously, Egon had to look up to make certain this was really Janine talking. She wasn't merely outraged on Adrian's behalf; she seemed as dangerous as a lioness defending her favorite cub. "But *what*?! There're no 'buts' about it! Adrian's nice, he's considerate of my feelings, not just his own. He's generous, he's polite, he cares about what I have to say, and he knows when to mind his own business — which is apparently more than I can say for *you*!"

Spengler was quite thoroughly taken aback by the unprecedented vehemence of this verbal attack. "Now, wait a second," he began, the computer momentarily forgotten. "I think you have the wrong impression—"

He'd made the remark in an attempt to forestall the argument that was obviously coming; it had precisely the opposite effect. "The wrong impression?" she scoffed. "You're damned right I had the wrong impression! I thought *you* at least were my friend — but brother, can I see now what a mistake *that* notion was!"

"But, Janine, I *am* your friend—!"

"Then you've sure got a rotten way of showing it! You don't like the way Adrian's paying attention to me? Good! I'm glad! Maybe now you'll finally understand what it's like to care for someone who doesn't give a damn about you! What I do with *my* time is *my* business, not yours or anyone else's, and since you never bothered to worry about what I did with it before, I'll thank you to keep your opinions to yourself now, Doctor Spengler!"

She yanked open the top file drawer immediately behind the receptionist's chair and threw the folder into it. For a split-second, Egon cringed, certain she was about to throw the thing at *him*. She then banged the drawer shut, and, buttoning her coat and shouldering her purse as if they were trappings of war, marched back to the front door. "I'm going home," she growled. "Call me when you get that stupid thing working again, and maybe I'll consider coming back in today." She wrenched open the door and was about to stride through it when she paused and looked back over her shoulder, her expression replete with disgust and fury. "On second thought, you don't have to bother calling — 'cause I *quit*!" With that, she stepped outside, slammed the door behind her, and was gone.

For a while, Egon sat there staring at the door, trying to figure out what had just happened. Even though he knew his manners weren't always the best, he couldn't for the life of him imagine how anything he had just said could have been taken with such intense and unmitigated affront. That left him with two possibilities: either he *had* said something terminally rude and simply couldn't see it, or something was wrong with Janine, more wrong than could be attributed to the loss of a single night's sleep. He'd heard it said that people acted strangely when in love, but vicious rage wasn't among the generally accepted reactions the condition reputedly caused. Besides, Janine wasn't really a violent person — and when he thought about it, he couldn't recall a single incident in which she'd referred to him by anything but his given name in private, not even just after they'd first hired her. All that combined with the... *falseness* he sensed about this Adrian character convinced him that he'd been wrong to defend him. Doyle was either playing some sort of unhealthy mind game with their receptionist, or she'd gone 'round the bend overnight. Or both.

The first option — that the broker was somehow responsible for Janine's sudden and unpleasant change of character — being the best explanation (or at least the one with the fewest objectionable complications, in Egon's opinion), he decided that as soon as he was finished with the computer, he'd have to do a little unobtrusive detective work on the mysterious Mister Doyle.

The first and last thing required of genius is the love of truth.

Goethe

Janine did not return to work that day, though Egon was in no particular position to notice whether or not she had. As soon as he was finished repairing the reception desk computer, the physicist withdrew to the privacy of the more capable PC in the basement lab, where, via modem, he set about wheedling his way into assorted files, both public and private, which could provide him with some answers to the many questions he had concerning Adrian Doyle, his business, his reputation, and his past. When his partners returned from their outing late in the day, well after their office's posted closing hour, they merely assumed that Janine had gone home and Spengler was working on some project again. They left him undisturbed until he left the lab of his own accord.

"More research for your slime mold experiments?" Winston asked innocently when the scientist showed up in the second floor rec area that evening on his way to the third floor lab, a sheaf of computer hardcopy in hand. Zeddemore and Ray were watching a less than exciting television movie; Peter, disinterested in the movie but equally bored, had been reduced to playing Scrabble with the Spud, a very slow-moving game, since Slimer's spelling skills were all but non-existent.

"What?" was Egon's immediate reaction, vague with preoccupation. His attention had been focused on the papers, not on his surroundings; his climb to the third floor had thus far been performed solely on reflex. When he looked up, he seemed surprised to find himself where he was, but the impression passed quickly. "Oh — no, I've given up on that for a while."

"You *have*?" Peter's question held its own note of doubt-colored surprise. "Since when do you give up on any science project?"

"When I don't have time to start it over from scratch," was the succinct, if somewhat lost-in-thought, reply. "I have more important things to do for the business, for the time being."

Considering how slow that business had been of late, Venkman couldn't for the life of him think of what could possibly be so pressing. His frown was one of puzzlement. "Like what? Finding a way to get rid of Slimer?"

The little ghost sputtered at him, literally and figuratively, while Ray, who was sitting beside the psychologist on the couch, clobbered the skeptic with a sofa pillow. "Did you finally get around to starting work on that portable containment system we've been talking about?" he asked.

But Egon shook his head. "No. Did you know that this Doyle character has no residence listed with any government agencies — not the city, the state — not even with Social Security or the IRS? And that his business doesn't, either?"

The laugh that escaped Peter was only to be expected. One could almost see his ears prick up at the mention of the broker's name, like those of a hound hearing the sounds of the horn calling him from boredom to the hope of excitement in the hunt. "Oh, so *that's* what you've been up to," he drawled, quite certain he now knew exactly what was going on, and why. "Well, I guess I really shouldn't be surprised...."

If Egon caught Peter's implications, he was doing an excellent job of pretending otherwise. "It surprised *me*," he admitted, amending, "Well, perhaps *surprise* isn't quite the right word. Doesn't it seem peculiar that there's no record of his home address anywhere, in any computer file I could access?"

Though Winston had decided at Peter's first comment that this had all the earmarks of shaping up into a fight he'd be best advised to stay out of, Spengler's mention of the broker's apparent non-existence piqued his interest. He shifted position in his chair, feeling vaguely uncomfortable. A part of him wanted to rise to Adrian's defense — for no consciously discernable reason — but the stronger, more practical part of him chose to at least listen to what Egon had to say. "You've gotta admit, that *is* pretty strange, Pete. The way the IRS goes after every cent they've got coming, you'd think *they* would at least have some line on him."

The psychologist shrugged. He knew, privately, that Winston's reasoning was sound, but things had been so dull lately, he simply couldn't bring himself to pass up such a promising opportunity for honing his witticisms, even if it *did* run the risk of having Ray and Winston jump down his throat for badgering Egon. Besides, he told himself, considering how often the others ribbed him about his relations with women, it was high time someone else took a little of that particular flak. And, a voice whispered in his mind, Adrian needed his support. "Maybe they do," he suggested, "and it's buried in a file even our boy genius here can't get at from the outside. Or maybe it's an oversight he never bothered to correct. Would you, if it kept you off the tax rolls?"

"But it's not just the IRS," Egon insisted. "It's everywhere, right across the board, public or private. The only record I could find *anywhere* on this guy is the phone listing of his firm, and even then, there aren't any specific names mentioned, not even in the billing records. Just UBIS, Inc., with the Manhattan address."

"That *is* strange," Ray agreed, remembering their own efforts to set up a phone line for their business. "Usually the phone company wants everything they can get on you short of your blood type and favorite color before they'll even consider opening an account." He paused to scratch his chin, thinking hard and wondering why some very persistent little whispering in his head kept urging him to take Doyle's side. There was no rational reason for it; the broker was a virtual stranger, whereas Egon was without question his closest friend. Not only that, but Ray also knew that Spengler wasn't given to drawing conclusions without some sort of logical — if not exactly conventional — evidence to back them up. Friendship bested compulsion with scarcely a struggle; the "support Adrian" whispers were forced into silent submission, to be contemplated more fully when there was time. "You don't suppose we were right about Adrian the first time, that he *is* some kind of clever con-man out to rip off Janine?"

Winston saw exactly what he had in mind. "Yeah, is this business of his legit, or what?"

The physicist made a noncommittal gesture. "That depends on how you define *legitimate*. There's a lot of information on the company — bank records, transaction files, brokerage reports, customer data." He displayed his printouts as proof. "But nowhere is there a single scrap of fact about the people running it. From what I can piece together, he *seems* to be a genuine investment counselor, but there's no evidence to confirm it. No work records or education transcripts — for all I can tell, he's never seen the inside of a school, not in his entire life, and there's not even a record of *that* ever beginning. If that doesn't sound suspicious, I don't know what does."

"I do," Peter piped up, still the very picture of nonchalance. "Maybe this Adrian guy just likes to protect his privacy — you know, from nuts who go around sticking their noses where they don't belong." From the way he waggled his eyebrows at his tallest partner, there was no doubting just who he intended to implicate with that statement. "If anything sounds suspicious around here, it's the way you've suddenly changed your tune, Egon. I thought you're the one who said we should give him the benefit of the doubt, for Janine's sake."

An aloof sort of displeasure touched the blond man's features. "That was before I met him."

Given Peter's proven nature and overall habits, no one was surprised when he laughed again. Winston, however, sighed. "I don't see what's so funny," he felt obliged to confess. "People on the up-and-up don't usually go through all these gymnastics to stay anonymous, 'specially not when they're in a business that thrives on having a big clientele. Janine really *could* be getting herself into trouble."

"Sure, and that's what we said right from the start," Peter reminded Zeddemore, still amused. "*Egon's* the one who kept telling *us* we were imagining things. I just happen to find it hilarious, the way he suddenly started singing a new song when it looked like things really *were* getting serious." From his tone, he obviously didn't mean *serious* in terms of possible criminal difficulties between Adrian and Janine.

Ray knew what the psychologist meant (and why), but he wasn't unsympathetic to Egon's position, either. "Come on, Peter, lay off," he suggested before Venkman's teasing got hopelessly out of hand. "Egon's got a point; so does Winston. Honest people *don't* go through this much trouble to keep themselves off everybody's records. This is a big city, and a lot of crooks come here, hoping to make a few bucks and get lost in the crowd at the same time."

Venkman snorted, slightly miffed by Ray's censure and hence now on the defensive. "Yeah, but most of 'em don't run investment services with Park Avenue addresses, put ads in the Yellow Pages, or go around wearing designer suits, custom-made shoes, solid gold jewelry, and Rolex watches — and they don't go around picking up women they hardly know to take 'em to lunch at expensive restaurants, either." When he saw that these reasonable

observations were having no apparent effect on his listeners, he shook his head in wonder. "Don't tell me you actually *believe* him?"

It was obvious from Ray's tentative shrug that he didn't want to oppose either of his friends, even though he was privately more inclined to side with Egon. "Well, you've gotta admit, Pete, it is a possibility." He glanced at the physicist, still frowning with an indecision he felt startlingly ill-prepared to explain. "Have you thought of trying to warn her? She might at least be willing to listen."

But a single shake of the head decisively squashed that embryonic hope. "I already tried, and she wasn't. Whatever mind game this guy is playing on her, she's completely bought into it."

"Sure," Peter quipped, "like you want us to buy this line of yours. Mind games!" he scoffed, completely unconvinced. "Do you believe this, Winston?"

Zeddemore, like Ray, wasn't a hundred percent certain. "Not exactly," he finally conceded. "But it's worth thinking about...."

"Only if you want to give yourself a headache. Come on, guys — you met Adrian, too. Which sounds more plausible: that he's a con-artist with designs to rip off a secretary who only pulls down twenty-two thousand in good years, or that Egon's got it in for him 'cause he's jealous?"

"I am not jealous," the physicist stated stiffly, becoming more than merely annoyed by Peter's almost obsessive preoccupation with the subject. "I'm just concerned; what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, depending on what you're *really* concerned about...."

Egon was willing to oblige him with an answer. "That I was wrong and you three were right," he admitted, ignoring the look of exaggerated surprise Venkman threw back at him. "There's something not right about Doyle. If he isn't after Janine's money, what *is* he after?"

Peter's eyes rolled expressively, one could correctly say suggestively; he opened his mouth, but before he could utter a sound, Ray stuffed a couch-pillow over it. "Don't say it," Stantz warned.

"Okay, I won't," came the psychologist's half-muffled reply before he could push Ray's hand and the pillow aside. "But," he continued more clearly as soon as he had, "that just proves my point. If he's not after her money, he must be after *her* — and that's what Egon doesn't like: the competition."

The remark did nothing to lessen Spengler's irritation. "In order to have a competition," he said with such an incredible lack of expression, it somehow managed to border on genuine anger, "you first have to have at least two people trying to win the same objective — and since I consider the very notion of competing over another human being as if she were some sort of prize in a contest utterly abhorrent, your entire reasoning is completely inaccurate and therefore irrelevant."

"Right," Peter agreed, clearly not agreeing at all.

His picked-on partner had to grit his teeth to keep from losing his temper. Externally, it showed as a certain strained quality in the physicist's normally pleasant voice. "I can't believe you don't find this even a little bit suspicious," he said, doing his best to remain in control of the situation (meaning he was trying his hardest not to do what he really wanted to do, pummel Venkman with his stack of hardcopy until he'd beaten some sense into his head). "All other considerations aside, Janine *is* our employee. What if she's walking into some sort of trap?"

Peter shrugged. "If she is, it's not my fault," he drawled. It was becoming increasingly difficult to tell if he was serious or joking. Both Winston and Ray winced at the impudent tenor of his remark; Slimer, always uneasy in this sort of tense situation, beat an unobtrusive retreat through the floor and out of sight. "You're the one who said it first: she's a big girl, now—"

"Whoa!" Winston interrupted, pinning the psychologist with a critical glare. "That's a pretty callous attitude, Pete. Don't you *care* if Janine's in trouble?"

Venkman's defense was immediate and adamant, not because he profoundly believed what he was saying but because he felt the others were ganging up on him, a position he never liked nor accepted without protest. "If we knew that she really was, yeah, I'd care — but we don't. All I've heard is a lot of Chicken Little worrying with no real proof to back it up. She doesn't need us or anyone telling her how to run her life — and I don't think she'd be too thrilled if she knew you were checking up on her new boyfriend, either. Why'd you do it, anyway, Egon, if you're not jealous?"

His fair-haired colleague grimaced. If he heard that word one more time.... "Because this whole thing just isn't adding up. I can't put my finger on it, but there's something about Adrian that's not right...."

"Not right? How, not right? Does he have three eyes? Six fingers? Two belly-buttons?"

