Something's happened to Patricia Wentworth...

The daughter of a famous politician lies in a coma...her mind trapped in the grasp of a bizarre fantasy world which threatens to claim both her life and sanity.

Phoenix is summoned...

Phoenix...the mysterious psychologist and adventurer whose methods enable him to enter the very fabric of the mind...to encounter dreams as if they were real.

To face the nightmare...

Phoenix crosses the gateway to Patricia's mind and discovers a twisted world linked to the legends of Oz. He journeys deeper, unaware that a creature from this nightmare has threatened his aides on Earth. It's the beginning of an extraordinary puzzle...an unexpected encounter of fantasy and reality that builds to a revealing climax!
WEIRD HEROES

VOLUME 5

PHOENIX

CREATED BY TED WHITE

A NOVEL BY

MARV WOLFMAN

BASED ON AN IDEA BY TED WHITE

GRAPHICS BY

STEPHEN FABIAN

EDITOR

BYRON PREISS

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Letters of comment are welcomed. Please address mail to PHOENIX c/o BYRON PREISS VISUAL PUBLICATIONS, 680 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY 10019. If you would be interested in seeing further adventures of this WEIRD HEROES character, please let us know. The next volume of the series, another anthology, will be available in April. WEIRD HEROES VOLUME 6 features Phillip José Farmer, Ben Bova, Arthur Byron Cover, Ron Goulart and Edmond Hamilton. Art by Craig Russell, Ralph Reese and others. For further information write: Mail Order, Pyramid Books, 757 Third Avenue, New York City 10017.

WEIRD HEROES VOLUME 5: DOC PHOENIX
and Text, Art Characters and Design

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“The stories, characters, and incidents mentioned in this book are entirely fictional. No actual persons, living or dead, are intended or should be inferred.”

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All art produced especially for WEIRD HEROES. This is the first publication of a novel based on the character featured in WEIRD HEROES Volume 2.
Phoenix on My Mind
a word from the editor

If you haven't noticed that this is a novel featuring Doc Phoenix, then we're in trouble.

If you have, but aren't sure exactly what's going on with this thing called Weird Heroes then sit back and relax. Here's the story.

In 1974, working with Pyramid Books, we produced the first of what was to be a line of new, illustrated paperbacks featuring pulp heroes for the 1970's. The premise was that the adventure heroes and heroines in prose form for the most part had passed away with the death throes of the old pulp magazines in the nineteen-forties. The likes of Doc Savage, The Shadow, Operator 5 and Sheena hadn't seen much light since Street and Smith switched from fantasy to sports. Instead, our popular heroes have come from the comics [Spiderman], television [The Bionic Woman] and the screen [which served as a popularization device for such prose characters as James Bond and Matt Helm].

We reasoned that it would be entertaining, fun, to introduce a new breed of popular hero through the print medium again, complete with the atmospheric sort of illustrations that graced the pages of the old pulps. We took a risk, tampered with old formulas, attempted to come up with something new. We developed characters that did not use violence to solve their problems, we developed series that reflected the needs of the '70's rather than the '30's.

We took a risk and, in 1975, released two volumes of heroic adventure, featuring work by Phil Farmer, Charlie Swift, Archie Goodwin, Steranko, Stephen Englehart, Joann Koblin and...Ted White.

The series went over successfully and we returned with the first of a cluster of novels featuring heroes introduced in the anthologies [plus a new contender: Nightshade]. The selection of heroes rested largely with you, our readers, and one character proved to be perhaps the best received and most entertaining of the s.f.-oriented stories. His name was Phoenix.

Ted White had developed the Doc Phoenix series as a Doc Savagesque type of adventure fiction. There was a team of talented agents and a giant of super-science at the helm. Yet Phoenix was more than a mirror image of an old pulp hero. He was a psychologist with a sophisticated modus operandi: He could enter the mind!

The approach was clever and it opened the door to numerous adventures. The minds of Doc's clients could allow for any sort of
world, from a macabre twist on the environment of Michael Curtiz's Casablanca to a fun house version of Dante's hell.

Or, as Ted speculated, a distorted, symbolic interpretation linked to a legendary land of Oz. The enticing concept of a nightmarish thriller set against a subjective version of a classic fantasy world propelled Ted into the first pages of a Phoenix novel.

Yet as Phoenix met with problems in the opening sequence of his adventure, so did Ted meet with problems in his Virginia home: A fire erupted, taking with it precious books and numerous manuscripts for Amazing and Fantastic. A dental ailment, thought subdued, resurfaced.

Within weeks, Ted was sitting in pain amid a buzzing collection of plumbers and carpenters. It was Towering Inferno, Part 2 with a bit of Marathon Man thrown in for fun. Not the sort of atmosphere conducive to Ted's writing. With an editorial backlog compounded by the fire, Ted was faced with a decision, one which left little room for choice. To neglect Amazing and Fantastic, which survived largely on his efforts, was unthinkable and so—

The Oz Encounter passed into the veteran hands of former Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics, Marv Wolfman. A long-time fan of the classic Baum stories and a widely-respected writer of heroic fiction, Wolfman reviewed the existing Phoenix material and caught the bug. The characters were in the best pulp tradition, the premise was clever and Oz was icing on the cake. After meeting with Ted and discussing the concept for the novel, Marv retreated into the world of Patricia Wentworth and fashioned the novel you now hold in your hands.

Our next step, as with all Weird Heroes novels, involved the illustrator. Here too Phoenix was in the best of hands. Fabian had illustrated the Phoenix short story in WH 2. The novel would allow him to tackle the character with the full sweep of his stipple board style.

The Oz Encounter was taking shape. Jeff Jones' cover painting evoked the other-worldly feeling for which he is renowned. Bill Murphy delivered a smashing logo and we met with Basile Associates to review the final design for the book.

Now it's up to you again. Journey with Phoenix into the mind of Patricia Wentworth, then let us know if you'd like him back for more adventures.

Phoenix is an open-ended series; if you have a favorite world, cue us in to it. Perhaps we can arrange for another 'encounter' before the year is out.

—Byron Preiss,
New York, New York
BOOK ONE
THE OZ ENCOUNTER
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“Count the fingers on your right hand. Do they equal five? Very good. Now then, close your eyes tight. No, not tight enough. Better now. Without opening them, tell me what I’m holding before you. That’s right, to the left of the wall. Very good. Now then, what color is the vase? No, you’re close, very close, but please try again. Good, Patricia, it is purple. Keep your eyes shut, please. How many fingers am I holding behind your back? Very good. Three is correct. Just one more test, then we’ll remove the wiring, Patricia.”

Phoenix moved away from the girl, crossed the room, then turned back. “Patricia, standing by the door is someone you know. First tell me whether that person is male or female. Then please describe in detail the clothing that person is wearing. Finally, explain as well as you can your reasons for remaining in your coma.”
Doc Phoenix turned toward James Wentworth and shrugged his shoulders. "She's responding well, but this is the crucial juncture. If she fails to respond completely, we'll have to take more drastic action."

Wentworth continued to stare at his daughter who lay comatose on the bed before them. "Whatever you think is right, Doctor Phoenix. You came very highly recommended, and I've been told I can trust you." The man ran his fingers through his hair. "Then again, I have little choice. There's isn't another doctor on the East Coast who even offered any hope for Patricia. Their best suggestion is to let the respirator take care of her for the rest of her natural life."

Wentworth turned to the window and sighed. "But I can't do that. I have to see what can be done to help revive her. I can't let her become a vegetable."

Lighting another cigarette, Wentworth fumbled with the lighter, then took a long drag. "I don't have to tell you, Doctor Phoenix, that these past six months have been torture for me and my projected campaign."

Phoenix nodded sympathetically. "I do understand, Mr. Wentworth, but now I must ask you to keep silent. This final phase of the testing is crucial." Doc turned from Wentworth and moved back to Patricia. "Do you have the answers to my questions, Patricia?"

The young girl was no more than ten years old, yet as she lay unconscious with multicolored wires leading from the small copper electrodes on her forehead to the secondary computer console near her bed, she seemed to possess the contentedness of an old woman. She began to speak, slowly at first, and her voice sounded as if it were coming through a filter. Transfixed, Wentworth watched as Doc's hands swept across the console, manipulating the controls with ease. Then his eyes returned to his daughter.

Patricia's lips barely moved as she spoke. "It is ... a woman ... My nurse ... Miss O'Brien ... She is wear-
ing... I—I can't... no... I—I see... it now... white... dress... with long... white stockings... white cap..."

"And why won't you come out of your coma?" Doc pressed for an answer. He didn't expect the young girl to give one, but he had to try.

She remained silent. Doc removed the wiring, leaving the copper electrodes taped to her brow. He turned again to Wentworth. "She has been hiding her thoughts. I can't help her with conventional methods. So, now I need your permission. It's time for entrance procedures. Can I start with the procedures we discussed?"

Wentworth wanted to say something but couldn't. Nodding, he sat back heavily in his chair and watched as Phoenix made a phone call.

In Doc's computer complex in West Virginia, the special red phone rang three times before it was answered.

"Doc?" asked Linda.

"We're set for a full transference, Linda. Please alert Moose and Dan, and set the main computer for total life-support. Then punch out the computer sequence as programmed." Doc checked his chronometer. "1300 hours. Eight minutes from now."

"Anything else I can do here, Doc? You make it all sound so perfunctory." Linda paused for an answer from the man who was both her employer and her friend.

"You've done it all for the past two weeks. Now you can pray, Linda. Nothing else."

Wentworth waited for Doc to hang the phone up. Forcing the words out, his voice cracked as he spoke. "I—I'm not sure I really understand exactly what you're doing. I'm sure you know I'm concerned for my daughter's safety, and I know you've assured me there won't be any danger, but—"

Doc cut him off. "I assured you I would not create any danger, Mr. Wentworth, I can't promise there won't be
any. Your daughter has lapsed into a coma. Her mind, so far as we’re concerned, is beyond any help. Yet the brain has not shut itself off, it’s . . .” Doc groped for the best means of simplifying his explanation.

“We all have dreams and nightmares, Mr. Wentworth, and as we dream our thoughts are as starkly real to us as anything we face while awake. Your daughter is lost in what resembles an extremely deep dream, and for reasons we don’t understand yet she refuses to leave her fantasy behind.” Wentworth’s eyes registered understanding. “Perhaps the dream is a pleasant one, something too tempting to vacate, or perhaps it’s a nightmare, one which is keeping your daughter its prisoner. We don’t know, but we can find out, through my special methods.

“There are dangers. If your daughter is wounded in her dream world, she will actually feel the pain in our real world. If she dies in the fantasy, she will die here. When I enter her mind, her fantasy will become real for me, and if I’m somehow slain there, I will be dead.

“The fact of the matter is, Mr. Wentworth, that for all our knowledge, for all our science, we are still victims of the most primitive form of self-torture known. Your daughter’s dream world is constructed from the fabric of her own mind . . . the same way dreams have been constructed for the past two thousand years. It’s my job to discover the fabric of Patricia’s dreams, to pull her away from her fantasy world whether or not she wants to go, and to bring her back to our reality. It’s a medical treatment, Mr. Wentworth, but the process is almost liberal in its operation. I must physically help your daughter to help herself.”

Phoenix connected another set of wires from the console to the copper electrodes on Patricia’s forehead. “Her fantasy will tell me what is bothering her here in the real world. By working in her dreams, I can hopefully cure her problems. I’ve had good success in the past, but I can
never promise that my treatment is without risk. We
could both be harmed, maimed, or even killed. I won't
sugar-coat my theory for you, but I believe it to be your
daughter's only hope at this stage.

"I'm not asking you to understand how the computer
insertion works. It's just that I need to be sure that you
want me to try to save your daughter. If your final
answer is no, I'll leave, and you can compensate me for
the preliminary tests. You must be absolutely certain. I
have less than three minutes before I'm to be transferred
into your daughter's mind."

Wentworth bit his lip. He had agreed in principle, but
the agony in making the final decision showed on his
face. He paced the small room for a moment, then turned
back to Phoenix for reassurance.

"You can do everything here, in her own room? Even if
there are complications? I don't want to take her to a
hospital—or to your complex. It's crucial that no one
besides us knows anything is wrong. It could hurt my
nomination."

Phoenix agreed reluctantly. "Yes, even the emergency
work can be done here, though I prefer my Virginia com-
plex, as you already know."

Wentworth was firm. "I'm sure you would. It is an in-
credible place to tour, Doctor, but I insist the work be
done here. For my reasons."

Doc glanced at the wall clock. "I have two minutes
left, Mr. Wentworth. If this means we are in agreement, I
will begin here in Patricia's bedroom. No one outside my
organization will learn anything from us. My files are
kept locked and I promise you complete secrecy."

Wentworth stared out the window toward the field of
grass surrounding his home. There were four weeping
willows clustered about the driveway and he recalled with
delight when he and Patricia had planted them a few
years after his wife's death. Patricia had been five then
and she had helped pack in the earth around the saplings.
She had been laughing then, but now... Wentworth turned back and stared at Patricia, five years older, lay-
ing on her small bed, eyes closed. “Damn it, go ahead. I
don’t understand any of it, but if your process can save
my daughter—Use it.” He scribbled his signature on a
paper on the dresser. “Do whatever you have to do.”

