## Mana from Heaven

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Here is a written-to-order story which appeared in The Magic May Return, the sort of sequel to The Magic Goes Away, by Larry Niven. As with Fred Saberhagen and Berserker Base, Larry opened up this particular universe and invited some of us to come and party in it. I stepped in and began the dance. Oddly, the story tried to run away from me. This doesn’t happen often, but I wanted a novelette, and it indicated that it wanted to turn into a novel. I was firm. I won. The results follow.

I felt nothing untoward that afternoon, whereas, I suppose, my senses should have been tingling. It \_1 was a balmy, sun-filled day with but the lightest of clouds above the ocean horizon. It might have lulled me within the not unpleasant variations of my routine. It was partly distraction, then, of my subliminal, superliminal perceptions, my early-warning system, whatever.... This, I suppose, abetted by the fact that there had been no danger for a long while, and that I was certain I was safely hidden. It was a lovely summer day.

There was a wide window at the rear of my office, affording an oblique view of the ocean. The usual clutter lay about—opened cartons oozing packing material, a variety of tools, heaps of rags, bottles of cleaning compounds and restoratives for various surfaces. And of course the acquisitions: Some of them still stood in crates and cartons; others held ragged rank upon my workbench, which ran the length of an entire wall—a row of ungainly chessmen awaiting my hand. The window was open and the fan purring so that the fumes from my chemicals could escape rapidly. Bird songs entered, and a sound of distant traffic, sometimes the wind.

My Styrofoam coffee cup rested unopened upon the small table beside the door, its contents long grown cold and unpalatable to any but an oral masochist. I had set it there that morning and forgotten it until my eyes chanced to light upon it. I had worked through coffee break and lunch, the day had been so rewarding. The really important part had been completed, though the rest of the museum staff would never notice. Time now to rest, to celebrate, to savor all I had found.

I raised the cup of cold coffee. Why not? A few words, a simple gesture ...

I took a sip of the icy champagne. Wonderful.

I crossed to the telephone then, to call Elaine. This day was worth a bigger celebration than the cup I held. Just as my hand was about to fall upon the instrument, however, the phone rang. Following the startle response, I raised the receiver.

“Hello,” I said.

Nothing.

“Hello?”

Nothing again. No ... Something.

Not some weirdo dialing at random either, as I am an extension....

“Say it or get off the pot,” I said.

The words came controlled, from back in the throat, slow, the voice unidentifiable:

“Phoenix—Phoenix—burning—bright,” I heard.

“Why warn me, asshole?”

“Tag. You’re—it.”

The line went dead.

I pushed the button several times, roused the switchboard.

“Elsie,” I asked, “the person who just called me— what were the exact words—”

“Huh?” she said. “I haven’t put any calls through to you all day, Dave.”

“Oh.”

“You okay?”

“Short circuit or something,” I said. “Thanks.”

I cradled it and tossed off the rest of the champagne. It was no longer a pleasure, merely a housecleaning chore. I fingered the tektite pendant I wore, the roughness of my lava-stone belt buckle, the coral in my watchband. I opened my attache case and replaced certain items I had been using. I removed a few, also, and dropped them into my pockets.

It didn’t make sense, but I knew that it had been for real because of the first words spoken. I thought hard. I still had no answer, after all these years. But I knew that it meant danger. And I knew that it could take any form.

I snapped the case shut. At least it had happened today, rather than, say, yesterday. I was better prepared.

I closed the window and turned off the fan. I wondered whether I should head for my cache. Of course, that could be what someone expected me to do.

I walked up the hall and knocked on my boss’s half-open door.

“Come in, Dave. What’s up?” he asked.

Mike Thorley, in his late thirties, mustached, well dressed, smiling, put down a sheaf of papers and glanced at a dead pipe in a big ashtray.

“A small complication in my life,” I told him. “Is it okay if I punch out early today?”

“Sure. Nothing too serious, I hope?”

I shrugged.

“I hope not, too. If it gets that way, though, I’ll probably need a few days.”

He moved his lips around a bit, then nodded.

“You’ll call in?”

“Of course.”

“It’s just that I’d like all of that African stuff taken care of pretty soon.”

“Right,” I said. “Some nice pieces there.”

He raised both hands.

“Okay. Do what you have to do.”

“Thanks.”

I started to turn away. Then, “One thing,” I said.

“Yes?”

“Has anybody been asking about me—anything?”

He started to shake his head, then stopped.

“Unless you count that reporter,” he said.

“What reporter?”

“The fellow who phoned the other day, doing a piece on our new acquisitions. Your name came up, of course, and he had a few general questions—the usual stuff, like how long you’ve been with us, where you’re from. You know.”

“What was his name?”

“Wolfgang or Walford. Something like that.”

“What paper?”

“The Times:’

I nodded.

“Okay. Be seeing you.”

“Take care.”

I used the pay phone in the lobby to call the paper. No one working there named Wolfgang or Walford or something like that, of course. No article in the works either. I debated calling another paper, just in case Mike was mistaken, when I was distracted by a tap upon the shoulder. I must have turned too quickly, my expression something other than composed, for her smile faded and fear arced across her dark brows, slackened her jaw.

“Elaine!” I said. “You startled me. I didn’t expect ...”

The smile found its way back.

“You’re awfully jumpy, Dave. What are you up to?”

“Checking on my dry cleaning,” I said. “You’re the last person—”

“I know. Nice of me, isn’t it? It was such a beautiful day that I decided to knock off early and remind you we had a sort of date.”

My mind spun even as I put my arms about her shoulders and turned her toward the door. How much danger might she be in if I spent a few hours with her in full daylight? I was about to go for something to eat anyway, and I could keep alert for observers. Also, her presence might lull anyone watching me into thinking that I had not taken the call seriously, that perhaps I was not the proper person after all. For that matter, I realized that I wanted some company just then. And if my sudden departure became necessary, I also wanted her company this one last time.

“Yes,” I said. “Great idea. Let’s take my car.”

“Don’t you have to sign out or something?”

“I already did. I had the same feeling you did about the day. I was going to call you after I got my cleaning.”

“It’s not ready yet,” I added, and my mind kept turning.

A little trickle here, a little there. I did not feel that we were being observed.

“I know a good little restaurant about forty miles down the coast. Lots of atmosphere. Fine seafood,” I said as we descended the front stairs. “And it should be a pleasant drive.”

We headed for the museum’s parking lot, around to the side.

“I’ve got a beach cottage near there too,” I said.

“You never mentioned that.”

“I hardly ever use it.”

“Why not? It sounds wonderful.”

“It’s a little out of the way.”

“Then why’d you buy it?”

“I inherited it,” I said.

I paused about a hundred feet from my car and jammed a hand into my pocket.

“Watch,” I told her.

The engine turned over, the car vibrated.

“How ...?” she began.

“A little microwave gizmo. I can start it before I get to it.”

“You afraid of a bomb?”

I shook my head.

“It has to warm up. You know how I like gadgets.”

Of course I wanted to check out the possibility of a bomb. It was a natural reaction for one in my position. Fortunately, I had convinced her of my fondness for gadgets early in our acquaintanceship—to cover any such contingencies as this. Of course, too, there was no microwave gizmo in my pocket. Just some of the stuff.

We continued forward then; I unlocked the doors and we entered it.