The grimace became exasperation. "I should've expected you to treat it like a joke."

"That's 'cause it *is* a joke," Peter replied, completely unaffected by the rebuke. "Admit it. This doesn't have anything to do with his reputation or his unpublished address or anything like that. You just don't like Adrian because you're jealous."

That was, as the cliché says, the last straw. "I AM NOT JEALOUS!" Spengler shouted, subconsciously figuring that sheer volume might succeed where repetition had failed in getting that point across. Fed up with Venkman and the entire pointless conversation, he resumed his climb to the third floor lab, and none too quietly. When he got there, those still in the rec room could feel as well as hear the door slam behind him.

"Don't," Ray warned the moment Peter opened his mouth. He may have been feeling inexplicably confused about the enigmatic Mr. Doyle, but Ray's mind was clear on other subjects, enough to know that he didn't want to listen to Peter say, "I told you so."

Egon, however, wasn't the only person in the city worried about Adrian and the success of his involvement with Janine. Melanie had been watching the whole affair very carefully, if covertly, and was now becoming concerned indeed. Given the mortal woman's current condition — a thing that the succubus was able to see as easily as a human can see the world before him under a full noontime sun — it would only be a matter of time, perhaps even mere hours, before Adrian had complete possession of her soul and with it, victory in their bet. Though she cared not a whit for Janine or what happened to her — Melanie was, after all, a minion of evil whose job it was to bring human souls to her Master — the fact that Adrian was almost certain to win their wager troubled her deeply. Though her specific course of action was at best hazy, what she needed to do was quite plain:

She had to stop him. By whatever means were necessary.

After Ray got up to answer the telephone around six-thirty the next morning (a wrong number), he sat on the edge of his bed, wondering if he should bother to try and get back to sleep or just stay up. As he sat there thinking, he reflected with amusement on how the not-quite musical dialogue of his partners' snoring reminded him of his high school orchestra trying to tune up before rehearsal. There was Winston's resonant french horn brassiness, Peter's clarinet-with-a-broken-reed nasal wheeze, and.... The analogy came to a dead stop at that point, when he realized that the stringed bass section — that being Egon's somewhat less thunderous nocturnal breathing — wasn't part of that oddly rhythmic fugue, that, in fact, the physicist's bed was perfectly neat, undisturbed, unrumpled — untouched. He supposed for a moment or two that his friend had gotten up even earlier, had made his bed and dressed in total silence, but somehow, Ray was more inclined to suspect that the bed hadn't even been slept in.

He released his breath in a softly sad sound. Things had been pretty lousy when he'd turned in, last night. Egon hadn't been heard from since he'd all but barricaded himself in the lab; Winston's attempt to get Peter to let up on his obsessive teasing had failed dismally, with Venkman even more firmly convinced that his behavior was justified; Slimer, who became singularly upset whenever things went badly among his human friends, had gone into hiding until the storm passed; and Ray had wished — *still* wished — he could do the same. He always hated it when there was conflict among them, especially when it didn't involve him directly and he was therefore in a position to do absolutely nothing to stop it. Last night, not interfering, leaving his two dissenting friends to their own devices had seemed the

right thing to do; now, he wasn't so sure. Worried, Ray stood up and slipped out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

He found Egon in the lab across the hall, sitting at a desk strewn with papers and computer disks and books. Dressed in the same clothing he'd had on the night before and slumped over a large book in a posture Ray had long since come to recognize as "unhappy," Spengler was perusing the text with single-minded intensity. His nose was almost literally buried in its pages, since his glasses had been set aside in an attempt to alleviate eyestrain. His concentration was such that he didn't look up when the door opened, nor when Ray stepped in, closed it, and came around behind his cohort-in-science to peer over his shoulder. From what he could see of the page Egon was reading, Stantz couldn't quite figure out why the man was so engrossed; at a loss, he sighed softly.

"Didn't you sleep at all last night?"

Caught unawares, Egon started at the unexpected sound of a voice so close by; he straightened so suddenly, he further scattered some of the already disorganized papers and sent his glasses on a dive for the floor. "No," he confessed as he bent to retrieve them. "I guess I didn't. Does it make any difference? We haven't had much business, lately."

Ray shrugged. "Doesn't matter to me, but you can just bet Peter'll have something to say about it if we do get a call and you're too tired to work." Again, he squinted at the book. "What're you reading, anyway?"

"Nothing specific." The book closed so quickly, even the rather innocent-minded Ray suspected that whatever it was, Egon didn't want him to see. "Just checking certain listings in some of our reference texts," he excused casually as he wiped the dust from his glasses before returning them to his nose.

"Oh? What subject?"

The physicist started to answer; half a phoneme escaped before he bit down on it, hard. He paused, then said, "Nothing important. Just some things I've been meaning to look into, when I had the time."

Ray wasn't quite sure he believed that, but he could see no obvious connection between all the various identifiable items that littered the desk-top. He picked up one, glanced at it, and saw that it was a professional journal opened to an article on a demon named Lilith, who was a very popular figure in old myths and legends, especially in Middle Eastern and certain Slavic cultures. He recognized the article; he'd read it before, but couldn't see how or why it might pertain to anything in which Egon might be currently interested. He put it back, started to idly pick up a second item — this a sheet of computer hardcopy — but had it plucked from his fingers before he could see what was printed on it.

He frowned, frustrated rather than angry. "Okay, what's going on?" he asked, his tone tolerating no more evasive excuses. "I know you're worried about Janine, and I can tell you're bugged with the way Pete's been giving you a hard time about it, but even that shouldn't be enough to keep you up all night digging through every book and magazine and newspaper clipping and file in the place."

"Who said it was? I just wasn't tired...."

The shorter man snorted softly, disbelieving. "I don't buy it. This isn't Venkman here, Egon; it's me, Ray. You remember me, don't you? Old buddy and business partner and best friend and all that?" His tone was cajoling, not scolding, and he could tell from Spengler's inadvertent, if faint, change of expression that it was having the desired effect. "C'mon," he urged, "what's going on? Why all the heavy research, all of a sudden?"

For a second, the occultist suspected that he wasn't going to receive the explanation he'd been hoping for; then, the vivid blue eyes looked up at him as their owner sighed in surrender. "Remember how I said that this Adrian character just doesn't feel right? Well, I think I may have figured out what's wrong with him."

Ray's eyes widened. "What, was Peter right? Does he have six toes or two belly-buttons or something?"

This time, there was distinct exasperation in Egon's expression. "No. But you've noticed the way Janine's been coming back to work ever since she met him, haven't you? Tired, worn out, drained?"

"Yeah, but I just figured that was 'cause she was using up so much energy on those long walks through the park, and on her emotional highs. They can do that to you, y'know."

"That's what I thought, too — at first. But... here, listen to this and see if it doesn't sound on target." He opened the heavy book he had closed to keep Ray from reading over his shoulder; he turned the pages, swiftly locating the appropriate spot. He adjusted his glasses, found the paragraph he wanted, and started to read aloud.

"His neighbors asked the fisherman where he had gotten his obedient wife, but he rebuffed such questions sharply, and soon the matter was mentioned no more. Still, people did not fail to notice how the pale woman grew stronger. They saw the small smile that trembled on her lips when her eyes rested on the fisherman. As for him, each day he grew more sullen and withdrawn. He seemed to fade. His face paled to dull gray, marked by the hectic glitter of his eyes."

"During the sunless winter hours, no windows glowed in the cottage. Inside, by the dim firelight, the fisherman each night surveyed his prisoner and said, 'Tell me what you are and where you came from.'"

"But she was stronger at night. She smiled a secret smile at him and invariably replied, 'I do not know.' Then she beckoned, and helplessly he obeyed."

"The fisherman became wraithlike; he took to drink and to staring at his blooming captive with hate-filled eyes. Always, he asked his nightly question: 'Tell me what you are and where you came from.'"

""I do not know.""

When he was finished, Egon looked up and saw that his stocky partner was staring at him — or, perhaps more accurately, at his book — with an indescribable expression. "Well?" the physicist prompted.

The brown eyes blinked as Ray was startled out of his reflective reverie. "Well... I'm not sure. What book is that, anyway? Something by Edgar Allan Poe?"

The fair head shook. "No, a collection of supernatural folktales. Sometimes, the best documentation on certain phenomena is still in the original myths and legends."

Ray shivered. "I'll say, it's creepy, all right. Though I don't see what that story has to do with Adrian and Janine. I mean, yeah, sure, she's seemed a little worn out, lately, but no worse'n Peter after a heavy-date weekend — and you've seen the guy. He's just a man — a crook, too, maybe, but just a man." He stopped, carefully considered the deadly serious look on his friend's face, then cleared his throat. "Isn't he?"

Again, Egon shook his head, not without regret. "I don't think so. Not the way we'd define 'man,' at any rate. And this story isn't about his specific kind of creature, just a close relative."

Ray bit his lip as he studied the piles of books and papers. "His kind of creature," he echoed thoughtfully, remembering the way he'd felt driven to take Adrian's side, even against his best friend. Those very impulses, in fact, began to stir again, whispering wordless suggestions in support of Doyle, eroding the edges of his consciousness with inexplicable insinuations — and suddenly, the notion of Doyle being other than human seemed less implausible — in truth, seemed all too likely. He'd felt the fingers of supernatural mental intrusion before, and now that his attention had been drawn to it, he could "see" those same telltale signs again, like psychic fingerprints all over his subconscious. With that sickening certainty now recognized, the involuntary, parasitic response was squashed like a bug, once and for all. "That would *really* make him not what he appears to be," Ray agreed, now eager to know more about the... *thing* that had so subtly and cleverly victimized him and his friends. "You've got to have a reason for thinking that."

"Several," he was assured. "Doyle's slick, but not slick enough. He's left all sorts of clues behind him."

"What sort of clues?"

"Names, for one. His name, his partner's name, the name of their business. Normally, I wouldn't attach much importance to something so trivial, but certain demons seem to take inordinate pleasure in being obscurely obvious. *Adrian Doyle*," he explained when Ray's confusion seemed to return and deepen. "It means *Dark Stranger*. And *Melanie Colton*'s pretty much the same thing."

"That could just be coincidence. Some people fit their names, others don't." He grinned. "Most people would say you don't fit yours, after all, O Ardent Tinsmith."

"Perhaps," was as far toward agreement as Egon was willing to go. "But I didn't choose it; my parents did. If these two are merely passing for human, they probably picked their own names, for cover — like they picked the name of their business. Look at it." He tapped a paper on which the acronym was prominently written. "Doesn't it seem the least bit familiar?"

At first, it didn't. The occultist studied it for a minute or so, looking at the letters forward, backward, upside down, inside out — and when he tried the last, a sudden, "Oh!" of comprehension escaped him. "UBIS, Inc.," he said, pronouncing the abbreviation as its own word rather than the full-blown "incorporated." "Inc. UBIS — incubus! You don't think..."

"...that Doyle's an incubus? I certainly do. And I'll lay you odds that his partner's a succubus, too."

"Cute name, then — and it *would* be consistent with what we know about demonic arrogance. But... working as investment counselors and stock brokers?" Ray shook his head, finding this to be at odds with what he knew of these creatures and their habits. "I'd think you'd have a better case if they were working in the red light district, not on Park Avenue."

"What they're ultimately after are souls," he was reminded. "And considering the way humankind has changed since most of the legends were written back in the Middle Ages, I wouldn't be at all surprised if they'd found it necessary to alter their methods to accommodate the sociological differences. Half the people in this city would happily sell their souls to get rich; Doyle and his partner must be taking advantage of that."

"With Janine? She doesn't have enough money to interest these big investment types, and she's not the greedy sort...."

"No, but if all they really care about is the number of souls they get and not how they're gotten, I'm sure they wouldn't be above resorting to their original methodology, if they thought it would work. Which convinces me all the more that Doyle is an incubus — and I intend to prove it."

"How?" Ray had to ask. He trusted Egon to have a plan, but for himself, he hadn't a clue on how it could be done.

"First, I want to get readings on him. If he really *is* an incubus, he'll register on our PKE meters. Then we'll have to find some way of breaking his hold on Janine—"

"What if he doesn't register?" Ray interrupted, seeing that unpleasant possibility.

Egon apparently felt it wasn't worth considering. "There's no reason he shouldn't. Incubi are actually spiritual in nature, lesser demons...."

"Yeah, but what if he doesn't register? What if he really *isn't* an incubus?"

"I'm virtually positive he is...."

"But what if he isn't? Y'know, there really *is* an easier explanation for what's been going on. Janine might've set it all up, just to try to get your attention by making you jealous...."

The look that flashed in his direction — irritated, bordering on betrayed — made Stantz suddenly wish he hadn't played devil's advocate quite so insistently. He couldn't blame his friend if his patience in this matter (and specifically with That Word) was wearing thin; after Peter's persistent teasing of the last few days, the seemingly endless fuse on Egon's temper had to be getting dangerously short.

But the incipient anger faded as quickly as it had flared. "I'm certain he's an incubus," Spengler said quietly. "And I'm going to prove it — to myself, if not to any of you."

"Hey, you really don't have to convince me," came the quick and sincerely apologetic assurance. "If you think you've really got a case for it, then that's good enough for me. But if I were you, I wouldn't mention it to Peter until you've got more visibly solid evidence. With the way things've gone lately, he'll think you're trying to build up an alibi, and that'd only make things worse."

The look that crossed the physicist's face was wistfully wry. "I never considered doing anything else," he confessed. "Setting myself up to get ribbed by Peter is *not* one of my favorite pastimes. He finds enough excuses for it, all on his own, and the last thing I need is to hand him a silver platter full of more ammunition — and oh, god, Ray, what if he's right?"

Stantz, who had been busy examining the document on Lilith (the relevance of which had suddenly become clear to him, since the seductive Lilith was reputedly the mother of all demonic night-creatures, such as incubi), was caught unawares by that almost horrified question. "Right about what?" he asked, puzzled. "That Adrian's really nothing but a stockbroker?"

"No — yes — not exactly."

The shorter of the pair interrupted his perusal of the journal to look up at his colleague. "Which one?"

"Both. Neither. Look, I *know* that Adrian's not what he seems to be — I've got enough proof now to convict him of it in a court of law — but...." He hesitated, obviously uncomfortable with whatever he was thinking. "What if Peter's right, too?"