Doc checked the dial on his belt and synchronized it
with the timer on the computer. He nodded in
Wentworth’s direction, then placed his hand on Patricia’s
forehead, his fingers touching the copper electrodes. He
smiled briefly at Miss O’Brien, the nurse who had stood
silently by Patricia during this whole exchange, then
reached for his belt again and pressed the special stud in
its center.

Before the startled eyes of Wentworth and the nurse,
Doc Phoenix vanished.

During the first moments of interphase there was
nothingness; neither heat nor cold, neither presence nor
illusion. Doc felt himself whirling madly through a
kaleidoscope of flashing colors and images that assaulted
him from all sides. Spiraling outward, stretching into the
black infinity that surrounded him, he spun around in
mid-nowhere to see Patricia’s face explode. The features
became a mad nova that leered, then fragmented across
the void.

There was a suddenness of extreme temperature.
Flames from exploding stars whipped him senseless; ice
needles pierced his flesh. Falling through endless in-
terlocking gateways, head over heels tumbling wildly out
of control, Doc screamed. Vertigo set in, and Phoenix felt
nausea well up and crawl through him.

Images coalesced now into ethereal giants. Long, in-
tangible vapors stretched between a glowing head, com-
plete with dark, shadowed eyes, and small revolving
planets erupting with volcanic intensity, forming a large, powerful torso. Astral afterimages resembling Phoenix himself formed strong, sinewy arms and legs.

Doc snapped his eyes shut, knowing that the moment of interphase he was traveling through was his own mind being shred into a thousand-thousand segments. He had to keep his own sanity; he had to fight off the insanity that claimed Patricia Wentworth.

But his eyes began glowing, and to keep them shut caused too much pain. They snapped open and Doc screamed again.

Phoenix tensed his muscles, arcing his floating body downward through the gates, the endless silvery, spiraling gates. The giant form stood back from Phoenix, then dissolved, and the planets, the flaming globes, the astral forms all melted together into a massive river of spinning color that flowed through the gateway like an onrushing river.

It was madness now; Doc swam through nothingness, an insane rainbow-colored ocean pouring in after him. He turned back to see a massive wave of color engulf him in midstroke.

He was drowning in the tide, clutching at cerebral straws. "Pull yourself together, damn you. Drag yourself free." He cursed himself, edged himself on. Buffeted back and forth, he ricocheted off intangible thought-bursts. They exploded above him like bomb flak, and he dove toward cover.

The ocean was gone now, replaced with a thin line stretching toward a distant sun. He reached to touch the line, to use it to pull himself to safety, but it was too far off. Damn it, too far in the distance to grab.

He was reaching cortex center, but he needed the towline, and he floated just out of its reach. C'mon, Phoenix—stretch, damn you—stretch!

He grabbed the line between two fingers, but that was enough for the images to shift again. This time the
blackness of space, the endless void, the limitless infinity of which he was a part, disappeared. He was in a small box, not quite large enough to stand upright in. The walls were four feet apart in all directions, forming a perfect cube. Crouched, Doc pressed against the walls and his hand went through the membranous fiber: they were like moist silk at his touch. He crawled through the opening he had peeled apart and found himself standing before a mirror. Doc lifted his hand but the images responded only after a four-second lapse. He moved toward the glass to examine it, and four seconds later the image rustled forward as well.

The time-delay factor intrigued Doc; nothing like this had ever happened during any other interphase. There were the usual moments of sickness, vertigo, illusion, and pain; they were common and expected by this point. But this image-time displacement was something new.

Reaching for the glass, Doc mentally counted off the delay. Four seconds went by and the image repeated Doc’s actions. But as its fingers came to the same position where Doc’s hands lay, it reached out from the mirror and grabbed Doc, yanking him in through the glass.

Doc fought back, straining to pull himself away from the mirror. He braced his feet against the flooring and pulled, dragging his doppelgänger through the glass to him. The image was a weird distortion of Doc, and with eyes wide open in horror, it leaped at Phoenix, grabbing him by the throat.

Doc fell back, kicking his feet upward, somersaulting over himself to force the image to let go of his neck. It didn’t. Instead, the thing roared as a third hand grew from its chest and smashed Phoenix across the face, still holding Doc with its other two hands.

Phoenix raised an arm to protect himself then kicked upward into the thing’s face. The doppelgänger threw itself back and then pranced around Doc, studying him.
The ground below them suddenly became liquid, and the two figures were thrown off balance, but the image grabbed at Phoenix, refusing to let go. It clawed its way up Doc’s leg, to his chest and throat. Doc grabbed its face between his hands and pushed the thing back off him.

The double screamed wildly, slashing its three hands in every direction, its long nails rending gashes down Doc’s face. Phoenix dove under the water, pulling his double down with him, and smashing it on the rocks below the water’s surface.

The thing’s mouth was open and blood poured endlessly from it, staining the water a deep scarlet. Doc backed off, rising to the surface, then looked about for land; there was none as far as the eye could see in any direction.

The water began to shift, hardening with every moment. Doc scrambled onto a floating log while the thickening process advanced. Within a minute the surface below Doc had been turned to gravel that Phoenix was able to walk on without discomfort.

The sky above him was black, flecked with glittering colored lights. Phoenix glanced down to his feet and saw the gravel too was black, and the sputtering starbursts were reflected below him as well. He stepped forward to discover he was standing on nothingness. He could only see endless black in all directions.

He floated awhile, for time meant nothing here; even his chronometer was stuck between the beat of seconds. After a long eternity he saw a colorless globe whirl before him, a huge planet that went into orbit around him. Phoenix reached out and touched the sky, and the world went white.

Then more color washed its way over his eyes. The sky began to form around him; blue streaks were painted in place, being organized before Phoenix’s startled eyes.

The ground below him became brown with lush green vegetation; to his sides huge trees and bushes popped into
being.

Doc watched in fascination as the world was sketched in about him.

He had arrived. He was in Patricia Wentworth’s mind. His assignment had begun!
He did not know yet where he was—only that he was suddenly assaulted with a sense of blueness, that a fence alongside the road where he found himself was painted blue, that a small dome-covered cottage tucked behind a rambling blue bush was shingled in blue, that a horse, tied to a post, munching absentmindedly on the grass, was bridled in blue. If he had been anyone other than Doc Phoenix, he would have believed he had been snatched from reality somehow and forced onto a canvas painted by a madman who, for an unknown reason, had only one color swatched onto his palette. But Doc had battled across many strange worlds in his past and he could not discount even that improbable thought.

He was following a winding, dusty road, taking in the lavish countryside as he walked. White, puffy clouds stretched lazily above him in a yawning blue sky. There
was a light, tranquil breeze in the air and it lifted the fragrant scent of flowers to his nostrils.

Doc sniffed and shook his head; this made no sense. Yet, how many of Doc’s adventures did at first? It would take time for the reality of this phase to take effect. Doc would wait. When he took on an assignment, he had no other choice.

Gazing at the fairyland fantasy into which he was thrust, Doc continued hiking. This land was peaceful, idyllic; not at all what he had expected. But Phoenix knew there had to be something more here than this superabundance of sweetness and buttercups, otherwise he would not have been approached with the assignment. He continued down the roadway, waiting for the rug to be pulled out from under him.

Doc squinted as he stared at the sun high above him. It was noon, time to pause for a quick meal from his backpack, then continue on. He checked his chronometer and grumbled; this first expedition was costing him too much valuable time. There was little enough as it was. Doc felt anxious. He was nothing more than driftwood waiting for an ocean current to take him to the proper shore.

Quickening his pace, Doc reached a small rise before him on the left, overlooking a long, deep valley and—a village. There were five small cottages, similar to the one he had seen earlier, clustered at the crossroad. All sported the same tall chimneys rising from the cottage’s side walls, and all were painted blue.

There was something else too which Doc wished he could force from his mind. The cottages all looked like faces: the chimneys were ears; the windows that flanked the doors were eyes; and the doors were obviously noses. Only the mouths were missing, and Doc supposed that the doors doubled as such when opened. He grinned; that would be taking the analogy too far. What would Moose say if he were to learn that Doc was capable of flights of
fancy? Phoenix smiled, breathed in the sweet air, then stepped back.

Suddenly, Doc shook his head. What was happening to him here? He grasped his face between his palms and stretched the skin above his eyes. He realized that this world was luring him in—seducing him with a sense of contentment that could threaten his mission. One by one, Doc tensed his muscles, first in his face, then his neck, his shoulders, his arms. He stared at his clenched fist, blocking all thoughts from his mind.

Remember where you are. You can’t allow yourself to be lulled by the target’s world. There can be danger if you become too closely tied in with the subject. Remember who you are; remember the mission, the assignment, the battery of computers focused on you, following your movement through the target’s world. Become involved only as much as necessary, then pull back. If you make even the slightest miscalculation, you will destroy not only the subject but yourself as well. You can become trapped in the target’s world. You can find yourself walking through this land forever! Steel yourself, man. FIGHT THE MELANCHOLY!

Doc Phoenix breathed in sharply, his eyes losing the lazy, languid film that had washed before it only a moment before. Moments passed, but the danger would not. It was constant in the other mind, a disarming, deceptive tranquility from which Doc knew he must protect himself.

The village stretched below him and Doc used his vantage point to study it. Each house was surrounded by a neatly cared-for yard and a low picket fence that, like the trim on the cottages, was blue. Something nagged at the back of Phoenix’s mind: Why did this scene seem so familiar to him? He put the question out of his mind, confident that the answer would come shortly.

Striding into the village, Doc saw a woman in the backyard of the nearest cottage, hanging laundry over a
line suspended between two trees. Both the laundry and
the woman's clothing were in shades of blue.

Leaning over the low fence, Phoenix called out to her,
"Excuse me, ma'am . . ."

The woman whisked to face him in evident surprise,
and Phoenix saw that she was smaller than he had first
 guessed, perhaps only four-and-a-half feet in height. Her
 face was unlined, but he guessed she was middle-aged.

"Goodness! You startled me!" she said, her voice ris-
ing high. She looked up at Doc, her eyes searching the
giant towering over her. "We don't see many strangers
here."

Doc smiled. "Sorry to bother you, but I was searching
for a place to rest and grab some lunch." Doc surprised
himself at the extreme quietness of his voice; he had
somehow instinctively altered his own speech pattern to
one that would be acceptable to this woman.

She nodded as though his comment was not unex-
pected and then said, "You're a big one for sure, and I
expect you can eat me out of house and home. Tell you
what, sir, the four-horned cow needs some hay in her
manger. Do that and I'll have a hot meal ready for you.
How about that?"

Phoenix agreed. This would be as good a place as any
to get the information he needed. Doc checked his
chronometer again, looked skyward, wondered what
Moose, Steffan, and Linda were probably arguing about,
then went to the rear of the cottage and to the barn.

The manger was not large, in fact it was only an appen-
dage at the rear of the home, and had only one stall,
presently empty. The four-horned cow was quietly grazi-
ing near the rear fence, and Phoenix again felt the un-
nerving flickerings of memory trying to coalesce. They
would come, he was sure.

Finding a wooden pitchfork leaning just inside the
open entrance to the barn, Doc climbed to the haymow to
begin his work. Half an hour later he was done and
returned to the inside of the cottage, which he found reminded him greatly of the illustrations he had long ago seen in children’s books. The room was small, considerably comfortable, with its furniture built directly into the walls. The kitchen had a large fireplace with a black pot suspended over the coals from an iron arm that the woman swung outward on its pivot. She dished a steaming stew onto a plate that she handed to Phoenix; the stew, very much like the house and the land itself, was sweetly pleasant—annoyingly so. Doc searched for some blemish to mar the fantasy perfection of the cottage, some bitter aftertaste to cut the sweetness of the stew, but there was none. And that fact bothered Doc, for he reasoned that when the blemish would finally reveal itself, it could prove to be a horror that even Phoenix might not be able to stop.

“Where do you come from, stranger?” the woman asked, interrupting his thoughts.

He looked into her blue eyes and stated as simply as he could, “A long way off, ma’am. I doubt if my home is even on your maps.”

“And where is your destination?”

“I don’t know. But I’ll come to it. All I have to do is follow the road.”

The woman shot him a harsh look, strangely out of place here. “And which road would that be now? The road to the northeast or the crossroad?”

Phoenix considered the relative position of the sun during his morning walk. “The road to the northeast,” he finally said.

“Ahhh. Best you turn to the crossroad, then,” she muttered, stirring the stew again, then ladling some out for herself.

“Why?”

“The northeast road leads to a desolate countryside where you’ll find little to satisfy your curiosity but the Iron Castle,” the woman said, shuddering as she said
those two final words. Doc sensed her nervousness instantly. Possibly this was the blemish he was looking for. He pressed on.

"You make the Iron Castle sound fascinating. Please tell me more about it."