I watched carefully as I drove. Nothing, no one, seemed to be trailing us. ‘Tag. You’re it,” though. A gambit. Was I supposed to bolt and run? Was I supposed to try to attack? If so, what? Who?

Was I going to bolt and run?

In the rear of my mind I saw that the bolt-and-run pattern had already started taking shape.

How long, how long, had this been going on? Years. Flight. A new identity. A long spell of almost normal existence. An attack.... Flee again. Settle again.

If only I had an idea as to which one of them it was, then I could attack. Not knowing, though, I had to avoid the company of all my fellows—the only ones who could give me clues.

“You look sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought, Dave. It can’t be your dry cleaning, can it?”

I smiled at her.

“Just business,” I said. “All of the things I wanted to get away from. Thanks for reminding me.”

I switched on the radio and found some music. Once we got out of city traffic, I began to relax. When we reached the coast road and it thinned even further, it became obvious that we were not being followed. We climbed for a time, then descended. My palms tingled as I spotted the pocket of fog at the bottom of the next dip. Exhilarated, I drank its essence. Then I began talking about the African pieces, in their mundane aspects. We branched off from there. For a time, I forgot my problem. This lasted for perhaps twenty minutes, until the news broadcast. By then I was projecting goodwill, charm, warmth, and kind feelings. I could see that Elaine had begun enjoying herself. There was feedback. I felt even better. There—

“... new eruptions which began this morning,” came over the speaker. “The sudden activity on the part of El Chinchonal spurred immediate evacuation of the area about—”

I reached over and turned up the volume, stopping in the middle of my story about hiking in the Alps.

“What—?” she said.

I raised a finger to my lips.

“The volcano,” I explained.

“What of it?”

“They fascinate me,” I said.

“Oh.”

As I memorized all of the facts about the eruption, I began to build feelings concerning my situation. My having received the call today had been a matter of timing....

“There were some good pictures of it on the tube this morning,” she said as the newsbrief ended.

“I wasn’t watching. But I’ve seen it do it before, when I was down there.”

“You visit volcanos?”

“When they’re active, yes.”

“Here you have this really oddball hobby and you’ve never mentioned it,” she observed. “How many active volcanos have you visited?”

“Most of them,” I said, no longer listening, the lines of the challenge becoming visible—the first time it had ever been put on this basis. I realized in that instant that this time I was not going to run.

“Most of them?” she said. “I read somewhere that there are hundreds, some of them in really out-of-the-way places. Like Erebus—”

“I’ve been in Erebus,” I said, “back when—” And then I realized what I was saying. “—back in some dream,” I finished. “Little joke there.”

I laughed, but she only smiled a bit.

It didn’t matter, though. She couldn’t hurt me. Very few mundanes could. I was just about finished with her anyway. After tonight I would forget her. We would never meet again. I am by nature polite, though; it is a thing I value above sentiment. I would not hurt her either: It might be easiest simply to make her forget.

“Seriously, I do find certain aspects of geophysics fascinating.”

“I’ve been an amateur astronomer for some time,” she volunteered. “I can understand.”

“Really? Astronomy? You never told me.”

“Well?” she said.

I began to work it out, small talk flowing reflexively. After we parted tonight or tomorrow morning, I would leave. I would go to Villahermosa. My enemy would be waiting—of this I felt certain. “Tag. You’re it.” “This is your chance. Come and get me if you’re not afraid.”

Of course, I was afraid.

But I’d run for too long. I would have to go, to settle this for good. Who knew when I’d have another opportunity? I had reached the point where it was worth any risk to find out who it was, to have a chance to retaliate. I would take care of all the preliminaries later, at the cottage, after she was asleep. Yes.

“You’ve got beach?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“How isolated?”

“Very. Why?”

“It would be nice to swim before dinner.”

So we stopped by the restaurant, made reservations for later, and went off and did that. The water was fine.

The day turned into a fine evening. I’d gotten us my favorite table, on the patio, out back, sequestered by colorful shrubbery, touched by flower scents, in the view of mountains. The breezes came just right. So did the lobster and champagne. Within the restaurant, a pleasant music stirred softly. During coffee, I found her hand beneath my own. I smiled. She smiled back.

Then, “How’d you do it, Dave?” she asked.

“What?”

“Hypnotize me.”

“Native charm, I guess,” I replied, laughing.

“That is not what I mean.”

“What, then?” I said, all chuckles fled.

“You haven’t even noticed that I’m not smoking anymore.”

“Hey, you’re right! Congratulations. How long’s it been?”

“A couple of weeks,” she replied. “I’ve been seeing a hypnotist.”

“Oh, really?”

“Mm-hm. I was such a docile subject that he couldn’t believe I’d never been under before. So he poked around a little, and he came up with a description of you, telling me to forget something.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. You want to know what I remember now that I didn’t before?”

“Tell me.”

“An almost-accident, late one night, about a month ago. The other car didn’t even slow down for the stop sign. Yours levitated. Then I remember us parked by the side of the road, and you were telling me to forget. I did.”

I snorted.

“Any hypnotist with much experience will tell you that a trance state is no guarantee against fantasy—and a hallucination recalled under hypnosis seems just as real the second time around. Either way—”

“I remember the ping as the car’s antenna struck your right rear fender and snapped off.”

“They can be vivid fantasies too.”

“I looked, Dave. The mark is there on the fender. It looks just as if someone had swatted it with an antenna.”

Damn! I’d meant to get that filled in and touched up. Hadn’t gotten around to it, though.

“I got that in a parking lot,” I said.

“Come on, Dave.”

Should I put her under now and make her forget having remembered? I wondered. Maybe that would be easiest.

“I don’t care,” she said then. “Look, I really don’t care. Strange things sometimes happen. If you’re connected with some of them, that’s okay. What bothers me is that it means you don’t trust me ... “

Trust? That is something that positions you as a target. Like Proteus, when Amazon and Priest got finished with him. Not that he didn’t have it coming....

“... and I’ve trusted you for a long time.”

I removed my hand from hers. I took a drink of coffee. Not here. I’d give her mind a little twist later. Implant something to make her stay away from hypnotists in the future too.

“Okay,” I said. “I guess you’re right. But it’s a long story. I’ll tell you after we get back to the cottage.”

Her hand found my own, and I met her eyes.

“Thanks,” she said.

We drove back beneath a moonless sky clotted with stars. It was an unpaved road, dipping, rising, twisting amid heavy shrubbery. Insect noises came in through our open windows, along with the salt smell of the sea. For a moment, just for a moment, I thought that I felt a strange tingling, but it could have been the night and the champagne. And it did not come again.

Later, we pulled up in front of the place, parked, and got out. Silently, I deactivated my invisible warden. We advanced, I unlocked the door, I turned on the light.

“You never have any trouble here, huh?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“People breaking in, messing the place up, ripping you off?”

“No,” I answered.

“Why not?”

“Lucky, I guess.”

“Really?”

“Well... it’s protected, in a very special way. That’s a part of the story too. Wait till I get some coffee going.”

I went out to the kitchen, rinsed out the pot, put things together, and set it over a flame. I moved to open a window, to catch a little breeze.

Suddenly, my shadow was intense upon the wall.

I spun about.

The flame had departed the stove, hovered in the air and begun to grow. Elaine screamed just as I turned, and the thing swelled to fill the room. I saw that it bore the shifting features of a fire elemental, just before it burst apart to swirl tornadolike through the cottage. In a moment, the place was blazing and I heard its crackling laughter.

