

The Demon War

by Sheila Paulson

1778

Isaiah stood beneath a churning sky, his hands thrust upward, muttering the preliminary words of the spell. Lightning seared the gloom of the day that was nearly as dark as night, followed so swiftly by the deafening clash of thunder that the militia gasped and cried out, and many of them retreated a step or two. The soldiers brandished their muskets or swords, and others waved pitchforks, shovels, even fat branches of fallen trees, but Isaiah doubted their courage would last. Yet, it must. Should they fail, should they leave him to face this peril alone, the very world might fall.

The danger was not of his making, but he knew the simple farmers and merchants would believe him to blame when, in fact, all he had done was use his knowledge to discover the great peril. The militia would stand, surely, but he saw doubt and panic in their faces. Redcoats had never daunted them, but this was a threat graver than the British. He might use Patrick Henry's rallying cry, "Give me liberty, or give me death," but this was not a fight for liberty from England and King George. This was a fight for their very existence. Should they fail, taxation without representation might seem a blessing, and Isaiah knew his spells might not be enough.

Yet, what good were guns, swords, and pitchforks against the threat he faced? Even if he could summon forth the generals from Washington, Gage, and on down, and that French fellow Lafayette, whom Isaiah had met last year in the autumn, what could they do? Lafayette was scarcely more than a lad. So were a number of the folk in the militia, but the rest were older, wiser.

Wiser? Did that mean tamer? Did that mean more cowardly? The band had been joined by even a few Tories, who wasted time glaring at the militia in the face of a threat that should have united them all. What did political lines of demarcation mean in the face of a greater menace?

From the time they had first come to the new world, and likely in the old country as well, Isaiah's family had held an interest in the occult. In each generation, at least one son had stepped away from the traditions of natural philosophy to explore the darker realms, not out of love of darkness but out of a burning desire to protect the light. His father Mordecai had been less driven than his grandfather, but even he held a great interest. When two of Isaiah's brothers had scorned him, accusing him of loving the devil, he had cried out in protest, for it was the devil he meant to stand against. How could one defeat an enemy without understanding it? Those Redcoats who marched in straight lines did not understand the colonists who had learned to fight from shelter, to attack like stinging mosquitoes and flee before they could be overwhelmed by superior numbers and better muskets. Isaiah meant to deceive the enemy he fought, who used fear as a weapon, used power as a weapon. Just as the slow trickle of water could undermine a dam, so did Isaiah mean to undermine the demon who sent men, horribly transformed men he controlled, forth to fight against the powers of the light. Muskets would slay men, but they would not stop the demon.

No, the only way to do that was to stand against his hordes, to find the words to shatter the spell that bound them. If he could do that, Isaiah could drive the demon to the fires of hell, where it would cower in defeat before Satan, its master.

Lightning and thunder came nearly simultaneously, so violent the very ground shook, and the air reeked with its power. Several of the folk in the rear of the crowd slipped away.

"It is only a thunderstorm. Stand your ground," Isaiah bellowed.

The militia crowded closer, but even they were uneasy. More folk melted away.

Overhead, amid the swirling crowds, a great face appeared, as if it were a part of the storm, or as if the storm were a part of it. "You cannot resist me, pitiful mortals," rang an unearthly voice so deep and echoing that more folk shrieked and fled. "My hordes will defeat you. See if they do not."

Conscious of no more than a dozen hardy militiamen standing with him, Isaiah lifted both hands and cried out the words of the spell. Latin it was, a language his old schoolmaster had drilled into him as a lad, the words coming with a desperate urgency. Time was running out. Soon the demon's army would pour through wood and field, and every one of them would mean to kill Isaiah, for he alone had the knowledge to end the threat. In the bursts of lightning, he could see them, creeping through the trees. As they approached, the remnants of his band, the men who had pledged to stand at his side, abandoned their posts and ran. In the end, only two remained with Isaiah, one of them his brother Japhet, who had always supported him, the other Thomas Laird, the schoolmaster. Both had white faces, both trembled, yet neither fled. Japhet was loyal and true, and Isaiah would have liked to embrace him and thank him for his courage, yet he dared not turn his attention from his task. As for Thomas, he was a learned man; he understood. It was he who held the book, the grimoire, he who had studied it with Isaiah as they realized the approaching threat.

Yet the three of them would surely fall to the men who staggered determinedly through the trees toward them, their every movement controlled. Here it was Isaiah had realized the demon's power. Here he would make his final stand.

He looked after his fleeing army, men who had sworn upon their honor they would stand at his side, and a desperate fury took him. "You gave your oaths," he bellowed after them. "You pledged to stand for your families, for your town, for your world, and you have failed. I curse you." He snatched the book from Thomas, who stared at him, shocked beyond words at Isaiah's sudden fury. Rifling through the pages, he found the one he sought and read aloud, translating the words to English, although they were in an ancient language he had laboriously mastered. "You did not stand your ground. Thus you shall linger, trapped between death and life, until you repent of your cowardice. When you are summoned forth again, you shall come. You must come. I bind you to my bloodline. Come you must, for only then shall you be free." He raised his voice in a great shout. "Return now, and you will be spared."

"Isaiah, *no!*" Thomas cried and yanked the book out of range. "You must not do this evil thing."

With a quick flicker of his fingers, he intoned the final words, for he remembered them well enough without the book before him. "There. It is done." He pulled it back, and Thomas let him, his face distressed. Hastily Isaiah turned the

pages. "I must end this now, or the world as we know it will fall and all will dwell in the darkness, controlled by *that!*" He thrust his pointing figure to the sky. "If they do not stand, if we fall, they will die anyway."

The controlled men staggered nearer. There must have been nigh onto 250 of them, many armed with muskets, some of which looked as if they had been snatched up from battlefields, the rest brandishing swords, a blunderbuss or two, or even sticks. Their numbers would compensate for their lack of skill and coordination.

Isaiah shared a look with his two staunch allies. "There is no time," he said. "Go, I free you both. Flee, and I will do my all."

"No, Isaiah," cried Japhet. "I will not desert you."

"Nor I," Thomas pledged

The three drew breath, clasped hands, then released them so as to face the enemy with their meager weapons. Two of the militia crept back, shamefaced, to stand with them, but five would never be enough.

Even as Isaiah read as fast as he could, and the demon in its cloud form suddenly spat a barrage of rain upon them, the sound of drums sounded behind Isaiah. Drums and a fife or two, and the thud of marching feet.

"Redcoats," spat one of the militiamen, but he held his ground.

"We need them," Isaiah cried. "Do not stand against them. They, too, are human. This once, we have common purpose."

Out of the trees came the British, in their neat lines, their red coats rapidly soaking through from the drenching rain, yet they never hesitated. Right up to Isaiah they marched, and their officer, a captain, halted and raised a hand for the men to stand. "What is this madness?" he demanded. "I have seen portents before." He gestured to the sky where the cloud face had been blurred by the incessant rain. "But not even my men can halt that."

"No, Captain. But you can halt *them*. You must!" He pointed at the staggering horde who approached without a cry.

"On them, men." The captain knew when to talk and when to fight. His men formed ranks, the first row on one knee to take aim, the second to fire above their heads.

Isaiah hoped their powder would not be wet.

There in the thundering storm, the British army with the addition of two members of the American militia, a schoolmaster, and Isaiah's brother, fought the controlled hordes of the demon. How silently the enemy battled. When their muskets failed, they used them as clubs or threw them aside to use swords, even sticks and rocks. But in the end, their blind charge came to grief against the unified force of the British troops, and, finally, the storm faded away, leaving one last image of the cloud demon gazing down at him as the clouds wisped and pulled away.

"You may believe you have won," it called in a voice that no longer cast thunderbolts. "You have driven me back with your words and your soldiers, but one day I shall come again. You will be long in the ground when that day comes, and you will have no power to stop me. You have only delayed my coming, for I am immortal and can wait." Then, the clouds tore apart, the last tingle of power faded from the air, and shafts of sunlight pierced the shredding mist.

As Isaiah sagged, only the grabbing hands of his brother and his friend kept him from collapsing to the muddy earth. "I am unhurt," he said as they guided him to a rock, where he could sit and draw deep breaths. He looked up at the British officer, a tall man whose powdered wig sat askew on his head, revealing a stray streak of golden hair poking out from beneath it. He was young, not yet out of his twenties, but the blue eyes surrounded by laughter lines had seen much.

"Captain, I am eternally in your debt. The world is eternally in your debt. Even though we stand on separate sides in this brief and petty conflict, I shall ever hold you in high honor. May I know your name, sir?"

"I am Captain Dominic Hall of the 64th Foot, a man of Devonshire. I know not what you did."

"Nor do I, truly. What you saw in the sky was a demon from hell, come to take over the world. It turned those men you fought into automatons, draining their identities. Once taken, they could not be saved; death, for them, was their only hope. The demon meant us all to fall thus, to worship it and serve it mindlessly."

"Will it return?" Hall scanned the now-cloudless sky.

"It says not for many a long year. I will be dead then, as it claims, but I shall leave my notes for those who follow me, in hopes that, one day, someone will find them who possesses the knowledge to end the threat for all time."

"What of those who ran away?" Thomas asked. "You cursed them."

"They fled when all of mankind faced jeopardy?" Hall asked, and his face held shock. "Yes, we feared, my men and I, for we are human, and how can we fail to fear the unknown, such a perilous unknown. What did you do to them? Can you lay curses? Is it not witchcraft?"

Isaiah hesitated. "Perhaps it is. But those men might have left the world to fall in peril. Without a stand here, the threat would have grown too vast to be contained."

"So I see. What will happen to them?"

"They will go beyond the edges of the world until they are summoned to defend the right." Then Isaiah shrugged his shoulders. "Or they may go home, untouched, to their dinners. I am not truly a spell-caster. Only time can say."

"May I know your name, Sir Sorcerer?" Hall asked. "Perhaps one day my kin and yours may again stand side by side as we stood today at the Battle of--er, what is the name of your town?"

"Nasburg." Isaiah pushed himself wearily to his feet, and his brother and friend aided him. "I am Isaiah Spengler," he said. "If it be so, I will be glad of it," and he shook the hand of a man who was both an enemy and an ally.

1994

"This is not good," said Egon Spengler as he looked around the third-floor lab of Ghostbuster Central. "It's not good at all."

Winston Zeddemore propped his elbow against Peter Venkman's shoulder, and leaned against him. "I hate it when he says that," he muttered in a voice just loud enough for all to hear.

Peter studied the physicist, who not only had two separate PKE meters activated but also a magnetometer, EMF detector, and spectrometer. Egon likely wouldn't have heard a rock concert, not while he fussed around so intently, let alone a thunderstorm.

"Are you getting this, Raymond?" he asked without raising his head.

"Wow, yeah! What do you think it is, Egon?" Ray sat at the computer energetically entering data, and didn't turn his eyes from the screen, but he was practically bouncing with excitement. There had to be something wrong with a guy who found minor ghosts boring and really loved the big, mean, dangerous kind. "I hope this storm doesn't get any worse or I'll have to power down."

"Whatever it is, it is not good," muttered Winston.

Peter ducked out from under Winston's arm and grabbed Egon by the shoulder. "I think that's already been well established. Come on, Spengs, I know it's bad, or you wouldn't have dragged me from my nice cozy bed at the ungodly hour of--" he sneaked a peek at his wristwatch-- "eight twenty-seven a.m. So is this one of those 'there's only one chance' deals, or do I have time for breakfast before the world ends?"

That roused Egon from his contemplation of bizarre readings, and he stared at Peter. With a gesture around the lab, he frowned. "Breakfast, Peter? When all this is going on?"

"Beeping and blinking never spoiled my appetite before, and neither did thunderstorms," Peter pointed out. "Come on, Egon, you've been yapping about the ambient energy levels rising for weeks now, but we haven't seen a ghost in four days. Not one call. What's it all about, Alfie?"

"Do you remember Mee-Krah, Peter?" Egon asked.

Ray left off keyboarding and swivelled the chair around to study Egon. "I sure do. Boy, that was exciting. And your gizmo saved the day, Peter."

"My ghost-attractor," Peter remembered. Never mind it hadn't attracted the myriad ghosts that had fled Mee-Krah in hopes of safety in the containment unit from the master spirit. At least the gizmo had overloaded the big nasty. Then the full meaning of Egon's question hit. "Egon, Egon, Egon. If you're saying old Mee-Krah has a brother, then it's definitely time for me to move to Cleveland--or maybe even Timbuktu."

"No, Peter, you may rest assured this is not another Mee-Krah. If it were, we would already be hip-deep in ghosts."

"And that is not a pretty image," Winston threw in. He stalked over to the row of detection devices and squinted at their readings. "You're saying whatever is causing all this is so nasty all the ghosts in the Tri-State area have gone for cover?"

Egon beamed at Winston the way he had bestowed favor upon gifted students when he was still teaching at Columbia. "Precisely, Winston."

Peter raised his hands like a sports referee. "Time out, Egon. You're claiming something really crummy is about to hit the Big Apple? What could be as powerful as Mee-Krah? A major demon?"

"Or a Class 11 mega-specter," put in Ray with another little bounce. The boy needed to have his head examined if he thought that was a good thing. Peter

remembered far too many major entities from Gozer on down through Proteus, Cthulu, Mee-Krah and more, and not one of them had been remotely exciting or fun, except in the good publicity afterward.

"Well, actually, Peter, we haven't had a major demon or an entity capable of ending all life as we know it for more than a year," Egon pointed out. "Perhaps we are past due."

"Past due?" Peter echoed. "*Past due!*" He slapped his palm against Egon's forehead. "No fever." Egon's glasses had slid far enough down his nose for Peter to reach over the top of them and tug at one eyelid. "Pupils are normal. So it must just be insanity instead of brain damage. *Past due?* Geez, Egon."

"I didn't say I *wanted* it to happen," Egon replied calmly as he batted Peter's hand away and adjusted his glasses. "Simply that these things do run in cycles. From the strength of the readings and from what I can detect through the combined meters, it is my contention this has been building for a long time."

"That's what I love about you, Egon, your specific information," Peter persisted. "Come on, big fella, do a Spock here, and tell me if you mean fourteen point six months, twelve days, thirty-seven seconds."

"Try two hundred years," Egon replied.

The other Ghostbusters stared at him in open-mouthed disbelief. "Two hundred *years?*" Ray blurted. He abandoned the computer entirely to stare up at Egon. "Come on, we'd have picked up something long ago. All those other times when we took care of a big meanie and the readings went nearly null for a little while afterward, we'd have picked something up."

"And we have," Egon replied. "There was always ambient energy, even when it was low. I've kept a detailed record of the ambient levels in the Tri-State area ever since we founded the business. At slow times, I've always played around with filtering those readings, to see if I could detect cyclical patterns, seasonal or more general. I tried to break it down to the types of entities, too, although, as you no doubt know," and he studied Peter as if to claim that Peter probably didn't, "that is difficult with ambient energy. Yet always there was one thin thread that didn't go away. I assumed, perhaps unwisely, that it was simply part of the city's energy, yet it was always at least at Class 7 level if not higher. Even when all other facets of the readings were muted, it never was, and now that I have compared the results, I see that each time I monitored it, it was higher, but very, very gradually, never enough to be truly alarming."

"Gosh, like it was biding its time." Eyes enormous, Ray beamed at the other three. "Wow, it's sure patient. This is gonna be a tough one."

"Egon, does this have anything to do with the zombies?" Peter asked. It was a question he wished had never occurred to him.

Over the past several months, there had been a series of unexplained disappearances throughout the city, even into Newark, and, as far as Peter had heard, reaching into Upstate as well. People simply didn't come home at night. Once or twice, a neighbor reported seeing one of the people on the night of a disappearance, and the description was nearly always the same, that the person had walked by with no trace of recognition, shambling along like a Hollywood mummy or one of the

undead. The witnesses had assumed the person in question was simply drunk, and had come forth when the news of a disappearance hit to offer information. It had been such an odd mystery, and had alerted the sensational press, causing a slew of articles about a plague of zombies. Although there had been no massive zombie attack and no one had reported a gathering of weird folk or even found bodies, the *Enquirer* and the *Star* were still having a field day with it.

Even though he had utterly no interest in tabloid journalism, Egon had insisted they investigate, in the event of a supernatural causal agent for the so-called "Zombie Plague". They had gone to several sites and taken readings. Nothing unusual registered on the meters, but residuals were quick to fade, and usually by the time the Ghostbusters heard of the latest disappearance, it was the following day.

On one such failed test they had encountered tabloid reporter Edgar Benedek, who had pounced on them gleefully. "Looking for zombies, guys? Let me tell you, they make the big change and then they're gone. I've been on this for weeks. None of my sources knows anything. They're going somewhere, but the ones in Manhattan aren't leaving unless they're driving their own cars. No trains or buses have reported the undead. You think a New York cabby is going to pick up a zombie? No way, José."

"So what do you think it is, Benny?" Ray had demanded eagerly.

"Lots of theories, Ray. You got a week, I'll run them past you. Personally, I think it's a voodoo takeover of the world."

That, of course, had been too much for Egon, who had disdainfully dragged the other three to Ecto. After that, he had listened very carefully to all news reports and actually kept the radio on to a local news station. Twice they had rushed to the scene of a recent disappearance and, each time, there had been residuals, fading fast. At least Class 7, Egon had proclaimed. Not good.

From the look on Egon's face at Peter's question, he wished he hadn't asked it. "I believe it is possible, Peter. This is very bad."

"It must be, because he's repeating himself," Peter said to the air overhead.

"No, but consider, Peter. We've seen no ghosts for several days. Ray, when did you last see Slimer?"

Ray jerked his head up and looked around the lab in case he'd overlooked the little green spud. "I think it was yesterday afternoon. He wasn't here when we went to bed last night, but Mr. Li down the street always puts out his garbage on Thursday nights and you know how much Slimer likes that. You don't think he's run away, too?"

"Gee, something good has come out of this after all," Peter muttered under his breath.

Ray threw him a reproachful glare. "Peter, that's not nice."

"Well, neither is Slimer when he sleeps on my pillow, gives me ectoplasmic noogies, or steals my asiago cheese bagels right before I was going to eat them."

Egon gesture curtly. "Forget bagels, Peter. The readings I've taken at the sites of the zombie disappearances match the ambient reading that has built so gradually. Whatever it is, it's been here a very long time, and now it is taking action. Whatever its purpose, it's building up to it, and now it is apparently creating its own army to do it."

Silence fell abruptly in the firehall. "Creating its own *army*? You mean it's gonna

make the zombies *attack* people?" Peter demanded. "So what, we call in the National Guard?"

"And attack innocent people with bazookas, Pete?" Winston challenged. "We can't do that."

"No, but we can't let some big ugly mother turn everybody on earth into zombies, either. Last I heard over a hundred people have disappeared, and that's just the ones that made the papers. There may be more, not only around here but in other states or other countries, or people nobody's reported missing."

Egon nodded. "Precisely. We must stop it."

"Okay, here's the 64-thousand-dollar question," said Peter. "How?"

Once the zombie problem had a likely connection to the ambient energy problem, Egon grew busier than ever. He put Ray and Winston to researching everything they could find on the Internet regarding the zombie situation, and even took to reading the tabloids, which won from him continual expressions of disgust. Yet, if he could glean even one kernel of useful information from the supermarket rags, it would be worth the teeth-gritting annoyance of such flamboyant garbage. Reluctantly, he read Benedek's articles, and was forced to conclude that, once one looked past the hype, the exaggeration, the absurd claims, what little actual information claimed was factual. Egon accumulated dates and times of disappearances, and he and the team went to the sites and questioned those who might have witnessed the disappearance. All they learned was exaggeration and nonsense, but they could not ignore the chance, however slight, of gaining real information.

Egon bade Ray contact Benedek and arrange to have information relayed to the team, and Ray reported that Benny had instantly agreed in exchange for the promise of an exclusive scoop--and with an offer to don a proton pack, as he had on one or two previous occasions, and stand with the team against the forces of Evil. Ray had claimed he had sounded delighted at the possibility, which was more than Egon did.

Egon also configured a PKE meter to read the entity's precise frequency, and connected it to an external power source when the team was in the firehall so it could be continually charged. Since the team had scarcely any calls over the next several days, they rarely needed to disconnect it save for their periodic sweeps of Manhattan, forays into Brooklyn, Queens, and then, one morning, upstate past Westchester. What truly alarmed Egon, although he spoke nothing of it to the others, was that the one reading did not alter as they proceeded northward. In fact, they even seemed to strengthen.

"Stop the car, Winston," Egon directed, frowning at the meter. "I want to take readings here."

"Here?" Peter echoed as Winston took the next turn-off, and eventually pulled Ecto-1 up to a gas pump. "Yeah, most demons have their headquarters at a gas station, so they don't have to go very far to refuel."

"Here," Egon said through gritted teeth, "being the town of Nasburg."

"Nasburg!" Ray cried, his face lighting up. "Gosh, Egon, your dragon. You don't think he has anything to do with this?"

"No, Ray," Egon replied in a tight and level voice. "I do not. But my ancestors lived in Nasburg for a time before the family moved west to Cleveland. Perhaps my ancestor Zedekiah was not the only family member to dabble in powers beyond his control."

"Or maybe the dragon wasn't the only disruption in local 1740s society, or whenever it was," said Peter. "Hey, Egon, do you think if you woke the dragon we could ask him to fight the demon for us?"

Egon glared at him. "No, Peter. I will not disrupt the dragon unless it is our only chance to save humanity. Putting it back to sleep after fighting a major demon might be beyond our powers."

"Oh. Well, then, forget I asked."

Egon frowned. There had been family records, long discounted, and, Egon suspected, some discarded by his father or grandfather. His father had scorned any ideas of the paranormal and shuddered at the very thought of his family's background, including not only the Nasburg branch but the Lewiston one before them. Egon himself had been unable to avoid an interest in the paranormal after his childhood encounters with the Bogeyman. Thus, he had considered those ancestors, and even then, his father's influence had held enough for him to be skeptical of them. Yet, within the limits of the science of their times, they had been thorough. It was true their beliefs had been colored by superstition, but that was inevitable. *We are all a product of our times.*

The readings were more clearly defined here. He recorded his findings, and climbed out of the car while Winston took the opportunity to pump gas, and walked around, judging the direction in which they were strongest, and winning the attention of a big, burly fellow who had ridden in on a Harley.

"Hey, you're a Ghostbuster," the man cried.

"Patently." Egon took a reading of him. Completely normal, if one could call a grey-haired fellow who wore his hair in a tail down the back of his neck and rode around in black leather with chains and sported tattoos of near-naked women on his forearms normal.

"You here about the zombies?" the biker asked, which not only sharpened Egon's attention but which drew Peter and Ray to his side.

"Zombies?" Ray cried, his whole face alight with interest. "Gosh, do you have them here?"

The biker looked at Ray's delight and shook his head. "Well, if you're into ghosts, you're probably into zombies, too. Yeah, there have been some around. People have seen them passing through. Once a whole carload of them ran a red light in town." He waved in the general direction of the village that sat back from the highway. "They nearly took out Mrs. Malloy. You should have seen her shaking her cane at them."

Ah, a small-town biker. But the thought of zombies driving a car alarmed Egon. Were they leaving Manhattan in carpools? From the uncontrolled staggering of the ones reported in the city, it was a wonder there hadn't been multiple pile-ups on the

freeways. "You don't know where they were going?" he asked.

"No, it wasn't like most people would chase after them. My buddies and I decided if we saw any more of them we'd follow and find out where they were headed, but we didn't see any others after that. Hey, look, I'll call you if any more show up."

"Great." Ray handed him a business card. "Here's the number. Thanks."

"Which way were they headed?" Winston called as he replaced the gas cap.

"Up into the woods," the helpful biker replied with a gesture westward.