She said nothing, pondering her words before uttering them. Then, with a worried look, she cautioned Phoenix, "A change in direction would be best if you wish to leave our land alive. I have never seen the Iron Castle myself, nor would I ever wish to, but they say its master is a wicked wizard of the worst sort, and that the castle itself is surrounded by a land devastated by his magic. Few go in that direction, sir, and none have been known to come back to tell the tale of what they have seen."

"Magic?" Phoenix asked, his curiosity aroused.

"To be sure, but magic of an evil sort, magic which enslaves those who make use of it . . . a black magic," she finally forced out, her voice dropping to the slightest whisper, as if the heavens would come down on her for saying what she almost dared to think.

Phoenix listened intently, then: "Are you familiar with other sorts of magic, then?"

The woman nodded more confidently now. "And who is not? I have my spells to keep the milk sweet, the butter creamy, the hens laying. Simple spells such as any country woman hereabouts would know. Why, magic is known through this entire land, sir."

Phoenix looked at her, confused. "I'm a stranger to this land. Where I come from magic is a thing found only in children's books and old, uhhh—old tales."

"I thought as much," she nodded. "Your dress is unlike any I have seen." She regarded Doc for a moment, then continued. "Have you business with the master of the Iron Castle, then?"

"I don't know," Phoenix answered politely. "But I suppose I might, if that's where this road leads to."

The woman suddenly stood and cleared the table of its
dishes. "Then I doubt you shall pass this way again." Her manner was suddenly very distant.

"Good-bye!"

Rising from the table, Phoenix smiled as best he could. "Then thank you for both your stew and your information. Keep well." He turned his back and headed for the door when the woman spun about and ran to Phoenix, stretching her arm toward his shoulder to stop him from leaving.

He turned to her and saw a tear-stained eye beseeching him: "Please take care, sir. The Wizard is quite wicked, perhaps the most wicked wizard in all the land of Oz."

Phoenix's heart stopped: A thousand memories fell into place in his mind.

Before leaving the crossroad village, Phoenix searched out three more of the village's inhabitants and asked them all of the Iron Castle and its master. Each told him the same story: the road he followed would lead him into a land of evil, a wasteland ruled over by the vicious master of the Iron Castle. A man bent from age was the first he questioned. Leaning on a gnarled walking stick, he peered up at Doc and stammered, "My cousin... he once entered the grounds of the castle, sir. He was a strong, strapping youth. Full of life and vigor, he was! He never reached the Iron Castle, and what horrors he saw on the road there we never learned, for he was found crawling back on this road, struck mute he was, and his hair, once rich black like the deepest coal, had suddenly frozen white."

The old man coughed and held his chest. "For years he sat quiet in his parents' cottage, saying nothing, only staring in horror out the window toward the grounds where the castle stands. A tragic sight it was whenever I came to see the lad."
“He said nothing?” Phoenix asked. “Nothing after seeing the castle?”

The old man shook his head sadly. “He was struck deaf and dumb it seemed to us then, but on the eve of his death, not five years ago it was, he suddenly rose from his corner and screamed. They say all of Oz heard that horrified wail, so frightening it was.” The old man’s eyes flickered in remembrance.

“Aye, man, if you be wishing to enter the land of the Iron Castle, know that you have heard this tale and then reconsider your destination accordingly.”

The second person Doc asked was an old woman who echoed that story with one of her own. She brought Doc to her cottage then sat on her stoop while absentmindedly picking up her knitting needles. Yarn suddenly popped into her hand and she nervously knitted away as she spoke.

“Oz is just a gentle land, rich with life and free from fear, but the land wherein dwells the master of the Iron Castle, well, that land is like death itself. The ground is barren of all life, the grass which grows so freely elsewhere is withered, even weeds and other foul life fear to grow within the line of vision of the Wizard. Know this, man, that the land you wish to enter is evil, and truly I say to you, don’t go there. No matter how desperate your need to visit the castle may be, nothing can be worth even a moment’s touch upon that wasted land.”

The third person Phoenix spoke with was a young man. Holding a crutch to support his crippled leg, and swinging a giant sledgehammer with his one free hand to pound a massive peg into the ground, he nodded as Doc approached and broke into a wide smile. It was rare when someone else as large as Phoenix came into their village.

“Howdy there, mister, what can I do for you? Need your horse shod? A fence repaired? Why, I do all sorts of handiwork around the house and farm.”

Doc returned the smile. “Not really, but I do need
some information.”

The youth was beaming now. “Shucks, you couldn’t ask for anyone better than me for that sort of stuff. Y’know, I’m one of the few ’round here who actually was taught by books and such. Of course, that’s when my mom worked in Glinda’s place, and I got to learn reading by looking at her magic book. What do you need to know?”


The youth’s face suddenly fell, eyes narrowed. He was remembering something, and it was something he wished to forget. He threw his sledgehammer to the side angrily and turned back to Phoenix.

“That castle! I don’t ever want to think about it again. Not after what it did to me... not ever again.”

“I only want information. But if you’re afraid to speak about it...” Doc let his voice trail off, hoping the youth would react to his bait.

“Afraid? Aye, I’m afraid to talk about that accursed place! I want to see that castle and its evil master crushed to the ground, then burnt to its final ashes, and the embers themselves trampled into the earth.” He gripped the crutch tightly. “My father once ventured into that awful land, and I curse the day he began his journey. I was only seven years old then. We were so much the same, the way we laughed and played together. Ahhh, I sometimes wish we could have died together, but that was not the way it was meant to be.”

The youth hobbled over to a bench and sat down. “You understand, my mother was quite ill, dying from some strange disease. None in Oz is supposed to naturally die, but she was dying, and my father thought the wizard of the castle, as horrible as he was always painted to be, would not refuse to help a dying woman.

“So my father began his journey, and, sir, he never returned. But two nights after we last saw him, I heard a
savage roar come from the wasteland, and terrified, I ran to my mother's side, but she had died at that moment, died when she heard that scream, which we both knew came with my father's dying breaths.”

Phoenix watched as the youth breathed in sharply. “And so, sir, I curse that land and the master of the castle, for he took both my mother and my father from me, and I will never forgive him for that.” Then the youth rose and slowly walked back to pick up the sledgehammer and gave the peg a final wallop, driving it deep into the earth.

As Phoenix followed the road out of the village, he noted how it dwindled to a scant track overgrown with weeds, barely wide enough for his feet to follow. The road had been unused for a long time and soon it would be covered over completely.

Phoenix’s mind dwelt upon two subjects as he continued his walk; the first was the Iron Castle and its unnamed master. Speculation on that subject would be wasted now; he'd see the Wizard himself soon enough. But the second subject was one he was definitely interested in mulling over: The name of this land was Oz!

As did so many other children, Doc had read all of the Oz books in his youth. He had been a voracious reader of all fiction, but he had encountered the Oz books in a haphazard fashion, reading them as he found them, not in any definite chronological order. He racked his memory for their details.

The land of Oz, he recalled, was divided into four countries, each with its own color coding. The Winkies' country was yellow; the Quadlings' was red; the Gillikins', was purple; and the most famous, the Munchkins', was blue. In some of the books, if Doc recalled them correctly, these colors applied to nearly everything—the trees, the grass, the flowers. In other books it applied only to the colors that people wore, painted their fences and houses with, and things of that
nature.

The grass here was green as everywhere else, the occasional wildflowers that grew beside the road sprouted in different colors, with none predominating. But the village had blue fences, blue shingles and barns, and its inhabitants were all dressed in blue. This was therefore the land of the Munchkins, and that was where Dorothy’s house had been dropped by the cyclone in the first book, *The Wizard of Oz*.

In the middle of Oz where the four countries met was the incredible Emerald City, constructed, according to the first book, by the Wizard Oz himself, though later books tended to dispute that point, giving the impression the city had always been there. As a child Doc had been confused by the geography of Oz; the various authors seemed to forget whether the country of the Winkies was to the east or to the west, agreeing only that the land of the Quadlings lay to the south.

Doc looked up to the sun, which was now to his left. He recalled that Dorothy had met the Good Witch of the North first, Dorothy’s house having fallen upon and destroyed the Wicked Witch of the East. That would mean, if Doc were now in the country of the Munchkins, following a northeast course, that he was traveling away from the Emerald City, placing the country of the Munchkins definitely on the east side of the map.

But this Oz was not the Oz of the books Doc had read as a child. If this was Oz, it was another Oz altogether, and Phoenix could hardly count on all its details matching those from the books. No, the best he could hope for was a basic similarity.

He didn’t recall anything about the Iron Castle being mentioned by L. Frank Baum, but its presence here fit with his assignment. It could definitely be the center of the disturbance Patricia Wentworth was going through. And the fact that Patricia’s dream took place in Oz also seemed to make some sense; Patricia’s bookshelves were
filled with the various Oz paperback reprints.

The land changed as he followed the faint path upon the road. The trees were few and stunted, gnarled and twisted almost beyond recognition. The lush greenery was reduced to a few weeds, and even these seemed to be weak, begging for life, stretching away from the baked clay and dust in which they grew. There were no flowers, no birds, even the clouds were now few and instead of being rich and full, they were long strings tugging at the sky.

He was entering a land in which little grew; the sun was dim and the sky gray and ominous. The breeze had been sweet with the scents of flowers, but now it wafted sluggishly with whiffs of sulfur. Phoenix could readily understand why the gentle people of Munchkin Country feared this land.

The road was now hardly a faint track over the hard ground, but Phoenix continued along it, his keen steel-gray eyes picking its trail as he searched out its signs ahead of him. The air around him became thick and muggy, and the quiet chirping of birds was replaced with a low, constant drumming sound. Doc’s ears were prickling with anticipation as the incessant pounding swelled with every moment. Doc stopped and craned his neck upward.

Far in the distance he saw a black cloud moving along the horizon; the drumming noise seemed to originate from the ebony mass. Within moments the sky became black ebony, and the unending drumming rose to a fevered crescendo. Doc grabbed his ears as the painful noise assailed him, and then, as he tilted his head toward the sky, he saw them—the black cloud alive—a vast horde of flying creatures!

They were like coal flying on a velvet backdrop, only their fiery eyes could be clearly seen, blazing closer and closer toward Doc. They were coming at him, dropping down, surrounding him! He tensed himself, waiting for
the attack.

As they flew in closer, he could see what they were: huge winged *apes*, four feet tall with wings spreading more than twelve feet. The circled like buzzards, but unlike the desert birds, Doc now saw that they would swoop down to wound their prey.

Their beating wings raised clouds of dust about Phoenix. He quickly inserted his nose filters into place, keeping his mouth tightly compressed, but he was not able to drown out the constant droning they made as they circled him.

Then it began—talons raked across his face and arms in lightning-quick attacks. They slashed at him, then withdrew; then another would get the nerve and rake its talons over Phoenix’s chest. Doc pushed them off him as quickly as they came, but there were too many of them to stop.

They soared around him viciously, swiping at his bare face when he couldn’t see them. They were studying Doc, deciding how best to make Phoenix their prisoner.

One claw shot out and grabbed at Phoenix’s arm. Another ape went for his legs, and a third grabbed his other arm. He struggled at first, then went limp as they lifted him into the air and headed eastward toward the Iron Castle and its master.

Doc grinned, through the pain, at the irony of their attack. The winged creatures were actually taking him where he wanted to go.

As they soared, Phoenix watched the landscape below take on a nightmarish appearance. All signs of living vegetation disappeared, leaving only rock and sand and clay flats. As they arced across this wasted land, the rocks climbed into twisted formations whose shapes suggested creatures frozen in poses of agony. Now all signs of the road vanished.

The sulfur smell was stronger now; wisps of smoke and steam shot out from rock crevices with great force.
Although there was no longer any sign of the sun (the sky overhead was still black as night), it grew hotter, almost unbearably so: the heat was rising from the land below. Phoenix let his body relax. There would be no excess movements to add to his discomfort; he would remain as cool as he possibly could to throw off the draining effects of the heat.

Minutes, miles passed. Then, with incredible speed, the apes swooped toward a black spire towering into the sky. The jutting shape looked at first to Phoenix like a fireblasted rock formation, but as they flew closer, it became clear that this was the Iron Castle. It was asymmetrical, with five ebony turrets, high walls with walkways along their heights. A dry moat that surrounded the castle appeared to be a bottomless chasm. The Iron Castle was completely black, highlighted by glints of deep gray. Phoenix took this all in, including a vague pathway that he formed in his mind. He would need to know the entire area to escape or reenter.

As the apes descended, Doc checked his chronometer. His mind thought back to his West Virginia complex, to "reality."

Suddenly, as if to punctuate his thought, the apes dropped into an inner courtyard of the castle, twice as long as it was wide and paved with blocks of black iron. Releasing Phoenix, the apes rose at once into the air, as if to flee what they knew—or did not want to know—of this hellish place. Doc wondered whether they had the right idea as he stood alone in the bleak Castle courtyard.