“Elaine!” I called, rushing forward, for I had seen her transformed into a torch.

All of the objects in my pockets plus my belt buckle, I calculated quickly, probably represented a sufficient accumulation of power to banish the thing. Of course the energies were invested, tied up, waiting to be used in different ways. I spoke the words that would rape the power-objects and free the forces. Then I performed the banishment.

The flames were gone in an instant. But not the smoke, not the smell.

... And Elaine lay there sobbing, clothing and flesh charred, limbs jerking convulsively. All of her exposed areas were dark and scaly, and blood was beginning to ooze from the cracks in her flesh.

I cursed as I reset the warden. I had created it to protect the place in my absence. I had never bothered to use it once I was inside. I should have.

Whoever had done this was still probably near. My cache was located in a vault about twenty feet beneath the cottage—near enough for me to use a number of the power things without even going after them. I could draw out their mana as I just had with those about my person. I could use it against my enemy. Yes. This was the chance I had been waiting for.

I rushed to my attache case and opened it. I would need power to reach the power and manipulate it. And the mana from the artifacts I had drained was tied up in my own devices. I reached for the rod and the sphere. At last, my enemy, you’ve had it! You should have known better than to attack me here!

Elaine moaned....

I cursed myself for a weakling. If my enemy were testing me to see whether I had grown soft, he would have his answer in the affirmative. She was no stranger, and she had said that she trusted me. I had to do it. I began the spell that would drain most of my power-objects to work her healing.

It took most of an hour. I put her to sleep. I stopped the bleeding. I watched new tissues form. I bathed her and dressed her in a sport shirt and rolled-up pair of slacks from the bedroom closet, a place the flames had not reached. I left her sleeping a little longer then while I cleaned up, opened the windows and got on with making the coffee.

At last, I stood beside the old chair—now covered with a blanket—into which I had placed her. If I had just done something decent and noble, why did I feel so stupid about it? Probably because it was out of character. I was reassured, at least, that I had not been totally corrupted to virtue by reason of my feeling resentment at having to use all of that mana on her behalf.

Well ... Put a good face on it now the deed was done.

How?

Good question. I could proceed to erase her memories of the event and implant some substitute story—a gas leak, perhaps—as to what had occurred, along with the suggestion that she accept it. I could do that. Probably the easiest course for me.

My resentment suddenly faded, to be replaced by something else, as I realized that I did not want to do it that way. What I did want was an end to my loneliness. She trusted me. I felt that I could trust her. I wanted someone I could really talk with.

When she opened her eyes, I put a cup of coffee into her hands.

“Cheerio,” I said.

She stared at me, then turned her head slowly and regarded the still-visible ravages about the room. Her hands began to shake. But she put the cup down herself, on the small side table, rather than letting me take it back. She examined her hands and arms. She felt her face.

“You’re all right,” I said.

“How?” she asked.

“That’s the story,” I said. “You’ve got it coming.”

“What was that thing?”

“That’s a part of it.”

“Okay,” she said then, raising the cup more steadily and taking a sip. “Let’s hear it.”

“Well, I’m a sorcerer,” I said, “a direct descendant of the ancient sorcerers of Atlantis.”

I paused. I waited for the sigh or the rejoinder. There was none.

“I learned the business from my parents,” I went on, “a long time ago. The basis of the whole thing is mana, a kind of energy found in various things and places. Once the world was lousy with it. It was the basis of an entire culture. But it was like other natural resources. One day it ran out. Then the magic went away. Most of it. Atlantis sank. The creatures of magic faded, died. The structure of the world itself was altered, causing it to appear much older than it really is. The old gods passed. The sorcerers, the ones who manipulated the mana to produce magic, were pretty much out of business. There followed the real dark ages, before the beginnings of civilization as we know it from the history books.”

“This mighty civilization left no record of itself?” she asked.

“With the passing of the magic, there were transformations. The record was rewritten into natural-seeming stone and fossil-bed, was dissipated, underwent a sea change.”

“Granting all that for a moment,” she said, sipping the coffee, “if the power is gone, if there’s nothing left to do it with, how can you be a sorcerer?”

“Well, it’s not all gone,” I said. “There are small surviving sources, there are some new sources, and—”

“—and you fight over them? Those of you who remain?”

“No ... not exactly,” I said. “You see, there are not that many of us. We intentionally keep our numbers small, so that no one goes hungry.”

” ‘Hungry’?”

“A figure of speech we use. Meaning to get enough mana to keep body and soul together, to stave off aging, keep healthy and enjoy the good things.”

“You can rejuvenate yourselves with it? How old are you?”

“Don’t ask embarrassing questions. If my spells ran out and there was no more mana, I’d go fast. But we can trap the stuff, lock it up, hold it, whenever we come across a power-source. It can be stored in certain objects—or, better yet, tied up in partial spells, like dialing all but the final digit in a phone number. The spells that maintain one’s existence always get primary consideration.”

She smiled.

“You must have used a lot of it on me.”

I looked away.

“Yes,” I said.

“So you couldn’t just drop out and be a normal person and continue to live?”

“No.”

“So what was that thing?” she asked. “What happened here?”

“An enemy attacked me. We survived.”

She took a big gulp of the coffee and leaned back and closed her eyes.

Then, “Will it happen again?” she asked.

“Probably. If I let it.”

“What do you mean?”

“This was more of a challenge than an all-out attack. My enemy is finally getting tired of playing games and wants to finish things off.”

“And you are going to accept the challenge?”

“I have no choice. Unless you’d consider waiting around for something like this to happen again, with more finality.”

She shuddered slightly.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I’ve a feeling I may be too,” she stated, finishing her coffee and rising, crossing to the window, looking out, “before this is over.

“What do we do next?” she asked, turning and staring at me.

“I’m going to take you to a safe place and go away,” I said, “for a time.” It seemed a decent thing to add those last words, though I doubted I would ever see her again.

“The hell you are,” she said.

“Huh? What do you mean? You want to be safe, don’t you?”

“If your enemy thinks I mean something to you, I’m vulnerable—the way I see it,” she told me.

“Maybe ...”

The answer, of course, was to put her into a week-long trance and secure her down in the vault, with strong wards and the door openable from the inside. Since my magic had not all gone away, I raised one hand and sought her eyes with my own.

What tipped her off, I’m not certain. She looked away, though, and suddenly lunged for the bookcase. When she turned again, she held an old bone flute that had long lain there.

I restrained myself in mid-mutter. It was a power-object that she held, one of several lying about the room, and one of the few that had not been drained during my recent workings. I couldn’t really think of much that a nonsorcerer could do with it, but my curiosity restrained me.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “But I’m not going to let you put me away with one of your spells.”

“Who said anything about doing that?”

“I can tell.”

“How?”

“Just a feeling.”

“Well, damn it, you’re right. We’ve been together too long. You can psych me. Okay, put it down and I won’t do anything to you.”

“Is that a promise, Dave?”

“Yeah. I guess it is.”

“I suppose you could rat on it and erase my memory.”

“I keep my promises.”

“Okay.” She put it back on the shelf. “What are we going to do now?”

“I’d still like to put you someplace safe.”

“No way.”

I sighed.

“I have to go where that volcano is blowing.”