Egon experienced a surge of gratitude. That was entirely in the opposite direction from the well where his ancestor's dragon slept peacefully, dreaming of Egon. Yet if one of his ancestors had triggered this problem, it would be up to Egon to solve it, even if it involved a confrontation with a powerful demon. His ancestors had lacked access to particle throwers or atomic destabilizers. What a Spengler had made wrong, let another put right.

The biker headed into the service station, and Winston trailed him to pay. But Peter studied Egon, head a-tilt, and came over to sling an arm around his shoulders. "What's bugging you, buddy?"

Egon could never conceal distress from Peter, and he had learned not to try. While Ray bounced around taking more readings, Egon drew a deep breath. "I fear this may be a crisis provoked by Zedekiah or another of my ancestors. The readings are strongest here. I suggest we head in the direction our biker friend indicated and see what we can discover."

"Well, you can dump that hair shirt right here, buddy. Even if it was old Zed or another Spengler with weird hair, it wasn't you. All it means is that you come from a long line of paranormal types, and that if anybody can figure it out, you can. Doesn't mean you're to blame, so you can just shove that thought right out of your pointy little head."

"Ah, Peter, you are always so eloquent."

"Yep, my middle name. So here's the deal, Spengs. If one of your ancestors did this, then maybe he left records. Any chance there'll be anything in the local library?"

"*You*, Peter, suggesting a library? I am shocked."

Peter grinned and buffed his fingernails against his shirt. "Come on, Egon, I live with a band of reading maniacs. Besides, where there are libraries, there's Marian the Librarian, and half the time if she lets her hair down out of that bun and takes off those glasses, she turns into a real stunner. Think a place as small as Nasburg has a library?"

"We shall go and see," Egon agreed as Winston returned and Ray bounded over. "Guys, the world is about to end. Peter has just suggested a visit to the library."

But when Ray and Winston fell upon Peter with loud-voiced teasing, Egon smiled, for Peter had eased his sense of guilt. Much better to deal with a crisis than to accept blame on the remote chance one of his ancestors had been involved. What they needed now was more information, to learn the nature of the threat. The fact that zombies had been seen here, in the center of the strongest readings yet, tied the two together in a way their speculation could not prove, even if there had been Class 7 readings at the sites.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Ray cried with a huge grin. "Let's go to the library."

Peter surveyed the tiny building that served as Nasburg's library. It looked like a mini-version of those uniform Carnegie libraries that had sprung up everywhere, except it contained only two rooms of books. From the look of the place, romances and action-adventure tales were the most commonly requested among the patrons of Nasburg, for a display shelf held huge bunches of them.

Peter headed for the desk. He had envisioned himself as Harold Hill ready to melt the heart of the local Marian the Librarian, but the woman behind the desk, while she did wear her hair in a bun with glasses perched on her nose, was probably the same age as Mrs. Faversham, whom Peter had adopted as a surrogate grandmother. When she saw Peter coming, she studied him through very knowing eyes, as if she could read his every thought, and her eyes twinkled with a smile.

"Welcome to the library. You're the Ghostbusters. I recognize your outfits. And you," she added to Peter, "must be Venkman, the one who hams it up on the talk shows."

Peter decided he liked her. He gave her an exaggeratedly hammy bow, and would have swept up her hand and kissed it if he hadn't known the guys would ride him about it for the next week. "Publicity's important," he said as if conveying to her the secret of the ages. "We're the Ghostbusters, all right. And we've come to check out old records about possible historical hauntings."

She gave her glasses a shove, just like Egon did. For all Peter knew, she might be distant kin. All the Spenglers might not have taken off for Ohio. "Well, that we have. The Spengler Collection." Her eyes pinned Egon knowingly. "Donated by an ancestor of yours, Dr. Spengler. Isaiah Spengler. His brother, Japhet left it to the library when he died in 1821. Isaiah had already gone west--the nation was opening up and he took his family several years after the end of the War of Independence. If you want information on ghostly manifestations in Nasburg, you've come to the right place." Suddenly she dimpled. "We even added a section on the dragon. Yes, we know all about it. It's difficult to keep a huge, green dragon secret, and you did produce a spectacular light show when you confined it."

"I assure you, Ma'am, it offers no danger to Nasburg," Egon said very sincerely. The tips of his ears had grown pink, a sure sign he was mortified.

"So we know. We had Zedekiah's records here, too, for he was Isaiah's grandfather. You are descended from Isaiah, no doubt?"

Peter gave Egon a poke in the side. "Just think, Spengs, all this genealogy has to be a big thrill for you."

"I would rather study the evidence of demon manifestations historically. We do know about Zedekiah, and I have heard tell of my ancestor Isaiah but, oddly, I know very little about him. Of course, my father was never interested in pursuing what he considered a 'diversion from true science,' so he let all that information lapse. I only know Isaiah's name from the old family Bible."

"Well, come along, then." She set down the pen she'd been doodling with, and rose, revealing that she wore blue jeans and that she was almost as tall as Winston. "This way, gentlemen."

She led them to a door off to the side that opened on a flight of stairs leading down to the library basement. As she opened it, she called over her shoulder to a boy of about seventeen, who had been industriously replacing books on shelves. Peter had noticed him listening for all he was worth.

"Mind the desk a minute, Jerry."

"You bet, Mrs. Quack."

"Mrs. Quack?" Winston asked as they started down a steep flight of metal stairs.

"I'm really Mrs. Mallard," she explained over her shoulder. "My husband's nickname was Quack-Quack, and I got stuck with Mrs. Quack."

She grinned, but Peter saw a flash of brief sadness in her eyes and realized she must be a widow. He could tell she wouldn't want it mentioned so he said, "We'll call you that, too. Hey, where are we going?" he added as they emerged into a basement dominated by a huge and ancient furnace. "Does anyone ever dust down here?"

"There is no dust, Peter. Perhaps you should have an eye examination," Egon chided, yet he looked around warily. "The Spengler collection is down here?"

"Now don't take it to heart, Dr. Spengler. We have a very nice room for it, and it's not musty or anything. In here." She produced a set of keys from her pocket and thrust it into the lock of a metal door. When it was unlocked, she reached inside to switch on a light and gestured for them to follow her inside.

The room was not large, but it was filled with three filing cabinets, and a wall of shelves with a collection of books and journals. A shelving unit on the far wall held a number of books preserved behind glass. All it needed was a set of jars containing mysterious potions for it to resemble an alchemist's lab.

"Hey, you ought to have a sign on the door that reads 'mad scientists enter here,'" Peter suggested, giving Egon a nudge.

"Wow, this is *great*." Ray's eyes grew huge with wonder.

"I have to say I agree with you, Ray." That was Winston, the inveterate reader. He tended toward mysteries, but the whole room must contain the mysterious; spooky Spengler magic from the 18th Century.

"Boy, Egon, looks like your ancestors kept a heck of a lot more notes than you do," Peter cried.

Egon frowned at Peter, his glasses sliding down his nose at the sight of all those books and journals. "I keep most of mine on the computer, Peter. Ah, where to begin. Mrs. Qua--er, Mrs. Mallard, what can you tell us about a possible demonic incursion in this region, perhaps several hundred years ago?"

What a question. Probably it would send Marion the Librarian fleeing in panic. But Mrs. Quack was made of sterner stuff. She frowned at Egon as if she thought his question was inappropriate for polite society. "You are the second one to ask that question in two days, young man."

"I am?"

"He is?" Peter asked. "Okay, I'll bite. Who was the other one?"

Ray drew a journal off a shelf and flipped it open, then hesitated. "Okay to

touch these?"

"Yes, but the ones in the cases will require you to wear special gloves. The previous questioner was a tabloid journalist."

"Benedek," Egon groaned.

"That's right, Edgar Benedek. 'Call me Benny,' he said to me." Her smile softened. "I did not show him the Spengler collection, mostly because it's at my discretion who sees it, and I did not want our small town written up in the *National Register*. But I could tell he was suspicious. He brought up the dragon. Most of the people here clam up right away when you talk dragons to them. It's our peculiarity, and most folks--other than those who go on those daytime talk shows and blab the most intimate details of their lives--would rather not be embarrassed in public. He didn't think the dragon was connected, but he talked about Nasburg being a nexus for the paranormal."

"Wow, what if it is?" cried Ray. "Egon, Egon, maybe that's why your ancestors settled here. Like they have an affinity for it."

"Egon sure has an affinity for *something*," Peter teased. "But I think it's for the weird. So what did you tell Benny, Mrs. Quack?"

"Very little. He was plausible and sucked up better than most, and I have to admit I liked him, but I, er, stonewalled him. He mentioned the zombies, too. Like everyone else, I've read about them in the spectacular press. I even saw two of them going into the woods a week ago."

"Where? We want to find out what's causing it," Winston said. "You could really help everyone if you talked to us."

"I mean to, of course. I figured a splashy headline wouldn't help Nasburg, and it wouldn't help the people who were altered. I'm wondering if it's not a natural thing--bad grain or something. Didn't that cause all kinds of problems in the Middle Ages? People turning into werewolves and the like."

"Well, not actually werewolves," Egon corrected. "But what matters is the zombies. I don't believe it's bad grain, or a dietary contamination, Mrs. Mallard. I believe there is a paranormal causality."

"Thus your question about demons. Well, legend has it there was a demon here, and that it was during the War of Independence, but I know little about it." She gestured around at the books. "I keep these well preserved and will show them to bona fide scholars, but they aren't my usual reading fare. I like detective stories, British police procedurals, myself."

"Hey, I like those kind of books, too," cried Winston, and he grinned at the thought of meeting a kindred spirit.

"Our answer, then, may be in this room," Egon cut into the exchange of book titles before it could fairly be begun. "Mrs. Mallard, is there an index? I notice no Dewey Decimal numbers on the spines. What organization can be found here?"

"And before you answer that," Peter said, waving his hand for attention, "is Benny still in Nasburg?"

"I believe he is. Checked into the Inn, just over on Maple. That's where you'll have to stay, too; it's the only place in town except for Mrs. Rittenhouse's bed-and-breakfast, and there's a fellow from England staying there who has been here nearly a

month now. You might want to talk to him. He's some kind of scholar doing research on the War of Independence. He had an ancestor who fought on the side of the British and was in a battle near here."

"Hey, cool," said Ray.

"But as to the books?" Egon prodded.

"As to the books, you will want this." She opened the first filing cabinet and retrieved a thick folder. "This has a list of all the books and journals here, and where to find the loose papers. Many of them have been laminated, or have been put on microfiche. The Rittenhouse estate did that."

"Rittenhouse estate?" Peter prompted. The word estate suggested lots of money, and Peter always loved to hear about money.

"Well, a generation after your Isaiah left, Dr. Spengler, there were no sons born, only daughters, and the eldest married a Rittenhouse--yes, the bed and breakfast lady is a descendant, and thus a distant relative of yours, Dr. Spengler."

"Indeed? I had not thought any of the family remained in the area."

"Well, there aren't very many who remember anything about the Spenglers, of course, but we have the collection." She glanced at her wristwatch. "I must relieve Jerry at the desk, but feel free to look at anything you wish, and if you need copies of anything, there's a Xerox upstairs. If it's the really old books, I'll have to do it for you. The microfiche viewer is upstairs. Do you know how to use it?"

"Just leave it to me," Ray agreed. "This is great stuff. I bet we'll find what we're looking for in a heartbeat. Hey, Mrs. Quack," he called as she started away.

"Yes, Dr. Stantz?"

"Call me Ray. If Edgar Benedek comes back, send him down to join us."

"I will." She smiled at him, left, and closed the door behind her.

"Why did you do that, Raymond?" Egon asked. "It's not as if he would be able to assist us."

"Sure he can. He's a researcher, isn't he? He knows all kinds of things about the paranormal. There's enough stuff here for us to search it for weeks and not find what we need. Another pair of eyes will really be useful."

"He's got you there," Peter said. "Of course he'll offer weird theories about everything he reads, and bizarre suggestions, probably that your ancestors danced naked in the moonlight, Egon." He paused, tilted his head, and studied Egon. "Come to think of it, that's a pretty horrible thought."

Egon tended to ignore that kind of comments, but he would find his revenge for them in subtle ways that Peter didn't even like to speculate about. Instead, he took up the folder Mrs. Mallard had given him, sat down at the small table in the center of the room, and spread the contents before him.

Ray headed for the microfilm shelf and read the labels he found. "Old newspapers, mostly," he said, "and it looks like a lot of loose pages from old letters. Here's some from 1785. That's a couple of years after the end of the American Revolution. Do you think I should go back farther than that?"

"I'd go back as far as 1750, Ray," Egon said without looking up from the papers he was sorting into six different piles. No, there was a seventh, arranged in some order that made sense only in Egon's twisty little brain.

"Well, okay, but I can't find any microfilm that was made of stuff before then. So I'll read this one and then look for older stuff."

"Even if there was a newspaper in Nasburg during the Revolution, I doubt any issues would remain, but see if you can find anything, Winston," Egon dictated.

Whoops, there went an eighth pile. Peter edged sideways out of Egon's sight, convinced he'd be directed to the stacks of what looked like old journals. They were sure to be full of dust and mildew, just what his hay fever would hate. He hadn't brought his antihistamines with him because they hadn't planned to stay up here overnight. Each of them had tossed in an overnight bag just in case, but Peter hadn't thought of the pills which he hadn't needed since spring. So he wandered over to the newer looking books in an attempt to give Egon the impression he meant to work.

"Peter."

Trapped. He should have known. "Yeah, Spengs?"

"I want you to run over to the bed-and-breakfast and locate Mrs. Rittenhouse's guest. As a scholar of the Revolutionary War period, he may possess information that would prove useful to us." He heaved a sigh. "And if you should run into Benedek, you may as well bring him along, too."

Egon, you're a prince. No allergies, thank goodness. "Right. I'll be sure and greet your distant relative and tell her you're here," he said, imagining her as looking a lot like Egon's mom only about twenty years older, and, hopefully, with a different hair style than Egon's bizarre flip.

With a wave at Ray and Winston, he set off on his great quest, trying very hard to ignore the possibility that Egon had sent him away because he thought Peter would mix up the papers or skim over an important bit of data. Could he help it if he was a lousy proofreader?

He wondered what this English guy would be like. A stuffy old professor, no doubt. Peter could remember his history prof at Columbia; a guy who had no point of contact with the 20th Century. Well, it wasn't this century the team needed to learn about. So maybe that would be okay.

While Ray fiddled with the microfilm files to decide which ones to take upstairs to the microfilm reader, Winston hauled out some papers from a shelf. They were old and so brittle he was afraid to handle them without gloves, but he didn't think they were nearly old enough to be the ones in question. No, here was one with a headline about the Johnstown flood--was it supposed to be paranormal? Much later; these probably wouldn't do any good.

Winston returned them and prowled over to a shelf of journals, many of them old and leather-bound; some of them even looked like they were hand-made. Boy, let Ray see these and he'd be thrilled. Still, except for Peter, whose feet were firmly planted in the 1990s, all the team had an interest in history. For Peter, that interest only stirred when it touched on the personal. Famous battles and lists of kings bored him. But throw in a little bit of human interest and he'd be sucked right in.

Ray said, "Be right back," and staggered out, his arms full of reels of microfilm,

the one he'd been most interested in perched precariously on the top of the pile.

With a grin at the absorbed Egon, Winston opened the first journal. The pages crackled a bit, but it proved a disappointment. *Being the book of profit and loss for the year of our lord Eighteen forty-nine, compiled by Ernest Rittenhouse.* When Winston flipped the pages, he found it was a balance book for a dry goods store. The 1849 version of an Excel spreadsheet. Interesting to compare the prices of those days with today's, but not exactly useful in the current crisis. He put it aside to glance through later, in case he had time. It seemed the Rittenhouse of his day had diverged from the Spengler scientific state of mind. Maybe it only passed through the male line.

Curious, Winston cast a look at Egon, and saw him frowning over another journal. From the impatient way he flipped through the pages, it didn't offer anything useful to him. Even when he set it aside, before he picked up another, the frown lingered. Was Egon brooding about the possibility that an ancestor of his had triggered the problem, the way old Zedekiah had triggered the dragon?

"You okay, Egon?" he asked.

Egon started. "What?" The book fell open in his hand. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"Well, I remember you when we had the dragon on our hands--and the fun and games in Lewiston."

"If an ancestor of mine triggered a zombie plague, it is mine to repair," Egon said.

"It's *ours* to repair. The *team's*, because that's what we do. Never mind who did it. You blame yourself for something that might have happened 200 years ago and it'll be the same as blaming Peter for his dad releasing Hob Anagarok on New York."

Egon drew a sharp breath. "It is not the same," he said, then he shook his head so fiercely his glasses slid down toward the end of his nose. "Well, perhaps it is."

"Yeah, none of this 'sins of the father' thing here, Egon. Whoever did it doesn't matter. What matters is finding out *what* they did, how they did it, and how we're gonna stop it now. We don't even know for a fact it happened here anyway, even though we've detected strong readings. Maybe if we go farther north there'll be even stronger ones."

"Zombies were seen here, Winston, going into the woods."

"So maybe zombies *like* the woods. You're always going on about needing complete information, and we don't have that yet. If you spend half your time worrying about whether or not a Spengler did this a long time ago, then you're not using that time to figure out what's actually going down or how we're gonna stop it. You need to get your act together. Besides," he added with a wicked grin, "if Pete saw that look on your face, he'd go into shrink mode, and you know how much you hate it when he does that with you."

"Not hate it, Winston," Egon objected. "He means well, and I always value that. It's just that..."

"That you don't want to spill your guts. Just like any guy I ever knew. So forget about who did it, except that if it was a Spengler, then we'll probably be able to find out something here. If they're all like you and keep detailed records, there's bound to be something. Maybe this English dude knows something, and, from our experience of Benny, he might have picked up leads. He might even have his professor buddy with

him, and if anybody can rein Benny in it's Jonathan MacKensie."

"Very true, Winston. All right. You're making excellent sense. If Benedek is here, let us hope Dr. MacKensie is, too. After all, he is a scientist, and perhaps an anthropologist would be beneficial." He picked up a book at random, and opened it. "Hmmm."

Great. He was caught up in it. Turn Egon in the right direction and answers came. They might not always be happy answers, such as in the case of preparing to die to save the world--and Winston mentally crossed his fingers and muttered a prayer that it wouldn't happen here--but they were answers. Any minute now, Egon might cry, "Eureka," and lead them out to zap the demon.

Winston resumed sorting through his ledgers, but he kept an eye on Egon, just in case.

That was why he was watching Egon when the physicist stiffened like a pointer spotting a pheasant. "Winston!"

"Find something?"

"I don't know if it has anything to do with this, but it's a copy of a letter from 1778. Listen to this." He cleared his throat and read aloud.

My dear Madeline,

I take up my pen in great distress to tell you of a mysterious and tragic occurrence. There has been a battle fought near here, four days ago. The British battled our militia in the fields near the great forest. When it was over, many of our husband, fathers, and sons did not return. Only two there were who came home, along with the schoolmaster and the Spengler brothers, and all were greatly shaken and exhausted and would speak naught of what they saw. Families rushed out to the field to seek the bodies of their loved ones, but alas, their bodies were not there. The schoolmaster claimed some of them had fled, but our folk are not cowards. If they fled, why not Isaiah Spengler, who has never seemed to me a brave man, always bent over his books rather than partaking in any bold, manly activity?

To make it worse, there were indeed bodies. But they were strange bodies, distorted men, great hulks of beings who --oh, my dear Madeline, they did not quite look...human. They could not be our dear lost ones transformed; they must be the ones the British fought. My father saw them, and he told me when I asked after James. James, he told me, did fight, and fight at the side of the Redcoats against these creatures, but my cousin was too shaken to speak to me. He would say nothing of the battle, save only that the enemy had fallen.

Yet, if we colonists battled the British, why did the British officer come into the town and speak kindly to the people? He would not allow his men to harm us, and they simply marched away. It must be true what James had said, that the British soldiers defended our town from the...the creatures.

The strangest facet of it was that when men went out from the

town to bury the strange bodies lest they lie and rot and bring plague down upon us, those bodies were but bones. In only two days, Madeline. It is the work of the devil. All are saying it, and the folk crowd into our church each day to pray that no such terrible events will harm us again. I wonder...

Egon stopped reading. "The text breaks off there. Hmmm."

"That is so weird, man. It sounds like they fought a zombie army, doesn't it? And now there are more zombies gathering. All those folks who were transformed. This is what we came to find out, isn't it?"

"I believe it is. How could something so strange be covered up all these years?" He glanced down at the page. "Bizarre happenings have been concealed before. But if the zombies attack, we have one advantage the British soldiers lacked. We have the particle throwers."

"To use against ordinary folks transformed by a demon?" Winston hated the thought of that. But who knew what the zombies would have done if the Redcoats hadn't shown up. Had the zombies been the missing militia? If so, they'd transformed and attacked a lot quicker than the modern version, and it sounded like Madeline's correspondent had not believed them to be. So what had happened to the ones who disappeared?

"I don't like that any more than you do, Winston," Egon said gravely. "Yet if they attack people, we shall have to stop them. Certainly we must stop the demon."

"So what happened to the militia, then? Or were they the zombies, after all? A major case of denial?"

Egon frowned. "I imagine a careful study was actually made when the bodies of the zombies were first discovered, Winston. True, the people of Nasburg would not have wished to believe their loved ones had been mysteriously transformed. Isaiah was there, and his brother, no doubt the one who stayed when Isaiah took his family to Ohio. He would surely have known if the militia had become zombies. I wonder why he, his brother, and the schoolmaster would not speak of it. And where the local militia disappeared. If those zombies were like the ones of the present day, a demon was involved, yet there is no mention of demons in the letter."

"At least in the part you had," Winston reminded him.

"Quite correct, Winston. At least in the part I had. This gives us several mysteries to ponder. The rapid decay of the zombie bodies is alarming. That suggests what animated them was entirely bound to the demon, and once it withdrew its power, they turned to bones. I have never heard of such an occurrence before. I must speak to Ray about this. It's possible the militia did flee in terror and, after this letter was written, crept back, shamefaced, to their homes and families. Yet if not, perhaps they were taken by the demon to serve as new zombies."

"You mean this could have been going on for centuries?" Winston grimaced. "We'd have heard of it if people were still doing the zombie thing all through the years. Ray would be talking about the mass disappearance of 1892 or something like that. He has whole books of Fortean phenomena and he's always comparing them to new cases."

"True." Egon flipped several more pages. "There are additional letters copied here, yet nothing to our purpose. It appears we have found the focal point of our crisis, yet that does not give us enough information to plan a way to stop a future event. I must find Isaiah's diaries. Obviously, he was in the heart of this crisis."

"Unless he didn't keep diaries--or he took them with him to Ohio."

Egon stiffened. "I have seen all the old family papers. My father keeps them boxed in the attic. There was nothing of Isaiah's, yet I knew of Zedekiah and the dragon. I do not believe my father would selectively allow the dragon journals to remain and destroy Isaiah's. Perhaps Isaiah believed they must stay in Nasburg. If so, it is up to us to find them."

Winston looked around the room at the collection of papers, books, and artifacts, and heaved a huge sigh. This was going to be one heck of a big job.

As he walked along the main street of Nasburg, Jonathan MacKensie was sulking. That wasn't what he chose to call it, but he suspected Benedek would. Look at him, charging into the paranormal all over again even if he had started taking a class or two at Columbia on parapsychology, and even anthropology. He'd been talking about maybe switching to Georgetown in a semester or two, but he was still hanging onto his job at the *National Register*, and wasn't quite prepared to give it up.

If truth were told, Jonathan admired his friend's eager enthusiasm and his willingness to plunge zestfully into each new experience. As time and a number of unexplained phenomena cases that remained inexplicable by conventional scientific reasoning had driven Jonathan to admit that Hamlet had been right--*there is more in heaven and earth*--Benedek had learned to temper his eager and automatic belief that everything strange was paranormal. Sometimes Jonathan would pass up clam chowder for a more exotic meal, and Benedek had been known to sit down and watch PBS and actually enjoy it.