Turning slowly, Phoenix surveyed his surroundings. He was certain that this place was the source of the blight upon this land. His job did not appear as easy now as it had when he'd first entered the land of Oz. There was a scraping sound from behind and Doc whirled to see an iron door creak open. It was large; at least eight feet tall, but the man who came through the doorway was so huge that it seemed to shrink in contrast. The man's head
came within inches of the top.

Phoenix’s first thoughts were that he was facing a transplanted ogre, a creature from mythlore far older than Oz. Then the great man laughed, a booming sound that seemed to fill the courtyard with surprise... humor. But the laughter chilled Phoenix to the bone.

“Welcome to the Iron Castle, stranger. We have so few travelers in these parts that it’s a pleasure to see another human face.” The voice was deep and it had no edge of viciousness.

Doc found himself staring at the huge man dressed in tatters. The man towered over Doc as Doc had towered over the Munchkins. He wore a gray beard streaked with white. It was long and shaggy, totally unkempt. His clothing was black, every inch of it frayed and torn, almost in pattern. A flash of memory showed in Phoenix’s eyes. Doc recognized him.

“You’re the Shaggy Man,” he said.

Laughing again, the big man nodded. “Indeed I am, but you have an advantage over me. Who might you be, stranger?”

“Just a wanderer,” Phoenix answered, leaving it up to the big man to press on.

“Indeed? And your wanderings brought you here to this seldom-visited corner of Oz?”

Phoenix walked around the Shaggy Man, studying him carefully. “I was curious to meet with the master of the Iron Castle. I didn’t expect to find you here.”

“Is that right?” the Shaggy Man commented, his tone doubtful. “And why shouldn’t I be here? It’s my castle!”

Phoenix said nothing but walked over to a suit of armor standing by the iron doorway. He lifted a large sword from its sheath and hefted it. “I thought you lived in Emerald City with Dorothy.”

The Shaggy Man thought for a moment before answering. “Dorothy? Do I know a Dorothy? I fear I don’t, stranger.” He wrinkled his brow in thought. “No,
I’m sure I don’t.”

“Perhaps not.” Doc said softly. “But tell me, why do you live out here, so far from people? I thought you wanted to be among friends.”

The Shaggy Man smiled. “Why not? I like it here. I like to live alone, not with people. They’re a bother, more of a nuisance than anything else. This land would be better off without most folks.”

Doc made note of the answer. He might tell him more about Patricia’s problem as time went on.

The Shaggy Man bent forward toward Phoenix, and his voice dropped to a hush. “In fact I’m working on a way to rid Oz of everyone, and each day my power grows and my mastery extends itself further. One day all of Oz will be a wonderfully barren wasteland like the grounds outside my castle. And then I’ll rule over one and all!”

“And what of the people?” Phoenix asked. He was already sure of the big man’s answer; after all, this was a children’s story, and the Shaggy Man’s motivation seemed to be nothing more than playing the role of the expected archvillain. But that idea reinforced a more direct and more significant thought: This was just a child’s story, but it was being played out in the mind of Patricia Wentworth.

The Shaggy Man laughed again. “The people shall go the way of all living things which once were here.”

“I thought no one died in the land of Oz?”

“Indeed so,” the big man nodded. “I have them all here in my castle. Would you like to see them?”

Phoenix was led through the iron door into a long corridor. The castle was scaled to the Shaggy Man’s oversized form: the hallways were broad, and the ceilings were no less than twelve feet high; the chairs and tables that were in the center of the rooms Phoenix walked through were all half again the size he was accustomed to. Phoenix, himself a giant against a normal-sized man, appreciated the extra toil necessary to create this out-
sized furniture.

The castle interior, devoid of any style or beauty, lacked color or softness. There were no windows, but a pearly gray light illumined every corner. The pathways were hard iron, and the walls were evidently the same.

At last the Shaggy Man led Phoenix into a grand hall, a vast room large enough to encompass Phoenix's entire headquarters, with space left for an annex. In the center, on the iron-tilted floor, occupying so small a space as to be dwarfed by the immensity of the room, was a bright blotch of color: greens flecked with gold and traces of blue. As Doc approached the shape, it took definite form. It was a full twenty feet on each side, rising approximately two feet high. It was a perfect miniature in every detail, a pastoral landscape dotted with farms and villages.

"Do you like it?" the Shaggy Man asked. He was evidently proud of his toy. "Here they are." He strode over the landscape, stooping to scoop up one small figure from those closest to him. "My models." He handed the figure to Phoenix to examine.

It was a small man, dressed in blue overalls. Only half an inch high, it rested comfortably in Phoenix's hand, lifeless, unmoving.

"Every day, as my dominion extends itself, so does my model. When my creeping blight touches land, the life it had is transported here. When the blight grasps a person, that person is brought here, reduced in size, and placed on the board."

The Shaggy Man laughed as he stretched his hands showing the immensity of the room. "One day this entire hall will be filled, and the lands of Oz will all be destroyed. Then there will be peace everywhere."

Phoenix shuddered. The small figure he was holding had been alive at one time; the lands the Shaggy Man callously stepped over had been flourishing, working farms. Doc stared at the small figure, his hand closing over it forming into a fist. "I won't allow you to do this
any longer.” Phoenix asserted. “I can’t let this madness continue.”

“I’m afraid you can’t do anything to stop it.” The Shaggy Man chuckled. “You see, I’m quite impervious to harm.” He reached into a fold of his tattered coat and drew forth a small object wrapped in tissue paper. He removed the wrapping and displayed a small black horseshoe magnet, “I have the fabled Love Magnet, you see.”

The Shaggy Man held it before him for Phoenix to see. “A fine trinket, this. It can bend the will of any living creature, making all who encounter it my slave—my devoted slave.”

Phoenix felt a perverse bliss fill his consciousness. It was the magnet crawling into his subconscious, forcing him to love the Shaggy Man. Shaking his head violently, clasping his ears in pain, Phoenix ran down the length of the hall trying to escape the effect of the magnet.

Snapping his fingers almost casually, the Shaggy Man leaned against an iron post, waiting for one of his winged apes to swoop before Phoenix, blocking his way of escape. Doc pounded the ape’s chest, but he finally fell to his feet, weakened. The magnet was sapping him of all his strength.

He stared up at the Shaggy Man, cursing the giant and loving him at the same time. He had been totally unprepared for that effect, and he was slowly being taken completely in. His love for the big man was growing with every second, his own will was vanishing. He was becoming a mind-slave whose sole desire was to please the Shaggy Man in any way he had to.

“Now,” said the Shaggy Man, pleased with Phoenix’s forced surrender to the thrall of the Love Magnet. “What shall I do with you? Perhaps I’d best make you one of my little models? I daresay, making you a guard in this palace would be too dangerous at this point. No telling what strange un-Ozly powers you may have. Yes, a
model it will be.” He laughed a warm, genial laugh as Phoenix fell helpless to the floor.

With his last vestiges of self-control, Phoenix forced his hand downwards to his belt. There, numbed and stiffening fingers groped for the special stud and then finally pressed it.

Phoenix saw the Shaggy Man’s smile vanish, and then it all vanished: the Shaggy Man, the Iron Castle—*everything*. 
The transition between fantasy and reality always brought with it a sense of unending vertigo. Then the shimmering mist that Phoenix saw all around him would vanish and he would return to true Earth—in this case, to the bedroom of Patricia Wentworth, the ten-year-old girl from whose mind he had just retreated.

The room was dark, the blinds pulled shut. Miss O’Brien, the nurse who lay asleep in a large plush chair, sensed Doc’s reappearance and started up. Phoenix glanced at her and shook his head. She slumped back into the chair.

“No change here either?” he asked, knowing the answer before she said it.

“None.” Her voice was tired, wistful, as she gestured toward the silent figure of the girl apparently in deep sleep. “She didn’t move at all, not at all.”
"I didn’t expect she would, but at times my entering a target’s mind is enough to cause a change." Phoenix crossed the room and gazed at Patricia’s features. "If only Wentworth would’ve allowed me to take her to my complex."

The door from the hallway opened and Wentworth poked his head in. He was middle-aged, and with his hair graying at the temples, he looked his forty-three years. "Did I hear my name taken in vain?"

Phoenix answered. "I was just mentioning that Patricia would be better off in my complex."

Wentworth shook his head angrily. "You know my reasons. The moment Patricia leaves here, I lose control. For my peace of mind, she stays here. Simple as that."

"Not that simple," Phoenix answered. "This is not going to be easy. I told you that before, and I’ve just found the first of the complexes I was searching for. It isn’t good."

"Why not?"

As Phoenix explained what he had found, the nurse watched him intently. Her face showed no emotion as Doc mentioned the trip to Oz and his meeting with the Shaggy Man. She listened and accepted his story.

Wentworth listened, unimpressed. "Oh, yes, she was a big fan of those books." He turned toward the bookcase by the girl’s bed. On its top shelf were paperbound copies of more than a dozen books with the word Oz imprinted on their white spines. "Her nurse at the time bought all these books. I didn’t like filling her head with that stuff then, but what difference does that make now? Why do my daughter’s thoughts about Oz complicate matters? I thought you were a specialist in—"

Phoenix interrupted. "The problem is this Shaggy Man character. He doesn’t fit in with the rest of your daughter’s fantasy world." Doc walked over to the bookcase and thumbed through the pages of two of the books. "Mind if I borrow some of these? It’s been a long
time since I’ve read any of them. It might help.” As he spoke Phoenix opened his left hand and looked at what was in it.

“What’s that?” Wentworth asked, lighting another cigarette, then coming in closer to peer down at the tiny object in Phoenix’s hand.

It was a small figure, half an inch high, clad in blue overalls.

Nothing had changed when Phoenix returned to Patricia’s room. Miss O’Brien regarded him questioning-ly. She had seen what was going to happen before. Phoenix wondered how many times she would see it again before he completed this assignment—if he com-pleted the assignment.

Patricia Wentworth still lay silent in her bed. She was a pretty girl, her face angelic in repose. As Phoenix stared down, a frown appeared on her brow, then dis-appeared so swiftly that Phoenix doubted he had seen it at all. So young! Ten years old and already in full retreat from the harsh realities of this world . . . the world to which she had gone had realities of its own, some no less harsh. He wondered whether she was one of the tiny figures on the miniature landscape in the Shaggy Man’s castle.

She was lying on her side, knees up against her stomach, half-curled, in memory of the position she’d oc-cupied before her birth. Phoenix reached down and stroked her hair from her cheek, and he worried momentarily about what would happen if he was not able to cure her. He breathed in a long, slow gulp; it was better not to con-sider failure.

Once again he touched her, his fingertips on the copper electrodes placed on her forehead. With his other hand Phoenix touched his belt stud.
And, for the second time in as many days, he disappeared.

In his rereading of the Oz books, Phoenix found one person who stood out above all the others. That was Glinda the Good. She appeared in the first book chiefly as a *deux ex machina*, the one person who could help Dorothy return to her world. She appeared in a similar role in subsequent books. In the second, *The Land of Oz*, the Scarecrow turned to her for help when he was deposed as ruler of the Emerald City. And it was Glinda who unraveled the secret of Tip, and returned Princess Ozma to her rightful place as ruler of all Oz. By the last L. Frank Baum novel, *Glinda of Oz*, it was apparent that she was wiser and more powerful than Ozma. Glinda played the wise-mother figure, ageless, beautiful, and, unlike Ozma, adult.

Doc needed help. There was nothing in his arsenal that could defeat the magic in an imaginary dream world where magic was the order of things. His best bet would be to find Glinda. Surely she could help; that was her role in Oz. He smiled to himself: helping was Glinda’s function. Then the smile faded slightly with his next thought: *Did Glinda exist in Patricia’s version of Oz?* And, even if she did, would she be the same Glinda he had just read about?

Doc considered the Shaggy Man. He was not the same as Baum depicted him. He first appeared in *The Road to Oz* as a tramp with a warm good humor who befriended Dorothy and followed her to Oz. He had the Love Magnet in that book, but used it for simple protection from harm. It had worked against all but the Scooters who wanted to hurl him and his companions into a giant pot of soup. When the Shaggy Man displayed the Love Magnet to them, they only laughed and said they would
love him in their soup. End of tragedy, of course, but Doc realized that any harm that would befall him in this fantasy world would be real. He was subject to any dangers. And if this new Shaggy Man killed him, he would die as quickly as if a bullet had entered directly through his heart.

Phoenix wondered how the Shaggy Man had become an evil giant bent on destroying all life in Oz. And, more importantly, what did he symbolize to Patricia Wentworth? There had to be an answer somewhere here in Oz, and Phoenix was hell-bent on finding it.

He found himself standing at the edge of an unfamiliar road. Similar to the first he encountered in Oz, only wider, perhaps more traveled. He glanced at the sun; it was high overhead. That didn’t help, as he wanted to go south into the Quadling Country where Glinda ruled, and with the sun at high noon he had no easy method of determining direction. Doc decided to wait a while. He ambled over to a tree that overhung the road and sat down beside it, his back against the trunk.

It was easy to sit here, do nothing and relax. But Phoenix tried to keep his mind active. Mathematical equations danced through his thoughts. Problems in calculus were created and instantly answered. He could not let this simple, pleasant world lull him away. He had to fight it. In many respects, this world was ideal.