“Buy two tickets,” she said.

It wasn’t really necessary. I have my own plane and I’m licensed to fly the thing. In fact, I have several located in different parts of the world. Boats, too.

“There is mana in clouds and in fogbanks,” I explained to her. “In a real pinch, I use my vehicles to go chasing after them.”

We moved slowly through the clouds. I had detoured a good distance, but it was necessary. Even after we had driven up to my apartment and collected everything I’d had on hand, I was still too mana-impoverished for the necessary initial shielding and a few strikes. I needed to collect a little more for this. After that it wouldn’t matter, the way I saw things. My enemy and I would be plugged into the same source. All we had to do was reach it.

So I circled in the fog for a long while, collecting. It was a protection spell into which I concentrated the mana.

“What happens when it’s all gone?” she asked, as I banked and climbed for a final pass before continuing to the southeast.

“What?” I said.

“The mana. Will you all fade away?”

I chuckled.

“It can’t,” I said. “Not with so few of us using it. How many tons of meteoric material do you think have fallen to earth today? They raise the background level almost imperceptibly—constantly. And much of it falls into the oceans. The beaches are thereby enriched. That’s why I like to be near the sea. Mist-shrouded mountaintops gradually accumulate it. They’re good places for collecting too. And new clouds are always forming. Our grand plan is more than simple survival. We’re waiting for the day when it reaches a level where it will react and establish fields over large areas. Then we won’t have to rely on accumulators and partial spells for its containment. The magic will be available everywhere again.”

“Then you will exhaust it all and be back where you started again.”

“Maybe,” I said. “If we’ve learned nothing, that may be the case. We’ll enter a new golden age, become dependent upon it, forget our other skills, exhaust it again and head for another dark age. Unless ...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless those of us who have been living with it have also learned something. We’d need to figure the rate of mana exhaustion and budget ourselves. We’d need to preserve technology for things on which mana had been used the last time around. Our experience in this century with physical resources may be useful. Also, there is the hope that some areas of space may be richer in cosmic dust or possess some other factor that will increase the accumulation. Then, too, we are waiting for the full development of the space program—to reach other worlds rich in what we need.”

“Sounds as if you have it all worked out.”

“We’ve had a lot of time to think about it.”

“But what would be your relationship with those of us who are not versed in magic?”

“Beneficent. We all stand to benefit that way.”

“Are you speaking for yourself or for the lot of you?”

“Well, most of the others must feel the same way. I just want to putter around museums....”

“You said that you had been out of touch with the others for some time.”

“Yes, but—”

She shook her head and turned to look out at the fog.

“Something else to worry about,” she said.

I couldn’t get a landing clearance, so I just found a flat place and put it down and left it. I could deal later with any problems this caused.

I unstowed our gear; we hefted it and began walking toward that ragged, smoky quarter of the horizon.

“We’ll never reach it on foot,” she said.

“You’re right,” I answered. “I wasn’t planning to, though. When the time is right, something else will present itself.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wait and see.”

We hiked for several miles, encountering no one. The way was warm and dusty, with occasional tremors of the earth. Shortly, I felt the rush of mana, and I drew upon it.

“Take my hand,” I said.

I spoke the words necessary to levitate us a few feet above the rocky terrain. We glided forward then, and the power about us increased as we advanced upon our goal. I worked with more of it, spelling to increase our pace, to work protective shields around us, guarding us from the heat, from flying debris.

The sky grew darker, from ash, from smoke, long before we commenced the ascent. The rise was gradual at first but steepened steadily as we raced onward. I worked a variety of partial spells, offensive and defensive, tying up quantities of mana just a word, just a fingertip gesture away.

“Reach out, reach out and touch someone,” I hummed as the visible world came and went with the passage of roiling clouds.

We sped into a belt where we would probably have been asphyxiated but for the shield. The noises had grown louder by then. It must have been pretty hot out there too. When we finally reached the rim, dark shapes fled upward past us and lightning stalked the clouds. Forward and below, a glowing, seething mass shifted constantly amid explosions.

“All right!” I shouted. “I’m going to charge up everything I brought with me and tie up some more mana in a whole library of spells! Make yourself comfortable!”

“Yeah,” she said, licking her lips and staring downward. “I’ll do that. But what about your enemy?”

“Haven’t seen anybody so far—and there’s too much free mana around for me to pick up vibes. I’m going to keep an eye peeled and take advantage of the situation. You watch too.”

“Right,” she said. “This is perfectly safe, huh?”

“As safe as L.A. traffic.”

“Great. Real comforting,” she observed as a huge rocky mass flew past us.

We separated later. I left her within her own protective spell, leaning against a craggy prominence, and I moved off to the right to perform a ritual that required greater freedom of movement.

Then a shower of sparks rose into the air before me. Nothing especially untoward about that, until I realized that it was hovering for an unusually long while. After a time, it seemed that it should have begun dispersing....

“Phoenix, Phoenix, burning bright!” The words boomed about me, rising above the noises of the inferno itself.

“Who calls me?” I asked.

“Who has the strongest reason to do you harm?”

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t ask.”

“Then seek the answer in hell!”

A wall of flame rushed toward me. I spoke the words that strengthened my shield. Even so, I was rocked within my protective bubble when it hit. Striking back was going to be tricky, I could see, with my enemy in a less-than-material form.

“All right, to the death!” I cried, calling for a lightning stroke through the space where the sparks spun.

I turned away and covered my eyes against the brilliance, but I still felt its presence through my skin.

My bubble of forces continued to rock as I blinked and looked forward. The air before me had momentarily cleared, but everything seemed somehow darker, and—

A being—a crudely man-shaped form of semisolid lava—had wrapped its arms as far as they would go about me and was squeezing. My spell held, but I was raised above the crater’s rim.

“It won’t work!” I said, trying to dissolve the being.

“The hell you say!” came a voice from high overhead.

I learned quickly that the lava-thing was protected against the simple workings I threw at it. All right, then hurl me down. I would levitate out. The Phoenix would rise again. I—

I passed over the rim and was falling. But there was a problem. A heavy one.

The molten creature was clinging to my force-bubble. Magic is magic and science is science, but there are correspondences. The more mass you want to move, the more mana you have to expend. So, taken off guard, I was dropping into the fiery pit despite a levitation spell that would have borne me on high in a less encumbered state. I immediately began a spell to provide me with additional buoyancy.

But when I had finished, I saw that something was countering me—another spell, a spell that kept increasing the mass of my creature-burden by absorption as we fell. Save for an area between my feet through which I saw the roiling lake of fire, I was enclosed by the flowing mass of the thing. I could think of only one possible escape, and I didn’t know whether I had time for it.

I began the spell that would transform me into a spark-filled vortex similar to that my confronter had worn. When I achieved it, I released my protective spell and flowed.

Out through the nether opening then, so close to that bubbling surface I would have panicked had not my mind itself been altered by the transformation, into something static and poised.

Skimming the heat-distorted surface of the lava, I swarmed past the heavily weighted being of animated rock and was already rising at a rapid rate, buffeted, borne aloft by heat waves, when it hit a rising swell and was gone. I added my own energy to the rising and fled upward, through alleys of smoke and steam, past flashes of lava bullets.

I laid the bird-shape upon my glowing swirls, I sucked in mana, I issued a long, drawn-out rising scream. I spread my wings along expanding lines of energy, seeking my swirling adversary as I reached the rim.