Ray frowned slightly, no more enlightened than before. "Oh, come on, you can't both be right. Either Adrian's an incubus or he's not—"

"That's not what I meant. Adrian's an incubus, all right — or some other sort of demonic minion — but what if I *did* go looking for evidence to prove it 'cause I really *am* jealous?"

The frown turned into mild surprise. "*If?* You mean, you don't *know?*"

"I'm... not sure," Egon finally had to admit, since he had spent a fair part of the night contemplating that very question, only to reach the bewildering realization that he'd had so very little personal experience with the emotion, he honestly didn't know *what* he was feeling.

Ray had some minor difficulty comprehending that. "It's all going on in your own head, y'know. How can you not be sure?"

"It's easy. The last time I can remember being actively *jealous* of anybody was when that jerk from Cal Tech stumbled into the same research I'd been working on for years, finished it two months before I could, and ended up winning a Nobel prize."

"Well, yeah, but this isn't the same sort of situation. Janine isn't a science project, and Adrian isn't an *idiot savant* from California...."

"I know — and that's what's got me worried. What if Peter's right, and I *am* going after Adrian just because of some primitive emotional psychosis?"

"I wouldn't call it a *psychosis*," Ray commented, but he considered this reluctant admission for several moments, then smiled crookedly. "Then you'd be no different from the rest of us poor mortals — which is nice to know, if you ask me."

The humor Stantz saw in that possibility was lost on his partner. "It's not so nice from a professional standpoint. I'd expect Peter to take a simplistically sophomoric approach to the question, but you of all people should know that a scientist can't afford to lose his objectivity."

Ray sighed, both amused and bemused. "Yeah, well, call me chauvinistic, but I don't think the man's been born who can keep his objectivity, scientific or otherwise, when there's a woman involved that he likes. Face it, m'friend: Being scientists doesn't make us immune to human frailties; if anything, it just makes us more susceptible

'cause we're always coming nose to nose with our limitations. And like it or not, you're just as human as the rest of us."

"Not if you listen to Peter," the physicist remarked rather somberly.

His colleague, on the other hand, laughed, a bright sound that was amiable, not mocking. "Well, then, there's your problem: you've been listening to Peter too much. And you know as well as I do that he doesn't mean half of what he says."

"Perhaps, but—"

"But what? Jeeze, Egon, you've picked a hell of a time to start swallowing Venkman's bull. And haven't you figured out yet *why* Peter keeps poking fun at you and Janine?"

From his blank expression, Spengler was completely without a clue.

A crooked smile touched the occultist's round face. "It's 'cause *he's* the one who's jealous, not the other way around. Look at all the dates he has, and how many girlfriends he goes through in the course of a year. Oh, sure, he wants us all to believe he's Peter Venkman, suave and sophisticated man of the world, and that he's just not ready to settle down and fall in love — but the truth is, he'd *kill* to have someone in his life as dedicated to him as Janine is to you. And every time you don't notice her, it kinda tweaks something inside him, and he just can't keep his mouth shut or swallow the wisecracks."

The physicist returned his gaze to the book, his discomfort sharpened. "I notice her, Ray," he said quietly. "And it's not that I don't reciprocate her feelings, but... you know what happened the last time I got involved with a woman."

Ray blinked; his wryness deepened. "If you're talking about Jeannie Mullins, that happened over fifteen years ago. I know she gave you a pretty bad third-degree burn and I don't blame you if it warped your attitudes toward romance an' all that — between her and the kind of example you got from your parents, it's no wonder you're terrified of anything but friendly relationships — but this isn't the same. Janine *isn't* Jeannie, even if their names are sorta similar, and if Janine was the same kind of witch Mullins was, she would've given up on you and moved on when she didn't get what she wanted right away. Don't let what happened a long time ago get in the way of what you've got now, Egon, 'cause I'm with Pete on this one: I'd trade my right arm to have someone care about me the way Janine cares about you — *anyone* in their right mind would. If you're really not interested in her, well, that's something else, but if you are, don't let it slip away just 'cause you got burned once before. It's not fair to Janine, it's not fair to you — and it's not fair to all the rest of us poor slobs who wish we were in your shoes."

Spengler listened to the younger man's speech in thoughtful silence, mildly amazed. Peter may have been the one with the degree in psychology and the well-honed knowledge of human nature — at least when he wasn't getting carried away by his own human foibles — but Ray occasionally demonstrated an equally profound comprehension, perhaps because his own natural sensitivity helped him empathize with those around him, especially his friends. A faint smile shadowed the physicist's expression as his eyes slipped toward the earnest occultist. "You make some very good points, Ray, and perhaps you're right — I probably *have* let my past over-influence my present, at least on this account. But right now, there's nothing I can really do about it, except try to make sure Adrian doesn't harm Janine any more than he already has. I don't believe I'm jealous of Adrian — but I *am* afraid for Janine."

Stantz nodded his understanding. "If everything you've told me turns out to be true — and I've gotta admit, it sure looks that way to me — then Janine really *is* in trouble. And it doesn't matter if you're jealous or not. If it takes a 'primitive emotional psychosis' to save her from that creep, then go right ahead and be a primitive psychotic, and 'hell with whatever Peter thinks about it. It'll be worth it in the end."

The blond scientist considered these comments for several silent moments; then he smiled, albeit wanly. "Somehow," he reflected aloud, "I doubt that Peter would agree with you."

Ray shrugged nonchalantly. "Then that's his problem, not ours. Besides, it's not like you don't have any reason to worry. Mister GQ there is enough to make *anybody* of the same gender think he's being threatened, whether he is or not. I can understand why you might feel a little rattled." He glanced back at the article on Lilith. "But what I *don't* understand is why he picked Janine as a likely target, or why she was able to be sucked in so fast. I've never done

any in-depth studies on incubi, so I really don't know what kinds of powers he might have to draw on, but Janine's always showed a lot more resistance to these devious supernatural types. That's half the reason we hired her."

Egon coughed, his uneasiness back in full. "Ah... well, all of the texts have their own theories on how incubi select their victims, but the only one that seems to apply in this case is the one postulating extreme vulnerability due to failed romances or..." He winced. "...unrequited love."

Mercifully, Ray understood what was being implied without elaboration. "Bummer," he declared succinctly, in sympathy with his friend's unenviable position. "I wouldn't mention *that* to Peter, either."

"Do you think I'm crazy? I had no intention of telling him, believe me."

"I didn't think so." Stantz scratched his chin, lost in thought. "Y'know, I might have an idea for how we could take readings on the guy without scaring him off by being obvious...."

The nearsighted blue eyes blinked. "*We*?" their owner echoed, mildly surprised. "Are you sure you want in on this? Having Peter give one of us a hard time is bad enough."

The occultist shrugged, but there was mischief in his smile. "Ah, but remember, there's strength in numbers. If we make it two against one, he might back off. Besides," he added ruefully, having made the vital connection between Janine's entrapment and his own initially mixed feelings about the broker, "I really *do* think you're right — which also means you were the only one of us who was strong enough to resist getting sucked in by this creep's brainwashing."

"Strength has nothing to do with it. I haven't been affected only I've because I've never talked to him."

The sound Ray made was politely dubious. "Don't you think you're being a little too modest?"

"No. There's a lot of raw information on this kind of creature — where they originated, how they maintain their physical human form, what constitutes a voluntary or involuntary binding contractual agreement with a mortal. That's why I sat up all night, to study it and get a better grip on what we're dealing with. Most of the sources I've read indicate that direct individual interaction is necessary for this type of demonic mind-control to work. One can, of course, consciously resist it, provided you know it's there, but so far, I've really just been lucky."

"Pretty damned lucky, if you ask me. I think there's one big factor you aren't considering, something that gives you an edge the rest of us don't have."

The blue eyes blinked, head cocked in genuine curiosity. "What's that?"

"You love her — don't you?"

It was really more a statement of fact than a question, but it was so unexpected, it caused the physicist's breath to catch and his eyes to close again. He turned away for a very long moment, caught in some internal debate to which Ray was not privy, but when the moment had passed, the blond head nodded.

To his intense relief, his youngest partner asked for no greater explanation. "Then that may give us a big advantage Adrian won't be counting on when we get to the final showdown."

Egon opened his eyes and looked back at him. "How?"

The occultist grinned. "I don't know for sure, but love's a pretty powerful force, especially supernaturally. And it may be something an incubus wouldn't have a lot of experience dealing with. It might *not* make a difference, but then again, it might."

Stantz mulled over all the other bits of information Egon had provided, then made a softly thoughtful sound. "'Involuntary binding contractual agreement,'" he repeated. "That doesn't mean what I think it does — does it?" He sounded almost as if he didn't want to hear the answer.

He was given one, anyway. "If you think it means that there's no such thing as a free lunch, then yes, it does."

Under different circumstances — and from anyone else's lips — Ray might've taken that all-too-apt comment to be a joke; from Egon, he knew it was meant with serious, if wryly ironic, sincerity. He moaned. "I was afraid of that."

"But I'm sure Janine had no idea what she was letting herself in for, at the time," the physicist added, for whatever consolation it was worth. "And chances are, if we do manage to gether out of this alive, she won't remember much — if anything — about it."

Ray glanced at the assorted oddments of information scattered across the worktable and shook his head. "Poor Janine," he sighed. "I can't imagine worse luck, getting tangled up with a sleazoid like Doyle just 'cause she was hungry — and I don't mean for you. Either we're gonna have to stop sending her on our errands during lunch, give her a longer lunch hour, or give her a raise so she can afford to have it brought in while she works." Staring at one of the less scientific and more lurid popular articles on incubi, another, more awful thought struck him between the eyes. "You don't think she knows *now*, do you, and that she's actually going along with him of her own free will?" The implications inherent in that possibility were almost too bleak to contemplate.

But if they had occurred to Spengler, it was plain that he had already considered and dismissed them. "I doubt it," was his promptly-offered opinion. "Given his apparent ego, Adrian certainly wouldn't have volunteered the information, and while I suppose it's *possible* Janine might consider doing something this drastic to get my attention, I can't believe she'd knowingly sell her soul to the Devil to do it."

That did indeed seem the more plausible of the two theories. "You're right," the occultist was relieved to agree. He was not, however, relieved to note, "Which means that Doyle's been playing the lot of us for suckers, all along."

"Maybe not exactly suckers...."

Ray wasn't willing to be so generous. "Whatever. I don't like being used, I don't like seeing my friends used, and I'm gonna make sure we *nail* that dirtbag if it's the last thing I do!"

It was, Egon knew, very typical Stantz-style oration, heavy on the enthusiasm if somewhat short on practical long-term strategies — incubi, for all that they were lesser demons, were still vampires of souls, powerful and very difficult to drive off a selected victim — but, for the moment, it was enough to make him feel that maybe, just maybe, they had a chance of stopping Adrian before it was too late.

They had to. There wasn't any other choice.

IV

A sharp tongue is the only edged tool that grows keener with constant use.

Washington Irving, Rip Van Winkle

They soon discovered, however, that whatever plan Ray had had in mind to confirm Adrian's true identity would not be needed.

Shortly before the office was due to open — somewhere between eight and eight-thirty — Stantz roused his still-sleeping partners while Egon was getting cleaned up and into more presentable clothes. Winston offered no complaints, since he wasn't the sort who was generally inclined to sleep until noon; Peter, on the other hand, was, and did not appreciate being disturbed for something as eminently foregoable as breakfast. Thus it was that he took his place at their dining table still in his pajamas, half-asleep and predictably grumpy.

"What's the rush?" he wanted to know as he cracked open one eye to see if the sight of food would be any more appealing at this hour than its smell. As far as he was concerned, it wasn't. "Do we have an early appointment to get to, or an expensive job that needs to be done before ten?"

"No," he was blithely informed as Ray (who, by now, was well familiar with Peter's usual pre-noon tastes) set a mug full of coffee in front of him.

Venkman latched onto the cup like a drowning man to a life preserver, but he scowled, unhappy with that reply. "Then why wake us up so early? Did you just now think of getting even for some practical joke I pulled years ago, or do you really enjoy making my life miserable?"

Stantz remained cheerfully unoffended. "I'm doing you a favor," he said, taking his own seat. "You really ought to get up early, once in a while. It's good for the spirit...."

The psychologist clearly had other opinions. "Yeah, like sleeping on a bed of nails," he grouched. "Farm-boys like you might like waking up with the chickens, but you *know* I hate getting out of bed at the crack of dawn."

Egon, who had been far more interested in the journal he was studying than in either breakfast or Peter's complaints, nonetheless felt compelled to observe, "Eight-thirty is hardly the crack of dawn."

If he'd been feeling more energetic, Venkman would've stuck out his tongue at him. As it was, he settled for making a pathetic face and an equally pathetic grunt. "It is when you're used to sleeping 'til ten or eleven. Or later."

"Ray's right," Winston noted, to Peter's displeasure. "Nobody needs twelve hours of sleep a day. And they've proved that the less energy you spend, the less you'll have. You need to get moving—"

"Fine," he was interrupted. Peter's words echoed slightly, as they were spoken into the cup he had poised before his mouth. "I'll go on back to bed, and as soon as you find something worth moving for, you come and tell me...."

"Then perhaps I can provide the necessary motivation, Doctor Venkman."

The comment came from the direction of the staircase to the first floor, spoken in a voice that was definitely female and just as definitely not Janine. As one, the four eliminators looked toward the source, startled.

What they saw startled them even more. Standing at the top of the stairs was a beautiful woman with long black hair and silver-gray eyes — so beautiful, in fact, that the mere sight of her was enough to rob anything alive and male of the power of speech for at least a minute. She was well aware of this effect she had on men; such was obvious in the small, sly smile with which she favored the quartet as she moved to join them.

"Let's not waste time with all the inevitable questions, gentlemen," she said, knowing that, for the moment, any talking to be done would be entirely of her initiation. Lithely graceful, she seated herself in the empty chair at one end of the dining table. "My name is Melanie Colton, and I want to hire you."

She wasn't the least bit surprised by the slack-mouthed way in which Peter was staring at her; she was, however, slightly taken aback when Winston — a full forty-five seconds ahead of schedule — managed to find his voice and squeak out, "How — how did you get in here? Did someone forget to lock the door or something?"

"I sincerely doubt it," Egon replied, neither slack-jawed nor tongue-tied, a fact that caused Melanie some small dissatisfaction. "Unless I'm mistaken, a little thing like a lock wouldn't be much of an obstacle to her." He looked her right in the eye. "Am I wrong?"