But it was no good thinking that. This land was unreal. He could enter it, walk here, talk here, fight here, even die here, but he could not live here—not inside the mind of a ten-year-old girl.

That was always the major problem with Doc’s adventures; it was so simple to become part of the mind-dreams his patients created, be it a trackless desert filled with rampaging sandworms, or a Martian village complete with murderous hordes of bug-eyed monsters, or an ethereal waterland where Doc would see floating forms fighting mindless sea-beasts.
Doc had battled his way through them all, but this elementary fantasy, a world that Doc himself had enjoyed as a child, though only through the pages of the novels, this world was so very easy to accept, too easy to make his own.

He glanced once more at the sun and then at his chronometer. He’d been here twenty minutes. Not long enough.

“Hello.”

Phoenix turned, startled by the young voice behind him. It was a girl.

“Hello, young lady,” he said, smiling.

“I’m not a young lady,” she answered. “I’m Dorothy. I’m just a little girl.”

She looked five, perhaps six years old. Her hair was blond and her face seemed very familiar. She was not the Dorothy from the books or the movies, but someone he knew.

She was dressed in a simple gingham dress with a high waist. She was barefoot, perhaps the reason he had not heard her approach. And she wore a wide sunbonnet on her head. Her eyes, looking directly into his own, were the clearest blue he had ever seen.

“What’s your name,” she asked.

“Doctor Phoenix. Doctor Raymond Phoenix.”

“Do you live here?”

“No. I’m a stranger. Do you live here?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m looking for my dog Toto. He’s a little black dog, and I can’t find him anywhere. Have you seen him by chance?”

“No, I haven’t, but I’ll help you look for him.”

Dorothy beamed. “Really? Can we look now?”

“Well, I have something else I have to do right away.”

“You certainly don’t look like you’re doing anything else. You look a lot like you’re just sitting here not doing anything at all.” Dorothy put her hands on her hips defiantly. She wanted Phoenix to help, and there was no
two ways about it.

Doc smiled. "I'm waiting for the sun to move a little."
"Why?"
"So I can tell the direction. It's noon now, or it was just a little while ago. When the sun moves it will head westward."
"You're heading west?"
Phoenix glanced at the sun again. "No, I'm going south."
"But the sun won't go that way."
"No, but once I know which way is west, I'll know which way is south."
"Oh." She regarded him silently for a moment, then wrinkled her brow, still puzzled over his explanation. There was something about that look, something about the way she frowned that struck a chord in Phoenix. Dorothy pouted and put her arms on her hips, waiting for a further explanation from Phoenix, but he continued to study her. Dorothy frowned again, and Phoenix knew: it was the same expression he had seen on Patricia Wentworth's face just before he'd reentered her mind. Dorothy was five years younger than Patricia, and her face wasn't as settled into definite lines, but this was definitely a projection of Patricia, the way she wanted to be. "Why do you want to go south?" she finally said impatiently.

It took a minute before Phoenix answered. "I have to see Glinda the Good, and I believe her land lies to the south."

"Why do you have to see Glinda?"

Doc paused. A child's questions could go on forever; she would want to know more about everything. "I want her to help me, Dorothy. I have to find someone here in Oz." Phoenix wondered whether this Dorothy knew of the Shaggy Man.

"That's a good idea," she answered, smiling brightly. "I think I'll go with you. Maybe she can help me find
Toto."

"Isn’t that a long way to go looking for your dog? You didn’t lose him there, did you?"

Dorothy shook her head. "No, but Glinda has a magic book of records. It tells her everything that ever happens in Oz. So it should tell what happened to Toto, don’t you think?"

Phoenix considered it for a moment. I might be a good idea to keep the child with him. He wasn’t sure what role she would play in this place, or how she might fit into his total plans, but he was sure she represented a special bridge in Patricia Wentworth’s fantasy, his best link to the consciousness of the real girl.

"Anyway," Patricia/Dorothy said, "I know which way to go to get to Glinda’s. She pointed back along the road in the direction Phoenix had come. "It’s that way, so you don’t have to wait for the sun to move, after all."

Phoenix grinned, then rose to his feet. "You’re on, Dorothy. We’re off to see the wonderful sorceress."

Dorothy took his hand in hers as though she had always known him and they were the best of friends. She was, he felt, a trusting child. But then, that had been the way of the original Dorothy as well. He wondered about her as they walked through the small forest that surrounded them. She was only a symbolic replica of Dorothy, yet she beamed happily. What was the horror that forced Patricia Wentworth to seek a fantasy fairyland? What could possibly have turned this girl into the child lying comatose on another world outside the mind? Doc gritted his teeth; he was more determined now than ever to learn the answer.

No good, he thought. He was becoming personally involved with the subject. He had to step back from her. He couldn’t become too involved; he’d miss a subtle change in behavior, a quiet, shifting reaction, a gesture from this dreamchild that might reveal the puzzle’s answer. The girl who walked by his side down the road only seemed to
be like the others in this dream world. She was not. Phoenix was the only invariable human reality in Patricia Wentworth’s dream world.

Doc turned to the girl. “How far is it?”

“Well,” she said, pausing in deliberation, “I can’t be sure, but I think it’s a long way from here. The other times I’ve visited Glinda I didn’t begin from here. So I don’t know, not for sure.” She shrugged, unworried.

“Does this road go all the way?” asked Phoenix.

“I don’t think so, but it goes south, I’m sure of that. See?” She pointed at a fence that bordered the road. “It’s red. That means we’re already in Quadling Country.”

Phoenix glanced at the sun. She was right; they were heading south. He looked again at his chronometer. He’d set the inner dial for noon while waiting under the tree. It now read 2:13.

The sun set at 8:47 by Phoenix’s chronometer. They’d had a pleasant afternoon’s walk, and unlike most children of her age, Dorothy had walked mile after mile without complaint, sometimes singing songs to herself, sometimes skipping while she held his hand, often pointing out the song of a nearby bird, or an unusual plant growing by the roadside, or some other point of interest. Her mind was alive and open, her spirit free, and this, Phoenix decided, was where Patricia Wentworth’s spirit had fled to, leaving behind the hollow body of a child.

They had stopped at a farm in the middle of the afternoon for a generous meal provided by a grandmotherly lady who fusses over Dorothy. It had been the last farm they had seen; they were entering the “Wild Country” now, according to Dorothy.

Nightfall found them in a quiet forest through which the road meandered as if it had forgotten its destination. “This is as far as we go, Dorothy. I’m afraid that I’d like
a night's rest even if you don't need one," Phoenix yawned. Dorothy didn't protest; she merely sat down heavily on a bed of leaves and sighed.

He took a nylon tent and sleeping bag from his backpack. It was a warm summer night; no blanket was needed, and the sleeping bag would be large enough for the two to use as a mattress, with dry leaves piled under it for comfort.

As Doc set up the campsite for the night, Dorothy explored the area and vanished into the darkness. Moments later she came rushing back, calling for Doc even as she ran. "Come here quickly. Look!" Doc dropped the tent peg and loped over to where Dorothy was pointing.

There in the distance was a light, flickering first faintly, then stronger, as though the branches were moving in and out of the light's path. But there was no wind, and the branches were still. The light did not appear to be moving. "What do you suppose it is?" Dorothy asked excitedly.

"A will-o-the-wisp, I suppose."

"A what? Oh, come on, let's look."

Dorothy ran through the trees toward the direction of the flickering light, and Phoenix, not liking the look of the scenery, plunged in after her.

Unseen ebony branches whipped against him. Thick roots caught his feet, tripping him as he ran. The light seemed to be far off, and Dorothy quickly vanished from his sight into the darkness. The sound of his running feet over hard gravel masked the sound of her passage. He felt himself plunging into a nightmare, and then he remembered whose nightmare it was. Phoenix shuddered at the thought.

He was sure it was a will-o-the-wisp, an evil sprite, a thing of magic in this land of magic, perhaps the work of the Shaggy Man; there was no way of knowing how far his influence extended itself.

A branch snapped out and raked across Phoenix's face
with clawlike thorns. He brushed it away from his eyes and saw Dorothy directly before him, staring entranced at the light that lay beyond her. Doc paused, breathed in deeply, then pushed his way through the final branches that stood between the girl and him.

"Over there, a house." Dorothy shouted toward him excitedly. "Let's go inside."

Phoenix looked down at her with barely suppressed anger. "Hold on. We go nowhere until we speak. I don't want you running off again."

"But I was afraid the light would go out." She didn't look up at Doc.

"Assume it would have when you were halfway through the forest. You'd have been caught there alone, in the dark."

Dorothy smiled, her eyes beaming mischievously. "But I knew you were right behind me. You sounded like an angry herd of elephants, you know. Besides which, the light didn't go out, did it?"

Phoenix half-smiled to himself: children's logic, the most impossible kind to refute. He said nothing to her but nodded as she ran the final yards to the house. "Go on, then. Perhaps whoever owns this place will put us up for the night," he finally said.

Doc eyed the house; it was actually only a small cottage, in fact; only one small room. Dorothy paused before the door, waiting for Doc to catch up with her. She knocked, and since there was no answer, before Phoenix could say anything, she opened the door and entered, Doc following close behind. "Anyone here?" he called out, knowing the room was empty even as he asked. There was silence; the only movement came from the waving flame of the candle, sitting in its holder on the table in the center of the room.

"There's no one here, but this place gotta belong to someone. The candle's lit." She looked under the table, perhaps for someone hiding fearfully. But there was no
one there, either.

The table was set with two places, and at each place was a bowl of steaming soup and a plate filled with meat and vegetables. Surprisingly, while the chair before one place was ordinary in size, the other was smaller in its seat and back, and perched upon taller legs—a modified high chair, exactly the right size for Dorothy.

Phoenix spun at the sound of the fire crackling behind him. There wasn’t a fireplace when he entered the room, he thought, but he must have overlooked it. He saw neither cooking utensils nor signs of the preparation of the meal that was set on the table before them. In fact, the cottage seemed to have no kitchen at all.

Staring at the set table, Doc was in deep thought when Dorothy called to him. “Well, what are you waiting for? Let’s eat.”

“I think not,” Doc answered. “The food is probably for someone else. I’m sure they’ll be right back.”

Dorothy frowned: “No, I don’t think so. I think it’s for us. I think it’s magic.” Simple as that.

As Dorothy pulled out her chair, sat down, and began eating, Doc considered the cottage, the food, and Dorothy. He crossed the length of the cottage and stared out the window into the blackness of the forest. The trouble with this phase, he felt, was its childlike nature. Created by the mind of a ten-year-old, the world operated at a speed Doc was unaccustomed to. The speech patterns, slowed to a drawl, like a 78 rpm record playing on 33 1/3, cleaved its way into Doc’s mind. There was a numbing, hypnotic feel to the people, to their way of talking, to everything here. It wasn’t real enough to force Doc to total alertness, and it wasn’t pure fantasy.

As a psychologist, Phoenix was able to accept behavior patterns of all kinds, but he was not prepared for this sort of world. Piaget would be fascinated, but Doc felt a need. There was little for him to relate to, less for him to guard himself against in this playground meant only for
children.

Dorothy was already eating as Doc studied her. Why did Patricia see herself as a five-year-old? What happened at that age that forced her to become five again? What did her version of the Shaggy Man, represent?

Phoenix already had his own answers, but he restrained them, waiting for the facts to back him up. “Aren’t you going to eat now?” Dorothy asked. “The meat’s really great.”

Doc sat and tasted the food. There was something about the meat that just didn’t satisfy him. Like everything else on this Oz world, it had no substance. The meat was neither sweet nor tangy, neither well-done nor rare. It was just right, but it wasn’t right enough. Something was wrong, but Phoenix could not put his finger on what it was.

After they’d eaten, they turned to examine the beds. There was one on either side of the room; one was adult-sized, the other child-sized. By this time Doc accepted the “magicalness” of everything within this cottage. If that was the way things were here, so be it. It was Patricia’s fantasy.

Each of the cottage’s beds was built on a platform attached solidly to the wall. Doc turned from his bed to check Dorothy’s; his eyes skipped past the table in the middle of the room, then swiftly returned to it. The table was cleared save for the lone, flickering candle. The flame waved enigmatically.

“I told you it was magic,” Dorothy sang, looking toward the tabletop. “So you see, it was all right to eat from it.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Phoenix. And, on that note, he climbed into his bed and rolled over to sleep.
“Doc?”

Phoenix rolled over and opened his eyes and saw he was lying on the floor of his West Virginia laboratory headquarters.

“Thank God you’re all right, Doc. We were worried.”

An acrid smell hung in the air where no smells should have been. Doc let his eyes sweep the room, finally coming to rest on the worried faces of his two closest associates, Michael (“Moose”) Moynihan and Linda Monteleone. “Why am I here? What happened?”

Moose’s expression was grim, totally out of character for him. “We’ve had trouble, Doc.”

Doc inhaled. “An explosion?”