Nothing. I darted back and forth, I circled. He/she/ it was nowhere in sight.

“I am here!” I cried. “Face me now!”

But there was no reply, save for the catastrophe beneath me from which fresh explosions issued.

“Come!” I cried. “I am waiting!”

So I sought Elaine, but she was not where I had left her. My enemy had either destroyed her or taken her away.

I cursed then like thunder and spun myself into a large vortex, a rising tower of lights. I drove myself upward then, leaving the earth and that burning pimple far beneath me.

For how long I rode the jet streams, raging, I cannot say. I know that I circled the world several times before any semblance of rational thinking returned to me, before I calmed sufficiently to formulate anything resembling a plan.

It was obviously one of my fellows who had tried to kill me, who had taken Elaine from me. I had avoided contact with my own kind for too long. Now I knew that I must seek them out, whatever the risk, to obtain the knowledge I needed for self-preservation, for revenge.

I began my downward drift as I neared the Middle East. Arabia. Yes. Oil fields, places of rich, expensive pollutants, gushing mana-filled from the earth. Home of the one called Dervish.

Retaining my Phoenix-form, I fled from field to field, beelike, tasting, using the power to reinforce the spell under which I was operating. Seeking ...

For three days I sought, sweeping across bleak landscapes, visiting field after field. It was like a series of smorgasbords. It would be so easy to use the mana to transform the countryside. But of course that would be a giveaway, in many respects.

Then, gliding in low over shimmering sands as evening mounted in the East, I realized that this was the one I was seeking. There was no physical distinction to the oil field I approached and then cruised. But it stood in the realm of my sensitivity as if a sign had been posted. The mana level was much lower than at any of the others I had scanned. And where this was the case, one of us had to be operating.

I spread myself into even more tenuous patterns. I sought altitude. I began circling.

Yes, there was a pattern. It became clearer as I studied the area. The low-mana section described a rough circle near the northwest corner of the field, its center near a range of hills.

He could be working in some official capacity there at the field. If so, his duties would be minimal and the job would be a cover. He always had been pretty lazy.

I spiraled in and dropped toward the center of the circle as toward the eye of a target. As I rushed to it, I became aware of the small, crumbling adobe structure that occupied that area, blending almost perfectly with its surroundings. A maintenance or storage house, a watchman’s quarters.... It did not matter what it seemed to be. I knew what it had to be.

I dived to a landing before it. I reversed my spell, taking on human form once again. I pushed open the weather-worn, unlatched door and walked inside.

The place was empty, save for a few sticks of beaten furniture and a lot of dust. I swore softly. This had to be it.

I walked slowly about the room, looking for some clue.

It was nothing that I saw, or even felt, at first. It was memory—of an obscure variant of an old spell, and of Dervish’s character—that led me to turn and step back outside.

I closed the door. I felt around for the proper words. It was hard to remember exactly how this one would go. Finally, they came flowing forth and I could feel them falling into place, mortise and tenon, key and lock. Yes, there was a response. The subtle back-pressure was there. I had been right.

When I had finished, I knew that things were different. I reached toward the door, then hesitated. I had probably tripped some alarm. Best to have a couple of spells at my fingertips, awaiting merely guide-words. I muttered them into readiness, then opened the door.

A marble stairway as wide as the building itself led downward, creamy jewels gleaming like hundred-watt bulbs high at either hand.

I moved forward, began the descent. Odors of jasmine, saffron, and sandalwood came to me. As I continued, I heard the sounds of stringed instruments and a flute in the distance. By then I could see part of a tiled floor below and ahead—and a portion of an elaborate design upon it. I laid a spell of invisibility over myself and kept going.

Before I reached the bottom, I saw him, across the long, pillared hall.

He was at the far end, reclined in a nest of cushions and bright patterned rugs. An elaborate repast was spread before him. A narghile bubbled at his side. A young woman was doing a belly dance nearby.

I halted at the foot of the stair and studied the layout. Archways to both the right and the left appeared to lead off to other chambers. Behind him was a pair of wide windows, looking upon high mountain peaks beneath very blue skies—representing either a very good illusion or the expenditure of a lot of mana on a powerful space-bridging spell. Of course, he had a lot of mana to play around with. Still, it seemed kind of wasteful.

I studied the man himself. His appearance was pretty much unchanged—sharp-featured, dark-skinned, tall, husky running to fat.

I advanced slowly, the keys to half a dozen spells ready for utterance or gesture.

When I was about thirty feet away, he stirred uneasily. Then he kept glancing in my direction. His power-sense was still apparently in good shape.

So I spoke two words, one of which put a less-than-material but very potent magical dart into my hand, the other casting aside my veil of invisibility.

“Phoenix!” he exclaimed, sitting upright and staring. “I thought you were dead!”

I smiled.

“How recently did that thought pass through your mind?” I asked him.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand....”

“One of us just tried to kill me, down in Mexico.”

He shook his head.

“I haven’t been in that part of the world for some time.”

“Prove it,” I said.

“I can’t,” he replied. “You know that my people here would say whatever I want them to—so that’s no help. I didn’t do it, but I can’t think of any way to prove it. That’s the trouble with trying to demonstrate a negative. Why do you suspect me, anyway?”

I sighed.

“That’s just it. I don’t—or, rather, I have to suspect everyone. I just chose you at random. I’m going down the list.”

“Then at least I have statistics on my side.”

“I suppose you’re right, damn it.”

He rose, turned his palms upward.

“We’ve never been particularly close,” he said. “But then, we’ve never been enemies either. I have no reason at all for wishing you harm.”

He eyed the dart in my hand. He raised his right hand, still holding a bottle.

“So you intend to do us all in by way of insurance?”

“No, I was hoping that you would attack me and thereby prove your guilt. It would have made life easier.”

I sent the dart away as a sign of good faith.

“I believe you,” I said.

He leaned and placed the bottle he held upon a cushion.

“Had you slain me, that bottle would have fallen and broken,” he said. “Or perhaps I could have beaten you on an attack and drawn the cork. It contains an attack djinn.”

“Neat trick.”

“Come join me for dinner,” he suggested. “I want to hear your story. One who would attack you for no reason might well attack me one day.”

“All right,” I said.

The dancer had been dismissed. The meal was finished. We sipped coffee. I had spoken without interruption for nearly an hour. I was tired, but I had a spell for that.

“More than a little strange,” he said at length. “And you have no recollection, from back when all of this started, of having hurt, insulted or cheated any of the others?”

“No.”

I sipped my coffee.

“So it could be any of them,” I said after a time. “Priest, Amazon, Gnome, Siren, Werewolf, Lamia, Lady, Sprite, Cowboy ...”

“Well, scratch Lamia,” he said. “I believe she’s dead.”

“How?”

He shrugged, looked away.

“Not sure,” he said slowly. Then, “Well, the talk at first was that you and she had run off together. Then, later, it seemed to be that you’d died together ... somehow.”

“Lamia and me? That’s silly. There was never anything between us.”

He nodded.

“Then it looks now as if something simply happened to her.”

‘Talk ...” I said. “Who was doing the talking?”

“You know. Stories just get started. You never know exactly where they come from.”

“Where’d you first hear it?”

He lowered his eyelids, stared off into the distance.