Yet the fact that they came at each new case from their differing perspectives, like Mulder and Scully on the *X-Files* program Benedek had forced him to watch in the beginning and that now Jonathan secretly watched for its own sake, made him and Benedek a better team. The sudden arrival of Benedek to drag him off to investigate a new case, or Dr. Moorhouse's determination to send him to investigate a zombie plague, had lost its power to disconcert him. Randy, once his favorite student, was now a professor in her own right, zipping around in her wheelchair, filling in for Jonathan when he went into the field, using her ever-increasing computer skill to find data when he needed more information. Dr. Moorhouse had assigned her to the paranormal phenomena department along with several student aides, and the department was flourishing. If Jonathan often and vocally regretted his studies of Australopithecus and wondered how a stubborn bone man had turned into a kind of Ghostbuster, he also realized he would not change his life.

Speaking of Ghostbusters, here came one now. Well, no wonder. Paranormal phenomena were right up their alley, and Benedek had told him the Ghostbusters were investigating the so-called Zombie Plague. If Benedek's trail had led him to this tiny village, why wouldn't the Ghostbusters have found it, too?

"Peter!" Jonathan called and waved.

"Hey, Jon-baby." Trust Peter to go the nickname routine. He had learned it from Benedek, realized it mildly bugged Jonathan, and, therefore, delighted in it. "Benny dragged you up here, did he?"

Jonathan struggled against the temptation to call Peter "Venkster" in retaliation, as Benedek sometimes did, then decided not to stoop to that level. "He did. He is convinced of this so-called 'zombie plague', as the tabloids are calling it."

Peter grinned, no doubt at the disgust in Jonathan's voice. "So what does he think is actually going on?"

"It depends on the day of the week. He has a separate theory for every one of them. My favorite of them is that there has been a change in the quality of the sunlight and that within five years Earth will be populated entirely by zombies."

"Love it," Peter chuckled. "Of course the fact that there have been no proven comparable sightings anywhere outside of a limited area of the country, New York, New Jersey--and *anything* can happen in New Jersey--and a bit of Pennsylvania, the sun would need a very narrow focus."

"His other theory is that toxic wastes have been dumped in the Hudson River and that it affects a certain type of the population. He's trying to find out the blood types of the people who disappeared, but there isn't any pattern that he can discover--and it's not for want of trying. I assume you Ghostbusters hold for a paranormal theory?"

Peter nodded. "Oh, yeah. Egon picked up demon readings, Class 7 anyway, at the disappearance sites we were able to reach within a day."

Jonathan's heart sank. He could never accuse Egon Spengler of fudging data to suit himself. Often enough, Jonathan knew, the Ghostbusters had been called to a site that could be explained by natural phenomena, and Egon had always pointed out to the panicked people the actual cause of the disturbance. Once it had even been a panicked old lady disturbed by subway vibrations. No, Egon would not claim high readings if he did not, in fact, detect high readings.

Jonathan hated that kind of thing.

It was so much easier when the main result of an unexplained phenomenon could be put down to natural causes. True that even in the beginning there had always been little minor touches that could not be explained away. Jonathan had always believed they simply hadn't tripped upon the actual cause for those happenings. The more he and Benedek had worked together, the more he understood Benny's delight in those mysterious moments, events that could not be easily explained. He took great pleasure in believing there were matters out there that were not safe, easy, conventional.

Over the years, Jonathan, who had always derived great comfort from the predictability of the universe, developed a small sense of wonder.

Of course, his wonder did not extend to the welcoming of demonic threats. He would more readily accept the belief that fairies dwelled at the bottom of the garden than that demons prowled the earth. "Class 7 means demons, doesn't it?" he asked, his shoulders sagging at the thought.

"Well, there can be Class 7's who aren't demons," Peter said instructively. "But

nice Class 7's aren't likely to turn people into zombies, are they?"

"No," said Jonathan reluctantly. "I don't imagine they are." He looked around the peaceful small-town street where ordinary people went about their business. There was not a zombie in sight. "Benedek thinks this is the heart of the problem. He's been talking to people around town, and a number of them have reported seeing zombies. Some have actually driven here, and according to Benedek, the local police chief has found a number of abandoned cars, the keys still in them. He's placed them in a holding area and plans to contact the people they are registered to, to correlate them with the disappearances if he can."

"He hasn't done that yet?" Peter asked.

"I suspect he's doing it as quietly as possible for fear of unleashing a media circus on the town."

Peter grinned. "Yeah, I see his point. Especially since we have demon residuals. Last thing we need is a bunch of idiot reporters with cameras and sound trucks running around while a demon takes pot-shots at them. Bad for the business. Last thing we need is civilians getting in the way of a bust."

Jonathan could see that. "It makes sense. You wouldn't want to take out a reporter by mistake. But you'll have Benedek wanting to put on one of your proton packs and stand with you when you bust it. He's always bragging about the times he actually did that. How he and Egon took out a demon."

"Yeah, with my help," Peter insisted. "But Benny's not so bad. If we need the help, we'll take it. We have a spare proton pack, because Egon brought the atomic destabilizer. Actually, we have two." He wagged his eyebrows at Jonathan as if to offer the second one.

Jonathan grimaced. He wasn't sure what an atomic destabilizer was but it sounded distinctly unpleasant, and he knew he wanted to be nowhere in the vicinity when one was in use any more than he wanted to strap on a regular proton pack and fight a demon. "So you are saying the residuals prove a demon was here?" Why did Georgetown suddenly seem so incredibly appealing? Grading papers might have its share of boredom, but suddenly it seemed so normal, so safe. Before Dr. Moorhouse had asked--no, ordered--him to take on the Unexplained Phenomena Department, he would never have imagined giant underwater creatures lurking in the Mississippi river or the thought of demons and zombies in upstate New York.

"At one time. But for the readings to linger, it wouldn't have been that long ago." Peter's face twisted. "I hafta say I'm not any happier about it than you look. But this zombie thing--if the demon's doing it, we have to stop it."

"Benedek found a collection of zombies once," Jonathan remembered. "We had people supposedly rising from the dead, or being buried alive. He insisted on following the lead and was taken to an underground hide-out where people were confined."

"Zombies?" Peter asked.

"Well, he thought they were, but they had been drugged for control, and were meant to use to illegally harvest organs."

"Ouch," said Peter. "I like all my organs where they are, thank you very much. These zombies are just wandering around, but Ray thinks they're being directed somewhere, and the fact that they've been seen here and the demon readings are

here kind of confirms it. So Nasburg is now officially Zombie Central."

Uneasily, Jonathan looked around, but he didn't see a single zombie. He didn't see that many people at all, but then it was a small town, and there shouldn't be vast crowds. Some of them regarded the two strangers, especially Peter in his Ghostbusters jumpsuit, with suspicion, others simply ignored them.

"Hey, I've gotta run," Peter said. "There's supposedly an English guy at the bed-and-breakfast that knows a lot about the history of the area, and might have some clues about what's going on. Egon says this has been building up for hundreds of years."

"Hundreds of years? Surely someone would have noticed before now."

"Well, yeah, but things that come on really gradually can be overlooked. 'Sides, Egon and Ray think it's just been a buildup of power and, now that these zombies are running around, things might start happening. I don't know *what* things," he complained. "And the guys can't say, but I know it won't be good. Egon's ancestor used to live here until he picked up his family and moved to Cleveland. Not exactly the most happening place in the known universe, but I bet there aren't any zombies there."

"A history scholar at the bed-and-breakfast? May I accompany you?"

"Sure. History and anthro ought to get along pretty well. Any idea where Benny is? Egon wants him to go over to the library."

"I think he's wandering around questioning people about zombies."

"Then we'll find him later. Come on."

Jonathan looked up and down the street for a sign of Benedek, but he must have been invited into someone's home. Much better than to think he was out there exploring the woods. With no trace of Benedek, Jonathan shrugged and set off with Peter to interview the Englishman.

Had Jonathan known where Benedek actually was, he would probably have been unhappy, but Benny knew when to drag a protesting Jonathan along with him and when to venture off on his own. While Jon-boy schmoozed over the phone with his assistant, Randy, Benny had spent an hour chatting up everybody in the local diner. Most of them were tickled to have a famous journalist interview them, even the ones who had absolutely no information at all and only wished for a willing ear. Benny had heard tales of straying husbands, a lifelong desire to visit the Black Forest of Germany, and a fervent belief that half the people in Nasburg were actually pod people put there by aliens from UFOs. Benny had happily taken notes on the UFO claim in case there was a slow news day, but had little difficulty ferreting out the interesting 'fact' that the guy who made the claim was a dyed-in-the-wool Republican and that all the UFO clones were Democrats. Sure to be the main agenda of the Roswell Greys.

It was only when Benny worked around to the subject of zombies that he noticed any genuine uneasiness among the folk in the diner. Several of them suddenly discovered it was past time to return to work and hurried away. Mr. Republican

insisted the zombies were part of a plot arranged by the Clinton Administration, while the waitress with a mound of teased hair confined in an old-fashioned hairnet claimed the Hell's Angels were to blame.

"All those bike fumes turns them into zombies. They're here for a biker convention. I saw some bikers only this morning."

Benny held up his tape recorder. "So, were they zombies? Yes, talk into here."

"No, they weren't, but they looked so evil I was sure it was a cover. I saw three zombies last week, and one of them had a leather jacket. That *proves* it, doesn't it?"

Benny withheld a sigh. "Tell me where you saw the zombies," he prompted.

"Well, they were going into the woods in the direction of the battlefield. And my daughter Candy and her boyfriend saw one there a few days ago."

"Battlefield?" Benny prompted, his ears pricking. "What battlefield? Revolutionary War?"

That won a chorus of answers from the locals who were so eager to tell him about the mysterious Battle of Nasburg and the way the bodies of the fallen had turned to bones in only two days that Benny was glad he'd decided to use the tape recorder. This was great stuff. "So you had it in with King George's men?"

"Well, the Redcoats were here, all right," said Mr. Republican. "But nobody knows where the militia went. Some folks said they ran away when the British came, and maybe they did. But when the people of Nasburg went out to look for their bodies among the fallen, they weren't there, only--" He broke off abruptly, and Benny could almost see a lightbulb come on over his head. "--Only zombies!" he cried triumphantly.

All the diner people shivered and shifted and talked among themselves in astonished and horrified voices. "They've come back," one of the diners, an old man with bushy white hair that even grew out of his ears, insisted. "Who's going to stop them, now that we can't expect the British army to arrive?"

Benny buffed his fingers on his neon green shirt. "I've fought with weird creatures before and I'm still alive. Yo, guys, if the local militia disappeared and the battlefield was full of zombies, what was to stop the local militia from having been turned *into* zombies?"

That silenced everyone. Wide-eyed and open-mouthed, they gaped at Benny.

"No, that is not what happened," said a new voice and everyone stared at the man in the doorway. Benny had noticed him come in and thought him a local, but from the accent he was more likely to have come from England. Devonshire, probably, although Benny didn't have the ear for British accents that Jonathan did, since the late, great Leonard MacKensie had been an expatriate Brit. The newcomer was about as tall as Benny, and probably the same age, and his hair had receded in exactly the same places as Benny's, although the rest of it was thick and wavy. That Benny insisted it was his natural hair line didn't distract Jonathan, with his full head of thick brown hair from occasionally arching a skeptical eyebrow at Benny's insistence.

The Englishman had a wide forehead, a narrow nose, and a mouth that looked like it preferred smiling to frowning. He was dressed in the tweed-sports-coat style favored by Jon-jon with a turtleneck sweater under it.

While the locals buzzed with whispered speculation, Benny bounced off his

counter stool to greet the man. Sticking out the hand that didn't hold the tape recorder, he said, "Edgar Benedek, *National Register*. Call me Benny. And you are...?"

"Ian Hall." He frowned around at the crowd. "I am not sure I should speak to a reporter."

"Then how about a university professor? My colleague Jonathan MacKensie of Georgetown Institute--son of the famous Dr. Leonard MacKensie--is somewhere in town. What say we compare notes, then go find him and learn what we can?"

The people of the diner heaved a unanimous sigh of disappointment, but Benny chivvied the man from the diner with the skill of a man who has been handling reluctant interviewees for years, pausing in the door to whirl and bow to the customers. "Hang in there, folks. When I have the answer, you'll be the first to know." *Right after I phone in the scoop to Jordan Kerner at the Register.*

The two of them stepped out into the street, and there, not ten feet away, stood Jonny, side by side with Peter Venkman.

Things were hotting up, all right. The Ghostbusters were here.

Egon frowned over the material he, Ray, and Winston had uncovered. The microfilm had offered up vague references to the battle mentioned in the letter to Madeline. They had not found a diary written by Isaiah to cover the period in question. An earlier journal belonging to Isaiah was full of speculation about alchemy, obscure references to the dragon his grandfather Zedekiah had summoned, and even theories about why some folks returned as ghosts and others did not. In spite of the primitive times in which he lived, Isaiah had reached some of the same conclusions as the Ghostbusters: murder victim, something important left undone, outside paranormal influences. Isaiah had documented only one encounter with a spirit, but then, before the coming of Gozer and the weakening of world walls that had allowed nether entities to bleed through into the world, more conventional ghosts, the Class 3's and 4's, had been more common than those nether entities the Ghostbusters customarily battled these days. Isaiah had even offered up theories about out-of-body experiences resulting in the assumption of ghost sightings.

Yet there was nothing in the journal about the mysterious battle with the men who had become skeletal two days after their deaths. The last entry ended in 1770.

"You know what I think," Ray offered, and his brow puckered because he didn't sound like he cared for his theory. "I think the demon must have sucked nearly all the life out of the zombies. Maybe that was how it got its power. So that when they died, they instantly became, well, uh, desiccated. And decayed all that much faster. Gee, that's terrible. Even if we can stop the demon, we might not be able to help the people who've been turned into zombies."

"Oh, man," muttered Winston, and a muscle bunched in his jaw. "That sucks. Is there any way we can draw energy off the demon and feed it into the zombies? They didn't ask to be turned into the living dead. I hate like heck the thought of trapping the demon and having them fall over and turn to skeletons." His brow furrowed. "Maybe their relatives would even sue us."

Peter would be certain to worry about that but, even more, he would worry about innocent people dying because of a demon. All of them would. "Hmmm," Egon said. "It might be that they died with the demon energy trapped in them and it burned up their bodies. We need a zombie to study. If they are passing through this town, then perhaps we should go out and capture one." With enough readings, Egon might be able to understand the cause of the transformation.

"We must also find the battle site," he decided. "A place where a mass disturbance occurred should possess unconfined death energy even after all this time."

"Like that place that had once been a morgue, where they were working on that balloon for the Macy's parade a few years ago?" Winston asked. "That was nasty."

"Wow!" cried Ray unexpectedly, bouncing up out of his chair. "Egon, hey, Egon, you know what I think? That energy would be sure to really hate the demon. Maybe we could sort of harness it, if it exists, and use it against the demon. Wouldn't that be neat?"

"It would, indeed, Ray. But since we do not know if it exists or whether it was so contaminated by the demon that it would stand with it rather than with life, we cannot expect so easy an answer. I am still not convinced the bodies were not the missing militia. Transformed into zombies, they would likely have been unrecognizable to their kin."

"Their clothes wouldn't have been," argued Ray. An excellent point.

"So, let's head out to the battlefield and see." Winston closed the journal he'd been leafing through. "We can continue the research after dinner tonight. I bet Mrs. Quack would let us."

So they straightened the papers they had taken out, returned the ones that had offered no use to the shelves, and went upstairs. They paused long enough to arrange with the librarian to return after their outdoor research and left the library.

They were just starting down the wide stairs when they saw Peter returning with not only Benedek and his cohort, Dr. MacKensie, but with an unfamiliar stranger about Ray's height but considerably thinner.

"Bingo, the other Ghostbusters, fresh from research," Benedek caroled. "Yo, Spengster, you haven't run into any underwater entities lately, have you?"

"Thankfully, no. Hello, Benedek. Dr. MacKensie."

While Benedek and MacKensie greeted Winston and Ray, Peter dragged the stranger over. "Egon, this is Dr. Ian Hall, a history professor from Oxford."

"I didn't know all the problems that were occurring here," Hall said, shaking hands with the three in turn. "But now that I've heard what Dr. Venkman and Mr. Benedek have told me, I realize that history is, as it often does, repeating itself."

"You mean you *know* what happened here during the Revolutionary War?" Ray cried. "That's great. We've been trying to figure it out, and all we have is a lot of unconnected facts."

"I do know, and I have copies of my ancestor's journals with me, at least the ones that cover the pertinent period. He was a military officer at that time and commanded the men who fought in the battle near here."

"Excellent," Egon said. "That is precisely what we need. Answers."

His meter stirred, and the antennae rose. It had been quiescent until now, with only the faintest residual power. Egon took a specific reading of Professor Hall. He was not emitting readings. Holding the meter up, Egon raised his other hand to still questions. "A quantitative rise in the area's ambient energy," he said. "If the demon is present, it is not materializing."

"It's back?" squawked Hall, and looked around wildly. "At least my ancestor had a musket to defend himself, although I suspect it would not have defended him from the demon itself. No, Dr. Spengler, it was your ancestor who did that. Isaiah Spengler. Are you a direct descendant?"

"Yes, in the direct line. He took his family west after the incident and later the Spenglers settled in Cleveland, yet I believe your landlady at the bed-and-breakfast is a descendant of Isaiah's brother."

"Japhet," confirmed Dr. Hall. "I learned that already. Diane Rittenhouse was able to show me the lineage back to him. We need to talk. Dr. Venkman says you don't know what happened here, and I've discovered that the local people simply don't understand it, and that a number of bizarre theories have arisen. I have examined records and can find no descendants of the schoolmaster who had allied with the Spengler brothers, but it was Isaiah who knew the solution to the problem. It was a spell."

"A *spell*?" Egon had not considered that. Although he had known spells to work, he found them unscientific and unreliable. Too often, inexperienced amateurs who had experimented with old spell books had brought down demonic wrath upon their heads, requiring intervention from the Ghostbusters.

"That's what my ancestor wrote in his journal. I have it with me, and we can collaborate over it, Dr. Spengler, you and the other Ghostbusters. The situation was not ended in 1778, merely deferred, with the threat that the demon would gradually regain strength and return long after Isaiah had died when, presumably, there would be no one with the ability to halt it."

"He didn't reckon with the Ghostbusters," Ray said with a quick grin. "We won't need spells, just our throwers, and we even brought along a couple of extras. Benny knows how to use them, and we'll decide who best can handle the last one, if we should need it."

"If you want help with throwers, I'm your man," said Benedek, thrusting out his chest. "But first, you've gotta listen to Ian here, because he has a really great story to tell."

A breeze kicked up and tugged at the sleeves of Egon's jumpsuit. He glanced up to see the skies darkening overhead, huge, billowing thunder clouds pressing in from the north. Odd, for the sky had been clear only moments earlier. Even a sudden chill touched the air, the meter squealed into near overload. Strange and unnatural thunder rumbled and out of it came a voice. "Spengler! Spengler! I will abide no Spengler to survive."

"Egon, look out," Peter cried and dove for him, Ray and Winston a second behind. Even as they moved a surge of power flowed out of the sky like a fluid lightning bolt, white and blue combined, so nearly instantaneously that Peter was still half a step away when it engulfed Egon in a strange, humming globe of energy. Its

impact knocked Peter backward into Ray and Winston with such force that the trio tumbled to the ground. Peter's hair stood momentarily on end, but he struggled up, yelling Egon's name.

Egon heard him as if through a thick wall, his words blurred. The world around him grew fuzzy, and he found it difficult to think, to reason what had happened to him. He experienced no actual pain, just a bizarre sizzle of energy flowing through his body that tingled all the way to his fingertips.

"Blast it!" he heard Ray yell, and then he, Winston, and Peter fired their throwers at the cloud. "Full streams!" cried Ray. "We have to save Egon."

The power intensified, and he staggered, clutching his head. There was something in his hand, but he didn't know what it was, except that it was making a shrill noise and full of blinking lights. He didn't like it. With a disgusted cry, he flung it from him and it rebounded against the glowing wall around him and hit him on the leg. Yowling, he fought to retreat, but the glow surrounded him. He batted at it ineffectually. What was it? Why was it all around him?

Save Egon? He puzzled over the words. It was not the concept of saving that perplexed him, but another sudden question that felt so odd his stomach clenched. Egon? Who was that? Why were these strange people bunching around him, and what was that fire that flew into the air? Fire! It would harm the master!

Then pain came, a horrible twisting pain that stabbed his joints, thrust daggers into his brain, and drove him to the ground. Strange, growling sounds emerged from his mouth. He struggled to think, but thought would not come, only anger, fear, and the need to defend the master. He lunged again at the ones who sent bright light into the sky.

"Oh my God, look at him." The words still held meaning; he could understand them, but the open-mouthed shock on the man's face was meaningless as he pointed.

The man in the glowing bubble snarled at him. Did he know the one who pointed? Did he know those others who made the bright fire? Or the little man in the very bright clothes and the other one who stared at the sky like he recognized the master? Ah, he was sure to be an ally. Good.

Then the master went away, just like that. One minute he was there, filling the sky with his wonder, the next, the clouds were tearing apart and the other three stopped doing what they were doing and ran for him. The golden cage melted away and he had no defense.

He put up his hands to fend them off, but they stopped even as he did it. Their mouths fell open, their eyes widened. How strange they looked. Then the one with brown hair ran to him and grabbed his shoulders. He yanked away from the man who had tried to harm the Master, and pounded him on the chest.

"Egon!" yelled his victim.

It dawned on him that might well be his name. Egon. He struggled to remember it but it meant nothing. These men were his enemies, even if they tried to fool him. He backed away.

"He's a zombie," said the man with dark skin.

A zombie? He put up his hands and touched his face. How did a zombie feel? There was something perched before his eyes, a strange device, and he yanked it

away and flung it at the black man, who caught it. At first, his vision seemed fuzzy, then it cleared. He snarled again.

Other people gathered around. Enemies. They must be.

"Egon, *no*," said the one with brown hair. He looked terribly sad, but it didn't matter because he wanted to hurt the master. Let him be sad.

"Fight it, Egon!" urged the third enemy, the one with rusty red hair. "You can fight it."

"Stay away," the man they called Egon commanded. Was that harsh voice his own? It seemed ponderous, sluggish. Stupid? But he was not stupid. Deep in his being, he knew that. He was *not* stupid.

"Egon." The brown-haired man took a step closer.

The man in the bright clothes grabbed his arm and tugged at him. He held his ground, leaning away from the pull. "Are you *nuts*?" cried the shorter man. "He's gone over to the other side. You can't *talk* him back. Use your meters. Take readings."

"Readings..." breathed the one with rusty hair. He held up a thing like the one Egon had flung away. It beeped. "Oh, gosh, Peter," he mourned. "It's just like those other readings. He's been transformed." He squinted at the screen then faced the brown-haired man, who caught his shoulders and looked him in the eye. "He...he isn't Egon any more," Rusty-hair said in a voice that was nearly a whimper.

"You bet he is," Peter answered. Peter? That name sounded familiar, but his memories were too vague to understand why. "You bet he is, Ray. The real Egon's still in there. We'll get him back. I swear it, we'll find a way to get him back."

Enough of this. He jerked away and set off down the street at a shambling run. The other people who had gathered parted to let him through. Good. They should not block him. He heard feet thundering after him, and he ran faster.

"Don't let him get away," someone cried. Then a force struck him around the upper legs, arms wrapped around him, and drove him crashing to the ground. People piled on top of him and pinned him down. He fought them with his great strength and threw off one of them, but another took his place. Someone yelled, "Bring a rope," and he fought harder. They must not bind him. He had to go to the Master.

Thudding feet sounded, and then they were removing a heavy weight from his back, tying his hands behind his back, and binding his feet. Voices gave commands, but the words had begun to run together, and he did not understand. Why couldn't he understand? He should be able to understand. A last, wistful flash of regret ran through him, then it faded, and all he could do was struggle against his bonds as he fought to for his freedom.