“The main computer room. We shifted immediately to the back-up system, but, well, I guess you see the results. We had to bring you back here—just to prove you could
get back. Understand?”

Doc nodded, taking in the sight of the wreckage. “How’d it happen? Sabotage?”

“yes,” Linda answered quickly. “And not the first time, either.”

“what?”

“We didn’t know what to do—I mean, about telling you. You were in Crystal City, and the last day or so you’ve been ah—inside. We didn’t want to disturb you—”

“Fingers wanted to yank you out then,” Moose broke in. “He didn’t figure any client was worth your life. But—”

Linda continued. “—but we felt the mission could have been jeopardized if we pulled you out then. I mean, you could have been close to the solution . . .”

“Besides,” Moose added. “We had to rig the back-up mechanism and make sure it all tested out. I didn’t want to take any chances when I didn’t have to. So we waited a few extra hours, and I made sure everything was functioning the best it could, under the conditions, of course. So we didn’t want to disturb you not until we had to. But, when the bomb went off—”

“We just didn’t have any choice then,” Linda finished.

“The back-up system’s supposed to take over instantly. You know the design as well as I do, Doc. But if there had been any break in the continuity, even a nanosecond’s worth, well, that was the one question we couldn’t live with, and it had me pretty well scared, let me tell you.”

“So we recalled you. I’ll take the responsibility, Doc,” Linda insisted. “I talked Moose into it.”

“I had my doubts, Doc. If I coulda been sure . . .”

Phoenix nodded. “You both did the right thing. The only way you could be sure was to recall me. I accept that.”

“Did we screw things up for you, Doc? I mean inside?”
Linda asked, her voice betraying her concern.

"I don't know. And I don't know whether I can return to exactly where I was. I guess we'll just have to find out. But that can wait. I'm more concerned about this, and the other acts of sabotage. Come on, we've got to go over it. All of it."

Phoenix's West Virginia headquarters were located in a nearly inaccessible valley between two ridges. There were no roads leading to the complex, and only a helicopter could navigate through the difficult series of mazes Doc had set up. The only other method of entry was hiking, and that was heavily discouraged both by the natural features of the land and by certain "improvements" Phoenix had introduced. Access to his headquarters was meant to be as difficult as possible, but somebody unwanted had entered the complex, not only once, but three times.

The first time, Linda explained, they hadn't realized there was an intruder in their midst. An alarm on the north ridge had gone off, but investigation proved fruitless: there was no sign of anyone. They assumed a stray animal had triggered the alarm, possibly a bear, since the inductance device would react only to a warm body weighing over one hundred pounds.

The second time it could not have been an animal: the outer door had been forced open. It had been a skillful job by a professional. The door had appeared to have been left unlocked by accident, but since the locking mechanism was automatically activated when the door was closed, it had to have been jammed. It would take a talented bear indeed to have accomplished that jimmy-rigging trick.

Immediately the staff had gone on the alert. Despite their precautions, however, it was obvious that the unseen visitor had made his way through the complex a third time, leaving behind the bomb that had made a shambles of the computer room.
However, during his escape, the intruder had tripped a hidden camera. When Phoenix examined the picture, he felt a cold chill travel up his spine and lodge itself at the nape of his neck.

It was a rear shot: the saboteur in the act of escape. Only his back from waist to head was visible. It was hard to get any sense of scale; his body nearly filled the photograph, blocking out most of the background. But Phoenix had seen the figure before. He recognized the scraggly graying hair that hung carelessly from beneath the brim of a tattered hat and tumbled on to the shoulders of a frayed jacket. He recognized these features even as his mind rejected their implications at once as totally impossible.

*His hidden headquarters had been invaded and sabotaged by the Shaggy Man.*

“That doesn’t make any sense, Doc!” Moose stared at the photos incredulously, shifting his head back between the copy of *The Road to Oz* and the snapshots.

Linda looked at the print and studied it again. “I don’t see how you can be sure who this is. It just looks like a man in torn clothing. I mean, that wig—it is a wig, isn’t it?”

Phoenix was grim as he paced the lab. “You’re both right. It doesn’t make any sense, a picture of the Shaggy Man. It would make a lot more sense if it was a man wearing torn clothing and a wig.

“But,” Doc continued, “I just met the Shaggy Man, and that is him. There’s no doubt about that, Linda. The reason has to be a combination of thoughts, and the question we’ve got to ask ourselves is why anyone would break in here using that disguise. And why does he want to sabotage our entire computer complex?”

Picking up a shattered computer tape, Phoenix then
turned once more to Linda and Moose. "Assume someone purposely dressed as the Shaggy Man. That would mean he knows about our assignment. How, then, does the fate of a ten-year-old girl become involved with his deliberate act of sabotage? Also, is the sabotage against us or against Patricia Wentworth?"

"I can't figure it out, Doc. Why would anyone want to hurt her? She looks so innocent and sweet sleeping there."

"Hard to say, Linda. We know that James Wentworth, Patricia's father, has political enemies. The attack on Patricia could have been engineered by one of them."

"Or perhaps it was Moose in a moment of typical clumsiness." The voice belonged to the newcomer to the discussion, Daniel ("Fingers") Steffan.

Moose shot a mean look at Steffan. "When did we allow you into this outfit, Fingers?"

"The picture of you participating in this undertaking is roughly akin to that of a wild animal rousing about freely within the halls of Buckingham." Steffan stared at Moose stiffly, flared his nostrils, then turned away.

"Aw, you're not in the courtroom now, shyster. You don't have to use those fancy ten-dollar analogies around here."

"If you are requesting that I cease using a functional vocabulary, it could only stem from the fact that you fail to understand the English language when properly spoken. And, should that be the situation, I sincerely suggest you return to your television set and pay careful attention to the next lessons they teach on The Electric Company. It might help you."

His brain trust was now assembled, and Doc paused before going on. Daniel Steffan was Doc's attorney and close friend. He was a tall, slender man, always impeccably dressed in the latest styles.

Steffan was a well-known lawyer willing to take on any
case where a person's civil liberties were violated, with little regard to the finances of the person involved. Steffan had joined Phoenix's operation several months before. He learned Doc's computer technology from Moose, and it was while speaking with Moose Moynihan for the first time that, in an unguarded moment, he let spill the fact that he had been nicknamed "Fingers" in law school when it had been rumored he had lightfingered a debating opponent's notes. Moose never let him forget that he knew that little fact.

Moose regarded all lawyers with suspicion and enjoyed picking on Steffan in particular, deflating the affectation he found in him. Moose was a huge, heavy man, most closely resembling a bear, with sandy-colored hair and a full bushy beard. He was a computer scientist and systems analyst, perhaps one of the best in the country. It was his knowledge of theoretical physics and mathematics that had been used in the development of Phoenix's parapsychology program.

From the moment Moose met Steffan he had found his perfect foil. Steffan would immediately become ruffled whenever Moose called him by his questionable nickname and would snap back at any comment the computer expert made. Over the months the two had become fast friends, sharing with Doc a great number of bizarre and exotic adventures, but neither relented in baiting the other and trading a dig.

It was good fun that relieved the great tensions and frictions at crucial times, yet it confused Linda Monteleone when she first came across it.

Linda was twenty-eight years old, but to a casual observer, she often appeared to be no more than fifteen. A valuable and subtle trait, she took advantage of it often. When she first broke into Phoenix's laboratory months ago,* it was under the ruse of a lost adolescent.

Moose had fallen for it quickly. Linda had been raised as an orphan in eastern Asia, and had suffered for many years as the “property” of a succession of “high-class” pimps.

At fifteen she’d begun her career as a spy and had been thought killed several years later in Cambodia. She’d joined Doc Phoenix’s crew after he’d performed his special brand of parapsychology on her, and she had been a loyal aide and friend of Phoenix and his brain trust ever since.

“Let’s get back on the subject,” Phoenix began, interrupting his own thoughts. “I think we can safely dismiss the idea of aging hippies at this point. Someone broke in here and planted a bomb. That required not only some forethought but a high degree of skill. Few people are even aware of this place, and fewer still possess the knowledge necessary to break through our warning devices.

“The man was dressed as the Shaggy Man, and I don’t believe he intended for us to see him; the cameras are hidden behind a wall panel, and I doubt that he was even aware they were there.”

“It seems to me,” Steffan butted in, “that our bomber just may be a bit too knowledgeable . . .”

“What are you trying to say, shyster? And how about saying it in English.”

“I am saying, my rather large and grotesque friend, that I would be inclined to believe the only persons sufficiently familiar with the working operations of our complex are those who work here.”

“See? I told you he couldn’t say it in English. C’mon, lawyer, tell it to us straight.”

“Very well, Moose. For the children among us—are you paying attention, Moynihan?—this would appear to be an inside job.”

“You sure, mouthpiece?”

“It would make sense, my Neanderthal. ‘He’ wore a
costume because 'he' knew 'his' picture would be taken, and 'he' didn't want to be identified. A person working here would be easily identified. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I hate to say I agree with you, fancy-pants, but I've gotta. You got any candidate in mind?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

Everyone stared at the grim-faced attorney. "Well?" Moose challenged. "Who?"

Steffan surveyed them all before speaking. He stood straight, cleared his throat as if to begin a final defense plea. "Perhaps you haven't considered all the implications of the costume. The long hair, for instance. Possibly it was not a wig after all, and possibly that could mean we have all jumped to the wrong conclusion that our bomber was a man. Suppose 'he' was a she?"

"Now just a moment," Linda broke in, angrily. "Are you trying to say I—?"

"What do we know about you, Linda? You came here with the intention of killing Doc. How do we know whether you aren't still planning that little caper?" From Fingers's expression it was hard to tell whether he was joking or being serious.

"I think this has gone on long enough," Phoenix said finally. "I'm well aware of Linda's past. But you've forgotten two things, Daniel. First, Linda's past is just that—past! It's behind her. Second, you've forgotten that she's already been through deprogramming. I've been through her mind, I know who she is, what she was. She can't have any secrets from me, Daniel. I trust her."

"Thanks, Doc." Linda smiled, looking up at Doc with obvious gratitude, and perhaps something more. "You know, I've always discounted Moose's prejudice against lawyers, but now I'm not too sure."

Steffan sheepishly put his hand out to Linda. "I'm sorry, but you've got to understand I can't have the knowledge Doc has. Besides, I tried to make my assump-
tions based on facts that should not be readily discounted. The possibility still exists that it was a female intruder who entered here.”

Linda looked at his outstretched hand and turned her back on the lawyer. “I don’t appreciate being accused of crimes I’m not involved in, Steffan.”

“I apologize, Linda. That’s all I can do. I only hope you’ll accept it.”

“I do, Daniel. I was only trying to keep you on edge a big longer.” Linda smiled and took Steffan’s hand.

Doc cleared his throat. “Although I met the Shaggy Man several days ago, I never told anyone here about that encounter. Whoever decided on that disguise—assuming it was a disguise—was not on staff here, which rules out any of our workers, Daniel. No, the implications run back to one specific place.”

“Where?” Moose and Steffan chorused.

“Crystal City! I described my encounter with the Shaggy Man to only one person: James Wentworth, Patricia’s father!”
Phoenix didn’t return to Crystal City with the others. Instead he gave his associates their instructions, then pressed the special stud on his belt that was connected with the microradio circuit that in turn was keyed to Phoenix’s elaborate computer system. The main computer was out of operation, but the back-up proved itself, and Phoenix was eager to return to Patricia Wentworth’s dreamworld.

Therein lay his first duty, but he wondered whether that alone was the reason for his impatience to return. It was, after all, a fairyland and in its childlike innocence quite the most pleasant fantasy Phoenix had ever experienced. Except for the blight of the Shaggy Man, that is.

He had yet to understand its role in Patricia’s fantasy. Had she retreated to Oz because she found it a better
place, and was the Shaggy Man simply another aspect of herself, trying to drive her out of her catatonia? Or was Oz a paradise that was becoming a hell?

The hypotheses speeding through Phoenix’s thoughts were intriguing. But then, so had been his adventures in other minds.

Doc thought of the Shaggy Man’s apparent crime, and the spreading of the blight on the land of Oz. Also, he considered the small toy figures, each representing a person taken in by the Shaggy Man’s growing power. They were representations of whatever was bothering Patricia Wentworth. Her mind had created them, and that meant there was some definite significance to them.

The blight seemed to be obvious enough: the ending of pleasure, the robbing of freedom. As it touched the fantasy of Oz, the dream ended and was replaced only with cold desolation. But what could have affected a ten-year-old to that degree? What could have caused the dream and then the nightmare?

The toy men meant something else altogether, but it was still beyond Phoenix’s grasp. They were simply toys taken from one unreality and placed in another. They were silent, Doc thought, perhaps that being the clue. Perhaps someone or something was trying to silence Patricia? But who? Why?

Doc felt frustration: a multitude of questions but no answers. Opinions with nothing to base them on.

There was a fantasy here, one that seemed entirely unhinged from reality. Worse, there was danger.