“Gnome. Yes. It was Gnome mentioned the matter to me at Starfall that year.”

“Did he say where he’d heard it?”

“Not that I can recall.”

“Okay,” I said. “I guess I’ll have to go talk to Gnome. He still in South Africa?”

He shook his head, refilled my cup from the tall, elegantly incised pot.

“Cornwall,” he said. “Still a lot of juice down those old shafts.”

I shuddered slightly.

“He can have it. I get claustrophobia just thinking about it. But if he can tell me who—”

“There is no enemy like a former friend,” Dervish said. “If you dropped your friends as well as everyone else when you went into hiding, it means you’ve already considered that....”

“Yes, as much as I disliked the notion. I rationalized it by saying that I didn’t want to expose them to danger, but—”

“Exactly.”

“Cowboy and Werewolf were buddies of mine....”

“... And you had a thing going with Siren for a long while, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

“A woman scorned?”

“Hardly. We parted amicably.”

He shook his head and raised his cup.

“I’ve exhausted my thinking on the matter.”

We finished our coffee. I rose then.

“Well, thanks. I guess I’d better be going. Glad I came to you first.”

He raised the bottle.

“Want to take the djinn along?”

“I don’t even know how to use one.”

“The commands are simple. All the work’s already been done.”

“Okay. Why not?”

He instructed me briefly, and I took my leave. Soaring above the great oil field, I looked back upon the tiny, ruined building. Then I moved my wings and rose to suck the juice from a cloud before turning west.

Starfall, I mused, as earth and water unrolled like a scroll beneath me. Starfall—the big August meteor shower accompanied by the wave of mana called Starwind, the one time of year we all got together. Yes, that was when gossip was exchanged. It had been only a week after a Starfall that I had first been attacked, almost slain, had gone to ground.... By the following year the stories were circulating. Had it been something at that earlier Starfall— something I had said or done to someone—that had made me an enemy with that finality of purpose, that quickness of retaliation?

I tried hard to recall what had occurred at that last Starfall I had attended. It had been the heaviest rush of Starwind in memory. I remembered that. “Mana from heaven,” Priest had joked. Everyone had been in a good mood. We had talked shop, swapped a few spells, wondered •what the heightened Starwind portended, argued politics— all of the usual things. That business Elaine talked about had come up....

Elaine.... Alive now? I wondered. Someone’s prisoner? Someone’s insurance in case I did exactly what I was doing? Or were her ashes long since scattered about the globe? Either way, someone would pay.

I voiced my shrill cry against the rushing winds. It was fled in an instant, echoless. I caught up with the night, passed into its canyons. The stars came on again, grew bright.

The detailed instructions Dervish had given me proved exactly accurate. There was a mineshaft at the point he had indicated on a map hastily sketched in fiery lines upon the floor. There was no way I would enter the thing in human form, though. A version of my Phoenix-aspect would at least defend me against claustrophobia. I cannot feel completely pent when I am not totally material.

Shrinking, shrinking, as I descended. I called in my tenuous wings and tail, gaining solidity as I grew smaller. Then I bled off mass-energy, retaining my new dimensions, growing ethereal again.

Like a ghost-bird, I entered the adit, dropping, dropping. The place was dead. There was no mana anywhere about me. This, of course, was to be expected. The upper levels would have been the first to be exhausted.

I continued to drop into dampness and darkness for a long while before I felt the first faint touch of the power. It increased only slowly as I moved, but it did begin to rise.

Finally, it began to fall off again and I retraced my route. Yes, that side passage ... its source. I entered and followed.

As I worked my way farther and farther, back and down, it continued to increase in intensity. I wondered briefly whether I should be seeking the weaker area or the stronger. But this was not the same sort of setup as Dervish enjoyed. Dervish’s power-source was renewable, so he could remain stationary. Gnome would have to move on once he had exhausted a local mana supply.

I spun around a comer into a side tunnel and was halted. Frozen. Damn.

It was a web of forces holding me like a butterfly. I ceased struggling almost immediately, seeing that it was fruitless in this aspect.

I transformed myself back into human form. But the damned web merely shifted to accommodate the alteration and continued to hold me tightly.

I tried a fire spell, to no avail. I tried sucking the mana loose from the web’s own spell, but all I got was a headache. It’s a dangerous measure, only effective against sloppy workmanship—and then you get hit with a backlash of forces when it comes loose. The spell held perfectly against my effort, however. I had had to try it, though, because I was feeling desperate, with a touch of claustrophobia tossed in. Also, I thought I’d heard a stone rattle farther up the tunnel.

Next I heard a chuckle, and I recognized the voice as Gnome’s.

Then a light rounded a corner, followed by a vaguely human form.

The light drifted in front of him and just off to his left—a globe, casting an orange illumination—touching his hunched, twisted shape with a flamelike glow as he limped toward me. He chuckled again.

“Looks as if I’ve snared a Phoenix,” he finally said.

“Very funny. How about unsnaring me now?” I asked.

“Of course, of course,” he muttered, already beginning to gesture.

The trap fell apart. I stepped forward.

“I’ve been asking around,” I told him. “What’s this story about Lamia and me?”

He continued his gesturing. I was about to invoke an assault or shielding spell when he stopped, though. I felt none the worse and I assumed it was a final cleanup of his web.

“Lamia? You?” he said. “Oh. Yes. I’d heard you’d run off together. Yes. That was it.”

“Where’d you hear it?”

He fixed me with his lai^e, pale eyes.

“Where’d you hear it?” I repeated.

“I don’t remember.”

“Try.”

“Sorry.”

” ‘Sorry’ hell!” I said, taking a step forward. “Somebody’s been trying to kill me and—”

He spoke the word that froze me in mid-step. Good spell, that.

“—and he’s been regrettably inept,” Gnome finished.

“Let me go, damn it!” I said.

“You came into my home and assaulted me.”

“Okay, I apologize. Now—”

“Come this way.”

He turned his back on me and began walking. Against my will, my body made the necessary movements. I followed.

I opened my mouth to speak a spell of my own. No words came out. I wanted to make a gesture. I was unable to begin it.

“Where are you taking me?” I tried.

The words came perfectly clear. But he didn’t bother answering me for a time. The light moved over glistening seams of some metallic material within the sweating walls.

Then, “To a waiting place,” he finally said, turning into a corridor to the right, where we splashed through puddles for a time.

“Why?” I asked him. “What are we waiting for?”

He chuckled again. The light danced. He did not reply.

We walked for several minutes. I began finding the thought of all those tons of rock and earth above me very oppressive. A trapped feeling came over me. But I could not even panic properly within the confines of that spell. I began to perspire profusely, despite a cooling draft from ahead.

Then Gnome turned suddenly and was gone, sidling into a narrow cleft I would not even have noticed had I been coming this way alone.

“Come,” I heard him say.

My feet followed the light, moved to drift between us here. Automatically, I turned my body. I sidled after him for a good distance before the way widened. The ground dropped roughly, abruptly, and the walls retracted and the light shot on ahead, gaining altitude.

Gnome raised a broad hand and halted me. We were in a small, irregularly shaped chamber—natural, I guessed. The weak light filled it. I looked about. I had no idea why we had stopped here. Gnome’s hand moved and he pointed.

I followed the gesture but still could not tell what it was that he was trying to indicate. The light drifted forward then, hovered near a shelflike niche.