His enemies picked him up and bore him away, and he could not break free, no matter how he struggled. "You will pay for this," he cried in the harsh, rumbling voice that no long seemed strange or unnatural. "My master will slay you."

"Yeah, well, he can try." It was the one called Peter, and Egon could hear the pain that ran beneath the determination. Once, he thought, it would have bothered him, but no more. Now he was only glad.

"Let me go."

"Not gonna happen," said the black man. "Never gonna happen."

"Gosh, yeah, Egon. We'll save you. I promise I'll find a way," insisted Ray.

In the very depths of his being, something stirred in response to the fierce claims, but it quivered and faded. They were his enemies, and he must kill them if he could. Kill them. Kill them. Kill them.

They bore him down the street away from the woods that drew him, and he fought them the whole way. He would be free. He must be.

Then all these mortals would die.

Ian Hall sat wrong way around upon a ladderback chair, his arms folded across its back, his chin upon his arms and watched the three Ghostbusters fussing over Spengler. Having no official headquarters in Nasburg, the three, aided determinedly by the reporter Benedek and Professor MacKensie, had toted the struggling zombie to the library. While Venkman placated the librarian, who looked ready to do anything the team asked, the others bore their captive down into the cellar into a room lined with books, journals, and papers, file cabinets along one wall, and bound him to a chair.

"This is the Spengler collection," Stantz explained. "We were doing research here. We were going to find Peter and Benny and go out to the site of the battle. We know something weird happened there." He turned sad eyes upon Egon. "You know what I think?" he said as he adjusted the device he carried, the PKE meter. "I think the demon heard Egon saying he was a direct descendant of Isaiah, and that's why it zapped him."

Egon growled, "Free me!" in a voice from which all precise diction had vanished. Intelligence had vanished from his eyes, replaced by an animal cunning. Periodically he tested his bonds. It was astounding to note how a few subtle changes could alter his appearance so significantly. They weren't physical changes, per se; he had not grown a neanderthal brow ridge. But his face had fallen into sullen lines, his mouth drawn into a snarl, and his eyes held a strange, inhuman glitter. Shoulders hunched as if his arms would swing loose like an ape's if they were not bound, head thrust forward, he looked ponderous, as if he would shamble down the street like a mummy from the cinema.

Peter entered the room. "Mrs. Quack says she's gonna call for the police to come over to stand guard in case he breaks free," he said. His eyes went to Egon, and at the sight of his hunched posture and glittering eyes, Venkman's shoulders sagged. He gripped Egon's shoulder. "Egon, if you're still in there, we're gonna get you back, and that's a promise from Dr. Venkman."

Egon jerked away from the touch, and Peter yanked his hand away as if he expected it to be bitten off at the wrist. He whirled and said urgently, "Ray..."

"His readings match all the ones we were able to pick up before," Ray said in a mechanical voice as he squinted at the device's tiny screen. "Gosh, did you hear him talking about 'the master'? He's totally controlled. I could see him..." He paused to swallow hard. "I could see him changing."

"We all could, Ray." Winston patted his shoulder. "But we're gonna save him."

"Yeah," said Ray, and squared his shoulders as if to prepare them to bear an

unaccustomed weight. "I detected some readings. It was a form of energy that hit him, that lightning bolt. I recorded it."

"And do you understand it, you boy genius, you?" Peter asked. He slung his arm around Ray's shoulders in a gesture that should have been casual, but wasn't, quite. Comfort, given and received, Ian realized.

"You bet he understands it." The cheering section came, unexpectedly, from Benedek. No, not unexpectedly. He knew the Ghostbusters already, and from the little Ian had heard, had even worn a proton pack on several occasions. The other three Ghostbusters had fired at the entity, but it had been unaffected. Were three proton packs too few to harm a demon? Was it simply too powerful to fall?

"I don't understand it," protested Professor MacKensie in the sort of voice one used when confronted with a contradiction to accepted reality. "What did it do to Egon? He cannot be a zombie."

"Looks like he can," Benedek said, then waved a placating hand at the three Ghostbusters, who glared at him. "I don't like it any more than you do. The Spengster's my bud, too. 'Sides, he's not really a zombie. This isn't a voodoo thing. It's some kind of demon energy, right, Ray?"

"Yeah." Ray turned dials on his gadget. "Really powerful, too. It's a Class 7 but one of the most powerful Class 7's I've ever seen. Three throwers didn't even faze it." He heaved a great sigh. "We usually need four, or the atomic destabilizer and three others, to bust a demon, but I don't think this guy's a physical entity, not if it takes the shape of clouds." Abruptly, he snapped his fingers. "Gosh, yeah. It's like the thing we busted in Mrs. Faversham's attic. It wouldn't materialize, but took other shapes, or took over other shapes. We had to trick it into appearing as itself before we could bust it."

Ian realized the explanation was for him. "In other words," he said, "it merges with clouds, or brings clouds together, and appears as part of them, like a projection? It appeared as clouds in the original incident, as well."

He had the undivided attention of everyone but Egon, who continued to fight against his bonds. "You know what happened then?" Peter cried. "You know how they stopped the demon the first time?"

Ian nodded. "I have a copy of my ancestor's journal." He pulled a packet of folded pages from his inside pocket and laid them on the table. "His writing takes a lot of practice to read, but I'll relate it to you, and you can study it later for additional clues. My ancestor was Captain Dominic Hall, a captain in His Majesty's 64th Regiment of Foot. At the time of the incident, the main body of the regiment was serving in New Jersey, but a detachment was sent north of New York City in response to strange reports filtering through the city and even from Philadelphia. General Clinton believed the colonials had a new plan of attack, and my ancestor with two hundred men was ordered to investigate.

"They came to Nasburg, encountering fleeing colonial militia, who threw down their guns to surrender without hesitation. Securing them in the rear, Captain Hall marched his men onward, and came upon a scene that was enough to terrify all who saw it; a demonic apparition hovering in the gathered clouds overhead, with only five men standing against it. One was Dr. Spengler's ancestor, Isaiah, another his brother

Japhet, and the third was the local schoolmaster, Thomas Laird. The other two were militiamen who had not fled at the sight of the cloud monster. Captain Hall, realizing they confronted a foe of all mankind, put aside the political and military differences of the day and sided with Isaiah and the others."

"They fought an army of zombies?" Ray asked, eyes wide. He glanced over at Egon, and he couldn't have looked more sick if Egon had jumped up and attacked them all.

"They did. The creatures blundered out of the trees, armed with what weapons they had scavenged, swords, muskets, a blunderbuss or two, and even rocks and branches. As the men of the 64th fought the zombies, Isaiah Spengler recited a spell in Latin. He held a huge book, a grimoire." Ian looked around the room, but he saw nothing that could be described as a huge spell book. "He recited the spell banish the demon."

"And won," Jonathan MacKensie offered.

"And won--for then," Ian confirmed. He saw in the professor's eyes the realization that was true, and that he wished it were not. Ian picked up the bound pages and leafed through them. "My ancestor wrote what the demon said as it vanished from sight. 'You may think you have won. You have driven me back with your words and your soldiers, but one day I shall come again. You will be long in the ground when that time comes, and you will have no power to stop me. You have only delayed my coming, for I am immortal and can wait.'"

He put the pages aside. "Through every generation since then, this book has been passed from father to son. In each generation, a Hall has come to Nasburg, to determine if the demon was returning. I first came five years ago, and I made contacts here, instructing them to notify me if any untoward events should occur. I was notified of the zombies two weeks ago, and came immediately."

He looked at the struggling Spengler, who had not heeded any of his words, but who muttered and grumbled to himself, and snarled at anyone he caught looking at him. "I had just reasoned the connection between the Spengler who fought alongside my ancestor, and the Spengler of the Ghostbusters, and had meant today to contact you. Then I encountered Mr. Benedek, and we met Dr. MacKensie and Dr. Venkman, and I knew I had come at the right time." He drew himself up to his full height, and faced the remaining three Ghostbusters. "I am here to volunteer my services in your attempt to bust the demon."

Peter could scarcely keep his eyes off the transformed Egon. He had half-expected the zombies to look like mutants, but Egon hadn't been physically transformed except in the slumping lines of his posture and the sullen glare on his face. His bottom lip thrust forward, his eyes had narrowed, even though he didn't appear to have any problem seeing without his glasses. Maybe he simply didn't care if the world had grown fuzzy.

His voice seemed hoarse and slurred, and references to his master really bugged Peter. The demon was not, and never could be, Egon's master--but Egon

believed he was. He didn't even seem to know the Ghostbusters any more.

All through Ian's story, Ray had taken readings, readings of Egon, readings of the ambient energy levels, readings of Ian himself. Ray's bright good humor had vanished; he was grim and urgent, struggling desperately to find a solution, even on occasion muttering to himself.

Winston hovered near Egon, offering him soft reassurances every now and then. He had muttered something about two hundred men when Ian had offered the number of soldiers of the 64th who had been dispatched to Nasburg. Would it take that many people to defeat the new zombie army? Egon seemed physically stronger than he had been before the demon's lightning bolt had hit him. So Winston hovered, the most muscled of the group, prepared to hold Egon down if necessary.

Peter studied the Englishman who had volunteered to help them. He was shorter than Ray by about an inch, and thinner, probably the same age. He didn't look remotely like a fighter. He was a professor, like Jonathan. But then Peter, Egon and Ray had once been professors, too, and now they fought demons.

They had the experience to do it. What experience did this guy have?

"How do you think you can help us?" Peter asked. He knew he sounded hostile, but as near as he could figure, Ian had already done all he could by producing the information.

Ian stood tall. There was an almost cocky air to him, but Peter, who had started learning to read people at his father's knee, could tell it was whistling in the dark. The Brit knew he was in over his head--but he had still crossed the ocean, determined to take a stand the way his ancestor had. He had courage. Peter had to give him that.

"I'm not sure," he said. "But I know Dominic had sporadic contact with Isaiah as long as they lived. Dominic was invalided out of the army after the Battle of Cowpens in 1781. He walked with a strong limp for the remainder of his life, but remained active in spite of it. He even visited Isaiah on two separate occasions, the last in 1819, and they remained friends all their lives." He looked sadly at Egon. "The connection was broken some years ago, when my father attempted without success to contact the Spenglers of Cleveland."

"Egon's dad was a conventional scientist, and so is Egon's uncle," Ray explained. "They never really approved of Ghostbusting." He stared sadly at Egon. "Gosh, guys, what are we going to do?"

"What do the readings say?" Peter prompted. Ray was smart enough to figure this out. He'd figured out how to take them over to the Netherworld to rescue Egon when Tolay had taken him, after all.

"It's weird. I can't really tell if something has been taken away or something's been added," Ray admitted. "His biorhythms are all wacky, like he...isn't quite human any more. See? This is his normal reading. Now look here." He traced a line on the meter screen. "This is what we should have. And this is what we do."

The second line wiggled all over the place.

Winston leaned over Ray's shoulder to look. "Oh, man, that's not right."

Peter studied Egon, who struggled against his bonds. He wasn't listening, and showed not the slightest reaction to Ray's or Winston's words. Staring into his eyes, Peter sought even the slightest trace of Egon's vast intelligence, his indomitable spirit,

his loyalty and friendship, but detected only hot, angry hatred. When he saw Peter staring at him, Egon snarled, his lips pulled back from his teeth like a mad dog. Did that animal rage smother the real Egon trapped inside, or was this what was left when Egon's own personality had been sucked away?

Benedek leaned closer and studied the screen upside down as if it could tell him things not even Ray could reason. Benny had a vast fund of occult lore from all his years with the Register, but so much of it was apocryphal--or else simply invented. It would be great if he would whip out an answer, but Peter didn't expect it. As for Jonathan, he was still largely a skeptic, and offered no answers.

The Englishman was another matter. He'd evidently been studying this very situation all his life as if it had been handed down as a sacred trust. That didn't qualify him as an expert but, if they were lucky, he might know some source material. Egon always said you couldn't do anything without complete information.

So Peter grabbed Ian's arm and dragged him over to the table. "You've studied all this. What can you do to help? You just volunteered, so I hope that means you've got some answers."

"Answers?" Ian raked his hands through his hair. From its considerable untidiness, the gesture must be a habit. "I don't know if I have answers. But Dominic amassed a vast collection of material on the possibilities from the works of John Dee, Queen Elizabeth the First's court magician, and Nicholas Flamel, the alchemist, to books of witchcraft, and even voodoo lore, and those of my ancestors who displayed an interest added to the collection. This does not appear to match in any way the actual Haitian zombie creation as might be performed by a bokor. The cloud demon we just saw is apparently the same one who appeared to Dominic. We know whatever it did affected Egon. Ray, were you able to record the energy involved?"

"Yeah. It's not like anything I've studied." He raised his eyes from the meter to study Egon, then faced the rest. "Every few minutes, there's a flash of Egon's real biorhythms, and then it's gone again. I've been trying to see if I can detect it in Egon himself by watching him when it happens, and I can't see any traces, but it's so quick there might not be time. It might mean Egon's still in there fighting--I just don't know. If only we had Isaiah's grimoire."

"I don't think it's here." Winston had been searching the room from the moment Ian mentioned the grimoire, but there was nowhere in the room capable of concealing a huge book, unless it lay flat in a file cabinet.

Peter started opening drawers. Yet in his heart he was positive Isaiah would not have left the book behind. If he had, he might have given it to his brother, or possibly Laird, the school teacher. Peter suspected he had carried it with him out to Ohio, and who knew what might have happened to it there? It wasn't like Egon's father and uncle would have valued it. For all Peter knew, it might be locked away in a cabinet in Spengler Labs, donated to a book sale decades ago, or destroyed.

"Didja bring any spell books with you, Ray?" Benny asked. "If not, I know some great ones, and I can have them flown up here within a day. I've got this super expense account..." He waggled his eyebrows at Jonathan.

For a minute, Peter thought the Georgetown professor would explode--Peter knew Benny had charged outrageous things to the Unexplained Phenomena account

like flying people from overseas and buying houses--but then Jonathan looked at Egon, and the protest died. He studied Benny, too, and then said, "Do it. I'll square it with Dr. Moorhouse."

Peter had met Jonathan's department chair. A classy, hard-as-nails woman who was probably near to retirement, she would never have hesitated to face the demon or a zombie army singlehanded. Probably the demon would have hesitated to confront her.

"There are a couple in Ecto," said Ray before Benny could hurry upstairs to call. "I'll go with you, Benny. You come, too, Ian, and we'll look them over. Peter, you and Winston keep an eye on Egon. I better take more readings out there to be sure the demon hasn't returned. The people of Nasburg are gonna be plenty upset, so I'd better try to calm them down."

"We'll keep looking here," Peter said. It wasn't much, but it was all he could think of. Then an idea hit. "Wait, Ray. Could we use a trap to pull the demon energy off Egon? You know, one thrower at his biorhythms and another at the demon's like you did when Watt possessed me."

"I thought of that, but Egon isn't possessed, not in the same way. I don't have two distinct sets of readings or even a sense of two personalities in him," Ray said. "But we could try just opening a trap in front of him and seeing if its suction will draw the energy from Egon."

That was better than sitting here watching Egon do his zombie number. "I'll cover his eyes because we sure can't convince him not to look into the trap," Peter said. He didn't have to ask if Ray thought it would be safe; Ray wouldn't have offered if he believed it could harm Egon. So Peter circled around behind Egon, who swivelled as much as he could to watch Peter with a kind of animal cunning. When Peter curled his hand over Egon's eyes, Egon threw back his head and tried to bite him.

Winston and Benny jumped to help, each grabbing one of Egon's shoulders to hold him in place.

"The trap suction won't hurt any of them?" Jonathan fretted.

"Worried about me, Jack?" Benny asked with a too-bright smile. "Come on, I don't have any PK energy inside to be pulled off. These guys are around traps all the time and haven't been sucked in. Go for it, Ray."

Jonathan opened his mouth, as if he meant to deny concern, but it showed in his eyes as he remained silent. He looked sadly at Egon, but his eyes kept flicking to Benny.

Ray let the trigger pedal fall on the floor before him, then positioned the trap so it was pointed toward Egon. "Don't look directly into the trap, Ian," he cautioned. "It could damage your eyes."

"Got it," the Englishman said and turned his head away.

Holding the trap before him like a catcher's mitt, Ray felt for the trigger pedal with his toe. "Ready?" he cried. "Close your eyes."

Brightness gleamed through his eyelids, and he scrunched his eyes more tightly shut. Egon heaved against the restraints and growled like a grizzly bear.

"Gosh, it's working," Ray gasped. "I can see energy coming out of him."

Peter kept his hand clasped over Egon's eyes, his other hand curved around the

back of Egon's neck, because he was afraid the thrashing might do him an injury. Egon fought with a near-superhuman strength, a stream of archaic curses streaming from his mouth. Peter didn't listen because it hurt to hear that strange, harsh voice instead of Egon's more mellow and reasoned tones. He could hear Jonathan and Ian in the background, calling warnings to hold him down, and Winston muttering something that sounded like a prayer. Good. They could use all the help they could get.

Egon screamed. It was a harsh, tearing sound, but it sounded like the genuine Egon and not the imposed zombie. The sound mutated into a wail of sheer agony, then, without warning, Egon slumped, his body as limp as a strand from a dust mop. The brightness that had burned Peter's eyelids vanished, and he opened his eyes, already helping Winston and Benny to ease Egon into a more comfortable position.

Then Peter saw Egon's face.

He was as white as winter, utterly lax, his eyes open and unblinking with the kind of stare that indicated that the lights were on but no one was at home. For the first instant, while Peter's heart stamped up his throat to his mouth, he couldn't see Egon breathing, then he realized the breaths were so light and slow they were barely detectable.

While a stricken Ray took PKE readings, Winston pressed two fingers against the side of Egon's neck to feel for a pulse. Mouth tight, Winston squeezed his eyes shut as if to give him better concentration and shifted his fingers fractionally, then he nodded once.

"But it's thready," he added. "We need to take him to a hospital right away."

"I'll have Mrs. Quack call it in," Benny said. "I bet they don't have paramedics in a two-bit burg like this." He ran, and Peter saw his face as he tugged open the door. He looked nearly as freaked as the Ghostbusters.

"What did you do, Ray?" Winston asked, not as if to accuse him but in hopes of finding an answer for the sudden collapse.

"I'm checking his biorhythms now," Ray said in a small, miserable voice. Hunched over the meter, his shoulders bowed, he squinted at the screen. "That weird wiggly line is gone. It's just Egon again, but his biorhythms are waaay depressed. We better be ready in case we need to give CPR."

All the Ghostbusters had CPR training, but Egon was breathing and had a heartbeat. Peter feared the trap had sucked out more than just whatever it was the demon had done to him. If so, was there any way to restore it?

"Let's take him upstairs," Winston said. "We can reach a hospital faster in Ecto than paramedics can arrive." He whipped out his Swiss army knife and sliced Egon's bonds.

If not for the readings, Peter might have wondered if Egon had falsified the collapse, but he couldn't have falsified a thready pulse. As soon as Egon was free, Peter helped Winston pick him up, and they settled him into a fireman's carry over Winston's shoulder for the trip up the steep stairs.

Benny met them and helped guide them around the corner, complete with gestures and warnings not to bump his head. He looked grim and not a single smart remark left his mouth. 'Course he and Egon had bonded when the sea monster had

pulled them under the Mississippi a couple of years ago. Even if Egon tended to scorn the *National Register*, he had been the one to tell Ray to contact Benny and keep him in the loop.

But all that faded in the face of the disaster. Egon looked like he was down for the count. They would have to solve this without him, but it was much more than that. *Could* he recover from what the demon had done? The original zombies hadn't.

The demon had turned Egon into a zombie, but the demon had hated Egon because of his ancestor. Maybe he'd given him a double dose. Peter watched Egon's face as he lay sprawled over Winston's shoulder. It was so still it was hard to believe he was even breathing.

If he stopped, would he turn to bones in two days?

Peter snatched the hand that dangled before him and squeezed it with both of his own. "Hang in there, Spengs," he said in a voice that barely rose above a whisper.

"There aren't any paramedics here," Benny said. "Nearest are 20 miles away over at the county seat. Mrs. Quack called the hospital there, and they said we should bring him in Ecto because it will cut the time in half. I told her there was a mobile phone, and we've got a number. Winston, you did some medic stuff in Nam, right? So you can be on the phone to a doctor there."

A pale and shaken Mrs. Quack waved them past. "I called the police chief, and he's waiting to give you an escort," she said. Her eyes fell on Egon's empty face. "Just go. Oh, the poor boy. I'll say a prayer for him. Hurry. But hurry back in case that cloud creature returns once you're gone."

"We will," Peter promised.

Ray drew himself up to his full height. "I better stay here," he decided reluctantly. "We'll need a Ghostbuster here. Benny, you can wear a thrower. You stay, too, and you better have one, too, Ian. Jonny, you go with them."

Mackensie looked at Egon, then turned a narrow-eyed scrutiny on Benedek and nodded.

Peter fell in beside Ray as they raced through the library and down the steps. They had parked Ecto across the street, and the police car was just pulling up in front. "I'll have Jonathan let you know the second we hear anything," he said, and heaved a sigh. "Winston and I will come back as soon as we can."

"I'll have Mrs. Quack and Ian help me look for the grimoire or anything that might have the spell Isaiah used copied in it," Ray promised. He flung open the rear door of Ecto, and helped them settle Egon upon the floor. Ray stared at him, his eyes glittering. "You're gonna be okay, Egon," he vowed fervently. "You're gonna be okay."

He hauled out a spare proton pack and passed it to Ian, who took it, and his face fell as he had to tighten his grip. Mouth tight, he put it on.

"You get used to it," Benny said, and heaved his shoulders to settle Egon's proton pack. "It's like wearing a backpack. Some of those kids at Georgetown where Dr. Jon teaches carry packs that weigh a lot more than this."

Peter ignored them. He caught Ray's eye for a second as he scrambled in and sat beside Egon. "You bet he is, Ray. You drive, Winston. You can get more out of the old girl than I can." He didn't want to relinquish his position beside Egon until he had to, and Winston could use the mobile phone better from the front seat. He grabbed a

jacket and folded it up to place under Egon's head. "You hear me, Egon. We're gonna see you fixed up just fine."

Egon's eyes were open, but he didn't respond, except to blink. Could it be a signal, or was it just an automatic response? "That's right," Peter soothed as Ray closed the rear door on them. "I'm right here. It's gonna be just fine." *Please, let it be just fine.*

Winston jumped behind the wheel and slammed the door, and Jonathan scrambled in beside him. The police chief's siren wailed, and as they took off nearly as fast as the shuttle launch, Ecto's siren came on, weaving its melody through the police car's as if they were playing two separate but clashing tunes. Everybody would hear them coming, all right.

Peter caught up Egon's hand and squeezed it in both his own. "You're gonna be fine, Egon. Come on, talk to Dr. Venkman. Give me a sign here."

Egon stared unseeingly at the roof of Ecto, and unless that was a strange, unreadable sign, he was so totally out of it he wouldn't have noticed Peter if he put on a pink tutu and did a pirouette.

Peter clutched Egon's hand against his chest and felt for the pulse in Egon's neck with his other hand. If Egon's condition changed for the worse, he needed to know it right away.

Sirens howling out their weird counterpoint, they raced for the county seat and the nearest hospital, leaving Ray behind with only Benny and an untested professor to help him figure out how to defeat the demon.

Nobody had ever been able to explain to Peter how he could be in two places at the same time.

Ray watched until Ecto had vanished around a corner, then he hesitated a moment longer listening to the siren. *Gosh, Egon, I hope you'll be okay.* But he didn't have the luxury of standing there doing nothing. "Come on," he said. "There's a lot we have to learn before we confront the demon."