The woman regarded him with a restrained scowl, miffed not by the question but by the straightforward, unbefuddled manner in which it had been asked. Much as she deplored Adrian's constant whine about the good old days, she also knew that she retained the traditional attributes and attractions of her species; hence, she was quite unused to dealing with mortal men who seemed unaffected by her mere appearance. Either this guy had the excuse of being even more nearsighted than his glasses indicated, or she was losing it. Regardless of the reason, she was not pleased.

"I'm not sure I appreciate the tenor of that remark," she said with a smile that danced a precariously fine line between innocent sweetness and a promise of death. From the way the fingers of her right hand were toying with the pendant around her neck, she was seriously considering using its heavy gold chain to garrote him. "Whether or not you're wrong depends entirely on what it is you actually want to know."

Peter coughed and sputtered and eventually managed to regain his power of speech. His own tone was all in the lady's favor. "Yeah," he agreed, though he wasn't even sure what he was agreeing with. "It sounds to me like you're calling her a thief or a swindler or something. And you tell *me* I'm not polite...!"

"Not a thief," Ray corrected, blinking at Melanie with a sort of interest only vaguely related to Venkman's open-mouthed, hormone-based adoration. "At least not the kind of thief you're thinking of." His eyes narrowed slightly, as if he could almost but not quite see the clue he was trying to find in Melanie's appearance. "You *are* a succubus, aren't you?" The question fell into that nebulous void between true query and mere statement of fact.

The woman regarded him with an attractive expression of mild distaste. "That's such an archaic word," she said, as if she found it loathsome, like a maggot or a worm. "We prefer to call ourselves Class One Procurers."

"Strangely accurate," was Egon's ever-so-dry opinion, "considering the alternate definition of the term."

If Peter had understood what the physicist meant by that remark, he doubtless would have wasted no time in leaping to the lady's defense. Since he didn't, he merely sat there looking confused while Winston spoke up. "Procurers?" he echoed, his eyes on Melanie. "What do you procure?"

Ray had none of his darker friend's difficulty in comprehending their guest's implications. "Souls, Winston," he said quietly. "They collect souls."

Zeddemore frowned. "What, like a bank after overdue accounts?"

"No," Spengler provided, "nothing so pleasant. Succubi and incubi are demonic creatures who serve the needs of their more powerful masters by tricking mortals into giving up their souls in exchange for certain... ah... *ephemeral* pleasures."

"You can say that again," Ray concurred with a nod, favoring their surprise guest with a quizzical eye. "And they used to lure their victims with promises of sex or romance — but now, it looks like they've changed to promising 'em success on the stock market."

Melanie shrugged quite prettily. "A necessity to keep in step with the times," she sighed. "Which brings me back to my reason for coming here. As I said, I want to hire you...."

This statement caused Winston's eyes to widen in totally befuddled disbelief. "You? Want to hire *us*?" He made it sound as if the very idea was not only impossible, but morally repulsive.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Trust me, Mr. Zeddemore: I find this situation no more enjoyable than you do — but I haven't any other choice. I need to have something done, and only you and your associates are able to do it.

"And what's that?" Ray asked, wary.

She got right to the point. "I want you to get rid of my partner."

Three sets of human eyebrows arched in surprise (Peter's didn't; he was still too involved in simply staring at her). "Adrian?" Stantz was first to ask. "He seems pretty efficient to me. Why would you want to get rid of him?"

"Because he's a nuisance," was the frank reply, "and I want him out of the way."

For several longish moments, none of the four men made so much as a peep; presently, Winston cleared his throat. "Ah... I don't think you've got the right idea of what we do, lady," he said, almost amused in a rather macabre way. "We may be paranormal exterminators, but we're *not* a mob hit squad."

There was definite, if comely, contempt in the curled-lip expression she turned on him. "I know *exactly* what you do," she nearly spat back, seeming to grow and crackle with threatening supernatural power without so much as rising from her seat. "You've caused quite enough trouble for my people, harassing us, capturing us — but do you believe for one second that the lot of you could actually do *away* with one of my kind, permanently?"

Winston's gulp was uncomfortable, not unlike his partners'. "Uh... no," he admitted, his attempt at an amiable smile only marginally successful. "But if he's as solid as you are, I don't think we could do it...."

"Solidity is a relative factor in a case such as this, Winston," Egon told him as he continued to study their uninvited guest. "As with other demons, their apparent 'solidity' is able to be changed at whim, depending on the outer form they select. If a situation requires them to be palpably physical, then they *are* physical — but a temporary state of corporeality doesn't present any obstacle to our equipment, if their natural state is spiritual." He frowned faintly as he addressed Melanie. "I must admit, you aren't the only one who'd be happy to see Doyle out of the picture — but why do *you* want to get rid of him? Nuisance or not, wouldn't your superiors consider hiring us tantamount to betrayal?"

There was something unnervingly sinister in her subdued responding smile. "Why should they? In my business, Doctor Spengler, the elimination of an annoying colleague is merely considered innovative goal-oriented strategy."

Ray shuddered. "I'm glad I'm not in your line of work, then," he confessed with a wince.

She made an airy gesture of dismissal. "If you were, you'd be of precious little use to me. But if it'll make you more inclined to accept my offer... I want to get rid of Adrian because, frankly, his obsession with the old, traditional methods of victim-seduction are interfering with the successful operation of our outpost. Procurement via financial routes has been shown again and again to provide the optimum results, given current social mores, and with him out of the way, I can request a new partner, one who'll spend his time doing his job instead of pining for the 'good old days.'" She paused and leaned back in her chair, her pose dripping arrogance, one hand again toying with her necklace in a gesture of casual, careless, smugly superior annoyance. "Does *that* answer your questions?"

"It sure answers mine," Peter beamed, his expression not unlike that of a lovesick puppy.

Winston wasn't nearly so easy to convince. "All but one," he said. "What are we supposed to get out of this?"

Almost as if she had been waiting for someone to ask that very question, Melanie smiled at him, the expression blending both vague relief and near-triumph. "I wouldn't ask you gentlemen to do it for nothing, of course," she fairly purred. "I understand that business is business — even though we happen to be on opposing sides of certain ethical issues. I'm prepared to pay you no less than one hundred thousand dollars for your services." She released her pendant; with seeming magic, a slip of paper appeared in that hand, a certified cashier's check for the amount mentioned, made out to *Ghostbusters, Inc.* "If the amount is inadequate, I'll be more than happy to negotiate...."

If there was one thing in the world that could reliably divert Peter's attention away from an attractive woman, that thing was a large sum of money (preferably cash, but a certified cashier's check drawn from a prominent local

bank was equally good). The blank look in his eyes was replaced with the green glint of avarice as he focused on the check. He blinked once or twice to be sure that it was no hallucination. It wasn't. The check remained as it was, solidly and enticingly real.

"Oh, trust me, it's adequate," he all but drooled, leaning forward to have an even better look at it. "Will you be paying in advance...?"

"If that's what you wish," Melanie readily agreed. Though her smile was no wider than before, she was secretly pleased with his reaction. She extended the check in the psychologist's direction.

He was about to take it when Egon interrupted. "Peter, we can't."

It would not have been an exaggeration to say that the face Venkman turned toward him was pitiful. "Why not?" he wanted to know. "It won't be an easy job, and if that's what she's willing to pay...."

Winston, who had also been staring at the check, though his greed was but a pallid reflection of Peter's, spoke up in his behalf. "I've gotta admit, that offer's nothing to sneeze at. We haven't had an awful lot of jobs lately, y'know, and the money would come in handy."

"And taking the job *would* be one way of solving all our problems with Adrian," Ray added, though he sounded far from convinced. Something about the offer bothered him, much in the way Adrian's post-hypnotic mind control had — in fact, in *precisely* the same way Adrian's mind-control had. He examined the sensation and wondered if it wasn't in truth the result of similar supernatural subterfuge on Melanie's part.

While he was pondering this puzzle, Peter continued. "That's twenty-five thousand apiece," he noted, just in case Egon hadn't considered that point. "Just think of all the little scientific gizmos you could buy with that."

"That's entirely beside the point," the physicist insisted.

"Only if your point doesn't include having a place to sleep and food to eat and money to pay our bills." He turned back to Melanie, his mind made up. "We'd be happy to accept your offer, Miss Colton," he began, reaching out to take the check. Melanie smiled at him, like the jaws of a trap waiting to close on its prey.

Just as he was about to take it, his hand was slapped down and pinned against the table. Furious, he turned to glare at Egon, who had done it; he opened his mouth to protest, but not fast enough.

"Think!" Spengler ordered, none too gently. "She's a succubus — and she's *admitted* that their entrapment methods have changed. If we agree to take her money, we also agree to give her our *souls*."

If he hadn't been scowling so angrily at Egon, Peter might have been looking at Melanie, in which case the physicist's rational speech would have been rendered completely useless. Since he was giving that partner his more-or-less undivided attention, the words soaked in; it didn't take long for him to realize the trap he'd almost fallen into, nor to acknowledge that Egon was right. Gingerly, he withdrew his hand; when he dared look back toward Melanie, his gaze was both guarded and suspicious.

She was frowning, now, not smiling. Her silver eyes flicked from Peter to Winston to Ray and then to Egon, lingering on the last with a brief but sincere snarl of disgust. "You *really are* a bunch of hopeless do-gooders, aren't you?" she grumbled unhappily. "I'd heard you were, but I always thought that was an excuse being passed around by idiots who don't know how to do their jobs. How disappointing." She flicked the paper between her fingers, and the check disappeared, not without causing Peter a momentary pang of regret. She sighed. "Very well, then, if you can't be bought to my advantage, what *do* you want in return for your services?"

"What've you got to offer?" Venkman asked.

All three of his partners scowled at him. "Peter!" Ray admonished, landing a solid jab to the accused's ribs for emphasis.

The psychologist pouted, rubbing the injured spot. "Well, I don't want to do this for *nothing*. If we can't take her money, what *can* we ask for?"

"How about asking her and her cronies to pack up and leave town?" Winston suggested. "New York's got enough problems without a bunch of demons crawling around the back alleys, stealing peoples' souls."

Melanie favored him with a sarcastic half-smile. "How little you know your own city," she said, tongue clicking. "We scarcely have to 'crawl around back alleys' to fill our quotas. Your species is so spineless, people come to us practically begging us to take their souls in exchange for what you laughingly call wealth. If we left, they'd follow us, or others of your own kind would take our place, so in the end, our departure would serve little purpose."

"Then what if we asked you to get Adrian to let go of Janine first?" Ray put in.

The woman sniffed, exasperated. "If I had that much control over him, he wouldn't be causing me such aggravation, and I wouldn't need your services at all. She's his client, not mine, and I have no power to interfere."

Winston's whole face furrowed with thought as he tried to sort things out. "You mean, he's a... whatever...."

"An incubus," Stantz provided.

"An incubus, and all this time he's been going out with Janine, he's been sucking the soul out of her?" Somehow, saying it made the concept sound nauseatingly gross.

Melanie laughed, a short, mocking sound. "What did you think he was doing? If our Master didn't need your souls, you mortals would be as attractive to us as squashed insects are to you."

"Is that why he picked Janine?" Peter wanted to know. "Just 'cause she was there and he needed to make his quota?"

Melanie looked down her nose at him; one corner of her mouth curled upward. "No. If he'd been doing his job, he wouldn't have given her a second glance. But I'd had enough of listening to him harp about the Old Ways, so I made him a bet: If he could get the soul of the next woman to walk through our office door signed, sealed, and delivered within three days, using the Old Methods, I'd support his effort to get our superiors to re-sanction their use as an option for field operatives. Naturally, I never expected him to succeed, especially not when I found that your secretary would be his target — but I didn't know that she'd turn out to be a repressed closet romantic."

Egon suddenly took great interest in studying the ceiling; Ray spoke up, sounding appalled and very nearly angry. "You mean Janine's in trouble just because you two made some stupid *bet*?"

The succubus remained nonchalant. "Of course. But when I realized he'd have no trouble winning if I didn't do something, I decided that the best thing I *could* do would be to have him disposed of before his time was up. Since you operate the only spirit disposal service around, I had no choice but to come to you." She paused, smiling reflectively. "Actually, I think it's poetic justice, don't you?"

"I think it's pretty rotten," Winston grumbled, as angry as Ray. "Where do you guys come off, thinking you can play games with people's souls just to prove a point?"

"And where do *you* come off, thinking you can hold us captive, against our wills?" Melanie retorted. "We're no different than you and your partners, Mister Zeddemore. We're all simply doing our jobs." She stood and leaned over the table, hands splayed against the polished wood surface. "Now, do you want to do this or not?"

Peter — who was still annoyed with the woman for trying to trick him — snorted softly. "Oh, we want to do it, all right — but not for the same reasons. I'd just as soon stuff both of you into the same trap and let you go at each others' throats for the rest of eternity."

When she smiled back at him, it was more a threatening display of fangs than an expression of pleasure or amusement. "Given a choice, I could wish the same fate on you. But time is one luxury I don't have. If you want to accept my business, then name your price — and do it fast, before I get tired of this runaround and leave without telling you where to find them."

It hadn't occurred to any of the men that locating Janine might be a problem, but if what Melanie had said was true — and they had every reason to believe it was — then it was a sure bet that their secretary wouldn't be coming

to the office today, and if she was with Adrian, whose home address was the most carefully guarded secret since the bombing of Hiroshima....

Egon was the only one with an answer. "Guarantee the release of Janine's soul," he said flatly, "and you've got a deal."

Melanie attempted to cover her surprise. In her business, one quickly became accustomed to striking bargains with truly selfish terms and conditions; altruism — be it in money or spirit — was all but unheard of. "I can't do that. I told you, I have no control over Adrian or his victims...."

"No, but you know how it's done, and how it's undone. Tell us how to make sure her soul isn't lost with him, and we'll do it. Otherwise, you can forget the whole thing."