Danger because the Shaggy Man existed both in the world of Oz and in the real world. Because the Shaggy Man was trying to destroy all of Oz and Phoenix’s computer complex at the same time. And, should the Shaggy Man destroy either reality while Phoenix was here in Oz, he would succeed in destroying Raymond Phoenix as well.

Yes, there was danger, and because he was now an
alien visitor of a ten-year-old’s mind, Phoenix was helpless to stop it. Yet somehow he had to stop it—and for some reason, Doc Phoenix believed the basis for this dreamworld’s Shaggy Man would give the answer that Moose, Daniel, and Linda were striving to find in the real world, somewhere out there, beyond the rainbow.

He was back in Oz, now, in the same cottage he had been in before, only now the room was empty. Dorothy had gone, or perhaps she had not yet arrived. It was always so hard to tell. Phoenix could have come here before his previous visit, or long after it. He could have appeared elsewhere, in a similar cottage.

Or . . . No, it wasn’t worth worrying over now. This was the same cottage, and he would probably meet with Dorothy again. Since she was Patricia’s mental self, she would have to play a major role in Phoenix’s search.

And Doc knew that search had to begin with finding Glinda the Good. There would be some sort of an answer there, for Glinda, possessor of all knowledge, would know why Dorothy/Patricia had reason to fear the Shaggy Man.

The concepts in Oz were confusing, Doc felt, but the answers would come clear as time progressed. He had walked through many dreams in the past, and that was the way it had progressed each time. He would find a memory fragment here, a clue there. Individually they were all useless, but together they would reveal the truth to whatever Phoenix came searching for.

Doc had never failed before, but then he had never faced twin menaces before. Two Shaggy Men existed in this Encounter, and either of them could destroy him. Doc shuddered as he left the cottage and stepped on the open road toward Glinda’s castle.

The land was clear and rolling now, and simply walk-
ing over the road was refreshing to his spirits. But as he walked, his mind continued to ponder the puzzle of his complex sabotage and his unlikely suspect.

It seemed on the surface that the "real" Shaggy Man—that is, the Shaggy Man he'd met here in Oz—could not have been responsible for the bombing. It was, to begin with, impossible to believe that a figment of a child's imagination, whose existence was real only in that imagination, could emerge into the real world. Phoenix had discovered the means to enter into others' fantasies, but he assumed that the process could not reverse itself.

He knew of no way for something from Oz to leave that subjective reality and leap over to objective reality. Yet he dug into a pocket and pulled out the tiny figure of a man he'd picked up from the Shaggy Man's model layout. He'd carried that into the real world, hadn't he? He'd brought back an aspect of subjective reality, and therefore it did have objective reality as well.

Could he, Doc wondered, without being aware of it, have opened the doorway into his world for the Shaggy Man to enter? When he'd escaped the Shaggy Man's increasing domination, had the Shaggy Man found a way to follow him home?

But the bombing was hardly the Shaggy Man's style, he thought.

More questions and still no answers. And this was a problem he knew he was unable to solve until he had more clues to work with. With that realization he pushed the entire matter to the back of his mind. It would simmer there until the proper information appeared or until his unconscious, working with all the data available to him, put the separate pieces together and gave him the answer he was seeking.

Phoenix's thoughts were interrupted by a sudden, muffled cry. He spun about, alert; the road at this point bordered a copse of trees, and as he stood still, the cry
was repeated. It was a half-strangled gag, a choking, grating noise. Was it a trap? A decoy?

The grass was wet as he stepped off the path and pushed past low-hanging branches that were sprinkled with droplets of a recent rainfall. And that gave him some information: some time had elapsed since he’d left Oz. He pushed on, moving the trees apart with one hand. Where had the cry originated from? Directly ahead? To the right? Or—?

Another cry, this time almost a groan, and it came from ... there? Ahead! Phoenix caught a patch of brightness, the glint of sunlight striking metal.

He pushed his way further on until he found himself standing face-to-face with ... the Tin Man.

There was no mistaking the figure. It was the size and shape of a man, as tall as Phoenix himself. Its body was a cylinder that tapered at the neck. Its legs were impossibly flimsy strips of metal jointed with simple hinges where, in a human frame, the hips, knees, and ankles would be. Its arms were similarly constructed, ending in hands with tubular fingers that were firmly gripping an ax.

The ax was raised as if to strike a blow, and the figure stood before a half-cropped tree, fresh chips lying at its knees. But the woodsman was unmoving, a metal statue on display.

Phoenix stopped, somewhat bemused, before the Tin Man. The sounds the pitiful creature made were known to him: “Llll ... llull ... ellll.” Oil! Was he destined to act out a part of each and every one of the Oz books?—Phoenix wondered. He looked about for an oil can but saw none.

The Tin Man obviously knew what Doc was looking for but was powerless to help him. He made a new gurgling sound: “Dddddd ... hdddd ...”

Phoenix puzzled over these sounds for a moment, then glanced at the Tin Man’s head: Of course! The metal man looked remarkably like the John R. Neill illustrations, but on his head, instead of a funnel, was an
Phoenix reached for the can, applied oil in place to the jaw hinges, then to the Tin Man’s neck, elbows, wrists, and hands, and by that time, the Tin Man was able to take the can from him and finish the job himself.

“Thanks, friend, I am much relieved,” were his first words as he applied the oil to his leg joints. “There! I feel much better now. Thanks again. You know, ever since I had this clever oilcan hat made for me, I had thought I would never again be caught unprepared by a sudden rainstorm.”

He stretched his tin legs and they creaked at first; the stiffening of his joints was loosening up. “I am quite abashed. Had you not come along when you did, I would be standing here still, frozen from rust.”

Phoenix regarded the Tin Man for awhile, not quite sure what to make of this new addition to his Oz cast. The man sounded intelligent enough, but previous experience taught Phoenix that everyone in this Oz world spoke with nothing larger than a child’s vocabulary.

The Tin Man looked puzzled. “Anything wrong with me, sir? You’re staring at me quite bizarrely.” Yes, he spoke well—surprisingly so, considering that this world was a figment of a child’s mind.

“Aren’t you the Tin Man, Dorothy’s friend?” Phoenix finally asked.

“To be sure I am.”

“I thought you lived in a tin castle in the land of the Winkies. Isn’t that some distance from here?”

The Tin Man thought for a moment. “You know, I can’t answer that question. I just don’t know. I seem to recall I was in my Imperial Palace, and after that my mind’s a blank. I just can’t seem to remember anything.”

He glanced around him, checking his surroundings, then returned his gaze to Phoenix. “But here I was chopping down a tree, and it seems a natural thing for me to do. I guess that’s because I was once a real woodsman.
years ago.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Years ago when I was a mortal like you.”

He seemed almost embarrassed at saying that, then quickly went on. “I was chopping wood out here when the rains came, quite suddenly, and before I thought to freshly oil myself, I was stopped, stiff with rust. But I still don’t know how I came out here.”

Phoenix mused. Another mystery. “I wish I could sort out the relevant from the irrelevant,” he said aloud.

“I beg your pardon?”

Phoenix smiled. “This is a land of mystery, is it not?”

“Indeed, I sometimes think so. And speaking of mysteries, my friend, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you around here before. You are not, I’m sure, a native of Oz.”

Phoenix introduced himself and explained his mission to see Glinda. The Tin Man listened intently. “I’m indeed fortunate you were passing by just then. We are, you say, already in the land of the Quadlings? I believe my best course is to accompany you to Glinda. She, no doubt, can settle my mystery as she does your own.”

Phoenix was curious to learn more about the Tin Man, and up until this moment the people he had met in this fairyland were not given to talking. Besides which, they were all humans, whereas the Tin Man was not, and yet he did not resemble a robot either. His motions were not mechanical, and there was no sound of metal clanking as he strode over the moist earth. Nor did he resemble the movie version of the Tin Man. His face was metal, and yet seemed capable of portraying emotions. His body was insubstantial and indeed could never function in objective reality, but here he moved with practiced ease.

More importantly, he was an adult with an adult’s sophistication in speech. Granted, he could not compete with Daniel Steffan, but he could easily hold his own with Moose until the conversation came around, as inevitably it would, to technics. The man was completely absorbed
with computers and cherished having a good argument on their capabilities and functions.

They began walking. "Tell me about the Shaggy Man," Phoenix said.

"The Shaggy Man? What do you wish to know about him? A fine fellow, I always thought. Another friend of Dorothy's, you know."

"Then you haven't heard about his present activities?"

The Tin Man shrugged in ignorance. "I have to admit I've kept pretty much to myself, lately. Isn't the Shaggy Man in the Emerald City?"

Phoenix shook his head. "No, he's in the land of the Munchkins where he's become master of something called the Iron Castle. Have you ever heard of that?"

The Tin Man thought for a moment. "Don't think I have," he said at last.

"Well, he's living out of that castle, spreading havoc across Munchkin Country, with a dreaded blight."

"Indeed?" The Tin Man looked genuinely startled. "This is news to me. The Shaggy Man, you say? Most strange. How is he accomplishing this?"

"If I knew," Phoenix said dourly, "I wouldn't be on my way to see Glinda."

The Tin Man shook his head. "You know, I find something very peculiar. I can recall quite vividly my life as a mortal woodchopper. I can recall my infatuation for a young woman whose guardian was a witch and the way the witch enchanted my ax so it first cut off my one arm, then another, then my legs, and finally my body."

He looked up to see Phoenix listening. "And I recall the tinsmith who made this fine body for me. I remember Dorothy and the Scarecrow, and my going with them to the Emerald City. Oz was there, a great man who gave me my tender regard for all living creatures. Then Oz went back to the outer world, and my friend the Scarecrow became ruler of the Emerald City."

He stretched his arms as he spoke; the squeaking punctuating his speech. "I recall the Scarecrow coming
to me with the boy Tip, who turned out to be an enchantment of the lovely Ozma, and who then became ruler of all Oz. I remember all that almost as certain as if it happened just yesterday. But of recent events I can recall nothing.

"It's most puzzling, most peculiar. And now you bring me further news, and I have to confess to you, my friend, I find it most disquieting." He sighed, a strange sound coming from a metallic creature, and then went on. "Surely Glinda will help us get to the bottom of this."

_I hope so_, Phoenix thought to himself. _I sincerely hope so._

"I wonder what happened to my old friends," the Tin Man mused aloud. "The Scarecrow—I do hope nothing bad has befallen him. And little Dorothy! Why, the Shaggy Man was one of her particular favorites!"

"I saw Dorothy earlier, Tin Man. She was on this road, heading to see Glinda." Phoenix wondered how much time had actually elapsed while he was on Earth.

"Good," smiled the Tin Man. "I guess she should be there by now."

On that note, the Tin Man did a little skip and danced on. A frown crossed Phoenix's brow. Storm clouds were gathering in the sky before him.
Moose saw stars swirling in the foggy grayness, then shook his head before his face caved in for the third time. He fell backwards over a small chair in the darkened office, with little time to see the tall, bald man crouched before him, beckoning the young scientist to rise again for another round of pummeling.

The man was larger than even Doc, and he moved with the perfection of a professional boxer. Moose was good with his fists, but he knew this man was better. If Moose was to win or at least survive this encounter, he would have to resort to other tactics, and for Michael Moynihan, “tactics” was another word for cheating.

He had been taken by surprise, with a heavy blow to the back of his head while leaving Wentworth’s Crystal City office, and for the life of him, Moose couldn’t see anything wrong with a bit of underhanded fighting of his own.
The man’s hands were beckoning to him. *Come on, get up!* they seemed to say. The hands were abnormally large, fit for breaking bricks. Moose groaned and fell back to the floor, seemingly unconscious.

The bald man stared at the inanimate body for a moment, then bent over Moose to see whether he was dead. Moose lurched up suddenly, grabbing the bald man’s collar with both hands and forced him down, hard, on the floor—head first. There was a sickening crunch as flesh hit wood, but when the bald man rose to his feet, Moose saw it was the floor that had cracked.

Enraged, the tall man kicked Moose, sending him sprawling into a file cabinet. Moose flattened himself as he rolled to a stop, waiting to be approached again. The man snorted like a maddened bull, charging as Moose’s hands shot up to the overhang of the cabinet, grabbed it tightly, and pulled himself up sharply, his legs cannonballing into the charging man’s midsection. The bald man smiled, unruffled.

Moose craned to see the door far to the left. He had to reach it quickly and call for help; he had to do something, anything. It was the only way he could survive against this man-mountain.

Damn Wentworth, Moose thought; if only he were in his office. Yet how could he know Wentworth hadn’t sent this—*thing* at him in the first place. Moose could only be sure that he was three doors down from Wentworth’s office, being pounded upon by an enraged Cro-Magnon, and he could only curse everyone connected with this Oz case and pray he would survive this battle.

The man was silent; his manner chilled Moose to the bone. It was one thing to engage in a brawl, but quite another when the man you were facing remained completely quiet, goading you on with fantastic strength, without revealing why he was after your life in the first place. Moose wondered whether the man was able to speak. Beside the point: his muscles spoke for him.
The bald man saw Moose staring longingly toward the exit and stepped into the scientist's path of vision; he smiled, and once again beckoned Moose to come forward. *Accept your beating,* the smile said.