"There's one other thing I forgot to tell you before," Ian said as they plodded up the library steps, two of them laboring under unfamiliar weight. "And I think it may be important."

"Good, tell us now," Ray urged.

"When we're in the Spengler room." Ian looked around at the few staring library patrons, who hovered just far enough away, pretending to be looking at books. "I think this had better be confidential."

Benny nodded, then he swept down on the patrons. "Coming through. Urgent Ghostbuster business. You folks go home and stay inside. What's the matter with you? If there was a tidal wave, would you go down to the beach to watch? Where's your brains? Go on, move."

Expertly, he chivvied them out of the library, then he spoke to Mrs. Mallard. "Sorry I had to chase them away, but there's a demon out there. They'll be safer at home. Maybe you should go, too."

She squared her shoulders, and pushed her glasses into place just like Egon did. "Nonsense, I'm a librarian. I'll come with you and help you with your research."

They exchanged glances, and Ray nodded. Ian hesitated, his forehead wrinkled, then he sighed and nodded.

They regrouped amid the Spengler collection, and Mrs. Quack *tched* and made as if to straighten the strewn papers and journals, then she stopped and held up her hands to indicate she had no intention of interfering.

"Okay, Ian," Ray said. "What didn't you tell us before?"

He looked at the librarian. "Ma'am, what I'm about to say ought not to be spread around the town. I would not have it mentioned now."

"I hate to make promises blindly," the librarian said. "But I realize there is a crisis. Six people came into the library and told me what had happened to Dr. Spengler. Go ahead. I will do nothing to aggravate the crisis." She studied the items on the desk. "While you do that, I will see if I can arrange these in a useful way. Just ignore me, dear, and speak as you will."

While she glanced at each sheet or journal and started stacking them into organized piles, Ian heaved a sigh and began.

"Originally, the militia intended to stand with Isaiah against the zombies," he explained. "Isaiah knew there was a demon, and he had explained that to the soldiers, but none had seen it. They had seen the zombies, although they didn't use that term for them. Some called them animal men, some automatons, and others claimed they were bewitched, and the ones seen shambling through the woods in small groups had not appeared any great threat. The militia was convinced that they could easily mop them up. They were used to guerilla warfare, although they didn't yet call it that, picking off the enemy as they marched in neat straight lines in their bright uniforms. Many of the local militia didn't even wear the buff and blue of the colonial army, but were local folk who gathered in their ordinary clothes to stand against threats to their homes. These folk had been tested a time or two, and had survived, so they had grown overconfident. They hadn't even realized a detachment of the 64th was in the neighborhood.

"So when the demon appeared in the clouds, it was a far greater threat than any of them had envisioned, so they broke and fled. They had not signed on to stand against a creature out of hell, especially since they were sure their muskets would have no effect against it. They were mostly simple farmers and shopkeepers, and every one of them in far over their heads. They ran. Only two found the courage to return."

"They didn't want to be Demon Chow," Benny muttered. "Probably thought Isaiah was a crackpot anyway, and figured a book of spells wouldn't do any good. Not that running away helps. Demons are faster than people."

"They were probably too afraid to reason," Ray said. "Gee, that's really awful. But then, Egon would have held his ground, too. At least Isaiah had his brother with him." He glanced wistfully at the door. His three brothers were farther away by the minute, in an urgent need to take Egon to treatment. Like Isaiah, Ray had only two allies, Benny, who would stand up to any demon going, and Ian, untested, but apparently indomitable--and certainly full of knowledge.

"His brother and his best friend," Ian said. "The schoolmaster, remember?" He smiled rather sadly when Ray and Benny exchanged a look.

"Yeah, somebody who'll face demons with you is the best friend there is," Ray agreed.

Mrs. Quack looked up from her sorting and offered a dotting smile, but didn't comment.

"So what happened that we don't know about?" Benny asked. "We know Isaiah survived and that the zombies were trashed, but we don't know what happened to the militia, just that we found a letter that said they didn't come home. But then they may have returned later--that was written only a few days later, after they'd searched the battlefield."

"No," said Ian, and he paused and gritted his teeth. "They didn't come home. Isaiah explained to Dominic after the battle. When Dominic visited him after the war, he admitted those men never came home."

Benny pounced on him. "Okay, 'fess up. What's the deep, dark secret? Did the demon snatch them when they ran?"

"No." Ian picked up a journal at random from one of the nearest stacks and juggled it from hand to hand. "When they fled, Isaiah did the only thing he could think of to stop them. He cursed them."

Ray jerked. "What do you mean, he cursed them?" he demanded. This was very bad. Egon would hate this.

If he ever had the chance...

"He was pissed off and got on their case," said Benny. "Probably threatened that if they didn't stay and fight, they'd be cursed, right, Ian?"

"Precisely. That if they fled, they would be cast into the outer darkness, or some such mumbo-jumbo, until they found the courage to take a stand. Isaiah told Dominic what he had done after the battle. Isaiah was ashamed. When Dominic returned to the guards he had left around the militia, they reported to him those men had simply vanished. Dominic wrote all of it in his journal. He said Isaiah claimed it made him no better than the demon. That simply because the men fled at an overwhelming threat beyond their ability to comprehend did not mean they were cowards or traitors. At the time, he was desperate and hoped it would drive them to return, but it only fetched two of them. He doubted at the time that his words would have any effect, but apparently the grimoire gave him power. I'm not surprised you haven't found it. I don't know for a fact, but I suspect Isaiah destroyed it before he took his family west. He wouldn't have left it here with Japhet or Thomas Laird. He knew how dangerous it was."

"But he must have known the demon meant to return," argued Ray. "He would have expected it, and knew he would be long gone by then. Wouldn't he have left something for his descendants?"

"He probably did," Benny said. "But who's to say they didn't think he was a crackpot. A couple of generations down the road, the new kids are gonna think great-grampa was a nutcase."

"Even Egon might have," Ray acknowledged with a sigh. "He's always been uncomfortable about his ancestors who dabbled in weird stuff. His dad and his uncle

wouldn't have bought any of this demon stuff, and in some ways, Egon's more like them than he thinks he is. He's more open-minded, but he'll fault anyone who doesn't use the scientific method. He hates spells and curses, even though he's seen them work."

He could imagine Egon in the ER at the hospital, lying white and unresponsive on the examining table while Peter and Winston hovered. They wouldn't be able to do the hover thing very long, though. They'd have to hurry back to deal with the demon. They'd have to leave him there alone--with strangers.

"Anyway," Ray plunged on, pushing his depressing thoughts into the farthest reaches of his mind, "what was the curse about, Ian? I suppose we ought to know."

"Eternal damnation?" Benny hazarded. His tone was glib, but his eyes weren't.

Ian heaved a sigh. "They were bound, unable to return home, until they kept their promise." He realized he was still holding the journal, and passed it to Mrs. Quack, who opened it, read the first few lines, and added it to one of her piles.

"Until they kept their promise?" Benny asked. "Pretty tough requirement. The demon was banished right away, before they could think better of it. Even if they'd been willing to come back, the Redcoats were there, and that probably scared them off, if they were outnumbered."

"It wouldn't have mattered," Ian said. "Dominic saw the greater threat and knew ideological conflicts had to take a back seat."

"Yeah, but the militia didn't know that," Ray said. "Gosh, they were trapped, weren't they? Nothing they could do. Afraid of the demon, held prisoner by the Redcoats, and then the spell worked and it was too late. Those poor guys. Ninety-nine people out of a hundred would have done exactly what they did." He paced around the room. "I can understand why Isaiah did it. He was desperate and hoped it would snap them out of their panic--only it didn't."

"Too bad it worked," Benny said, and Ray could tell he sympathized with the cursed militiamen. "Isaiah couldn't have known it would. I bet he'd never done any spells before that day. Even if he had that book and spent all his spare time reading it--after all, he didn't have any TV to vege out in front of--he probably never had the chance."

"There are simpler and kinder spells," Mrs. Quack said suddenly. "My old granny was a white witch, or so it's told. It was a long time ago, because I'm not exactly a spring chicken myself, and she was already 40 years old when my mother was born. I barely remember her. People would come to her when they had colds or with problems with their gardens, and she'd give them little charms. She knew herbs and would mix up some little packet of something with comfrey to clean cuts or hyssop for the chest. My mother was all for the modern, but I still remember a few of the old remedies, and they work just as well as your prescription cold medications." She broke off her reminiscences. "I don't know if Isaiah was a herbalist. But he studied spells, it's said."

She picked up a stack of loose sheets and rearranged them. "If I were Isaiah," she said without turning her eyes from the papers, "I would have destroyed the grimoire rather than leave it behind--but I would have copied the spell and left it with Japhet."

"You'd think he'd have wanted his descendants to stay here and take the responsibility," Ray said. "Egon sure would."

"We don't know why he left," Benny cut in. "Maybe the nice people of the town found out and decided it was time to ride him out of town on a rail. Maybe he had a choice of going or dressing up in tar and feathers."

"It may be it was too uncomfortable for him to stay," said Ian. He took up another journal and fanned the pages. "No doubt, guilt played a part in it, as he watched children growing up without their fathers and wives waiting for husbands who would never come home. He may have left all kinds of information behind for next time, but he couldn't guard it through all the generations."

"No, he couldn't," Ray said. "I think I'd have wanted to go away, too. Especially if the people of the town wondered if those skeletons were really their missing soldiers."

He shuddered. They had been transformed by the demon and had turned into skeletons in only two days. Was that in store for Egon? He had tried so hard not to think of that, but he couldn't help it. What if it meant they couldn't rescue any of the poor people who had been transformed? They might not even be able to save Egon. *Oh, no...*

"Yeah, not a jolly thought," Benny said. "But he did it. He should have taken the heat. Got a question for you, Rayster. Where do you think those militiamen wound up? Hell?"

"I don't know. I was there once," he said vaguely, trying to think.

"In *hell*?" Ian boggled. "You couldn't have been."

"Well, I wish I hadn't been. We had to cross the River Styx and everything. But those militia guys--they weren't cursed to hell, were they? Ian, do you know the exact words of the spell?"

Ian tossed aside the journal and picked up his own sheaf of notes. "I have it right here. Just a sec." He flipped the pages while Mrs. Quack forgot her sorting and waited, eyes wide, mouth agape. Her bun had sagged sideways, and she thrust up an automatic hand to adjust it as if it were a daily occurrence.

"Here," Ian said. "It was something like this. 'You did not stand your ground. Thus you shall linger, trapped between death and life, until you repent of your cowardice. When you are summoned forth again, you shall come. I bind you to my bloodline. Come you must, for only then shall you be free. Come now, and you will be spared.' Only they didn't come."

"'I bind you to my bloodline?'" Ray echoed. "Oh, gosh. What if that means Egon can summon them to help...?" His voice trailed away. "You know, summon them to fight the zombies this time around. Only... Only Egon can't."

"Betcha the demon knew about the spell. He was there, after all," Benny pointed out. "No wonder he was so hot to trot to zap Igor."

"So it wasn't revenge. It was protection." Ian frowned.

"Yeah, but wait," Benny said. "It wouldn't have to be Egon. The spell said 'bloodline', but it didn't say 'direct descent'. Come on, Mrs. Q. You said the bed-and-breakfast lady was a descendant?"

"Diane?" Ian cried.

"Diane?" Benny arched a suggestive eyebrow. "On a first name basis, are we? What about Mr. Rittenhouse, then? And if there's a Mister, why is the wife related to Egon?"

"Because they were fifth cousins," Mrs. Quack explained. "There used to be a lot of Rittenhouses here, but in the end only those two families remained, and since Diane and Mike were the same age and sat next to each other all through school, they wound up together. Mike died in the Gulf War a few years ago. Operation Desert Storm. Diane started up the bed-and-breakfast after he was gone."

"You mean you expect Diane to summon up a cursed army?" Ian bristled. "She can't do it. She's only a little bit of a thing."

"Well, maybe Egon will be back in time," Ray said. *Please, Egon, be in time.* "But if he isn't, maybe she'll have to."

"Her father is still alive," Mrs. Quack offered. "But he's in a wheelchair. He was in a car accident and is paralyzed from the waist down. He'd probably do it if you asked him to, and be glad to. But he wouldn't be able to dodge fast enough if the demon took pot shots at him."

"No, we can't ask him to do it," Ray said. "That would be awful. I wish Peter or Winston would call."

"Jerry will let me know if there's a phone call," the librarian reassured them. "Let's think about this spell. My old granny would say that maybe those militiamen were in limbo, waiting. Maybe they wouldn't even know any time had passed. But they would come if they were summoned."

"And fight a zombie army?" Ian shuddered. "I always thought Dominic must be the bravest member of our family. He never hesitated, you know. He wrote in his journal that he knew it was his duty, that when he had joined the army, he had vowed he would stand for honor and freedom. In those days, sons of the wealthy could join by purchasing a commission, and that had happened with Dominic, but all his life he had wanted to be a soldier, and he wasn't just a gentleman's son playing war games. He believed in what he did with his heart and soul. I'm a scholar, not a soldier, but I'm his direct descendant, and if you want someone to stand with you, I'll do it, even if my knees are knocking together."

"So you think the militia is going to pop out of thin air when Diane--or better yet, Egon--calls them?" Benny asked. "And how do they do it, just call, 'yoo hoo, militia guys, report for duty'?"

"If the spell is set that a Spengler descendant can summon them, that's what will happen," Ray said. "Gosh. I wonder what will happen to them afterwards? They'll be misplaced in time. They won't just die then, will they? That's so unfair."

"A chance to speak to an actual soldier from the American revolution?" Ian's face lit up. "A historian would practically sell his soul for an opportunity like that." He sobered. "But it would be no thrill for those poor men whose only fault was to flee from a demon. I understand exactly how they felt. I wanted to run myself, and it wasn't even interested in me."

"We'd have to help them," he said. "We need Peter for that. I wish he'd call." He crammed the worry for Egon into the farthest recesses of his mind. "Okay. Here's the deal. We need to track the zombie army. If the demon showed up when it heard Egon

was a descendant of Isaiah, then it could mean it's ready to try his takeover. We need to scout the woods."

"The three of us?" Ian asked doubtfully.

"The three of us armed with nuclear devices," Benny pointed out. "Major power here."

Ian looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Three of them with a spell book didn't work against the demon before."

"They'd work against the zombies," Benny said, but then his face fell. "Guys who didn't ask to be zombies. If we zap them hard enough, they'll die and they'll turn into skeletons right away. Instant Halloween. Jon-boy would be on my case so hard if I started zapping innocent people that I'd probably lose my expense account at G.I."

"Expense account!" Ian cried, then he must have realized Benny didn't mean to sound mercenary; it was just the way he talked.

"We need the militia," Ray said. "We better go find Diane."

"And expose her to the demon?" Ian whirled on Ray, his eyes enormous. "You can't do that."

"Then a great many people might die. The demon plague will spread, and the whole world will turn into zombies who exist to worship the demon, including Diane. Is that what you want, Ian?" Ray hated to sound so mean, but he had to. They couldn't count on Egon showing up in time--or at all--and that hurt so bad he couldn't let himself dwell on it. "Peter and Winston will be back soon, and Jonathan, and we have six throwers if you count the atomic destabilizer." He didn't know what would happen if he fired at the zombies with it, but it might stop them. If nothing else, it might prevent them from being able to hurt anyone--or even to fire weapons if they had them.

Weapons? Now there was a scary thought.

"Maybe we should send for the National Guard," he said, carrying the thought a step further. "After all, in all those great monster movies, the army always shows up."

"Good thought, Ray," Benny said and he withheld sarcasm only because of the crisis. "And they try to zap the monster with howitzers or even the A-bomb, and the monster keeps right on rampaging. I grew up on movies like that. You can't zap zombies with the common cold."

"This isn't *War of the Worlds*," Ray objected. "Let's go talk to Diane. We might not have much time to waste. Mrs. Quack, would you call the National Guard? If there's going to be a fight, we might need backup."

"The only reason that worked is because Isaiah kept reciting his spell during the battle, driving the demon away," Ian argued. "I don't think we need to fight a battle. I think we need to summon the militia instead."

"Let's do both," Ray said. "If there's going to be a major invasion and we only have three throwers right now, we need all the help we can get. Tell them it's the Ghostbusters, Mrs. Quack."

"Yeah, you tell 'em, Mrs. Q," Benny encouraged. "Onward, team. Let's go fight the demon."

Ray had to hand it to Benny. He might be afraid--he'd have to be stupid not to be--but he didn't let it stop him. He'd been challenging the unknown as long as the

Ghostbusters had, and battling with his wits, a quick mouth, and a vast store of arcane knowledge. He'd be out there checking for ghosts with an ectometer stone, and then talking them into dispersing. Even if he couldn't fast-talk a vengeful demon, he was a good ally to have.

As for Ian, he might be more inclined to protect Diane Rittenhouse, but he'd come here at the first sign of trouble, prepared to help. He hadn't fled when he saw the demon in the clouds, either.

Okay. They were all the team Ray had. They would have to do. He squared his shoulders, adjusted his pack, and prepared to march out to face the enemy.

Just as he opened the door, the kid Jerry ran down the stairs. "Dr. Stantz," he cried. "You have a phone call."

Egon. Ray crossed his fingers as he charged up the stairs.

Peter paced. It took twenty-three steps to go from one end of the waiting room to the other, twenty-three back, then twenty-three more. He had lost count of how many times he'd walked it, but Winston had urged him to sit down four times already. When Peter wouldn't stop his restless pacing, Winston gave in and walked beside him, offering nonstop reassurance. Peter didn't think he believed what he was offering, but it sounded good.

Jonathan MacKensie didn't pace. Instead he haunted the nurse's station, fetched coffee, watched the clock, and was up and down out of his chair a dozen times. He would be worried about Egon, of course. He liked Egon. But his thoughts were in Nasburg with his buddy Benedek, wondering what trouble the reporter had found in his absence.

Peter understood that perfectly. Ray, eager, I-love-danger Ray, was there with Benny, who at least knew how to use a thrower, and Ian, who might be a decent guy, but who was pretty much untried. All he had going for him was a slew of knowledge-- Egon would say that was an excellent start, assuming he could say anything at all-- and the fact that he hadn't set off for the next county at a dead run when he saw the demon.

The people of Nasburg had scattered when the demon came and were probably hiding in their basements as if they thought the demon would plow through their town like a tornado, or else they had thrown emergency supplies into their cars and set off for points unknown. That's what ordinary people without throwers tended to do.

Ignoring the fact that Jonathan had done so only fifteen minutes earlier, Winston volunteered for a coffee run. He patted Peter's shoulder, muttered, "Hang in there. Egon's tough," and set off for the nearest vending machine.

Peter watched him till he was out of sight, then he took a few more urgent steps. The doctor didn't come, and the nurse at the station studiously avoided Peter's eye. Abruptly, he stilled his pacing and slammed his fists against the wall. He was thinking about the people of Nasburg so he wouldn't have to think about Egon, in there with no fewer than four doctors, all of them trying to figure out what the heck was wrong with him.

Egon hadn't been conscious once the whole time.

Peter had heard them talking about electrolytes, and figured that was sure to be mentioned. Being brushed with a thrower at low power tended to mess up a guy's electrolytes, and every one of the guys had dealt with that at one time or another, but it sure wasn't fatal. Usually, if they were stunned, they woke up fast feeling crummy but alert. They didn't just lie there like an empty skin.

Peter shuddered. Egon's eyes had been open on the way to the hospital, and Peter had closed them because the empty, mindless stare had freaked him out, but then they would open again. No matter how hard Peter looked, he couldn't see Egon looking back.

It hadn't stopped him from talking to Egon the whole time, with brief pauses to report pulse and respiration to Winston, who had relayed the information to the doctor waiting for them. "Come on, Egon," Peter had muttered. "Give me a sign here." But Egon hadn't.

"Come and sit down, Peter." It was Jonathan MacKensie, his voice gentle and soothing. "You'll wear a path in the floor."

"It's not my stupid floor," Peter snarled, then he caught himself. "Sorry. I just can't relax, y'know."

"I do know," Jonathan replied. "You would rather it was you lying in there."

That was so on the money that Peter took a closer look at Jonathan. "You've been through this, too?"

"Oh, yes. We were in a car accident once, Benedek and I. His heart stopped and they had to use the paddles. I heard them say they were losing him. I know exactly how you feel. It's not easy, is it?"

"What's not easy?" Peter asked, even though he knew nothing was easy.

"Friendship," Jonathan said simply. "I never thought I'd accept Benny as anything but a shortcut through the unexplained phenomena Dr. Moorhouse wanted me to research. I wanted to return to my own work, and Benny seemed the easiest way to do it. I thought him such a charlatan that Dr. Moorhouse would see the whole field was, er, crap, and would close the department entirely. But...but it isn't crap, although some of it is false, scams, misunderstandings, or misinterpretations. And Benny...well, he's stood with me through things most people would flee like the militia did in 1778. I know you're torn because you can't help worrying about Ray, any more than I can help worrying about Benedek, already under the demon's eye."

"Yeah, you called it," Peter said. "I want to be in two places at once, but I'm not leaving here until I find out about Egon." His fists clenched. "Unless I have to," he muttered under his breath. If Ray needed him, if the people of Nasburg had to be protected, then there would be no choice. Egon was where he could be cared for. Peter would have to leave.

If he left and then Egon died...

"They said he was stable," Jonathan reminded him as if he had suddenly been gifted with ESP.

"But if he's in a coma..." Peter's voice trailed off. Sometimes people lingered in comas for years and years, and when they woke up, their minds were affected. Egon, who valued his mind so greatly...

Jonathan caught him by the shoulders. "You have to trust him," he said. "He's strong. You know he is. He's a fighter."

"I know," Peter said. "But here's the thing. I have an obligation. People in Nasburg are in danger, and it's gonna spread unless we stop it. I've got *no right* to stay here waiting for news. Winston and I ought to be in Ecto right now, racing back to stand with Ray against the demon. But I keep thinking if I wait just a few more minutes..."

"I could stay," Jonathan volunteered. "I don't know how to use a particle thrower. I'd be more use to you here, and if you need someone to use the sixth thrower, maybe there'd be someone in Nasburg, a police officer, perhaps, who could wear it as effectively as I could."

Peter saw the desolation in Jonathan's eyes and realized how hard it must have been for him to offer when he was as worried about Benny as Peter was about Ray. If they didn't hear anything soon, he and Winston would have to take Jonathan up on it.

"Ten more minutes," he said and as soon as he spoke the words he wanted to take them back. How could he give Egon only ten more minutes?

How could he leave Ray without someone to back him even that much longer?

"Perhaps we will hear something by then," Jonathan said soothingly. "Come and sit down. I haven't heard any signs of crisis in that direction."

Peter hadn't either. He'd been scared to death there'd be a code blue or whatever it was, and that a medical team would rush a crash cart to Egon's bedside, but that hadn't happened. Maybe no news really was good news.

He let Jonathan steer him to a chair--why were all waiting room chairs universally uncomfortable?--and gesture Winston over when he returned with three cups of coffee.

"Good, you made him sit down," Winston said with a crooked grin. "Here you go, Pete. I can't guarantee it's good, but it's hot." He passed the steaming Styrofoam cup to Peter, who curled his hands around it, grateful for the warmth, although the waiting room was, if anything, too hot.

Jonathan accepted his cup, and blew on it.

Winston sat down beside Peter. "You know we've gotta head back to Nasburg, bro."

Peter nodded. "Yeah. I told Jonathan just now we'd give it ten more minutes. We can't leave Ray hanging out to dry." He sipped the coffee. Gaaah. It was strong enough to fry his throat. Maybe that was what he needed.

"We'll give them the mobile number. And Benny has a cell phone. I don't know if he can get reception in Nasburg, but there's a chance."

"No, I don't think he can," Jonathan replied. "He was complaining about it. But they have the library phone number."