The physicist seemed very adamant on the subject, a circumstance Melanie found thoroughly irritating. Given the way he hadn't showed a flicker of reaction to any of her blandishments, New or Old, and had even presented enough interference to break the tenuous control she'd managed to exert over his partners, especially Venkman, she was beginning to dislike the man intensely. It showed in her eyes when she looked at him, like the gleam of blood on the edge of a sharp dagger. "You're in a very poor position to bargain, Doctor Spengler," she said through clenched teeth. "If you *don't* cooperate, your secretary will certainly be doomed—"

"And you'll be doomed, too," he interrupted with the curiously ardent dispassion of a college lecturer convinced of the unassailable accuracy of his research findings. His placid confidence did nothing to please Melanie; quite the opposite. From the way her hand was spasming around the crystal pendant of her necklace, Egon was quite sure she would have been much happier if the stone were his head and it an eggshell she could crush out of existence just by clenching her fist. He found her apparently nervous habit interesting, but not worth abandoning his line of conviction. He continued, undisturbed. "You'll lose your bet, and you'll be stuck with Doyle — probably for the rest of eternity, which is certainly a much longer time than we'll have to live with our guilty consciences if something terrible *does* happen to Janine. Cooperation works both ways. Either we both win, or we both lose. Your choice."

Though they said nothing, his partners were plainly in agreement — even Peter, who tended to think of Janine as the sister he'd never had and hence had never had the joy of picking on. This time, Melanie scowled outright, not because she found his terms unreasonable, but because she knew, damnably, that Egon was right. She fumed for all of a minute, then surrendered. "Have it your way, then — for all the good it'll do you. The power he holds over her is similar to what you humans call hypnosis; if you break the cycle of fascination in the subject, you'll break his control over her, and prevent him from doing any further damage."

"Any *further* damage," Ray repeated, seeing in the phrase something he didn't like. "Meaning he's already taken part of her soul from her."

"Part?" The woman snorted indelicately. "Most of it, I should think. You didn't actually believe her when she said she was exhausted from mere lack of sleep?"

"Well, no, but... she wouldn't've *lied* about it, either," he insisted, unable to believe that such brazen dishonesty was in their receptionist's makeup.

Neither did Melanie. "No, I don't suppose she would have — a pity, too. This thing you mortals call integrity can be *such* a bother."

The sound Peter made was sublimely rude. "Only to people warped enough to call a stab in the back 'innovative goal-oriented strategy.'"

The succubus hated having her words thrown back at her, especially by cheeky, presumptuous humans. She hissed at Venkman, sounding very much like an angry cobra preparing to strike.

Ray was oblivious to this mutual exchange of hostilities; he was busy contemplating the more important situation. "If Adrian's still trying to... procure Janine's soul," he said reflectively, "and we break his control before he's finished the job, will she automatically get back whatever he's taken?"

"Not necessarily," was her blunt answer. "When we draw out the souls of our victims, we hold them in us, in part or in whole, until they're delivered to the Master. If you want her to be as she was before, you either have to get him to release it of his own free will, or find a way to separate their essences before you trap him. If you don't, she certainly won't have enough psychophysical strength left to survive for long. But," she added, anticipating the question, "don't ask me how to do it, because frankly, I don't know how it's done, other than by conscious release. That knowledge, the Master keeps to himself."

"Just goes to show you how much you can trust a demon," Winston observed dryly.

Melanie didn't grace that remark with more than a sour twitch of her nose. She glanced at her watch, then shook her head. "I've wasted too much time here, already. Though I don't expect him to show his face at the office again until he's won the bet, Adrian's sure to call when we open, to rub it in by telling me how close he is to winning, and if I'm not there when he calls, he might get suspicious. I've given you as much of a guarantee as I can. Do we or don't we have an agreement?"

The four colleagues traded glances. Winston clearly harbored some doubts — Melanie's lack of assurance on the matter of returning soul-energy that had already been siphoned off was disturbing — but, since both Ray and Egon appeared relatively unconcerned and Peter seemed inclined to trust their instincts, he was willing to go along. As one, they nodded.

"You've got a deal," Venkman told the woman, his smile dripping both sunshine and acid. "But next time, don't call us — we'll call you."

"I tried calling Janine's place and didn't get any answer," Winston announced ten minutes later as he joined his colleagues in the basement lab, where Ray and Egon were rapidly — so rapidly, it came within a hair's breadth of frantically — digging through a locker full of equipment fragments while Peter watched from a safe distance. "Which means she's either at Adrian's or on her way here."

"It means she's at Adrian's," Peter said, his offhanded certainty winning him a glare from Winston, who, in spite of everything, still believed that Janine was a lady, which meant she wouldn't have spent the night with the man — or, rather, *incubus* — as Venkman was implying. His scowl did nothing to change the psychologist's mind. "Come on, Winston, he *is* an incubus, after all. If Janine's as far gone as Melanie says, she's probably floating too far off the ground to notice what time it is, much less where she's spending the night — and that's what Doyle needs from her to win his bet."

Zeddemore wanted to argue with that observation, but unfortunately, he had to admit it was all too likely. He sighed. "We can't do anything to Adrian until we're sure she's free of him. Should I call his place and see if she's there...?"

"No!" That immediate response came from every other mouth in the room. "Are you nuts?" Peter was first to amend. "Call him up on his unlisted phone, and he'll *know* we're on to him. We don't need him skipping town on us before we lower the boom."

That possibility hadn't occurred to Winston, but he realized that it, too, was well worth considering, though it did nothing to further his peace of mind. He frowned, looking for other angles and problems he might have missed.

"Don't worry, Winston," Ray, ever the optimist, assured him from where he knelt, digging through the bottom of the locker while his tallest partner searched through the top. "The idea I've got is sure to work, and — hold it, Egon, that's it! Those're what I've been looking for!" He caught the physicist's wrists before he could toss the items onto the discard pile.

Spengler glanced at the bits of patchworked electronics, leftovers from a job they'd taken several years back, and favored their clumsy shapes with mild skepticism. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." He pushed himself to his feet, claimed the ugly little items, and headed for the stairs. "C'mon, I'll explain in the car on the way there."

"The principle's really very simple," Ray told the others while he worked on assembling his whatever-it-was en route to Adrian's. "By setting up a specifically-tuned filter on the induction fields of a trap, we can screen out any spiritual energy that isn't Adrian's and prevent it from getting sucked into the trap with him. That way, not only will Janine's essence be freed, but so will the essence of anyone else he's been... uh... working on."

"Sounds great," Peter, who was driving, approved. "But why're you fixing up two traps? Won't one be enough?"

"It should be, but it never hurts to have a backup, just in case the person with the trap can't get it into position or something."

"Good idea," Winston commended. "But that won't break the hold he's got on her right now, will it?"

The auburn head shook with regret. "No. We'll still have to deal with that first or this won't work, filter or no filter."

"Even worse," Egon noted, his deep voice well suited to the grimness of his words, "you'll need to tune the filters to his specific spectral frequency beforehand — and we don't know what that is. We never *did* get a chance to scan him, remember?"

Stantz chuckled wanly. "Yeah, well, that *is* a little bit of a problem."

"A little bit?" Peter snorted, exasperated. "We can't just walk up to the guy, stick a PKE meter in his face, and tell him to smile for the birdie, Ray."

"No," the occultist agreed, "but I was thinking: If one of us could get him to come to the door — tell him we're looking for Janine or something — the rest of us could hide out of sight, but not out of meter range, and take a reading on him. Then I can set the traps before we move in to bust 'im."

"And since you've got to tune the filters, you can't be the one to knock on the door, right?" Venkman's tone was more than mildly sarcastic.

"Whoever does it won't be able to go in armed," Winston noted darkly. "Not without tipping him off."

Peter groaned. "Oh, great. So what should we do, draw straws to see who gets to bell the cat?"

"That'd be fair," Zeddemore had to admit.

"It won't be necessary," Egon said. "I'll do it."

Though Winston frowned, an expression of consummate relief crossed Peter's face. "Fine by me," he quipped.

His black partner wasn't quite so cavalier. "I still say we should draw straws."

"Why?" Peter's voice was the epitome of reason. "If Egon wants to be brave and noble an' all that, we should let him."

"But we still don't know everything there is to know about this Doyle creep...."

"Oh, I'm sure we don't," their fair-haired colleague agreed with amazing calm. "Melanie answered our questions, but I doubt she told us everything we might need to know. In fact, I'm *positive* she didn't."

"Well, that's it, then," Winston said decisively. "If these demons are lying to us and keeping important information secret, then he's probably got powers we don't know about — he could be dangerous, especially if something happens an' he finds out what we're up to before we're ready to bust him."

"All the more reason to take volunteers," was Peter's logical conclusion. "And you wouldn't be volunteering unless you already had some sort of plan, would you, Spengs?"

The physicist cleared his throat. "Actually," he confessed, shrugging, "I don't have a specific course of action in mind, at least not in the sense of an overall strategy...."

Winston was appalled. "You don't?"

Egon, on the other hand, remained remarkably equable. "No, but does it really make any difference? Someone has to do it, and it might as well be me. I'm the one who suspected Doyle of being an incubus, after all." He didn't bother to mention that a sense of guilt was actually far more responsible for prompting this apparently noble offer; if the others presumed it was a resurfacing of his usual scientific curiosity, he was content to let the misapprehension stand.

Adrian's residence was an expensive townhouse in one of the better neighborhoods of midtown Manhattan. Peter, recognizing the area from the address brought Ecto-1 to a halt on a side-street about a block away from their actual goal, figuring that they would be best advised not to advertise their presence by parking the high-profile converted ambulance on Adrian's doorstep. From a discreet distance, they studied the place and made plans.

"Okay," Ray said after several moments' perusal, "one of you guys can hide in those bushes alongside the front steps, get the reading when Adrian comes to the door, and send 'em to me on the walkie-talkies once he's gone back in."

"One of us?" Peter echoed. "Don't tell me you can't do *this* by yourself, either."

Stantz shrugged. "I need a little more time to finish hooking up the filter systems...."

"That's all right. Just give me a couple of seconds, and I'll hook it up to your—"

"I'll do it," Winston volunteered, not wanting to hear the rest of Peter's suggestion. He knew that most of Peter's attitude could be chalked up to his usual pre-noon grouchiness, and what couldn't be attributed to that was most likely due to Melanie's appearance and their subsequent discovery that Adrian had been playing all of them — except Egon — like a symphony of harps. Peter hated being made to feel like a chump, and under the circumstances, Winston was willing to cut him a little slack. He took the PKE meter Ray offered him. "Is there any way to cut the sound on this thing? It'll blow the whole show if Doyle hears me crawlin' around in his bushes."

In answer, Egon reached out and reset one of the smaller knobs on the device's left side. Winston nodded his thanks. "Okay, then. Give me a minute or two to go on ahead and get myself good and hidden before you come knockin' at his door." With a sigh, the black man headed for the townhouse in question.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Ray asked his physicist friend once Zeddemore was gone. "For all we know, Winston'll be able to get a clear reading on him without one of us calling him to the door."

"Maybe," Egon conceded, "but we can't be sure. Besides, his partner told us we've got to break his hold on Janine's soul *before* we trap him."

"She might've lied."

"Maybe, but there isn't enough time to find out whether or not she did — and we aren't likely to get much of a chance to do *anything* if we come storming into Doyle's apartment like a SWAT team making a raid. Unless he's short on brains, he'll know something's up once he sees even one of us coming at him with a proton pack. There's no telling what he might do."

"I guess you're right...."

"I *know* he's right," was Peter's confident correction. "Quit trying to talk him out of it, Ray."

"I'm not," Stantz insisted. "I'm just—"

"Look, Winston's in position," Peter was quick to observe. "Better get going, Egon. And don't worry — we'll come after you as soon as we can." There was an indefinable something in that last remark that made one think "soon" would not be very soon at all, but the physicist was given no time to reconsider as Peter gave him a not-terribly-discreet shove to send him on his way.

It took perhaps a minute — and that at a very sedate pace, given his usual length of stride — for Egon to reach Adrian's front door. By the time he arrived, a single glance showed that Peter and Ray had again moved out of sight, probably gone back to Ecto-I. Winston, too, was well-concealed amid the shrubbery; for a moment, the scientist felt very much alone, to say nothing of singularly foolish. To remedy the latter situation, he hesitated long enough to consider what he might say when Adrian opened the door; then, he rang the bell.

Doyle responded so promptly, two suspicions immediately entered Egon's mind: either he'd seen him coming — which meant he'd probably seen Winston coming, too — or he was expecting someone. Egon sincerely hoped it was the latter; if not, he might be stepping into very serious trouble.

The man — *incubus* — 's pleasant, if slightly surprised, greeting strongly supported the second theory, much to the physicist's relief. Doyle's initial, "Oh!" seemed the startled exclamation of one who had been expecting to open the door to admit someone else. From his clothing — clearly intended for leisure, from the tips of his spotless white deck-shoes to the vainly fashionable gold chain revealed by his tieless, open-necked Izod shirt — he had on his mind plans for anything but a day of doing business at his brokerage. He smiled sunnily, just on the tasteful side of blindingly, the sort of look one might use to greet the unheralded appearance of a seldom-seen childhood friend. "Ah — Doctor Spengler, isn't it? What an unexpected pleasure! How on earth did you manage to find me?"

There was no especial suspicion or condemnation in the request, merely politely astonished curiosity. The latter question had occurred to Egon perhaps two seconds before Adrian had voiced it; fortunately, a plausible answer presented itself without delay. "With the help of your business partner," he replied smoothly, which was no lie — a good thing, since he had precious little of Peter's talent for dissembling. "I needed to locate you, and she was... cooperative, though not exactly enthusiastic."

The incubus laughed. "Yes, well, I shouldn't imagine she would be. We do tend to be very selfish in guarding our privacy, considering how very public our work-lives must be. If you managed to wheedle my address out of Melanie, you must've had a very convincing argument."

"She seemed to think so," was the glib response — again no lie, though Adrian could not have even guessed at the nature of their actual argument. "I'm trying to find our secretary."

Doyle's answering blink was utterly guileless; it would have fooled anyone who did not know his true nature, and stood a fair chance of fooling even those who did. "And you believe I know where she is?"

"Don't you?"

The query was so blandly polite, one could not have called it an accusation under any definition of the term. Adrian didn't try; he merely smiled and accepted it at face value. "Yes, I do suppose we've been keeping rather close company of late, which would make this a perfectly logical place to look. But I'm afraid she isn't here, Doctor Spengler — though I *am* expecting her to come along any time now. If you want, I can give her a message — or would you prefer to come in and wait, and deliver it yourself?"