Angles altered, shadows shifted. I saw it.

It was a statue of a reclining woman, carved out of coal.

I moved a step nearer. It was extremely well executed and very familiar.

“I didn’t know you were an artist...” I began, and the realization struck me even as he laughed.

“It is our art,” he said. “Not the mundane kind.”

I had reached forward to touch the dark cheek. I dropped my hand, deciding against it.

“It’s Lamia, isn’t it?” I asked. “It’s really her.

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“She has to be someplace, doesn’t she?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

He chuckled again.

“You’re a dead man, Phoenix, and she’s the reason. I never thought I’d have the good fortune to have you walk in this way. But now that you have, all of my problems are over. You will rest a few corridors away from here, in a chamber totally devoid of mana. You will wait, while I send for Werewolf to come and kill you. He was in love with Lamia, you know. He is convinced that you ran off with her. Some friend you are. I’ve been waiting for him to get you for some time now, but either he’s clumsy or you’re lucky. Perhaps both.”

“So it’s been Werewolf all along.”

“Yes.”

“Why? Why do you want him to kill me?”

“It would look badly if I did it myself. I’ll be sure that some of the others are here when it happens. To keep my name clean. In fact, I’ll dispatch Werewolf personally as soon as he’s finished with you. A perfect final touch.”

“Whatever I’ve done to you, I’m willing to set it right.”

Gnome shook his head.

“What you did was to set up an irreducible conflict between us,” he said. “There is no way to set it right.”

“Would you mind telling me what it is that I did?” I asked.

He made a gesture, and I felt a compulsion to turn and make my way back toward the corridor. He followed, both of us preceded by his light.

As we moved, he asked me, “Were you aware that at each Starfall ceremony for the past ten or twelve years the mana content of the Starwind has been a bit higher?”

“It was ten or twelve years ago that I stopped attending them,” I answered. “I recall that it was very high that year. Since then, when I’ve thought to check at the proper time, it has seemed high, yes.”

“The general feeling is that the increase will continue. We seem to be entering a new area of space, richer in the stuff.”

“That’s great,” I said, coming into the corridor again. “But what’s that got to do with your wanting me out of the way, with your kidnapping Lamia and turning her to coal, with your siccing Werewolf on me?”

“Everything,” he said, conducting me down a slanting shaft where the mana diminished with every step. “Even before that, those of us who had been doing careful studies had found indications that the background level of mana is rising.”

“So you decided to kill me?”

He led me to a jagged opening in the wall and indicated that I should enter there. I had no choice. My body obeyed him. The light remained outside with him.

“Yes,” he said then, motioning me to the rear of the place. “Years ago it would not have mattered—everyone was entitled to any sort of opinion they felt like holding. But now it does. The magic is beginning to return, you fool. I am going to be around long enough to see it happen, to take advantage of it. I could have put up with your democratic sentiments when such a thing seemed only a daydream—”

And then I remembered our argument, on the same matter Elaine had brought up during our ride down the coast.

“—but knowing what I knew and seeing how strongly you felt, I saw you as one who would oppose our inevitable leadership in that new world. Werewolf was another. That is why I set it up for him to destroy you, to be destroyed in return by myself.”

“Do all of the others feel as you do?” I asked.

“No, only a few—just as there were only a few like you, Cowboy and the Wolf. The rest will follow whoever takes the lead, as people always do.”

“Who are the others?”

He snorted.

“None of your business now,” he said.

He began a familiar gesture and muttered something. I felt free of whatever compulsion he had laid upon me, and I lunged forward. The entrance had not changed its appearance, but I slammed up against something—as if the way were blocked by an invisible door.

“I’ll see you at the party,” he said, inches away, beyond my reach. “In the meantime, try to get some rest.”

I felt my consciousness ebbing. I managed to lean and cover my face with my arms before I lost all control. I do not remember hitting the floor.

How long I lay entranced I do not know. Long enough for some of the others to respond to an invitation, it would seem. Whatever reason he gave them for a party, it was sufficient to bring Knight, Druid, Amazon, Priest, Siren, and Snowman to a large hall somewhere beneath the Cornish hills. I became aware of this by suddenly returning to full consciousness at the end of a long, black corridor without pictures. I pushed myself into a seated position, rubbed my eyes and squinted, trying to penetrate my cell’s gloom. Moments later, this was taken care of for me. So I knew that my awakening and the happening that followed were of one piece.

The lighting problem was taken care of for me by the wall’s beginning to glow, turning glassy, then becoming a full-color 3-D screen, complete with stereo. That’s where I saw Knight, Druid, Amazon, etc. That’s how I knew it was a party: There were food and a sound track, arrivals and departures. Gnome passed through it all, putting his clammy hands on everybody, twisting his face into a smile and being a perfect host.

Mana, mana, mana. Weapon, weapon, weapon. Nothing. Shit.

I watched for a long while, waiting. There had to be a reason for his bringing me around and showing me what was going on. I searched all of those familiar faces, overheard snatches of conversation, watched their movements. Nothing special. Why, then, was I awake and witnessing this. It had to be Gnome’s doing, yet ...

When I saw Gnome glance toward the high archway of the hall’s major entrance for the third time in as many minutes, I realized that he, too, was waiting.

I searched my cell. Predictably, I found nothing of any benefit to me. While I was looking, though, I heard the noise level rise and I turned back to the images on the wall.

Magics were in progress. The hall must have been mana-rich. My colleagues were indulging themselves in some beautiful spellwork—flowers and faces and colors and vast, exotic, shifting vistas filled the screen now—just as such things must have run in ancient times. Ah! One drop! One drop of mana and I’d be out of here! To run and return? Or to seek immediate retaliation? I could not tell. If there were only some way I could draw it from the vision itself...

But Gnome had wrought too well. I could find no weak spot in the working before me. I stopped looking after a few moments, for another reason as well. Gnome was announcing the arrival of another guest.

The sound died and the picture faded at that point. The corridor beyond my cell seemed to grow slightly brighter. I moved toward it. This time my way was not barred, and I continued out into the lighter area. What had happened? Had some obscure force somehow broken Gnome’s finely wrought spells?

At any rate, I felt normal now and I would be a fool to remain where he had left me. It occurred to me that this could be part of some higher trap or torture, but still— I had several choices now, which is always an improvement.

I decided to start back in the direction from which we had come earlier, rather than risk blundering into that gathering. Even if there was a lot of mana about there. Better to work my way back, I decided, tie up any mana I could find along the way in the form of protective spells, and get the hell out.

I had proceeded perhaps twenty paces while formulating this resolution. Then the tunnel went through an odd twisting that I couldn’t recall. I was still positive we had come this way, though, so I followed it. It grew a bit brighter as I moved along, too, but that seemed all for the better. It allowed me to hurry.

Suddenly, there was a sharp turning that I did not remember at all. I took it and I ran into a screen of pulsing white light, and then I couldn’t stop. I was propelled forward, as if squeezed from behind. There was no way that I could halt. I was temporarily blinded by the light. There came a roaring in my ears.

And then it was past, and I was standing in the great hall where the party was being held, having emerged from some side entrance, in time to hear Gnome say, “... And the surprise guest is our long-lost brother Phoenix!”

I stepped backward, to retreat into the tunnel from which I had emerged, and I encountered something hard. Turning, I beheld only a blank wall of rock.