That was when Peter saw a doctor approaching them, and he stiffened, nearly dropping the coffee cup. It was Dr. Ringgold, the one who had spoken with them when he had thrust Peter and Winston from the examining room. There was no distress on his face, and he smiled when he saw them, but Peter wasn't ready to accept that as a hopeful sign. He lunged to his feet, and hot coffee sloshed over his fingers, but he ignored it. "Doctor?"

"Well, gentlemen, I have good news. Dr. Spengler has regained consciousness."

"He's *awake*?" Peter cried. "Is he okay?"

"He's weak yet, although alert and coherent. His system sustained a shock, and I would prefer to keep him here overnight, although he is already claiming he will sign himself out AMA, that there is an urgent crisis. I do not believe he will possess the strength to battle ghosts wearing one of your heavy packs for at least a day. His system was depressed by the, er, demonic attack." When Peter opened his mouth to protest, he held up both hands. "Don't lambaste me for my skepticism, Dr. Venkman. We know of the Ghostbusters, of course. Who doesn't? But we don't have any practical experience of it around here, and many of us tend to doubt. Yet one of my team is a Ghostbuster aficionado, and he insists it's all true."

"Can we see him?" Peter demanded. He pulled the PKE meter out of his jumpsuit pocket. "He'll want to take readings of himself. We need to be certain there's no negative energy still lurking." He was already walking in that direction, and the doctor didn't try to stop him. Winston fell in at Peter's side, and Jonathan, who didn't really have a claim to see Egon, trailed behind.

"Yes, you can see him. I really would prefer to keep him overnight, and, failing that, at least a few more hours so we can monitor him. See if you can talk sense to him."

Peter was prepared to do just that, but when he walked into the examining room and saw Egon sitting up on the examining table in a hospital gown, wearing his glasses, his legs hanging over the side, a lot more color in his face, and his mouth set in a line of fierce determination, all Peter's good intentions vanished in his relief.

"Egon!" He lunged at his friend, hugged him fiercely, ruffled his hair, and finished his demonstration by pushing his sliding glasses into place.

"Hello, Peter," Egon said, and smiled. "Winston. Dr. MacKensie," he added with a nod at Jonathan who lurked in the doorway. "I'm perfectly well. I can rest on the drive to Nasburg, but we cannot leave Raymond unprotected. Give me the meter, Peter."

"Hey, he's even rhyming. He must be okay." Winston grasped Egon's shoulders and squeezed. "Looking good, my man."

"Guys, I must return to Nasburg," Egon insisted. "Doctor, you do not understand, but we face a great peril. I may not have the strength yet to fight, wearing my proton pack, but my knowledge will be vital. I am quite prepared to sign myself out against medical advice, and I give you my word that, should we survive this threat, I will return and place myself once again in your care."

Peter hated the 'should we survive' part, but he could see in Egon's eyes that level of stubborn resolve none of them had ever been able to alter. Egon had taken on Isaiah's burden, and believed it his own to resolve. If he could not be present to halt the demon's approach, he would always believe he had failed.

'Course the whole world might be destroyed, too, and Peter was sure that was beyond Egon's ability to save. But he didn't want his best friend believing himself to blame.

"We'll look out for him, Doctor," he said. "I won't let him put on his proton pack-well, unless the whole world's gonna crash and burn if he doesn't."

The doctor flinched, his eyes full of shock. "You can't seriously mean that could happen?"

Egon slid down off the table and looked around for his clothes. "When a major demon enters into the equation, yes, it is possible. We have faced demons before from the time of Gozer on down. It's what we do. It's what we're sworn to do. It's what I must do."

He looked pretty shaky on his stockinged feet, but his face was resolute. Peter had to give it to Egon. He was a great guy, brave and stubborn and determined. "What we must do, Egon," he said. "It's why we're Ghostbusters."

"Amen," Winston cried fervently. "We'll make him lie down the whole way, Doc. I was a medic in Nam. I'll keep my eye on him."

The doctor studied the three, and he must have seen their united front, because he heaved a great sigh. "Well, it's against my medical judgment, but under the circumstances, I'll have to let you go. I want you to return when all this is over. I may even hospitalize you overnight--which is what I'd rather do. But you told me this was caused by a demon attack. If you and the other Ghostbusters can prevent further damage, then you must. I don't want whole wards full of people in your condition."

Or dead... He didn't say it, but he might as well have. Peter's stomach tightened. That was what this was all about. Egon might have been spared zombiehood but he would return to Nasburg wearing an imaginary bull's-eye. The demon knew him for a descendant of Isaiah, after all. What was to stop it attacking Egon all over again?

The rest of us, Peter thought. We'll have to protect him. But can we fight it if we're protecting him? This is fate-of-the-world stuff. We might not come out of it. We might all die.

The rest of them had to keep the demon so busy he wouldn't have a second to spare for zapping Egon.

And if Egon even guessed what Peter was thinking, he'd come down on him with hobnail boots. *It's not about protecting me, Peter, he would say. It's about protecting the world.*

Yeah, but the world needed Egon. They needed his brilliance, his courage, his resolution, his grim determination never to yield.

Egon looked Peter full in the eye, and Peter knew he had recognized every thought Peter had, and understood them fully. One eyebrow lifted, Spock-fashion. "Peter?" he said.

In that one word, Peter heard a world of questions, but the main one was the one that always Egon asked, although never in so many words. *I plan to risk us all for the sake of humanity, Peter. Will you stand at my side?*

When he put it like that, there was only one possible answer. They'd done this too many times not to understand. "Yeah," said Peter, and passed Egon his shirt. "Let's get this show on the road."

Jonathan looked at them as if he realized there had been more going on than he knew about, glanced at Winston, who wore a resigned and understanding grin, and he got it. "I'm with you, too," he said. "I never thought I'd have to battle demons."

"Benny would say you should ask Dr. Moorhouse for hazard pay," said Winston

with a huge grin. "You can bet *he* will. It'll go on his expense account."

Jonathan grimaced, then he laughed aloud. "Of course it will," he said.

Ignoring the byplay, Egon threw on his clothes, then sat down to pull on his boots. They had to hurry.

Ray returned to the Spengler room, his face alight with a huge grin. "He's okay," he cried. "Egon's okay. The guys are bringing him back."

"He's okay?" Ian echoed, staring. How could he be well enough to return after that massive attack? Did that mean if any of the rest of them were zapped, they would survive it, too? Or had it been what Ray had done with the ghost trap that had made Egon's survival possible?

All his life, Ian had believed Dominic's duty had been passed down to him. He hadn't known if the demon would return in his lifetime, but in spite of everything else he'd ever done, his history studies, his classes, his research, he had also studied the paranormal, demonology, occult lore. He had always rather hoped the demon would never return, or that it would return sometime in the distant future. But return it had, and he owed it to Dominic, who had faced it so bravely without a moment's hesitation, to live up to his courage. Firing the thrower would not be easy; he'd seen how it pulled when the other three had fired at the demon, and how the demon had been untouched, even amused, by the attack.

The combination of soldiers and spells had done the trick last time. If speculations were correct, Egon would be able to summon up the fled militia, who had been bound by yet another spell. Egon's summons would free them from a strange and inconceivable limbo, thus sparing Diane Rittenhouse the necessity of risking herself.

Diane... Ian had not yet let himself think of Diane in any personal way, but when it had been suggested she come out and summon the banished army, his stomach had tightened in automatic protest. Every evening since his arrival, the two of them had gathered together after dinner and talked. He knew she was a Spengler descendant, from Japhet's line, and he knew about Mike, who had fallen in a distant desert halfway around the world. She knew of Catherine, who had not been his wife, but who would have been if cancer hadn't taken her so very quickly. He and Diane had shared hopes and dreams, slowly coming to know each other, speaking no words of commitment, yet a part of him had longed for it.

Knowing the zombies proliferated, that a number of them had been seen in the area, that the time was coming, he had not dared speak of a future together, but even after so short a time, he knew he wanted it. Until the demon came and the Ghostbusters defeated it, there could be no possible resolution of his hopes. How could one's future change in such a brief span?

Yet that was a foolish question. No matter how, it *had* happened, and he'd known it completely and utterly when he realized Ray would expect Diane to summon the banished militiamen from the realm of ghosts, a target for the same demon that had struck Egon down.

But now Egon was returning, and unless the demon struck before he arrived, Diane was safe.

At least, as safe as anyone could be with a threat of annihilation or global domination hanging over one's head.

Benny gave a cry of triumph and grabbed Ray's shoulders. "Great news, Stanzo." He shifted the proton pack on his shoulders. "We better find that spell. We're gonna need it."

Ray's face grew thoughtful. "I don't know if we have to have the exact one, Benny. Maybe any powerful banishing spell would do it. I've got a couple of books I can look.... Oh. They're in Ecto. I hope the guys hurry. Maybe we ought to go out and take readings."

"Can you take them from inside, dear?" asked Mrs. Quack. "Much better than going out there where it can cast lightning down on you." She hadn't gone to summon the National Guard. Maybe she still should.

"Better from outside, but we can do it just inside the door," Ray said. "Except then the demon might attack the library, and we wouldn't want that. No, we'll go outside. I think we ought to issue a warning to the town, too."

"I can do that," Benny volunteered. He didn't look the least bit uneasy about running around out there where demons threw lightning bolts. "I know just what to say."

"What, 'run for your lives, a demon is coming?'" Ian asked. "How will that help?"

"They already know a demon is coming, and if half the folks in town haven't already hopped in their cars and taken off for points unknown, I'll eat my hat. Not that I've got a hat. I'll do it like the Weather Channel. You know, the 'seek shelter immediately' game."

"They can go to their basements," Ray agreed. "We have to keep them off the streets. The last thing we need is for the demon to turn them into zombies. I'm sure there's a big enough army already, and we don't know if the militia will really come or not. For all we knew, they gradually crept back later and fit in, or some of them joined other militia units and died in distant battles." He heaved a sigh. "We just don't know, and we might not find out until Egon summons them. We don't even know if he needs to use certain words or if summoning them in Isaiah's name will be enough."

For someone Ian had pegged as an eternal optimist, Ray could certainly offer up a healthy dose of doom and gloom. Maybe it was just that he was the only Ghostbuster here, and the weight of that burden was too heavy for him to be optimistic.

"Come on," Benny urged. "Let's go do a Paul Revere. 'The zombies are coming, the zombies are coming!'"

Ian knew enough of the American War of Independence to understand that. "I don't believe they'll rouse to a call to arms, Benny."

"Then we better hope Winston sets a new land speed record," the journalist replied.

Leaving Mrs. Quack to continue the research, Ray led the way up the stairs, his thrower drawn. "We better take a look, anyway. It doesn't help anybody if we hide in the basement, and I know the books in Ecto. I can find spells in there that might

work. After all, I don't think Isaiah bound the demon to respond to only one particular spell."

They reached the upper floor to find the brave Jerry holding down the fort, an uneasy look on his face, and a broom laid across the desk in front of him like a weapon. Relief flashed across his face at the sight of them. "Have you figured out how to stop that thing?" he demanded.

"We have some ideas," Ray said. A look around proved no library patrons remained. "You go downstairs to the Spengler collection and help Mrs. Mallard. She'll tell you what to look for. Lock the door after us and don't open it unless one of us or the other Ghostbusters comes to tell you it's safe."

Jerry jumped up and grabbed the broom. "I'll help her," he agreed. "Uh, what am I supposed to help her do?"

"She'll tell you," Benny said. "Reference work. You just might help save the day."

Jerry's spine straightened. "I always knew being a librarian was important," he said.

Ray smiled after him, then he sobered and stalked to the door with Jerry trailing behind to lock it after them.

Nasburg reminded Ian of those mysterious towns that people came upon to discover all had vanished, hot meals partly eaten on the tables, cars idling, not yet out of gas, and doors standing ajar. Those tales were clearly apocryphal, but Ian found himself wondering if those stories, and perhaps others such as the *Marie Celeste*, were the result of demons. Three weeks ago, he would have laughed such an idea to scorn, even knowing what he did of Isaiah and Dominic long ago. Now he hesitated on the library steps looking for the slightest trace of inhabitants. Birds flew, and a fly hovered in front of his face for a second before he waved it away. But no one walked along the streets, no cars moved. Overhead, the clouds lowered, black and ominous but free of the demonic face, and there was no trace of a breeze.

Benedek looked around and intoned in a portentous voice, "Then the rains came."

Ray poked him. "They're watching us," he said. "Look at the windows."

They all stared. Here and there, a curtain twitched. Ian saw faces peering out at them. A few doors opened.

Benny bounded down the steps and into the middle of the street. "Okay, people, listen up!" he bellowed. "We don't know what's gonna happen, but it could be dangerous. We're asking you to go down to your basements and wait. You all saw what the demon was capable of, and we don't need any more zombies. Or people passed out if we use the traps to rescue zombies. You saw Dr. Spengler. He's gonna be okay, but if we're battling the zombies in the woods, we won't be able to rescue any of you. So stay put, folks. We'll let you know when it's safe to come out."

He ran up and down the street. "What's the matter with you people? Go to your basements now." A gesture with the thrower reinforced his words. The people at the windows vanished.

Ray watched them disappear. "It won't guarantee their safety," he said when Benny joined them. "The demon can smash the whole town."

"But it won't," Ian disagreed. "It needs followers. That's where its power comes from. That's what Isaiah figured out. The demon spent a lot of it creating the followers, but once there are a good bunch of them, it was reciprocal. We don't know how many it has now, or why they came here, but now there are...how many, Ray?"

"We probably haven't heard of everybody, but I would guess at least two hundred zombies," Ray said, his eyes enormous. "I don't think Isaiah had recruited that many militiamen."

"No, but Isaiah didn't have a particle thrower," Benny reminded him. "This is the 1990's. High-tech all the way. All we have to do is hold out until the guys come back, and you'll have the militia as reinforcements."

"We hope," Ray said in a small voice. "We don't *know* that will happen." He brightened. "But I bet it will. That's what Isaiah's curse was all about. Making those people fight the demon. When he cursed them, he didn't know the demon would return, but he must have suspected his banishing spell wouldn't last for all time. He was protecting the future."

"He was pissed off and taking it out on them," Benny said. "But they did break their oaths. We'll have to see what happens next."

What happened next horrified Ian. Down the street, a door opened and someone emerged. God, it was Diane.

"No, stay inside," Ray called. "It's not safe out here."

Diane gave no ground. Head held high, shoulders squared, she marched to meet them. Clad in blue jeans and a blue blouse exactly the same color as her eyes, she came up to them and halted.

"Gosh," said Ray, staring at her. "You look a little bit like Egon."

"Good thing it's only a little bit," Benny muttered irreverently.

It truly wasn't much of a resemblance. Diane's face was long, but not as long as Egon's, and her chin was less prominent. She did have the same nose and her eyes were set the same, but apart from that and from the white-blond hair, no one would have ever thought of them as being distant kin. A lot of generations of Rittenhouse in there, too, muted the Spengler genes.

"Egon and I are distant cousins," Diane said. "I'm Diane Rittenhouse. I know you're Ray Stantz, and you're Mr. Benedek, the reporter. Ian, there's a story in my family that says one day a Spengler descendant will have to face the demon. I don't know what it did to Egon, but was it because Egon was a direct descendant of Isaiah Spengler?"

"We think so," Ray said. "So don't say anything more about descent. It might be able to hear us."

She darted an involuntary glance skyward. "I don't know if it would even work with me, since I'm from Japhet's line. We haven't been Spenglers for nearly two-hundred years."

"Egon's okay," Ray told her. "He's on his way back now. He's probably a little shaky, but he'll be all right. We know how to stop the zombies, but the thing is, it's a one-at-a-time process, and I don't think the demon will give us the time to do it, even if we could save them before they'd overwhelm us. Do you know about...the curse?"

She bobbed her head. "The word passed down through the generations. Mike

and I were fifth cousins, and we used to talk about it sometimes, whether or not either one of us would be able to summon the militia. He always hoped that if it happened, he'd be the one. He was an adventurer at heart." Her eyes saddened, then she swallowed and put aside her memories. "Egon isn't here. Does that mean I'll need to do it?"

Benny took her by the shoulders. "Only if the zombies show up before Egon does."

The four of them looked around nervously. Ray took a reading with his meter, and his face fell.

"What, Ray?" Benny prompted.

"There's a huge power buildup. I think they might be coming. It's a lot stronger than before." He turned slowly, staring at the meter screen, then pointed off to the west.

Ian knew the land was forested there, and that the battlefield was in that direction because he'd checked it once he arrived, and had visited the site.

"Will there be time for our buds to get here?" Benny juggled the particle thrower he held from hand to hand.

"I don't know." Ray squinted at the meter, adjusted the dials, and lifted his head in a listening attitude. "It's not residuals I'm getting, and it's not the direct presence of a demon, but the ambient PK has really intensified. It's what I'd expect if there were a lot of the zombies close by."

"Any way you can modify your trap to suck off all that demon energy, Stanzo?" Benny asked.

"There might be if I had a whole bunch of traps, but even so, it would need to be at close range, and I think the demon would probably interfere. We'd have to link all the traps through a power source, like a back-up generator, and set them to trigger from a central location. The traps aren't really designed to pull energy off living people." He frowned at the meter as if it were his enemy. "I had to modify it to make it work on Egon. There wasn't time to fine-tune it." He grimaced.

"I know what settings would work best. We always bring a lot of traps when we travel. Besides the ones attached to the packs, there are a dozen more in Ecto. Mine still has the zombie energy in it, but I think there wouldn't be any problem with releasing it."

"Whoa, Tex. Maybe it would go around hunting for a new victim," Benny warned him.

"I won't let it go unless I'm sure that won't happen," Ray assured him. "Mrs. Rittenhouse, you said you'd wondered if you would ever need to summon the cursed militia. Did you ever see anything in a journal or letter that gave you instructions how?"

"No. It was passed down by word of mouth. Which, of course, means it could be utterly jumbled, like that game kids play, whispering something to everybody in a circle, and at the end it's nothing like what was originally said." She offered up a doubtful smile. "Mike and I decided if it ever came to us, we would evoke Isaiah's name and be very, very sincere. We were so earnest about it." At that, she gave a shuddering breath. "When his Guard unit was deployed to the Middle-east, he said

that if he didn't come back, I should call the Ghostbusters. But by the time it all happened, you were already here."

"Diane and I talked about calling you, before you came," Ian admitted. "But even though there'd been a zombie sighting or two, we hadn't called yet. Maybe if we'd done it sooner..."

"We decided yesterday that we had to call today," Diane explained. "But by then you were already here."

"And in time," Ray said. "I don't think anything could have happened sooner anyway, and it was only today we could really track the readings." He glanced up at the sky.

The day was beginning to wind down. It wasn't yet time for dinner, but if Ian had been home, he'd have begun thinking about tea. He couldn't think about it now. Instead he worried about how to protect Diane if the zombies came. Could she really summon the cursed militia? If she did, would they defeat the zombies and then turn on her as a descendant of the man who had cursed them so long ago?

"Listen!" Ray jerked up a hand for silence. "Do you hear that?"

Benny tilted his head in a listening attitude. "Hear what?" he demanded. "The march of the zombies?"

Ian didn't hear anything except the wind that had suddenly picked up. Was that what Ray had meant? Or could he hear the distant approach of zombies? No, there was another noise cutting through the sound, a distant wail.

"It's Ecto!" Ray cried, his face alight. "The guys are coming!" He shot a nervous glance at the sky to be certain the demon hadn't heard him. If it had, it did nothing. Would it attack Egon again?

Diane's face turned very white. Ian knew precisely what she was thinking.

"No," he said. "Don't do it, Diane. Don't make yourself a target."

"They need Egon, more than they need me," she argued, and she thrust out her chin.

In that moment, Ian saw a stronger resemblance to Egon than he had seen yet. She was going to do it. She was going to summon the militia.

Ray must have seen it, too, because he shook his head. "No, Diane. Don't. We're not ready. It has to be when the zombies are actually coming, or there's no point."

She studied him suspiciously but then, to Ian's relief, she saw the sense of the argument. "All right, but I'm willing."

"I know you are," said Ray, and smiled at her. "I think you're great, but this isn't the time." He checked the meter. It was beeping brighter every minute. "I think we have to go to the battlefield. The demon will probably want to appear at the same place as before, and that's why all the zombies have been coming here."

The wail of Ecto's siren grew louder, and a moment later, the converted hearse turned into the main street and bore down on them like a juggernaut. Ian and Diane stepped to one side, but Ray and Benny, more used to Ghostbusting, didn't move, and at the last minute, Winston, behind the wheel, screeched to a stop. Ian saw Egon sitting up in the rear. They must have urged him to rest all the way here.

"Egon!" crowed Ray and raced around to help him out of the car. "Gosh, you

look *great*."

"Hello, Ray." Egon appropriated the meter from Ray and studied it. "The time is fast approaching," he said, smiling a bit when Ray energetically slapped him on the back.

"Not so hard, Ray, you'll knock him over," Peter said, joining them. His eyes fell upon the meter, and his mouth tightened. "That looks *bad*," he said. "Is it time?"

Egon nodded. "We must go to the site. Ian, do you know its actual location?"

"Yes, I do, and before you ask, we can drive most of the way there."

"Then get in." Egon paused and looked at Diane. "You, I presume, are Mrs. Rittenhouse. You look very much like my great-aunt Esther--at least in her younger photos."

"Diane," she said. "I was going to summon the militia if you didn't come."

"Summon the militia?" Egon echoed, his eyes widening. Peter and Winston exclaimed.

"The cursed militia, you know," Benny said. "The ones that will show up and fight if you call them."

"Yeah, I told Peter on the phone," Ray said. "Peter, didn't you tell him?"

Peter stared at him. "Well, I was gonna," Peter said. "But he slept the whole way--he needed it," Peter justified himself. "Tell him, Ray."

So Ray, Benedek, and Ian explained, singly and in chorus, while Diane admitted she had been prepared to summon the militia if Egon hadn't arrived in time. While they talked, Winston urged everyone, including Diane, who would not be sent away, into Ecto, and climbed behind the wheel. Ray pounced on a couple of books stowed in the back and flipped pages, in search of spells. While Diane and Ian gave directions, he drove them out along a country road to the nearest point to the battle site.

The meter went berserk all the way.

Summoning a ghostly militia had not been Egon's plan when he had awakened that morning for the drive to Nasburg. Now, as the afternoon approached evening, he pondered the situation. Why had there been no information handed down to him as it had to Ian and to Diane? Ian's family hadn't even been scientists or dabblers in the occult until the Battle of Nasburg.

But Egon's family *had* been scientists and, in recent years, they had shunned the paranormal, leaving Egon to resurrect an old interest that had cropped out every other generation. Had some earlier skeptic destroyed vital notes, considering Isaiah's tale no more than superstition and ignorance? Egon himself had shared their attitude, to a point. He had insisted there were no charlatans in his family tree, that the Spenglers were scientists. Because of his childhood encounters with the Bogeyman, he had known all his life that there was more to science than his more conventional father and uncle were prepared to accept.

The knowledge had been lost over the years, years in which the disbelievers had allowed the story to fade away into skepticism and scorn. No doubt records remained somewhere, perhaps stored in a vault deep inside Spengler Labs, but Egon

had never seen them. Perhaps his father had wished it that way. He had certainly fought hard enough to turn Egon from his path.

Egon's mouth tightened, but he could do nothing about that now. Fortunately the meter readings had brought them to the correct place, and Dominic's descendants--*and Japhet's*, he thought with a glance at Diane--had done the same. Egon now knew his purpose. It was to summon the aid the demon would never expect, to stand off the zombies.

As for the demon, well, that was a job for the Ghostbusters. That was why they had brought six throwers, one of them the destabilizer. Egon realized he would need to let Ray wear that one, as it was heavier. In spite of what the doctor had said, Egon intended to wear a proton pack. Crossing the streams had brought down Gozer. Even if this demon spread itself through the clouds rather than taking a cohesive form, the crossed streams would surely be enough to stop him.

Stopping the zombie army was another matter.