Egon hesitated. There were myriad implications to that offer. Adrian, plainly, was utterly confident that his human disguise was impenetrable, that he'd tricked everyone on the planet into believing that he was no more or less than exactly what he appeared to be: a charismatic stockbroker who could charm anyone into supporting him. There was very definitely some supernatural trickery at work whenever the incubus spoke; now that he was involved in a direct one-on-one conversation with him, the scientist could feel a sort of pressure at the back of his mind, trying to wheedle its way into his thoughts to push all the right buttons that would suppress any suspicions and make him respond to Adrian as a "friend," and one who must be supported and defended at all costs. Peter's annoying persistence of yesterday suddenly made a great deal of sense, and any lingering irritation the physicist felt over their arguments instantly evaporated. Fortunately, from both his reading and Ray's warnings, he'd known this was coming, and now did his very best to resist the mental intrusion. That he found it astonishingly easy to deflect supported Ray's contention that he had some inner edge his partners did not.

Adrian, happily, interpreted Egon's defensive hesitation as surprise or confusion, the precise reaction he had anticipated. A sort of sympathy touched his smile, the pity one feels for a disoriented lesser creature. "Why don't you come in, then?" he suggested magnanimously. "I wouldn't want you to go away disappointed, since you went through all this effort to find her."

A rather uncharitable, *I'll bet you wouldn't*, flitted through the scientist's mind, though he never even considered saying it aloud. To decline the offer risked inciting the man — demon — 's suspicions, especially given the half-truth Egon had used to explain his presence on Doyle's very doorstep; one did not go through the trouble of finding an all-but-unknown address simply to leave the second one was given no for an answer. Besides, though he couldn't be sure, the physicist got the very strong impression that Doyle *wanted* him to be there when Janine arrived, possibly to have a witness who could corroborate the time and thus prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Adrian had abided by the terms of the wager and had won fair and square. Egon didn't especially *like* that possibility, but cooperating seemed to him to be the logical next step, so he accepted the invitation with a silent nod. As he crossed the threshold, he glanced surreptitiously at Winston's cover-bush, hoped that his colleague had had enough time to get the information Ray needed, then followed Adrian inside.

Peter and Ray were back at Ecto-1, waiting for Winston's report when Zeddemore came running up to join them, anxious and slightly out of breath. Seeing him, Stantz immediately feared the worst. "I thought you were going to radio the readings back to me," the occultist told his dark partner while the latter tried to steady his breathing. "What's wrong, couldn't you get 'em?"

"No, it went just fine," Winston assured him, holding out the meter so that Ray could assess its memorized data for himself. "But this may be trickier'n we thought. Janine's not even there, an' now, Egon's inside with him."

Venkman's first response to that announcement was a frown. "What the heck did he go and do *that* for?" the psychologist wanted to know, finding it to be an incredibly stupid move.

"He didn't really have any choice," Zeddemore shrugged. "When he told him Janine wasn't there, Doyle invited him in to wait, an' I guess Egon figured he couldn't say no without makin' him suspicious." He paused to take another deep breath, then scowled. "I don't like this, Ray. Are you *sure* this idea of yours is gonna work?"

Ray had no doubts. "Of course I'm sure," he said confidently as he finished assessing the meter readings and resumed work on the trap augmentation. "Once we're ready to go after him, this filter'll do just what I said it would."

Winston sniffed. "Yeah, but we can't do that 'til we're sure Janine's in the clear, and if she isn't even here, yet...."

"Correction," Peter interrupted, having kept an eye on the intersection with Doyle's street all the while. "She's here now. She was in the back seat of the last cab that went by."

The black man groaned. "Great, that's just what we need. This is all moving too fast, guys — and if we don't find a way to catch up with him, we're gonna be eating Doyle's dust an' watching him ride off into the sunset with Janine's soul."

"I'm working as fast as I can, Winston," Ray assured him without looking up from that very task. "I don't see how we can get the jump on him—"

"I do," Peter suddenly piped up, grinning. He was eyeing the townhouses surrounding them (all of which were virtually identical) with an expression of consummate cleverness, like a mouse who has just seen the perfect way to slip past a hypervigilant cat.

But somehow, given Venkman's past performances, Winston scarcely found it reassuring. "What do you have in mind, calling in the National Guard?"

His sarcastic tone was lost on Peter, whose grin continued to exude undilute satisfaction. "Nah, nothing quite so tame. Have you ever seen *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*?"

Zeddemore frowned at this apparent non-sequitur, then had to think a moment. "No," he finally admitted, thus winning himself a petulant look from Venkman, who was slightly miffed at having his perfect example shot down.

His sulk lasted for only a second, the length of time it took for him to come up with another, less obscure analogy. "Okay, then, you've seen all the old *Star Trek* episodes, haven't you?"

"Well... yeah — but what's that got to do with Adrian...?"

"Oh, nothing, just an idea for how we can trip 'im up." His conspiratorial grin did nothing to ease Winston's confusion, so he elaborated. "Look, I'm the captain, Ray's Scotty, you're Sulu, an' if you'll listen for a second, I'll tell you how we're gonna pull off another miracle and get Nurse Chapel and Mister Spock back on board the Enterprise...."

Nothing gives one person so much advantage over another as to remain always cool and unruffled under all circumstances.

Thomas Jefferson

The interior of Adrian's apartment looked almost exactly as Egon had expected to find it: replete with the conspicuous consumerism that so typified the affluent segment of the population known as the Yuppie. The furnishings, though fashionably understated, were so blatantly expensive, they bordered on tasteless. The room into which Doyle ushered his unanticipated guest could be called a "living" room only under generic definitions, since it appeared about as lived in as items on display in a retailer's window. One wall of the room was covered with state-of-the-art electronic everything, as pristinely dust-free as equipment in a NASA clean-room; the glass-fronted cabinets filled with videotapes and compact discs and other recorded media showed evidence of having been selected with a specific up-to-date and wealthy image in mind; the magazines carefully arranged on the glass-topped coffee table were clearly the result of similar image-conscious selection, even though none appeared to have been opened, much less read; the kitchen one was able to glimpse through an adjoining archway seemed to fit perfectly with the rest of the place, being filled with a wide array of elaborate and expensive culinary equipment that, though clearly never used, had been prominently and artfully displayed to impress any potential viewers. Though it was nowhere in sight, Egon strongly suspected that, somewhere in this display-case of a house, Adrian kept a top-of-the-line personal computer that he undoubtedly used about as much as his factory-spotless Cuisinart.

The place had clearly been designed to appeal to the covetous greed of Doyle's prospective clients; as image-unconscious as he was, the physicist found this useless display of wealth banal, bordering on crass. When he thought of all the things he could do with that kind of money to further the cause of science...! Needless to say, he was singularly unimpressed.

That reaction — or lack thereof — was noticed by the incubus, for once they were inside, Adrian's unflaggingly friendly efforts doubled in intensity. "I know the place isn't really much to look at," he said cheerfully, completely misinterpreting the root of the scientist's disdain, "but I'm intending to redecorate, and I haven't decided which look I'm after...."

It didn't take long for Doyle to realize that his chosen area of discussion was interesting Egon about as much as a lecture on the mating rituals of giant squid might interest a comatose hamster. An unstifled yawn confirmed it.

Recognizing that this particular topic wasn't going to result in any sort of conversation he could use to his own advantage, Adrian switched to a different subject without missing a beat. "I must confess," he said pleasantly, taking a seat on a stylish futon couch and gesturing for his guest to do likewise, "Janine hasn't really told me much about you or your colleagues, but your work sounds terribly fascinating. Would you like to tell me more about it?"

Egon's blunt, "No," was so honestly to the point, it bordered on rude, an impression that was further enhanced by his apparent refusal to accept Adrian's invitation to seat himself.

A frown briefly flitted across the incubus' too-perfect features. From the evidence of past performances — his initial interaction with the other three Ghostbusters, for instance — Adrian could have logically expected anything from uneasy evasion to uninhibited compliance; thus, such unabashed and unhesitant denial came as a total and thoroughly unpleasant surprise. For a moment, Doyle suspected that something had gone wrong with his supernatural skills, a notion that passed as quickly as his frown. If there was something amiss here, he rationalized, it certainly wasn't with him.

His smile dripped perceptive forgiveness. "Of course, I understand. Every business has its secrets, even high finance. I, for example, couldn't discuss the affairs of certain clients with certain other clients, not with a clear conscience...."

"Really?" The remark, though dry as the Sahara, indicated some small amount of attention on the scientist's part, even though he displayed more overt interest in studying his host's complex audio system. "I was always under the impression that having a conscience was considered a detriment in business circles."

Doyle laughed, relieved to have finally hit upon an acceptable subject. He hated dealing with mortals whom he hadn't sucked into his own camp, and he needed some sort of direct interaction with a potential subject in order to wield the psionic skills used to do it. The vast majority of humans felt most comfortable talking about themselves and their achievements, but if this one preferred to discuss *Adrian's*... so be it. Doyle's overblown ego would have no trouble handling it.

The incubus conceded the accuracy of his guest's observation. "In certain respects, I'd suppose it is, especially if one deals in... questionable trading practices."

"Which, naturally, you don't."

The broker's smile turned faintly sly. "Well," he admitted, confidentially, "I've bent a few rules here and there, when it was in my clients' best interests. But this isn't a child's world, Doctor Spengler. Even strictly above-board businesses, like yours, have their secrets."

"And I don't imagine you mention your... occasional rule-bending to prospective clients, either."

"Now, what kind of businessman would I be if I did?" was Adrian's amiable response. "To tell the truth, I don't ever mention it, if at all possible. When people come to me, their bottom line is profit, nothing more; if I can promise them that and show them the ledgers and accounts to prove my effectiveness, they generally won't care whether or not my methods are entirely by-the-book. It's all part of free enterprise — call it creative productivity."

"Innovative goal-oriented strategy," Egon quoted with a suggestion of sarcasm Doyle failed to catch, just as he failed to recognize the source of the quote.

"Exactly," the incubus nodded, pleased to find that the physicist actually understood his elusive point of view. "Besides," he added, winking, "it's to the client's advantage, being kept in the dark. He can't be held responsible for something he didn't order and knew nothing about, now, can he?"

Spengler accepted that; his answering, "I see," was disarmingly blithe. "Is that how you get so many clients, then — by presenting them with a squeaky-clean corporate image to win their confidence long enough to get them to sign a contract and sell away their souls?"

Adrian was so caught up in his own attempts to be friendly and ingratiating, the implications of that remark — indeed, even true comprehension of the remark itself — slipped right past him. "Just so. You see, any brokerage thrives or dies according to size of its clientele, and—"

He choked to a stop, only then realizing what Egon had said. His head snapped about so that he could glare at the human; he almost hoped that he'd been hearing things, that the man hadn't actually said what Doyle thought he'd said.

But from the perfectly placid way in which the intensely blue eyes were looking back at him, Adrian knew that the physicist had said precisely what he'd meant to say.

The incubus hadn't intended to hiss, but a sound very like that whistled through his teeth despite his intentions. He smiled, but for once, it wasn't an entirely amiable expression. "Very amusing," he said, sounding as much as possible like someone who knows he has been insulted, but is trying his best not to take offense. "But I don't believe you have a terribly complete grasp of the investment business, Doctor Spengler, if you believe we ask that much of our clients. We do have them sign contracts guaranteeing our commissions, yes, but you could hardly call it 'selling their souls.'"

Egon remained unperturbed. He stopped his study of the broker's electronic gadgetry to lean back against the tape cabinet. Standing only a matter of two or three feet to the left of the couch, he had no trouble seeing the finer nuances of Doyle's ever-changing expression. "Oh, I'm sure I don't have a complete picture of the internal workings of the investment world — my field is science, not finance — but that isn't what I'm talking about. I just want to know if, when you're trying to convince a possible client to sign on with you, you cover up the fact that you're an incubus the same way you cover up your shady business practices."

The color drained from Adrian's face at the utterance of the word, "incubus." For a time, he sat there mute, not sure which horrified him more: the fact that Spengler knew what he was, or the totally unconcerned manner with which the scientist apparently viewed that knowledge.

"I suppose it's pretty much the same thing," the human went on as serenely as ever. "What they don't know won't hurt you. Tell me, do you still work strictly with women, or do these new tactics of yours disregard the traditional gender restrictions?"

This time, Adrian's hiss was deliberate. Briefly, he considered trying to maintain his "I-don't-know-what-you're-talking-about" attitude, but there was a certain air of superiority in the physicist's tone that profoundly irritated him, like a grain of sand caught in the eye. Arrogant as he was, Doyle couldn't stand knowing that a mere mortal had somehow managed to penetrate his usually reliable facade and thus had the advantage of him. His scowl was now distinctly unpleasant. "Janine was right when she said you were too smart for your own good," he grumbled, no compliment intended by the remark.

"Was she?" The innocent surprise in those two words merely aggravated Adrian's already aggrieved condition. "I thought you said she didn't tell you anything about us."

The sound the incubus made deep in his throat was nothing if not akin to an animal's growl. "Don't push it," he recommended, all pretense of amiability evaporated. "I may not be able to make use of your soul, but I could find just as much pleasure in tearing you to pieces with my own two hands."

The statement had clearly been meant as a threat, but Egon seemed to have no difficulty remaining calmly unconcerned by it. "Undoubtedly," he agreed. "But," he added reflectively, "I wonder how Janine would react to it, if you did."

Adrian opened his mouth to assure the scientist that she wouldn't react at all, but a mildly puzzled, "How I'd react to what?" beat him to it. Standing in the archway-access to the front hall, Janine blinked at the two of them, as if she was having trouble focusing. Such was quite likely the case; she was now looking so fatigued and utterly depleted, an uninformed bystander could have easily made the mistake of assuming that she hadn't slept in days. "The door was open, so I let myself in," she explained, though no one had asked how she'd come to be there. "How I'd react to what?" she repeated when neither man seemed inclined to answer. She made no comment whatsoever concerning Egon's presence in the broker's home; from the almost glassy-eyed, exhausted look of her, it was entirely possible that she didn't recognize him. Considering how she'd reacted to him the last time he'd seen her, the physicist took that anonymity to be a blessing rather than a handicap.

Doyle, suddenly feeling very sure of himself, stood and smiled at the woman in a thoroughly possessive fashion. "Nothing important, my dear," he purred silkily. "He came here to bring you some sort of message, I suppose — and we were just discussing your... ah... reactions to my line of work."

"In a manner of speaking," Egon amended, rather drolly. "He was threatening to tear me to pieces, and I was just wondering how that might affect your relationship."