“Don’t be shy, Phoenix. Come and say hello to your friends,” Gnome was saying.

There was a curious babble, but above it from across the way came an animallike snarl and I beheld my old buddy Werewolf, lean and swarthy, eyes blazing, doubtless the guest who was just arriving when the picture had faded.

I felt panic. I also felt mana. But what could I work in only a few seconds’ time?

My eyes were pulled by the strange movement in a birdcage on the table beside which Werewolf stood. The others’ attitudes showed that many of them had just turned from regarding it.

It registered in an instant.

Within the cage, a nude female figure no more than a hand high was dancing. I recognized it as a spell of torment: The dancer could not stop. The dancing would continue until death, after which the body would still jerk about for some time.

And even from that distance I could recognize the small creature as Elaine.

The dancing part of the spell was simple. So was its undoing. Three words and a gesture. I managed them. By then Werewolf was moving toward me. He was not bothering with a shapeshift to his more fearsome form. I sidestepped as fast as I could and sought for a hold involving his arm and shoulder. He shook it off. He always was stronger and faster than me.

He turned and threw a punch, and I managed to duck and counterpunch to his midsection. He grunted and hit me on the jaw with a weak left. I was already backing away by then. I stopped and tried a kick and he batted it aside, sending me spinning to the floor. I could feel the mana all about me, but there was no time to use it.

“I just learned the story,” I said, “and I had nothing to do with Lamia—”

He threw himself upon me. I managed to catch him in the stomach with my knee as he came down.

“Gnome took her....” I got out, getting in two kidney punches before his hands found my throat and began to tighten. “She’s coal—”

I caught him once, high on the cheek, before he got his head down.

“Gnome—damn it!” I gurgled.

“It’s a lie!” I heard Gnome respond from somewhere nearby, not missing a thing.

The room began to swim about me. The voices became a roaring, as of the ocean. Then a peculiar thing happened to my vision as well: Werewolf’s head appeared to be haloed by a coarse mesh. Then it dropped forward, and I realized that his grip had relaxed.

I tore his hands from my throat and struck him once, on the jaw. He rolled away. I tried to also, in the other direction, but settled for struggling into a seated, then a kneeling, then a crouched, position.

I beheld Gnome, raising his hands in my direction, beginning an all-too-familiar and lethal spell. I beheld Werewolf, slowly removing a smashed birdcage from his head and beginning to rise again. I beheld the nude, full-size form of Elaine rushing toward us, her face twisted....

The problem of what to do next was settled by Werewolf’s lunge.

It was a glancing blow to the midsection because I was turning when it connected. A dark form came out of my shirt, hovered a moment and dropped floorward: It was the small bottle of djinn Dervish had given me.

Then, just before Werewolf’s fist exploded in my face, I saw something slim and white floating toward the back of his neck. I had forgotten that Elaine was second kyu in Kyokushinkai—

Werewolf and I both hit the floor at about the same time, I’d guess.

... Black to gray to full-color; bumblebee hum to shrieks. I could not have been out for too long. During that time, however, considerable change had occurred.

For one, Elaine was slapping my face.

“Dave! Wake up!” she was saying. “You’ve got to stop it!”

“What?” I managed.

“That thing from the bottle!”

I propped myself on an elbow—jaw aching, side splitting—and I stared.

There were smears of blood on the nearest wall and table. The party had broken into knots of people, all of whom appeared to be in retreat in various stages of fear or anger. Some were working spells; some were simply fleeing. Amazon had drawn a blade and was holding it before her while gnawing her lower Up. Priest stood at her side, muttering a death spell, which I knew was not going to prove effective. Gnome’s head was on the floor near the large archway, eyes open and unblinking. Peals of thunderlike laughter rang through the hall.

Standing before Amazon and Priest was a naked male figure almost ten feet in height, wisps of smoke rising from its dark skin, blood upon its upraised right fist.

“Do something!” Elaine said.

I levered myself a little higher and spoke the words Dervish had taught me, to put the djinn under my control. The fist halted, slowly came unclenched. The great bald head turned toward me, the dark eyes met my own.

“Master ...?” it said softly.

I spoke the next words, of acknowledgment. Then I climbed to my feet and stood, wavering.

“Back into the bottle now—my command.”

Those eyes left my own, their gaze shifting to the floor.

“The bottle is shattered, master,” it said.

“So it is. Very well ...”

I moved to the bar. I found a bottle of Cutty Sark with just a little left in the bottom. I drank it.

“Use this one, then,” I said, and I added the words of compulsion.

“As you command,” it replied, beginning to dissolve.

I watched the djinn flow into the Scotch bottle and then I corked it.

I turned to face my old colleagues.

“Sorry for the interruption,” I said. “Go ahead with your party.”

I turned again.

“Elaine,” I said. “You okay?”

She smiled.

“Call me Dancer,” she said. “I’m your new apprentice.”

“A sorcerer needs a feeling for mana and a natural sensitivity to the way spells function,” I said.

“How the hell do you think I got my size back?” she asked. “I felt the power in this place, and once you turned off the dancing spell, I was able to figure how to—”

“I’ll be damned,” I said. “I should have guessed your aptitude back at the cottage, when you grabbed that bone flute.”

“See, you need an apprentice to keep you on your toes.”

Werewolf moaned, began to stir. Priest and Amazon and Druid approached us. The party did not seem to be resuming. I touched my finger to my lips in Elaine’s direction.

“Give me a hand with Werewolf,” I said to Amazon. “He’s going to need some restraining until I can tell him a few things.”

The next time we splashed through the Perseids, we sat on a hilltop in northern New Mexico, my apprentice and I, regarding the crisp, postmidnight sky and the occasional bright cloud-chamber effect within it. Most of the others were below us in a cleared area, the ceremonies concluded now. Werewolf was still beneath the Cornish hills, working with Druid, who recalled something of the ancient flesh-to-coal spell. Another month or so, he’d said, in the message he’d sent.

” ‘Flash of uncertainty in sky of precision,’ ” she said.

“What?”

“I’m composing a poem.”

“Oh.” Then, after a time, I added, “What about?”

“On the occasion of my first Starfall,” she replied, “with the mana gain apparently headed for another record.”

“There’s good and there’s bad in that.”

“... And the magic is returning and I’m learning the Art.”

“Learn faster,” I said.

“... And you and Werewolf are friends again.”

“There’s that.”

“... You and the whole group, actually.”

“No.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, think about it. There are others. We just don’t know which of them were in Gnome’s corner. They won’t want the rest of us around when the magic comes back. Newer, nastier spells—ones it would be hard to imagine now—will become possible when the power rises. We must be ready. This blessing is a very mixed thing. Look at them down there—the ones we were singing with—and see whether you can guess which of them will one day try to kill you. There will be a struggle, and the winners can make the outcome stick for a long time.”

She was silent for a while.

“That’s about the size of it,” I added.

Then she raised her arm and pointed to where a line of fire was traced across the sky. “There’s one!” she said. “And another! And another!”

Later, “We can count on Werewolf now,” she suggested, “and maybe Lamia, if they can bring her back. Druid, too, I’d guess.”

“And Cowboy.”

“Dervish?”

“Yeah, I’d say. Dervish.”

“... And I’ll be ready.”

“Good. We might manage a happy ending at that.”

We put our arms about each other and watched the fire fall from the sky.