From everything he had heard and researched, he had determined the demon expended power to create zombies, but once it had created enough of them it could draw reciprocal power from them. Gradually, in a series of attacks, it would kill everyone willing to stand against it, enabling it the leisure to create more, until eventually the demon would cover the whole world with zombies.

Or would have done, if not for Isaiah Spengler and a determined British captain, unlikely allies in the midst of a war that put them on opposite sides.

He was suddenly conscious of Peter watching him.

"Hey, Spengs, you've solved it all, haven't you?"

"Not solved it, Peter. But I have reasoned what we need to do to halt the demon."

Peter grimaced as if he'd been reading Egon's mind. "Cross the streams, right? Even if that would be *bad*?"

"Wow, yeah," Ray exulted, looking up from his book. "We'll have to. It's dangerous," he explained to Ian, Jonathan, Benny, and Mrs. Rittenhouse. "But sometimes it's the only way. It's how we took out Gozer."

"Major explosions," muttered Benny with relish to Jonathan, and elbowed him in the ribs. The two of them sat in the back, Ian beside them. "Blew the top right off an apartment building."

Jonathan rolled his eyes at his friend. "No doubt an apocryphal tale, Benedek."

"No, true," Benny confirmed. "I was there. Saw the whole thing, got the pictures to prove it. Taxis being stomped, giant marshmallow man, everybody freaking."

"We were pretty new to it then," Winston admitted. "It's still dangerous, but sometimes it's the only way."

"If it's the only way, will it also resolve the zombie issue?" Jonathan demanded. "This is madness. The eight of us against a demon army and the demon itself."

"That's where Egon comes in," said Ray with a grin. "I found a couple of spells we can try before we start blowing up the woods, but Egon's gonna summon the militia and see if they'll fight for us."

"What's to stop them taking revenge on Isaiah's descendant?" Benny persisted.

"You're gonna call them in his name, because you're one of his bloodline, Spengster. Maybe they've spent the last two centuries building up a honking big grudge?"

If true, the team would have no defense against it. There was also the possibility that the summoned militia would refuse to fight against the zombies. More basic was the option that the spell itself had not worked, that the militia had simply fled, and had returned later, or had been swept up in the war, had been defeated by Dominic's men afterward, that some of them had returned home without fanfare at a later date, or had died in battle. Until Egon attempted the summoning, he would have no way of knowing. Which meant they might have to use the throwers on the zombies, too. He said so.

"No, Egon, I've got an idea about that," Ray said. He stuck a marker in the page of his book, and set it aside. "We really don't want to kill the zombies. They're just poor schmucks who got zapped when they were out minding their own business. Isaiah and Dominic didn't know any better, but we do. A trap's suction can pull away the demon energy. So I'll link all the spare traps we brought. We'll save as many as we can."

"Well reasoned, Ray," Egon praised him. "We must do that now."

"Pull out all those traps in the container on your left, Benny," Ray urged. Line them up as best you can. Jonathan, see the blue box just behind you? Take out the roll of yellow tubing and unroll it. We need to save time."

Egon left Ray to his directions and spoke to Mrs. Rittenhouse, who sat beside him. "It might be best if you remain in the car. The meters reveal a strong buildup ahead of us that has been growing steadily. We'll leave the key in the ignition, and, if necessary, you can flee."

"I have no intention of fleeing, Dr. Spengler. Egon. My ancestor Japhet stood beside Isaiah, and I won't turn tail like the militia. This was what Mike and I always planned for. I'm not turning tail. I can do like Japhet did, and hold the spell book for Ray. Or if you need someone to manage the traps...."

"I had in mind that Jonathan might do that," Egon said, but the gleam in her eyes suggested he had no right to deny Diane Rittenhouse her part in the coming events. "You are correct, that you have the right to be involved, yet this could go very wrong. We could all die."

"Egon always warns us of that," Peter said from Diane's other side. "Then he goes in with guns blazing--well, throwers, anyway--and saves the day."

"Gee, yeah." Ray left off his directions to the contingent in the rear of Ecto. "It'll be great. We'll protect you, Diane."

"We certainly will," insisted Ian.

"Women are not meek little violets who need to be protected." She grinned suddenly, and Egon realized she had a smile just like his mother's--who was also a Spengler by birth, if a distant cousin--and a determination as strong as Katherine Spengler's. "We're coming up on the place," she concluded. "Winston, if you can turn down that path... Keep this way as far as you can. It's a mile from here."

Only a mile...

Egon checked his meter. The zombies waited ahead. From the readings, there had to be several hundred of them. Was that the site of the demon's greatest power?

Winston turned onto the path. The ride grew rougher, and Winston muttered a mild profanity under his breath at the risk to his beloved Ecto. Ray squinted ahead through the trees, then resumed his instruction, telling Benedek to secure the links of tubing he had cut, and glanced over his shoulder to see Ian and Jonathan passing him the yellow strips.

Benny worked deftly. "Presto chango. The quickness of the hand deceives the eye. You guys do this all the time for fun and games? When we're back to New York, I'll show you how to have a good time, because this isn't one."

"He'll drag you to Boom-Boom's club," Jonathan said sourly.

"Nah, Boom-Boom retired four years ago. Get with the times, Jack."

When they reached a point where a huge branch lay across the road, allowing Ecto to go no farther, they all piled out. Everyone who was to wear one put on his pack, leaving Jonathan and Diane to handle the traps. Ray, of course, grabbed his spell-book and tucked it under one arm before accepting the power device he had cobbled together on the journey that would link all the traps to a central trigger.

Peter looked around, then he tensed. "Whoa, wait a minute, Spengs. You're not supposed to be wearing a pack. Give yours to Jonathan. We promised the doc you wouldn't do anything strenuous."

"No, Peter. I feel better, but even if I did not, I must be involved in the process. Jonathan has never used a thrower. Neither has Ian, and to have two throwers in inexperienced hands will limit us, especially if it is necessary to cross the streams."

Peter grimaced at the very thought. "If you keel over, we'll just step over you, then," he threatened, a promise Egon knew he would never keep. "So just don't do it before you summon the ghost army to the rescue."

"I promise I won't," Egon replied with a quick smile. "Adrenaline will see me through."

"So you'll keel over when we're done," Peter said, but he looked prepared to watch Egon.

They scrambled over the fallen branch and continued on the path. The sun sank lower in the sky; it was fortunate that the month was June to give them more daylight. To do this in full darkness would be much harder.

Winston glanced up at the sky, then he snapped his fingers and darted away. When he returned, he carried the high-power floodlight from Ecto's roof. They'd designed a battery function in case they should need light away from Ecto.

A five minutes' walk brought them to a clearing large enough to host a football field or two. Brush grew here and there, but the trees had drawn back to allow a large clear space. Over in one corner, a shelter house contained a picnic table painted a deep forest green, and a trash basket in need of emptying. A plaque at the opening into the clearing announced, "Nasburg Park," and beneath it, in much smaller letters, "site of the Battle of Nasburg, 1778". No further explanation marked the site, but Ian gave the sign a fond pat.

"Set up at the picnic table," Peter suggested and plopped down an armload of traps, then pretended to pant as he mopped his brow.

Winston attached the floodlight to one of the pillars of the shelter house and turned it on, throwing the clearing into stark relief, and creating dramatic shadows.

Ray's meter gave a persistent squeal, and Peter straightened to instant attention, drew his thrower like an old-west gunfighter in one of his Dewey LaMort books, and jumped to Egon's side.

"I'll do guard duty, Egon. What's happening, Ray?"

The whole party formed up around Egon, and Ian pushed Diane through them so she could stand at his side. Egon checked his meter, then dialed down the sound as it practically went into overload. "This is not good," he said.

"I hate it when you say that," muttered Winston.

"Shut down, Ray," Egon cried, as he turned off his meter. "We don't want it to implode."

"No, we sure don't," Benny said. His thrower was at ready, clutched in a two-handed deathgrip, but he gave no ground.

Ray dumped his inactive meter on the table. "Jonathan, Diane, quick, we need to finish these attachments." He grabbed the nearest cable and secured it to his device. "Keep passing them to me, and try not to tangle them up," he instructed.

As they worked, Egon looked around, then pointed across the clearing. "The zombies are coming from that direction. Peter, Winston, Benny, Ian, line up with me. Ray will join us as soon as he is finished. Diane, please stand right here. Take hold of my hand, if you would."

Ian looked at him sharply, then relaxed. Diane passed her tubing to Jonathan and put out her hand unhesitatingly, her chin thrust out. Yes, there was that stubborn Spengler blood.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"Now?" said Egon, and drew a deep breath, "I summon forth the militia. I want you to repeat what I say. We need not shout. From the readings, I could detect an unfamiliar energy that I have learned to associate with the casting of spells. The time, the place, the demon's presence, and the approaching zombies have created the proper conditions to activate the spell--and, no doubt, my presence here, and yours, were the catalyst needed to enable us to act."

"Wow, Egon," Ray called. "This is so neat. Go for it."

Egon smiled to himself, took a deep breath, then spoke in a level voice, not loud but firm, "I am of the bloodline of Isaiah Spengler."

In precisely the same tone, Diane said, "I am of the bloodline of Japeth Spengler, descended from Mordecai, from Zedekiah."

"In Isaiah's name, I summon those who were banished in this place in 1778."

Diane repeated his words a second after he spoke each, like an echo.

"In Isaiah's name, I, Egon Spengler, summon you to do battle as you were pledged long ago. Come forth now, fulfill your pledge, and you shall be free."

"...you shall be free," Diane concluded, and stared around.

Nothing happened.

Egon raised his voice. "Come forth. The time is now. Come forth and you will be released. Fight for this land and the people of the world, as you swore long ago."

Across the clearing, the first of the zombies emerged from the woods.

"Egon..." Peter gritted out in a warning tone. "Ray, hurry."

"Nearly ready," Ray cried. "Okay, Jonathan. Can you spread these traps out in a

line in front of the guys?"

Jonathan looked at Ray as if he believed the Ghostbuster had gone insane. "Out there?" he ventured doubtfully, and gestured. His shoulders slumped.

"I'll help you, Jonny-boy," Benny volunteered. "But let's hustle. It looks like the attack of the mummies, except they forgot the bandages. Too bad all my voodoo spells won't work on them."

"If you know any, Benedek, feel free to attempt them," Egon urged.

"Right." Benny muttered under his breath as he helped Ray and Jonathan gather up the traps to carry them into position.

If his words affected the zombies, Egon saw no sign of it. They did not run, but merely bunched at the far end of the clearing, then started forward at a slow pace, gait unsteady and ponderous. Egon had feared they would carry weapons, but they did not, other than branches. One of them had what looked like a hand gun, but he was not aiming it at the Ghostbusters and their allies. Perhaps it had been easier for a man to lay his hands on a weapon in the Revolutionary War days.

"Come forth as you were commanded," Egon called.

Overhead, laughter ran across the sky, chasing the tail of a crack of thunder. Clouds seethed and churned. "They will not come," the demon chuckled. "I should not have wasted my energy upon you, Spengler, for you are ineffectual. Useless."

No matter how hard Egon squinted, he could not see the demon. "It refuses to take form," he said under his breath.

"Uh, Egon, I hate to point it out to you," Peter said in an undertone, "but the zombies are coming. And the militia *isn't*. What do we do?"

"We blast them," Egon said, although he hated the idea. The zombies were as innocent of evil as he had been when the demon turned him into one.

Sounds behind him in the trees made his heart sink. They were surrounded.

He whirled, the team with him, then he stopped, gaping openmouthed, for it was not more zombies who emerged from the trees but men in archaic garb, several in the buff and blue uniforms of the colonial army, others in homespun garb, many carrying muskets, some bearing swords. They seemed dazed, confused, but they did not stagger, just approached steadily, staring at the Ghostbusters and their allies, their modern equipment, then looked past them to the approaching zombies. The nearest cast uneasy glances at the sky.

"What has befallen us?" asked the one who must be their leader. He approached cautiously. "We were summoned out of the darkness."

"I summoned you," Egon announced, conscious of Peter at his side, shaking his head, as if to warn Egon that mention of Isaiah might cause the men to grow angry and turn on him, but Egon did not expect that to happen. "You were cursed long ago but, with your return, that curse is lifted. You must stand with us, so that we can end the threat of the demon for all time."

"Is it Satan himself?" one of the men, a stocky fellow with bristling red hair and a Scottish brogue demanded.

"No, it is a lesser demon," Egon replied.

"Yeah, we'll stop him," Ray said eagerly. "That's what we do. We'll trap him so he won't ever come again. But we really need your help to keep the zombies

occupied."

"Zombies?" queried several of the militia. When Ian waved a hand at the approaching horde, one of them said, "The animal men. They came before. This is the same, yet not. The trees are higher, and there was no such structure as that." He was a tall man; in his day, he would have towered over most folk, and did with his army. "We have been gone long years," he said, and heaved a great sigh. "Our families are dead. What year is this?"

"It's 1994," Jonathan said, and Egon could hear the ready sympathy in his voice, mingled with fascination to speak with a man from another century.

"Isaiah Spengler cursed us," the man said. "You," and he bowed his head to Egon, "are surely his kin and the one who summoned us."

"I am."

"I am of his blood, too," Diane said. "I helped."

"Lady." He bowed even deeper to her. "To see a woman garbed as a man... This world is strange to us." He pulled himself together with a sort of dogged courage and drew a deep breath.

Fascinated, Egon realized these men were actually alive and not spirits. All of them were breathing, were solid. The grass curled around their booted feet.

"What will happen to us when we are finished with the automatons?" another man asked. "Will we die? Or will we be stranded here, torn apart from our families?"

Peter stepped in and spoke in his most soothing voice. "We don't know, but we'll find out. There'll be a way to help you if you stay. We won't just hang you out to dry. Uh, abandon you.."

"Uh, hate to mention it, guys," Benny called. "But the zombies are a lot closer."

Ray held up his hand for attention. "If you can stop them without killing them, do. They're ordinary people who were cursed, cursed by the demon. We know how to take the curse off, but it isn't easy, and we can't do it if they overwhelm us by their numbers. When the demon appears, we'll attack it."

He, Jonathan, and Benny filled their arms with traps and started out into the clearing.

The leader bowed his head to them. "I am Josiah Wilder," he said. "And I will serve as bidden. Come, men, to battle. Fight not to kill, but to halt this attack."

Overhead, the clouds opened up to reveal the leering face of the demon. "Fight if you must but I shall triumph," he called.

Members of the militia cried out in panic, but Josiah shouted, "Steady, men. Onward." Then with a wave of the hand to urge them forward, he ran into the open field toward the zombies, passing the three who laid out the traps. After only a second's hesitation, the rest of the militia ran after him.

Egon was relieved to see they were holding their muskets like clubs rather than taking aim at the zombies. Just in time, too. In moments, the zombies could have overwhelmed the Ghostbusters, before they had time to cross the streams. As Ray hurried frantically to line up the traps, and Egon prepared and read off the settings to the other five with throwers, Egon watched the battle, and knew they could never have halted the zombies without the soldiers. They would have been overwhelmed long before they could blast the demon.

A lightning bolt came down into the middle of the field and struck between the two 'armies', causing both zombies and militia to retreat, although the zombies instantly pressed their attack. The militia stared upward superstitiously, mouths agape, then pulled themselves together. Time was running out. They began to fight. The zombies were clumsy, awkward, but they were strong, and Egon saw no less than five of the militia fall, not wounded fatally, but stunned or just upset. Some of them scrambled up again. Shouts and cries from the soldiers rang out over the thunder that ran across the sky, but the zombies fought silently other than wordless grunts.

As the battle raged, Ray checked each of the traps, waving Benny into line, and Jonathan to duck behind him. "Nearly ready, Egon," he called. "Go for it."

"Ready, men," Egon shouted, knowing Ray would have already set his thrower. "Prepare to cross the streams."

The five powered up, Ian lingering a beat before he steadied his thrower. "Come in next, Peter," Egon urged, and Peter brought his thrower next to Egon's.

When he felt the pull of the conjoined streams, Egon realized the doctor had been right, that he was not at full strength, so he forced iron into his legs to keep himself steady.

"Egon, this is nuts," Peter said.

"I know, Peter, but what choice do we have? Winston? Now. Benny, come in from the other side."

Benny brought his particle stream in like a professional, his face split with a delighted grin.

"Done," cried Ray, and raced to join them, drawing and powering his thrower. He took his place beside Ian, and brought his particle stream in to join the others, a huge smile on his face.

"Now, Ian," Egon directed. "The pull will be nearly overwhelming, but hold on."

Ian complied uneasily, his shoulders set, his mouth tight. When he felt the intensity of the pull, his breath went out in a surprised whoosh, but he held steady. His muscles bunched as he fought to hold his ground.

Before them, the militia and the zombies battled. The militia were clearly outnumbered, but they had their minds and it gave them an advantage. Egon hoped it would be enough. They waded in, swinging their muskets like clubs, and Egon saw no less than four of the zombies fall before he gave his attention to his task. At least the militia had broken the zombie charge before they could reach the Ghostbusters, allowing Ray the time needed to lay out the traps. Egon didn't know how long the 18th century men could hold them, but a few more minutes might just be enough.

"Steady, men," he urged his team. "Take aim at the entity."

Their throwers linked by the force of the crossed streams, they aimed in a giant burst at the sky. Complacent, no doubt remembering the futility of the earlier attack, the demon cackled, and a sneer crossed its massive cloud face. "You cannot stop me," it called down. "I have experienced the tickle of your weapons, and it amused me. Do your worst."

"You bet we will," Peter muttered under his breath.

Ray added, "Yeah," and glowered at the demon, his bottom lip outthrust.

"Take that, sucker," Benny challenged.

The crossed stream struck the cloud creature.

With a bellow that echoed louder than the loudest thunder Egon had ever heard, the demon squirmed and whirled. Around it, the clouds eddied so viciously that mini-tornadoes dipped down from them, although not low enough to touch the ground. The battling zombies jerked to an abrupt halt and staggered. The soldiers froze, gripping their muskets, and aimed them into the clouds. Egon doubted their shots would have any effect, even if the antique weapons could reach so high.

Ray yelled, "Don't fire. Just guard the automatons, men."

Several of the soldiers stared at him as if he had lost his mind but, bound by the curse, leveled their muskets at the zombies, who blundered around like wind-up toys that would run until they bumped into an object. In this case, they bumped into each other, and a number of them fell down. Those still standing blinked vaguely and gaped up at the sky like animals reacting to an unnatural stimulus.

"Maintain fire," Egon yelled. His arms ached from the need to hold his thrower steady, and he could feel perspiration trickling down his back and gathering in his armpits. Just standing up and clutching the jerking thrower took every ounce of strength he possessed.

"You hanging in there, Spengs?" Peter asked, his voice barely audible over the crashing of thunder and the demon's roars. It was a wonder they had not been instantly deafened by the cacophony.

"Hanging in there," Egon confirmed breathlessly. "But when this is over, I believe...I will need to...lie down."

"Jonathan, get over here," Peter bellowed. When the anthropologist came, his eyes wide and uneasy, darting glances at Benedek, who looked as if he was having the time of his life, Peter said, "Stand behind Egon and hold him up if you have to. If he goes down, we'll lose the impact."

Jonathan edged up behind Egon and wrapped his arms around Egon's waist. He wasn't as tall as Egon, but it was enough.

"I've got the demon trap," Ray said. "Diane, take it off my pack and throw it out there between us and the others. Be careful they don't come after you."

Ian yelped a protest, but he couldn't leave off what he was doing, so he merely added, "Be careful, love."

She turned in his direction, putting her in the full glare of the floodlight, and her eyes warmed as she looked at the Englishman. She snatched the trap and ran a few steps toward the soldiers who guarded the zombies. The way the transformed men wandered around, the guarding was every bit as effective as herding cats, but several of the soldiers saw Diane and formed a protective line between her and the zombies.

The trap on the ground, Diane carried the trigger cable toward the guys to the limit of its cable, then set it on the ground. "What shall I do now, Ray?"

"When I tell you, stomp on it. But not before."

She gave a brisk nod. "Right."

Jonathan's support enabled Egon to remain upright; he leaned much of his weight against the scholar, who firmed his stance and took it.

"Jonathan, take the meter from my pocket, if you can reach it," Egon directed. "That's right. Turn it on. Yes, that button. Now, hold it up so I can see it." The device

might overload, but he had to take the chance.

Jonathan complied, and Egon studied the readings. They had the demon. Its fierce struggles might cause it to break away if they didn't reel it in soon. A trap should hold it perfectly well. "All right, men, we'll pull it lower," Egon directed.

The demon emitted a roar so loud Egon was not sure his eardrums could survive a repeat performance.

Peter darted a quick, measuring glance his way before he yelled at the demon, "Stop that, or I'll come up there and slap you silly."

Perhaps it was fortunate the cacophony drowned out Peter's threat, for major demons had been known to cast lightning bolts at people who mouthed off to them. But the demon must have only seen that Peter's mouth was moving.

As they worked the throwers lower, Ray bellowing a running commentary to Ian, and also to Benny, who hadn't crossed the streams before, the noise grew continuous. A few more zombies fell down, and some of the soldiers dropped their muskets and clapped their hands over their ears.

The demon clung to the clouds as if they were solid, projecting two huge arms, its taloned fingers separated from the clouds only by shadow and texture, and dug its grip into the clouds, but the clouds tore away under the impact of the throwers. Lower came the demon, howling protests that hurt the ears as much as the explosive thunder. Lightning struck so close to Ian that he jumped and nearly lost control of his thrower.

"Ian!" Diane screamed.

"Stay there, I'm all right," he reassured her.

Her foot hovering over the trigger, she held her ground.

"Steady, steady. Ready. Jonathan, hold up the meter again." When he obeyed, Egon studied the screen. "Just a few more moments. Soldiers, be prepared. Steady. *Now*, Diane! Don't look into the trap."

She slammed her foot against the trigger, and a huge wedge of light shot up to envelop the demon. It jerked as if it had been caught by a gigantic magnet and fought, harder, perhaps, than any other entity they had ever trapped. Egon could feel his hands shaking. Jonathan must have sensed it because he let the meter fall and braced Egon more securely, his breath whistling out.

"Take a dive, Bunky!" Benny yelled at the demon. "Down for the count."

The demon looked at him as it slid into the trap, thrust out with one hand as if it meant to cast fire, then, with a wail of despair, sank into the trap. The doors snapped shut over it, and the only light remaining in the clearing came from the floodlight.

Instantaneously, the storm stopped. The clearing went so silent, Egon swallowed hard, trying to determine if they had all been deafened. But no. Ray's urgent, "Power down!" rang out loud and clear.

Gratefully, Egon shut off his thrower, and everyone else did the same. Then, with aching weariness, Egon said, "Don't let me fall, Jonathan," and surrendered at last to the darkness.

As Egon dropped, the other three Ghostbusters cried his name, but Ray kept his eye on the zombies. They had to deal with the crisis first, and Ray hoped Egon was just exhausted, the way the doctor had said he might be, and that it wasn't a relapse brought about mysteriously by the demon's incarceration. He didn't mention that fear to the others; better if they didn't think it, and Ray honestly didn't believe any link had remained after the earlier trap work. "Peter, check him," he urged, but Peter already knelt beside Egon.

With anxious fingers pressed against the side of Egon's neck to check his pulse, Peter reported, "He's steady, he's breathing. I think he's just exhausted. Diane, can you come over here and monitor him for us? We have to deal with the zombies now."

Winston craned his neck to see. "Hang in there, Egon," he urged. "We shouldn't have let you wear a pack."

"We didn't have a choice, Winston," Peter said tightly as he and Jonathan pulled off Egon's proton pack and arranged him as comfortably as possible on the ground. Jonathan removed his tweed jacket and folded it up to place under Egon's head.

Diane joined them. Sitting cross-legged beside Egon, she took up his hand and checked for a pulse in his wrist. "I've had first-aid training," she said. "CPR, too, but we won't need that. There's a good, strong pulse, and it feels like it's only a little fast. Too much exertion after all he's been through, I think. I'll watch him."