From the look on Janine's face — total incomprehension — he might as well have been speaking a foreign language, or gibberish. Adrian's confident smile widened. "You see, it's totally useless," he told the scientist. "I'll admit, you were very clever in figuring out the true nature of the situation — and of myself — but I'm afraid you're much too late. She hears only what I want her to hear, so nothing you can say will present the slightest interference to our... bond."

The befuddled, "Huh?" that came from Janine perfectly suited her wearily perplexed expression. "What are you talking about, Adrian? The true what of what?"

Doyle turned back to her, planning to give the woman some innocuous — and blatantly untruthful — explanation to appease her curiosity. His fair-haired guest spoke first. "Why don't you tell her the truth?" he suggested, correctly assessing the incubus' intent. "Or are you afraid it might change the status quo?"

If he had been any less confident, Adrian might have taken offense; in his arrogance, he stayed pleasantly unperturbed. "Certainly not — but it would be pointless. She hears only what I want, believes only what I want, and

since I want her to believe my designs are wholly honorable, I could tell her who and what I really am, and she'd think nothing of it."

"Well, if that's the case, then why don't you do it? You've got nothing to lose."

There was something insidiously crafty in the broker's small smile. "I have a better idea. Why don't *you* tell her? I won't interfere — and perhaps then you'll see just how unbreakable my control really is."

"Not a bad idea," Spengler admitted. "But maybe first, she should see what you really *look* like." He was standing little more than an arm's length from the fashion plate-perfect demon, a position he'd calculated very carefully from the moment they'd settled into the room. Thus, it required very little effort for him to lean forward, reach out, and grab the chain around Doyle's neck. It took only one hard pull to tug it free; the soft gold broke easily, as did the formerly concealed crystal pendant attached to it, one identical to that on the necklace Melanie had worn openly. He swung it against the hardwood paneling of the wall behind him; he moved without telegraphing his intent, so quickly that Adrian was caught completely unawares and could only gasp as he watched the crystal shatter into a thousand tiny fragments.

The moment it did, a sweeping change came over the broker. One instant, he was the very image of Park Avenue affluence and success; the next, without a flicker, he was something profoundly different, something plainly not of this world. Still tall and humanoid, the incubus now stood in his true form: a fanged, bat-winged, and bat-eared creature that could have seemed beautiful only to another demon, and one who looked curiously ridiculous, standing there in a Yuppie's Izod shirt (now somewhat shredded from the protruding wings and demonic physique), yachting slacks (also rather strained at the seams), deck shoes (likewise in tatters, from the wicked daws now poking through the canvas uppers), and Rolex watch. Under less serious circumstances, Egon might've been inclined to find the sight eminently laughable. Given the current situation, he maintained his level-headed sobriety.

Adrian was anything but amused. "How — how did you know to do that?!" the latter demanded furiously, one arm extended, its claw-tipped forefinger pointing to the pendant's remains.

Egon shrugged modestly. "Research, observation," he replied. "I've always found that it pays to know one's enemies before meeting them face to face."

The incubus snarled, his expression lent considerably more power, given the rows of razor-sharp teeth the drawing-back of his lips exposed. He then smiled, which was no less threatening than the snarl. "Perhaps, in other cases — but this time, it changes nothing. Look."

He gestured toward Janine, who, though still puzzled, was staring at the broker with almost-blank eyes and a vapid smile on her face. Considering that Doyle's abrupt change in appearance had caused even the usually imperturbable physicist to recoil slightly, it was safe to assume that Adrian's influence extended to Janine's sight as well, allowing her to see only what he wanted her to see. Egon had expected that, of course, but he'd been hoping — foolishly, he now supposed — that if it all happened suddenly, Doyle wouldn't be able to act quickly enough to prevent Janine from seeing what he really was, and in that split-second, his control would be broken. Obviously, it hadn't worked, but knowing that the odds had been against him from the start didn't make the scientist take any more pleasure in his failure.

"Ah, nuts," he swore softly, annoyed. Robbing Adrian of the amulet-device that maintained his human guise had been Egon's one and only plan that stood even an outside shot at working. Since he had no further course of action to fall back on, he could only hope that the rest of the guys would show up soon, and that one of them would have something in mind to thwart this arrogant demon.

And arrogant he was, for, as if he hadn't a care in the world, Doyle stretched his bat-wings and yawned. "Now, really," he sighed, sounding ever so bored, "this is getting much too tedious. The charade is over, Doctor Spengler, so if you don't mind, I'd appreciate it if you'd leave now and allow me to finish my work. I have so many other clients to attend to, not to mention a wager with my partner which requires settling." He took a step toward Janine.

Without thinking — for if he had, he undoubtedly would've considered such an impulse stupidly reckless — the physicist moved to stand between the two, blocking Adrian's path. "Not yet," he corrected, doing his best to remain unaffected by the demon's glower, which was threatening indeed. "You haven't gotten complete control of Janine's soul, and the bet won't be won until you have."

"A technicality," Doyle assured him, hissing the words through clenched teeth. "And what do you know of our wager? I don't remember mentioning it to any of you...."

"You didn't. Your partner did."

Adrian frowned. "Melanie? Why would she do that? She loves mortals no more than I do."

"Maybe not, but she doesn't have any particular love for *you*, either. So she hired us to make sure you don't win."

The demon's frown deepened; his leathery brow furrowed as he considered what the human had said. At length, he snorted, and dismissed the matter with an imperious wave of one hand. "Even if Melanie *did* tell you about it, it was a wasted effort. Did either of you truly believe that one unarmed mortal would be able to stop me this late in the game?"

"Well...." He was right about that, and Egon was beginning to feel acutely his lack of defense, even self-defense. Without his mortal disguise, Adrian stood almost a head taller and half again as wide as the slender human, and from the appearance of his musculature alone, the incubus' threat to tear the man limb from limb hadn't been an idle one. He wasn't quite on the verge of panic, but the scientist was starting to think that now would be an excellent time for his better-equipped colleagues to put in an appearance.

They didn't, and Adrian didn't back down. "It's too late for heroics," he scoffed, "so why don't we make this easier on all of us and just get it over with?"

Egon continued to resist the demon's intimidation, an increasingly difficult effort, as he could feel his knees slowly turning to mush. "No, I don't think so. Why don't you just let go of Janine and give her back her soul?"

From the way he looked at the human, the incubus found his suggestion amusing. "What, let Melanie win, and saddle me with this idiotic New Method for the rest of Eternity? Don't be absurd!" He extended one open hand in the bewitched secretary's direction. "Come, my dear," he beckoned softly.

She started to move toward the demon like a sleepwalker drawn to some unfathomable goal, but her employer again put himself between them. Without taking her eyes off Adrian, she sidestepped the physicist and would've gotten around him if he hadn't grabbed her arms from behind to stop her. She struggled to break free, but her energy was so depleted, a newborn could have put up a better fight.

Doyle laughed softly, unconcerned by this interference, his head shaking. "I'm telling you, it's a waste of both time and effort. She's completely under my control, and nothing you can do at this point will change it."

Someone else might have believed that, but his dedication to science — especially to a science as tenuous and disreputable as parapsychology — had long since taught Egon that the failure of one method didn't mean the goal was impossible to reach, only that another approach was needed. Unfortunately, he didn't have another in mind, at the moment. Janine continued squirming in her attempts to wriggle free, and Adrian was so certain that his own triumph was inevitable, he didn't even try to hurry it along.

"Give it up," he suggested, his tone just shy of gloating. "It can't possibly work."

"Don't bet on it," the scientist grumbled. Lacking any better ideas, he turned the redhead around to face him on the off-chance that Adrian's control over her might be weakened if she wasn't able to look at him — an approach that seemed somewhat cliché, but was the best he could do on such short notice. "Janine, don't let him do this," he exhorted, shaking her. "He isn't what you think he is!"

She blinked at him, blearily; from her confused, "Huh?" she had no idea what he was saying or even who he was.

Doyle snickered, finding the exchange humorously pitiful. "I warned you, whatever you do will be ineffectual. If Melanie *did* hire you, she must have told you that the only way to sever the bond is by breaking the cycle of fascination — and frankly, I don't think it can be done, anymore."

Egon — who was getting quite tired of listening to the demon's repetitious and self-aggrandizing monologue — threw him his best dirty look (which, having been learned from constant exposure to Venkman, was actually pretty effective) and started to say, "I don't think—" when it suddenly occurred to him that Adrian had struck the nail squarely on the head.

Coercion, cajoling, force, even logic — none of these were the key that would unlock the demon's control. The answer was in Doyle's own words; Melanie had mentioned it, too — *breaking the cycle of fascination* — and he could have kicked himself for not seeing it sooner. The solution was obvious: What was needed here was shock, not persuasion.

But what could a single unarmed mortal do to deliver a quasi-electric jolt powerful enough to break a demon's supernatural shackles?

For the briefest of instants, the physicist found himself wishing he was Peter, with all Venkman's sharp-tongued talent for shocking improprieties at his command; but he was who he was, and any solution he devised would have to come from his own gifts, his own idiosyncratic approach to life. Given that nature, his available options, the lack of time, current circumstances, and the evidence of past history — in general, history as evinced through numerous fairy tales and folk stories, but most specifically *Janine's* past history — he could think of only one virtually guaranteed way to get her attention away from Adrian, unscientific though it might be.

He kissed her, soundly enough to leave no doubt in her mind, or Doyle's — or his own, for that matter — that it had been anything but fully intentional, and more than a mere gesture of friendship.

Adrian — who was almost as surprised, though not as potentially chagrined, by this unexpected turn of events as was Egon himself — didn't know whether to laugh or be concerned. Janine just stood there for several moments, blinking like someone struggling to wake up, thus causing the physicist some significant worry that he'd gone and discarded his professional — to say nothing of his personal — dignity on a losing gamble. "Come on, Janine, please snap out of it," he whispered urgently, able to see that she was fighting against Adrian's controls, but having a very difficult time of it.

Doyle's eyes narrowed as he glared first at the scientist then at the woman's back; from the angry tightening of his expression, it was clear that he was exerting power in an attempt to reestablish the tethers between them. Determined not to let that happen, Egon kissed her again, gently, and with quiet fierceness said, "You can do it, Janine — you have to. We need you back. I need you back. Don't let him win."

It was all the persuasion that was needed. Furious, feeling his controls crumbling, Adrian made one last attempt to resolidify them — but without success. Janine shook her head to brush away the last of Adrian's mental chains like old, dusty cobwebs; eventually, her eyes focused and her mind cleared. She looked up at her employer, one shaky hand lifting to touch his face and verify the reality of his presence.

"Egon?" From her tone — thoroughly perplexed — he was the last person on Earth she'd expected to find standing there, holding her upright and thus preventing her from wilting like a bunch of overcooked broccoli. But the image did not waver; he was here, and he was real. But she had no idea where *here* actually was. "What in the world... where... who... wha— what's going on?"

Intense and grateful relief flooded the physicist's blue eyes; he opened his mouth to explain, but before he could answer, a displeased Doyle hissed in anger, reminding her of his presence.

"Adrian?" she began reflexively as she glanced over her shoulder to locate him.

The moment she did, she screamed.

The incubus snarled like an angry wildcat, all too well aware of what had just happened, that, by failing to mind his own tongue, he had stupidly provided his opponent with the solution to his problem. Every succubus and incubus knew that the most reliable means of shattering a victim's control-trance was to replace that induced fascination by stirring memories of an older, much more strongly-rooted, and unarguably real one. Janine's fascination with Egon had, over the years of her employment, grown roots both real and firmly planted, and as Ray had suspected, love was the one tie to a free soul these demons could not break. Twist, circumvent, confuse, conceal — but not break, not unless they could cause it to be forgotten. And in that Doyle had come terribly close to succeeding because he had

caught Janine in a moment of extreme vulnerability, but not close enough. Furious with the humans and their cleverness — not to mention his own stupidity for not checking his victim's background more thoroughly — Adrian's fists clenched, his wings thrashed like those of an angry, captive hawk, and his expression twisted into a bare-fanged display of rage. Janine found the sight no more or less horrifying than Egon found it, but some perverse little imp inside the scientist prompted a singularly droll observation:

"Not much to look at any more, is he?"

The redhead shuddered, then cringed back against her fellow human as Adrian's fists unclenched and reached out with plainly violent intent. He launched himself toward the two mortals with inhuman strength and speed, but they managed to evade the attack just in time by diving for the floor.

"What do we do now?" the secretary shrieked as the demon checked his forward motion, pulled himself together, and readied for a second attack. Although she didn't have enough energy to run, she no longer seemed quite on the verge of total collapse.

"Pray?" Egon suggested, since their backs were to the wall and he couldn't see any exit near enough for them to use before the superhumanly-swift incubus could catch them.

But there wasn't enough time, even for that. "Look out!" Janine shrieked as Doyle once again sprang toward them. Caught flat against the carpet, they were barely able to avoid him again, but this time, Adrian landed less than a yard away, in control of himself, his wits about him, and his purpose clear. He pivoted on one heel to move in for the kill. Without a second thought, Egon crept forward to position himself between Janine and the incubus, knowing that she was in no condition to fight off anything — save perhaps a newborn kitten — and prepared to take the worst the demon had to offer in hopes of buying even a few moments of precious time.

"Hold it right there," a familiar voice warned from behind Doyle, sending a wave of unutterable relief through his captives. Standing in the arch to the kitchen, Winston held the business end of his partide thrower leveled at the demon's head.

Doyle had enough time only to glance at the grim-faced Zeddemore before the sound of shuffling feet heralded Ray's arrival from the front-door hallway, and Peter's from the dining-room access and, presumably, the terrace doors beyond. The incubus exhaled slowly, sounding much like an angry cobra sizing up a group of about-to-attack mongooses.

"Don't try anything funny," Ray suggested, his own weapon held as rock-steady as Winston's.

"Yeah," Peter agreed in a more flippant tone, though he, too, was prepared to fire at the first sign of trouble. "The cavalry's here." He grinned, immensely pleased with himself and the success of his plan. "Don't cha love it? It's just like in the movies...."

"What took you so long?" Egon demanded as he and Janine scrambled to their knees, immensely relieved to see their friends' welcome — if overdue — arrival.