With a grimace at the weight, Jonathan picked up Egon's pack. "Should I put this on? What will happen with the zombies?"

"Go ahead and put it on," Ray decided. "I don't think we'll need it, but let's not take a chance. Look."

He pointed out across the field. A number of the zombies sprawled on the grass, unmoving. Ray could tell the nearest, at least, were breathing. The rest of them, more than a hundred of them, milled about in the middle of the field, loosely surrounded by the smaller number of militia. One of the men in the colonial uniform was calling orders to the men.

"Keep them together. Don't let them break free."

"Don't think they'll run, Cap'n," the redheaded Scot answered. "I don't think they know what to do." He turned to the Ghostbusters. "What *are* they?"

"They're men, just like you," Winston explained. "The, er, devil transformed them. We're going to transform them back. Keep them surrounded, if you can. It will be easier if they're all in one place."

The authority in his voice evoked a response, as if they could sense he'd been a soldier.

Benedek bounded over. "Herding zombies is easy," he said. "You just have to be firm with them. I'm your zombie expert here." Before anyone could halt him, he plunged into the heart of the band of zombies. "Yo, zombies, listen up. If the real you is in there, we're gonna fix things. All you need to do is stand here, and pretty soon there's gonna be a really bright light. Next thing you know, you'll be yourselves again." He caught one by the shoulder, and another. "Sit down, there's a good zombie. Sit. Right here on the ground. Sit."

Six zombies promptly sat down. Benny looked over at the rest of them. "Damn, I'm good," he muttered, then raised his voice. "Sit. Stay."

"You needn't sound like the Westminster Kennel Club, Benedek," Jonathan chided, and Ray could hear in his voice his exasperation with Benedek for the risk he had taken. He shifted his shoulders, clearly uncomfortable with the pack he wore, although he gripped the thrower steadfastly as he waded through the zombies to reach his friend.

"Benny's got it right," Ray cried, and with a worried look at Egon, he plunged into the band of zombies and joined Benny in urging the transformed men to sit. Interesting there were no women, but perhaps the demon had believed women should not serve in the demonic armed forces.

Peter and Winston rushed to help, and Ian, too, and presently all the zombies were sitting. The ones who had collapsed were dragged over to join them. Ray could tell they had no sense of purpose, so anyone with the strongest voice could command them. Good. That way, they'd all be in range of the traps. He kept checking the faces of the zombies for any signs of initiative, but saw only a blank, passive waiting. Ray kept glancing over at Egon, but Diane shook her head to show he had not yet roused.

When all the zombies had been contained, Ray went to the officer in uniform. "We need you and your men to draw back now. As soon as we restore the automatons, we'll find a way to help you, and that's a promise. My name's Ray Stantz, and I want to help you. When Egon wakes up, he might know what to do, too."

"I thank you," said Josiah Wilder, and corralled his men. One of them, Ray saw, had a broken arm, but another soldier had splinted it with two tree branches. Another had sustained a gory head wound and blood had run down his face, but he had tied a cloth around his head and carried on. There seemed to be no graver injuries than those, although a number of the militia looked rather bruised and shaken.

"Come away," Wilder commanded. "I think they mean to use more witchcraft, and we must not be too near, lest it affect us, too." He directed his men over to the shelter house with the picnic table, and they bunched around there, muskets gripped tight in their hands, some of them staring in surprise at the floodlight. The officer had the man with the broken arm sit down at the picnic table, and singled out several others to sit, including the man with the head wound.

Ray and Winston brought over the linked traps and arranged them in a line before the zombies. "Gosh, I hope there are enough traps," Ray muttered.

"Come on, Ray, I bet the demon took a lot of his energy with him into the trap," Peter reassured him. "Anyway, I bet if we let the energy out after we've sucked it off, it won't return to the zombies, and we can use the traps again. What do you think?"

Ray stared. "I bet you're right, Peter. It wouldn't necessarily have any affinity for them now that the demon is trapped."

When everything was in place, Ray gestured his team back, and positioned himself at the link device and its trigger. He could hardly wait. "Everybody ready? Benny, get out of there. We don't want the effect to zap you, too."

Jonathan manhandled him out of the trap circle. "Stay there, Benedek. I don't want the traps sucking out what little brains you have left."

"I made 'em sit, didn't I, Jon-Jon?" Benny challenged. "I didn't notice Mr. Ph.D. figuring it out."

Jonathan grimaced. "Well, you *are* our zombie expert," he said. "Courtesy of that massage oil from the Fitness Factory."

"Massage oil creates zombies?" Ian asked, mouth agape.

"Tell you later," Benny promised with a grin. "Go, Ray."

"Ready?" Ray called. "Remember not to look into the traps." He stomped gleefully on the trigger.

Every trap opened and a blaze of light many times brighter than their lone floodlight brightened the gloom of night. The traps had been positioned on their sides facing toward the zombies, and Ray had carefully checked each trap's setting so it would be as compatible with possible with the energy he'd recorded when it had been drawn off Egon. They didn't usually set the traps to specific settings but, this time, Ray had gone the extra mile.

As the light enveloped the zombies and the suction struck, they jerked and writhed. Ray called over his shoulder, "We need help out here to transport these guys the hospital. Winston, get on the mobile phone and arrange whatever you can."

"Yo," called Winston, and Ray heard his thudding feet as he ran down the trail toward Ecto.

"Ray?" It was Diane. "I think Egon's waking up."

Ray's heart soared. "Good. Peter, keep him lying down."

"Already here, Ray," Peter yelled, and then, in softer tones, "Hey, Spengs. No you don't. Lie down. When they gave out smarts, you only got the physics kind, not the common sense kind. That doc at the hospital is gonna read you the riot act--and I'll help."

Ray took his eyes away from the quivering zombies long enough to see Peter grab Egon's shoulder to keep him flat, but Egon raised his head and looked around.

"Oh, excellent," he said. "Is it working, Ray?"

"I think so." Ray gave his attention to the PKE meter. "I'm detecting the same readings I did from you. I think it's gonna be enough. Look at 'em."

Egon sat up with Peter's help and, leaning against Peter's shoulder, watched the transformation taking place. Jonathan retrieved Egon's meter and gave it to him, then darted to Benny's side to keep him from doing anything crazy.

While Egon studied the meter, Diane joined Ray. "They'll need aid, won't they? I'll help."

Ray wished he hadn't sent Winston to Ecto, because his medic experience would have helped. There was sure to be disorientation. They might all have to be transported like Egon had been, and there wouldn't be enough ambulances anywhere in the vicinity. Maybe helicopters could airlift them out.

"Dig the zombies," Benny said, giving Jonathan a nudge in the ribs with his elbow. "One zombie cure coming up. I should have had some traps at the Fitness Factory."

It was true. The zombies looked perfectly human. It was nearly done. With a cry of triumph, Ray watched the traps snap shut over the energy they had suctioned forth. Slightly unsteady footsteps behind him announced the arrival of Egon, Peter at his side, one hand on Egon's arm to support him.

"We did it, Raymond." Egon's voice rang with satisfaction.

All the zombies who had been sitting up fell over.

Diane gave a cry and ran to help them, Ian one step behind calling, "Be careful, Diane." Ray chuckled because he could foresee their life together with Diane plunging headfirst into chaos and Ian, determined but pursuing, in her wake.

Ray beckoned to the militia, and they spent a busy ten minutes making sure everyone was breathing well, was lying comfortably, and that there were no serious injuries. "Should we check for wallets, so we can identify them?" he asked.

"Let the police do that," Peter urged.

Winston hurried back. "I've got everybody in the world coming, I think. They were suspicious at first, but ambulances and evac helicopters will be here as soon as they can. Did it work?"

"It sure did," Ray called. "Come and help, Winston. I want to make sure everybody's all right."

While Winston and Diane examined the restored zombies, Egon summoned the militia to him. "Gentlemen, if you would, I wish to speak to you."

They lined up before him. "What happens to us now?" asked Wilder. "This is not our world, and we feel lost, so far from home. Can you send us where we belong?"

It was one of the few times Ray had ever seen Egon look helpless. He stiffened as he surveyed the men who had been cast forward in time by his ancestor's curse. This time, they had faced up to the zombies with courage. They deserved better than clumsy attempts to assimilate them into modern culture.

"Gosh, Egon, is there any way to send them back?" Ray asked.

"What about your spell book, Ray?" Peter asked.

"Unless we knew the same spell, I don't know if it would work," Ray said, thinking furiously. There had to be an answer. He whirled around for the book. "Where's my book?"

"Over here," Benny called and scooped it up off the grass. He flipped through it as if spells were a dime a dozen to him.

Then Egon's voice strengthened. "No, Ray, I do not believe the book will be necessary." He put out his hand to Wilder, who hesitated, then gripped it.

It must be very odd to shake the hand of a man who had been born in the 1700s. Ray stared, wondering what Egon intended.

When they released the grip, Egon spoke. "My ancestor cursed you for doing what 99 men out of 100 would have done, fled from a terrible power beyond their comprehension. In the end, a British troop arrived and prevented a disaster, but only prevented it for a time. That time came today, and you responded to my summons. You have fulfilled your oaths. Therefore, I give you my thanks and, in the name of Isaiah Spengler, I give you your freedom."

Ray caught his breath, everyone else did, too. Would it work? Would it be enough? In spite of his pallor and obvious exhaustion, Egon stood tall and strong, and didn't need the hand Peter offered to keep him on his feet. "Go in peace," he said.

The militia looked around doubtfully, and then it happened. As everyone stared, they shivered, grew transparent, and then faded away entirely. In moments, only the sprawled former-zombies and the eight remained.

"Wow, Egon!" Ray cried. "That was so great!"

Egon gazed at him soberly. "Was it, Ray? Did I free them to return home? Or did they simply die, far from home, with no hope of ever seeing their families again?"

"They were smiling, Egon," Peter pointed out. "They did what they were supposed to do. That means they went home. It hasta."

"But we didn't find anything in the records to indicate it," Egon said. "And the local legends indicate they disappeared." He bowed his head. "I did not mean to complete the condemnation Isaiah began."

They stared at each other, full of doubt. In the distance, Ray could hear the beat of approaching helicopters, and, nearer at hand, the wail of a police siren, and knew rescue was coming for the restored zombies, who would finally be able to return to their homes.

"We saved all those men, Egon," he said, and pointed to the zombies.

"But the militia..."

Ian drew out the papers he had brought with him, and flipped through them. His mouth fell open, and he waved his hand for attention. "You will not believe this," he said. "Listen." He drew his breath. "When I first read this, it said that the men who were cursed vanished and were never seen again. Now--the very same paper reads this way. 'For more than a year, our missing men were never seen again. Then, in the year of our Lord 1779, they came marching home. A joyful reunion was held in the town square, and there was much rejoicing. The men claimed they had marched away into a strange future where men with devices that emitted fire had destroyed the devil in the clouds. They could in no other way explain their absence, but Josiah Wilder claimed that the man who sent them home was a Spengler, and a descendant of Isaiah. Isaiah received this news with great gladness, for long had he been troubled by guilt at the thought of what he had done to those men. Yet all returned safely, and with no more than slight injuries and one broken bone. Although they were swiftly sucked into the conflict that still plagues us, they remained home long enough for joyous reunions with their families.'"

Ian passed the leaf to Egon, who studied it, then he smiled a wonderful smile.

"Remarkable," he said. "Truly remarkable."

Peter reached up and ruffled his hair. "Great work, Spengs," he proclaimed. "But I think we better move our zombie buddies so the helicopter can land without squashing them."

Recalled to the practical, all eight of them ran to do just that.

By the time enough vehicles had arrived to transport the restored zombies to hospitals, some of them had actually recovered on their own. They used police radios and Ecto's mobile phone to contact their families and let them know they were safe. Several press helicopters arrived, but Benedek dealt with their reporters with great skill. It was his story, after all; he had been in it from the beginning. After a quick parley with Ray and Egon, he gave an interview to the CBS feed, fielding the questions with deftness and skill, and managing a few plugs not only for the Ghostbusters but for both the *National Register* and Georgetown Institute. Jonathan

wincing at the latter.

Peter hovered nearby when Benny talked, and did not object to being summoned forth to give the Ghostbusters' version of the incident. He loved talking to the press, and he mugged it up happily. If Egon had talked, he would have lost the audience in less than a minute with his formal, detailed presentation. Ray would have done his 'gee whiz' number, bubbling over in excitement. Winston didn't enjoy publicity for simply doing his job. But Peter thrived. He and Benny played off each other perfectly, and before long, the other network feeds had turned their cameras upon them, too. Peter's only objection to the press conference was that Egon had insisted all the restored zombies be treated before any of the paramedics and doctors who had gathered at the site look at him.

"After all, Peter, it is only exhaustion."

Peter wanted a doctor to tell him that so he could be sure of it, but Egon was steady on his feet, not even pale, and he seemed to be breathing well as he traveled among the patients, taking PKE readings of each one and reporting to the medical personnel that each was rid of the demon's influence.

Out here in the sticks, the paramedics and doctors weren't as accustomed to the Ghostbusters and their associated weirdness as the ones in the City, but enough of the Nasburg folk had responded to the call with offers of help, and they had seen zombies. A few of them had even followed the team, unknown to them, and had lurked in the bushes, although many of the rubbernecks had fled at the sight of the demon and the sound of the massive thunder claps.

There was even a Willard Scott wannabe in the crowd who demanded an explanation of the bizarre weather. Peter steered him toward Ray, who gave him a complicated explanation of the effects of Class 7 energy upon meteorological conditions.

None of them mentioned the 200-year-old curse, though. Benny would write it up for the *Register* so that everyone would consider it hype or a tall tale. The idea that a man, and an ancestor of Egon's, could send so many men into limbo to appear at summons would make most people uneasy--and it would give nasty folk ideas.

Ian was introduced as a visiting professor, whose ancestor had aided in the previous incident, and Diane as a distant cousin of Egon's in a collateral line. Several of the reporters picked up an aura of romance between Ian and Diane, and played it up. Nothing like a good love story. To Peter's amusement and Benny's crowd of laughter, Ian blushed bright red, but he didn't deny it. When he and Diane withdrew from the reporters, they were holding hands.

Of course, as the son of a Nobel Prize winner, Jonathan came into his share of attention, but he had to be used to that.

Finally, everything wound down. The remaining restored zombies were transported to various hospitals, where they would be met by their eager and relieved families. While Peter had enjoyed himself in front of the cameras with Benny, Winston had systematically disconnected all the traps from Ray's gizmo and stored them carefully in Ecto. He and Ray had checked their settings carefully, and also the one that held the demon.

It was nearly ten o'clock by the time they had finished. Egon was proclaimed

well by one of the doctors, who gave him the instruction to sleep late the following morning and do no more busting for at least two days.

"And we'll see that he does," Peter vowed, grinning at Egon.

"I am perfectly fit, Peter."

"We just want to keep it that way," Winston chimed in. "You listen to the doctor, Egon, or we'll tie you down--or take you back to the hospital."

Only the fact that Egon was very tired prevented him from further argument. It showed in the slump of his shoulders, but they were all tired. A good night's sleep would help, and for once Peter would have his own chance to sleep late without one of his teammates rousing him at the crack of dawn. It would be Egon's turn to be waited on by his buddies rather than Peter's, but it would be worth it. The zombified Egon had not been a pretty sight.

The Ghostbusters joined Benny and Jonathan at the local inn for the night. They ate a late dinner and fell eagerly into bed. When Peter finally roused, it was noon of a sunny day, and Egon, who had shared a room with Peter, was still snoring. Good. He needed it. When they finally gathered for breakfast, Egon looked himself again.

"I have a question," Winston said over bacon and eggs. "I hate to bring it up, but what about those dead zombies who turned into skeletons?"

At the question, everyone stared at Egon, who blinked in surprise, his fork suspended in mid-air. For once, he looked completely at a loss. Peter tensed. Would that happen to Egon? To all the zombies? Two days after the demon had disappeared...

"No, wait, I've figured it out," Ray said, gesturing with his knife. "I thought of that, and I took all kinds of readings. I know what caused it."

"Of course you do, you boy genius, you," Peter said. "So tell us before Egon starts needing Prozac worrying about it."

"Well, gee, it's simple. All that demon energy was still in them when they died," Ray explained, looking around to each of them in turn. "The demon was gone, and it had no place to go, and it couldn't just drift out on its own. Don't you see? It sort of consumed them because it couldn't consume their life energy any more."

Egon pondered that, his face grave. "Then if that is the case, we had better put out an alert for any remaining zombies. They would not be dead because of the demon's departure, but if any are found whom we missed, we will need to draw that energy away." Recollecting his fork, he took a bite.

"Leave that to me," Benny said. "I'll call my new buddies at the networks and get the word out."

"I'll let the local police know, too," Ray promised, and as soon as they had finished eating, he hastened over to the police station to relay the word. There might be more zombies in the woods. Ray returned to report that search parties would go out looking for them, and that the National Guard had already started the search the previous night.

Ray insisted on returning to the library in the afternoon and sorting through the Spengler material. They found a letter from the same woman who had written to her friend Madeline, announcing the sudden return of the local militiamen. She spoke of weird powers and strange lights, but with little understanding.

"Wow!" cried Ray. "I knew it yesterday when Ian showed us his notes. But we changed history. That is so cool."

"I don't know, Raymond," Egon replied, and thrust up a hand to shove his sliding glasses into place. "If so, we have no way of knowing what other things may have altered, things we may not even realize." He turned to the librarian, who had joined them to assist in returning the books and papers to their proper places. "Mrs. Mallard, do you remember both ways, or only the return of the militia a year later?"

She blinked at him. "Why, I do remember both. How very peculiar."

"There's another thing," Ray said. "If those men were gone the first time around, and came back this time, they would have had families, people who had not been born the first time around. Wow, this is really neat. I think we need to research it."

Peter shook his head vehemently. "I think we should put these books away, tiptoe out to Ecto, and drive away as fast as we can."

"I'm with Pete," Winston agreed, his arms full of journals that he was passing, one at a time, to Mrs. Quack. "Let's get the heck out of Dodge."

"I mean to research it in great detail," Ian said. "There will be records in the City Hall here, surely. Details of births and deaths through the centuries. If we have changed things drastically, there should be different people here. Mrs. Quack, have you noticed anything of that sort?"

She frowned. "Now that you mention it, I have not. I remember the papers, but I see no difference in the town itself. To notice one and not the other seems peculiar and unlikely to me."

"No, I know," Ray cried, waving his arms for attention. "It's one of those weird paradoxes. The men were sent home, so it had already happened, even before we came here."

"So what about the papers, Ray?" Peter asked.

"I think the papers were part of the curse--a message for the Spengler descendant whose job it would be to restore those men. Only if we failed would there be a difference in the town. Mrs. Quack knew all about what happened before because she's been the caretaker of the Spengler Collection. Most people wouldn't care. Diane knew because she was a descendant of Japhet, and so did her husband, for the same reason. But I bet nobody else in town had a clue, did they?"

The librarian smiled. "Why, no, dear. And for some reason, although I knew those men had disappeared, I never discussed it with anyone. I didn't know when I took over from old Mr. Sandhurst, who was librarian before me. He must have been nearly 100 years old when he died, and he worked here until he was 90, but when I took over, he only told me to mind the Spengler Collection carefully." She paused, her head tilted like a listening bird's. "Why, how very odd. He said that one day men would come who would need to research the Spengler Collection, that perhaps they would come from England, or even from Ohio, but that when the time came, there would be signs, and I should allow it. I did wonder when you came, especially with those poor folk who were turned into zombies, but it didn't make full sense until this very minute. There was even a letter I was supposed to read at the time. I'll fetch it now."

The others stared at each other while she was gone, and Benny whipped out a tape recorder.

When she returned, carrying a sealed envelope that looked brittle with age. "I had it with the papers I had set aside for my retirement. See, it says here, '*To Mrs. Mallard. Please, if you do not need to open this, pass it on to your successor.*'" She tore open the envelope and pulled out a page that was brittle with years.

"Careful with it," Ray said. "Don't touch it with your bare hands. Put it on the table."

She laid it out and the others crowded around to read it.

To the guardian of the secret: this is the story of an ancient curse and its fulfillment in the days of the future. This knowledge must pass from librarian to librarian, for in all times a librarian will be a keeper of knowledge.

In the year of our lord 1778 a demon beset our village, turning men into automatons to serve at its bidding. When Isaiah Spengler stood against it with the local militiamen, several Tories and a few of our farmers, they fled, and Isaiah cursed them to darkness until they should be summoned forth by one of his bloodline. A year later, those men returned. They claimed they had been thrust forth into the future to the year 1994, where they met a descendant of the Spengler line, who had summoned them forth, for the demon had returned. There in the future, they battled the automatons, and the Spengler descendant and others who stood with him defeated the demon. Thus were our men freed from the curse and returned home.

But since in our day we know the demon will return we must conceal this knowledge and pass it down from person to person through the intervening centuries. Thus when the Spengler descendant comes, he will only see that our folk disappeared. Only when the men respond to his summons and succeed will this screed be read, to explain the events.

As I write this, I do not understand the paradox, but I know it exists. To venture to and fro in time is not known in this age, but it may be better understood in future. Perhaps their return is simply the result of the fulfillment of the curse.

To those who read this, please show it to the Spengler who summoned the men and then sent them home.

I pen this in the year 1787. I must leave it behind for those who follow, for I mean to take my family and venture west.

The remainder of this message is intended for Egon Spengler. I am Isaiah Spengler, your ancestor. I acted in anger when I spoke the curse, and feared my temper destroyed those men, but thanks to my descendant, I am freed of that guilt. Perhaps it was as it was meant to be.

My dear many-times great-grandson, Egon, I shall cherish the image of you, standing tall, wearing your device of power upon your back, as you were described to me. Although we can never meet, I will think fondly of you all the rest of my life.

It was signed, "Isaiah Spengler."

Egon had stiffened when he had seen his name in the ancient letter. Peter could tell how touched he was. He reached out to touch it, then drew his fingers back. "No, it must be preserved. But I will keep this."

"Of course you will, dear," Mrs. Quack said. "It is yours, after all."

"Great time paradox," Benny exulted. "Yo, Spengster, any chance you'll let me print this in the *Register*? Jordy would kiss your feet."

Egon arched an eyebrow. "I cannot imagine anything I would value less than that. No, Benedek, this letter is private. Write your story. I can't deny you that. But not the letter. And no Instamatics, either," he said when Benny reached into his pocket. "Be content with the shots you no doubt took of the demon, the zombies, and the militia."

"Got a great one of the militia fading away," Benny crowed. "They'll say it's special effects or Photoshop or something, but I know what I saw. Besides, all I have to do is mention you Ghostbusters and the public will believe anything I write."

"Some of the public," Jonathan said skeptically. "The ones who believe Bigfoot is secretly a member of Congress and that NASA has a pact with aliens from Alpha Centauri."

Benny slapped a dramatic hand to his forehead. "What? You mean they don't?"

Without touching more than the edges of the letter, Egon worked it into its envelope, and secured it in the pocket of his jumpsuit. "Ian, I'll leave the research to you, but I would value copies of anything you find that has bearing on the subject."

Ian looked around the room, at the many file cabinets and shelves. "It will take me a long time," he said. "I think I will be in Nasburg some months." He glanced sideways at Diane, who smiled at him. "Before I return to England, before Diane and I return to England," he clarified, taking her hand, "I will come to New York to give you the results of my findings."

In the flurry of congratulations that followed, Peter sneaked in a kiss. Ian arched a brow just like Egon at the sight, but he didn't complain.

Then, as Benny began angling for copies of Ian's reports, and Jonathan asked if Georgetown could also receive a copy-- "Dr. Moorhouse will be delighted." --Peter looked around the room, grinned at his teammates, including a completely restored Egon, and demanded of all and sundry:

"Can we go home now?"