Venkman's shrug was casual. "Well, first we had to come up with a way to get here without being too obvious, then there were all those pesky locks on his doors to get around, and—"

His self-satisfied explanation was cut short by a bestial growl from Adrian, whose patience and temper had both reached their ends. Moving too fast for those with the weapons to prevent, the incubus reached down, grabbed both of his former prey by the throat, and effortlessly hauled them to their feet. "Do anything against me," he warned in a very ugly voice, "and I'll rip out both their throats." For emphasis, he tightened his grip just enough so that his dagger-sharp claws pressed into the soft flesh, almost but not quite puncturing it. The three armed eliminators could see the indentations, and knew that he meant business; they also knew that, in such close proximity, they couldn't fire at Doyle without hitting their friends. Suddenly indecisive, their steady aim began to waver.

But Janine, exhausted though she was, had put two-and-two together and had finally realized just how much of a pawn she'd been in Adrian's hands. Though she didn't know what he'd ultimately wanted from her, she had no doubt whatsoever that his intentions had been anything but honorable. The knowledge filled her with outrage and just plain rage, and the latter gave her the strength she needed to do something about it. "Don't bet on it," she snarled back

at him as she summoned all her remaining strength and, with the accuracy of long practice, she brought up a knee to jab the incubus, hard, in a tender spot he shared with mere mortal males.

The pain was so sudden, so sharp, and so unexpected — the incubus, in fact, looked as if he hadn't known he possessed this weakness — Doyle reacted just as any human male would've: he bellowed loudly, his hands spasmed open, releasing what he'd been holding, and he doubled over in protective reflex. When the agony started to pass, he straightened, intending to carry out his threat and shred the mortals' throats, but, to his everlasting surprise, he was greeted by the fist of an irritated physidist who'd also had all he could stomach of the demon and his egocentric arrogance. It delivered an astonishingly effective right cross that sent Adrian stumbling back into the open center of the room.

"Nice one, Egon!" Peter applauded, wishing he could've been the one to do it.

"Throw 'em!" Winston ordered, and they did. Three streams of highly-specialized energy pinned the disoriented Doyle where he stood. When the moment of truth arrived and Ray set out the modified trap, all four of the eliminators followed whatever luck-invoking rituals they favored in hopes that the hastily-rigged filter would work. To all evidence, the trap performed as efficiently as ever, sucking in the now-vaporous demon and sealing him inside with an electronic burp.

"Did it work?" Winston wanted to know. He'd been expecting the filter to somehow alter the trap's usual display, and had been sorely disappointed.

Ray picked up the thing, studied it briefly, then shrugged. "I don't know, for sure," he was forced to admit. "Janine, are you all right?"

The secretary — who would have collapsed from exhaustion after emptying her scant energy stores with that well-timed knee to Adrian's groin, if Egon hadn't caught her — stirred and opened her eyes to look up at Stantz. "Huh?" she breathed blearily before the question registered on her still-spinning mind. "Oh — yeah, I'm fine. I'm just so tired, and... was that really Adrian you guys trapped?"

"Do you really want to know?" Winston asked, wondering if she had been fully freed of him.

The glance she threw the black man was puckeringly sour. "Do I really want to know?" she repeated, indignant. "If he was that disgusting demon all along, of course I want to know — and as a matter of fact," she added, her energy building along with her indignation, "I'd also like to know how you guys could've blithely gone along, letting me think this guy was Prince Charming for three whole days without even *trying* to tell me you knew he wasn't...."

"She's all right," Peter groaned. "Nobody could be that ungrateful and be dying at the same time."

Janine started to snap back at him, but, as soon as she did, she realized that Venkman was right, she was being ungrateful, not to mention irrational, since she still didn't have a very clear picture of everything that had occurred over the last few days. She relented, "I'm not ungrateful," she corrected with a sigh. "Thanks, guys. I don't really know what's been going on around here, but I think I would've found out the hard way, if you hadn't come to the rescue. Especially you, Egon." From his ambiguous expression and lack of response, the physidist didn't seem particularly inclined to take credit for having done anything more than his partners, but he also didn't object to Janine's continued use of him for other-than-moral support, so she wasn't about to ruin that distinctly pleasant situation by making an issue of it.

When Ray had finished collecting the trap and filter, they all headed for the nearest exit. "We would've been here sooner," he explained, giving a fuller answer to the question Egon had voiced immediately after their dramatic entrance, "but we didn't know how we'd be able to tell when Doyle's hold was broken, and like you said, we couldn't really take a chance and spring the trap any sooner."

"Yeah," Peter joined in, "but we figured that hearing Janine scream was as good a signal as we were gonna get. And I'm sorry I gave you such a hard time these last couple of days, Egon. You were right: Doyle really *was* nothing but a twenty-four karat gold-plated creep. I just wish I'd had a chance to belt 'im one before we put out his lights for good."

"Amen to that," Winston agreed.

"What'd you do to break his hold, anyway?" Ray asked, genuinely curious. "Get Janine to kiss a frog or something?"

Egon cleared his throat, somewhat uncomfortably. "In a manner of speaking," was all he would say. It was a thoroughly cryptic comment; no amount of cajoling could get him to elaborate, a conspiratorial silence shared by Janine, who, if she even remembered the actual event, would say not a word about it.

They didn't go straight home; Peter insisted on making two stops: the first at a florist's shop, from which he emerged with a fancy, be-ribboned box peculiar to gifts of long-stemmed roses, the second at the UBIS offices, where he intended to apprise Melanie of their success. His partners — all of whom felt he was making a mistake if he intended to get romantically involved with a succubus — stayed in the car and let him go up alone, as he requested. A short time later he returned, the box tucked under his arm and a wide smile on his face.

"What was that all about?" Winston asked as Venkman slid into the passenger's seat beside him. "Did she throw you and your roses out on your ear?"

"Roses?" Peter echoed innocently. "What roses?"

Winston grumbled. "C'mon, you know what I mean. What'd you do, go up there with this gift for her an' then walk out without letting her open it?"

"Oh, no," the psychologist assured him, quite cheerfully. "I let her open it, all right."

"And... ?" Ray, who was sitting behind him, prompted.

Peter grinned, removed the lid from the now-ribbonless box, and pulled out the second modified trap. A light on one side of it was blinking, indicating that the trap was full.

"Just making a wish come true," he said brightly. "And believe me, knowing that the two of them'll be spending the rest of eternity together is gonna make me happy for a long, long time."

All's well that ends well.

William Shakespeare

Since the entire confrontation with Adrian chewed up a good part of Friday morning and early afternoon, Peter, feeling unusually pleased with himself and the world in general, gave Janine the rest of the day and the entire weekend off. Not about to argue with his rare generosity, she took him up on it and spent most of that free time sleeping. Instrument scans indicated that Ray's filter had, indeed, been successful, even though it took several days for her exhausted energy levels to be restored. Egon had stopped by on Saturday night to make sure she was all right, and even though he'd come equipped with a PKE meter to check for any potential relapse, she'd been delighted by his freely offered company and hadn't made the slightest peep of protest.

Come Monday morning, it was clear that everything was back to normal. Janine came in five minutes late and had to listen to Peter gripe about it until Slimer popped up in one of his desk drawers and provided him with a new target; Ray was busy in the upstairs lab, trying to refine his jerry-rigged filter into something they could use on a regular basis; Egon was again in the basement, in the middle of his resumed slime-mold project; and Winston was back to work, trying to find a new and elusive glitch in Ecto-1's electrical system. Once again, all was right with the world.

As he puttered with the car, Zeddemore gave Janine a more detailed explanation of everything that had gone on around the firehouse while she'd been under Adrian's control. "...and that's about all that really happened," he said, concluding his long monologue. "If Melanie hadn't been so fed up with him that she wanted us to put him away for good, he probably would've gotten away with it, and we wouldn't've ever known what'd actually become of you."

"But you knew he was an incubus, even before she showed up," Janine noted without looking from her final work on the re-file project.

Winston shrugged. "Egon and Ray knew, but not Peter an' me, and *they* didn't even know, right away. But without Doyle's home address, I don't think they would've been able to track him down. Once he found out someone was on to him, he would've skipped town, if he'd known what was good for him."

"Then I'm glad Melanie had it in for him. I've never felt so stupid, Winston, or so... used. Falling for a creep like him, just 'cause he had a good-looking face...!"

"I wouldn't exactly call it 'falling for him,'" he consoled. "More like getting *tripped* by him. After all, Doyle had some pretty mean supernatural powers. He conned the rest of us into thinking he was our best friend, and we didn't even know him. Well, all of us but Egon. He never *did* buy into Adrian's snow-job, and we're lucky he didn't, or Melanie might've trapped us before we even knew what was happening."

The secretary sighed, punching the appropriate buttons to save the file she'd just completed. "Well, I'm glad it didn't work out the way Adrian wanted, in the end. And next time anybody asks me to do 'em a favor, I'm gonna think more'n twice about saying yes!"

"That's the idea. Don't let anybody push you around, do what you think is right, and you'll stay out of trouble. That's what my mama always told me."

Shortly, the computer signaled the end of the save cycle; Janine withdrew the disk, replaced it with another, and ordered the machine to make a backup. While she waited for the computer to finish its task, she glanced at her watch. "Almost lunchtime," she noticed wistfully.

Zeddemore grinned. "Got any errands to run today?"

"No, and all I'm gonna do is get my lunch, eat it, and come right back. You couldn't pay me to do anything else, not after what happened last week!"

Winston was about to say how he hoped this new resolve of hers would last when he heard footsteps coming up the stairs from the basement. It was uncharitable of him to even think it, but he suspected her resolution was about to be put to its most stringent test.

On cue, Egon appeared and approached the reception desk, distracted as he finished marking the label on a sealed specimen jar. "Janine," he began.

She stopped him before he uttered another word. "Don't tell me: It's another slime-mold sample for that friend of yours in Red Hook."

She hit it right on the mark; curiously, the physicist seemed not at all surprised. "As a matter of fact, it is. If I can get it to him before one, he promised he'd be able to get to it today, and I was wondering if you would..."

"...take it to him during my lunch hour?" Janine finished for him. She paused, prompting Winston to think she was trying to find a polite way to say no; to his shock, she came out with an unequivocal, "Yeah, sure, no problem. Just leave it on the corner there and I'll take it out as soon as I'm done with this file. Okay?"

"Okay. And thanks." Satisfied, he headed back to his lab.

Winston watched him go, thoroughly appalled. "Wait a second," he said once Egon was gone. "Did I miss something, here? I thought you just told me you're gonna think twice the next time someone asks you to do 'em a favor."

"I did," was the receptionist's instant assurance.

"Then why the heck did you say you'd take that thing to Red Hook during lunch? Not that I'm sayin' it's all your fault, mind you. After everything that went on last week, Egon should know better, too, an' I've got half a mind to go downstairs an' tell him that—"

"No, Winston, don't," Janine interrupted before he could fit action to words. "I don't mind doing it, really."

Now, Zeddemore was getting confused. "You don't mind? But didn't you just say—"

"I did, and next time anyone e/se asks, they're gonna need a pretty convincing argument to make me say yes."

"Maybe — but you still shouldn't let Egon take advantage of you."

"He's not."

The dark man frowned, his confusion intensifying. "Come again?"

She paused to consider her answer, then sighed. "Think about it. Outside of maybe your work — and I know that's a stretch, sometimes — what's the thing you enjoy doing most?"

Winston didn't have to think about it for long. "Goin' to baseball games, I guess. I always wanted to be in the majors, but I didn't have what it takes. Watching's the next best thing."

"And when you go, don't you like to take Lydia with you?"

"Sure. I want her to get as much enjoyment out of it as I do. But she doesn't come with me too often; she doesn't really understand all the fine points of the game the way I do, and she's really not a big sports fan."

"Right. And this is the same thing."

Winston tried to grasp the logic she'd used to reach that conclusion, but it totally escaped him. "Huh?" was all he could say.

The computer finished making the back-up; she pulled the disk from the drive, put it away, and put the system on stand-by. "Don't you get it?" she asked, clicking her tongue in pity when the poor man indicated the negative. "Some guys give flowers, others spend money on nights at fancy restaurants — and others buy tickets to baseball games. I had a lot of time to think over the weekend, and I figured it all out. Egon doesn't *have* to ask me to run these errands for him; the guys at the lab told me they'd come and pick up his stuff if he asked 'em, but he doesn't. I think he asks me to do it for the same reason you ask Lydia to go with you to ball games. *She* doesn't understand baseball,

and I don't understand all this heavy science stuff. But I don't mind taking Egon's samples to the lab 'cause at least this way, I can be *involved* in an important part of his life. It's attention, of a sort — an' right now, I'll take whatever I can get. Do you see what I mean?"

He did, and found her willing acceptance of this less-than-ideal situation nothing short of amazing. "I suppose I do — but I still can't see why you put up with it. No one's worth that much patience."

She shrugged. "That's a matter of opinion." And on this question, her mind was quite firmly decided, though for reasons she was not about to give Winston, or anyone. For even though she'd spent the last few days in the waking fog of mind-control, her memories of what had happened during that time were reasonably clear — clear enough for her to realize afterward that Egon had not told his partners of their secretary's impulsive and ill-considered resignation. Living with the humiliation of Adrian's manipulation was bad enough; groveling to Venkman to get back her job would have been unbearable. Oh, it was entirely possible that Egon had failed to mention the incident to his colleagues simply because it had slipped his mind, but Janine somehow knew that his omission had been deliberate — just as she knew exactly what he had done to break her free of Adrian's supernatural shackles. And for both, she was quietly grateful.

She smiled, more to herself than to Winston. "Besides," she added lightly, a mischievous gleam in her eye, "we've got an agreement, now: If I don't have enough time for lunch after I finish running his errands, *he* gets it for me, *he* pays for it, and *he* gets to listen to Peter if he starts complaining about me taking too much time for lunch — and he promised he won't let Peter dock me for it, too. So either way, I can't lose. It's not exactly what you could call *romantic*, but it was his idea, not mine, and for Egon, it's actually kinda sweet. He's learning — and that's not so hard to live with, is it?"

Winston saw her point, but still thought she was being far more understandingly patient than anyone could possibly deserve. "Y'know, lady," he warned with an amused shake of the head, "if I didn't already have Lydia, Egon might have himself some serious competition...."

"Not a chance," she vowed, though amiably. "No offense, Winston, but I find baseball even more boring than Lydia does. And believe me, after three days of hanging around Adrian and his ego, I've had enough of tall, dark, and handsome men to last a lifetime!"

Since it was a compliment and he was no fool, Zeddemore did the best thing a wise man could do: He laughed, and Janine laughed with him.

The End