Moose backed away from the file cabinet, watching the bald man carefully. Between them was a heavy steel desk, weighing at least three hundred pounds.

The bald man smiled at Moose again, then, with one hand, brushed the desk from his path. Moose gulped, wondering whether prayers would help at this moment, and quietly hoped there was such a thing as divine intervention. If ever it was needed, now was the time.

He took a deep breath, then charged head first into the mountain.

It didn't move.
It didn't even quiver.
But Moose went down, heavy and fast.
Funny how your mind wanders when you're in pain, Moose thought. His mind flashed to Wentworth's secretary.

"Is Wentworth in?" he had asked.
"Mister Wentworth is not in. He is gone for the afternoon."
"Any idea where I can find him, or when he'll be back?"
"May I ask your business with Mr. Wentworth?" Her tone had been cool enough to chill a volcano.
"It's rather private, I'm afraid." Moose had hesitated to mention his connection with Doc Phoenix. He wasn't sure who Wentworth confided in, and he had been ordered to say nothing to anyone not approved of by Wentworth in advance.
"Really? Well, I am afraid I just can't be of any help, then," the woman had said, turning to her typewriter in obvious dismissal.

Moose left Wentworth's office intending to return to Fingers at the motel they were staying at in Crystal City.
He was halfway down the hallway when he heard a voice calling him from behind.
"Hey, buddy?"

Moose turned into the first punch; a steamroller with knuckles on the end.

And now, less than three minutes and an eternity later, he lay on the floor of a darkened office, less than fifty feet from the friendly secretary, and a trained gorilla in a business suit was trying to flatten him to the level of the floor below.

Moose kicked up between the man’s legs. That should at least slow him down, he thought. It didn’t. The bald man stood there a moment more, then smiled again. Moose was getting tired of the man’s smile; it was always followed by the sound of bones crushing, and the bones were always Moose’s.

His right hand darted out, grabbed Moose by the neck and lifted him high into the air. Moose weighted 273 pounds, yet he was tossed across the length of the room as if he were nothing more than a paper airplane. He rolled as he fell heavily into some packing crates.

There was a crowbar by the scientist’s feet, probably tossed aside by workmen. He took it in his hand, and hefted it to check the weight. It was solid. The bald man approached slowly, eyeing the bar with every step. Moose grasped the crowbar tightly with both hands, then smashed it across the bald man’s chest.

Nothing! No reaction!

Moose swung the bar again, but this time his wrist was caught in the bald man’s viselike grip. Moose felt his arm being crushed until he dropped the crowbar to the ground.

The man smiled, then shrugged Moose off against the far wall. Damn it, he really wished he could remember those prayers now. He needed them. He cursed his Sunday School teacher for not drilling them into his head better.
His bones aching, his face bleeding profusely, Moose staggered back from the wall to lean against a crate.  

*May as well be comfortable when the end comes.*

The room was swimming in scarlet before his eyes, but through the red shroud he saw the tall man stalk slowly toward him. There was no rush; there wasn’t need for any. The man seemed to be taking a leisurely midday stroll; no look of concern showed on his face. Moose didn’t care any longer. He would die, or he would be tortured; it didn’t matter which. All he wanted was peace, and he could find peace in death. It would be welcome, he thought. *Anything* would be welcome now.

He tried lifting his arm, but found he couldn’t. Blood was gushing from his shoulder and wrist, and then Moose began laughing. He hadn’t expected it to end this way, not in the beautifully mundane City of Crystal. He had always hoped that when the time came, he would be sailing along the Riviera aboard his yacht, girls flanking him, fanning him, and feeding him fruit. He would, of course, be ninety-three, and when the shroud of death came, he would rise and bow, and walk off without a look back.

He wanted a good life, a long life, and a peaceful end. He did not want to die disgracefully in a darkened office, beneath the battering-ram fists of a silent assassin. And he certainly did not want to die without knowing the reasons.

"Tell me why," Moose forced out. "Just tell me why."

The man looked at him again, then smiled. This was it. He could not survive another beating. But, Moose thought, he would not go willingly, he could not die without a fight. This wasn’t the angel of death taking him at the end of a long and fruitful life; this was a maddening murderer, who would at least have to work to accomplish his goal.

Moose somehow forced himself to rise from the wooden packing crate he was lying on. He teetered back
a moment, then straightened himself out.

Come on, you bastard! You may kill me, you murdering bastard, but I'm not giving up. You're going to have to work to kill me. You hear that? You're going to have to work for your stinking money.

Moose had wanted to say that. He desperately wanted to finish that last curse, but all he could say before he passed out was: "Come—"

It was a shame, but his final words, before blackness overtook him, meant nothing.

Daniel Steffan paced about his room nervously; Moose had been gone for two hours. Surely that was more than enough time to have seen Wentworth and gotten the information Doc Phoenix had sent them to get. He looked at his watch for perhaps the tenth time in as many minutes, then paced the room again.

Damn it, where is that monkey! he thought to himself. Why hasn't he called? God, if he decided to grab a quick lunch, I'll... Steffan didn't finish the threat; he knew Moose well enough, and the scientist would never slow a mission down for anything. Something had happened, and whatever it was had to be plenty bad to prevent a call from going through.

The television cried on, a male voice shilling a great new record album by some forgotten fifties rock singer: "Now, for a limited time only, you can get this record plus three more for only seven ninety-five, nine ninety-five for tape!" Steffan snapped the annoying noise off; enough was enough.

He had to find Moose, even if that meant disobeying Doc and going to Wentworth's office. They had their orders: only one was to speak with Wentworth, the other to check on two other men. Steffan had completed his mission and had waited long enough for Moose to have
finished his.

There was no other choice now, he couldn't check with Doc. He would have to find Moose.

Steffan’s rented car glided down the flat expressway toward the business center of Crystal City, a city along the East Coast that had sprung up after World War II. At first a “bedroom community” located between two older cities, it soon attracted its own industry, commerce, big-city development, and a healthy amount of pollution. In short, Crystal City progressed with the times.

It was, reflected Steffan, a city almost completely without character of its own. The expressway was pleasant enough, slightly winding, flanked by parklike strips of land that largely concealed the acres of Xeroxed housing that stretched off into the distance on each side.

Ten miles out from the city line, the expressway abruptly ended, dumping its traffic onto an old, worn, three-lane highway lined with gas stations, motels, fast-food carry-outs, and an occasional drive-in movie. It was a cultural wasteland, Steffan decided, punctuated by telephone poles and signs of all sizes and types, most of them already lit up and blinking off and on, although it was still early in the afternoon.

The old highway turned into a more modern four-lane straightaway with a fifth center lane for left turns at the city limits. Otherwise, there was little change in scenery. Steffan drove another block, and pulled into the large parking lot by the side of a two-story office building.

He surveyed the building in a quick glance, with a lawyer’s eye for detail. Moose’s rented car was parked on the other side of the lot beside Wentworth’s Lincoln, license plate number WWORTH 10. Through the window Steffan could pick out a copy of the New York Times opened to page 34, on which a small headline reported “WENTWORTH BACKS STASSEY-McCLUHAN BILL.”

That confirmed the other information Steffan had
picked up in Crystal City. Steffan was involved with politics, working out his own election to state senator. A member of Wentworth’s legal staff had said his boss had been behind the scenes in the drafting of most state laws for the past four years. So why shouldn’t he toss his hat in the ring?

Another staff member, after repeated questioning, had told Steffan that Wentworth had at one time been linked with the Syndicate. Supposedly, they’d kept him on the payroll for more than four years until Wentworth had abruptly quit. Granted, he’d simply been a lawyer for several Syndicate members, but the connection had been there, and might yet be in force. After all, it was virtually impossible to get elected to any office these days without a full machine backing you.

A Syndicate front man running for state senator would get the backing he would need and, chances were, he would also win.

Steffan jotted the new information into his black file book, then headed into the building, walking up the winding stairs to the second floor where Wentworth’s office was located.

There were six offices on the floor, four lit up from within, two dark, probably empty. Wentworth’s office was at the far end of the hallway, and the door, emblazoned with James Wentworth, Attorney-at-Law, led Steffan to it without further delay. As he opened the door he thought he heard a muffled crying sound behind him, something like a baby begging for food. Then it was gone and Steffan moved on.

And in the office three doors down, Moose lay on the floor, forcing himself to a whimper. But it was a lost cause.

The snooty secretary Moose had talked to less than two hours before looked up at Steffan and smiled. “Is there anything I can do for you, sir?” Steffan was impeccably tailored as always and he wore clothing well. His
small mustache complemented the rest of his face perfectly, and he looked exactly like the movie image of a good lawyer. Strong contrast to Moose, who dressed as if he lived in a manger and shoveled manure for a living. The secretary was obviously charmed by him. Clothes indeed make the man, or at least the impression thereof.

"I'm here to see Mr. Wentworth, if you don't mind, Miss . . .?" There was a definite question placed at the end of his statement.

"Mrs. Shorter. But, I am sorry, Mr. Wentworth isn't in today. He's been called away."

Steffan looked about the room bewildered. Then what was keeping Moose? And why was his car still here if Wentworth wasn't in? Steffan cleared his throat, then continued. "I'm sorry to hear that, but, you see, I, uh, sent my delivery boy, ahem, to see Mr. Wentworth earlier. You must have seen him, rather tall, resembling a bear. Rather slovenly, the poor boy. Orphan, you know. Well, I sent him here to give Mr. Wentworth some rather important papers, and he never returned. I was naturally concerned."

Mrs. Shorter's lips curled up in disgust as she remembered Moose. "Oh, yes, a rather crude sort. He was here about two hours ago. I told him Mr. Wentworth wasn't in and asked what he wanted, but he refused to say."

Daniel smiled, "You just can't get good help these days. But I promised the boy's father to take care of him. The man died in my arms in Korea, you know, took a mine blast meant for me. I could hardly refuse him."

Daniel played with the pens on Mrs. Shorter's desk.

"But had I known his son was that boy, well, I might have considered differently when I made the promise. But please don't take it out on him, he does have problems—besides his rather grotesque form, that is. He's the result of some nutritional misadventure he had when younger. Quite a shame, quite a shame. And his
father was so proud of him. Ah, well, they say love is blind, do they not?"

Mrs. Shorter agreed, reappraising her view of Moose. "You don't have any idea where the poor, demented boy went off to, do you?" Steffan asked.

"To be honest, I didn't pay much attention. He left, and that was the last I saw of him. Had I known his problem, I might have taken some further interest, but the truth of the matter is, he was rather rude, and I wished to pay was little attention to him as possible. You just can't encourage some people."

Steffan smiled as he extended his hand toward Mrs. Shorter. "I thank you for your information, dear lady. You've been a definite help."

"But whom should I say called? Mr. Wentworth would want to know."

"Just tell him an old friend, if you will. I'd rather suprise James later on. Just ask him to remember Mrs. Margolin, our third-grade teacher. That should start the old memory rolling again."

Steffan bowed and left the office, bemused and concerned at the same time. His lawyer's instinct told him she was telling the truth; Moose had gone. But his car was still in the lot. That meant . . .

Steffan heard the muffled cry again. This time it sounded almost like words. If he tried, if he forced the matter to any degree, the crying could be heard as "Help!"

Steffan became silent as he pressed against the wall. The sound was coming from somewhere, probably from one of the blackened offices. He waited a moment, then it started again; it came from halfway down the hall.

He moved quietly toward the closed door, grabbed the doorknob with his left hand, and twisted. He entered the room but could see nothing until he turned on the light and gasped. For there, before him, lying in a pool of blood, was Moose, crying like a tiny baby. Steffan turned
instantly, nauseated by Moose's appearance, then rushed to his side. Moose rolled over and groaned, smiled slightly, then fell silent.

It took less than fifteen minutes for the ambulance to pull into the parking lot beside the office building, two minutes for the attendants to race upstairs with the stretchers and equipment, four minutes for a doctor to check over Moose, and another fifteen minutes for the ambulance to return to Crystal City Hospital. Steffan followed the time exactly, feeling helpless.

_Damn it, he thought, what is happening? Why is someone out to get Doc Phoenix's entire crew? Is Daniel Steffan next? Or is someone out to get Wentworth, and Moose simply wandered into the way? Did this attack have anything to do with the bombing of Phoenix's complex? Just what is going on here, anyway?_

There were no answers, but the questions kept flying through Steffan's mind as he followed the ambulance to the hospital and watched as Moose was wheeled into Emergency.

There was nothing he could do, and Steffan knew that, and the knowledge made him that much angrier. He could not recall Phoenix from Patricia Wentworth's mind again. He could not help Moose; that was up to God and the expertise of the medical staff. He could not find Wentworth, and to visit the man's house at this point seemed useless.

But there was Linda, and though Steffan shied away from calling her, he felt this time he had to. Doc trusted the girl, and that should have been enough for him. But for some reason, that wasn't enough.

He knew Doc had entered Linda's mind, that she could hide nothing from him, and therefore, if Phoenix trusted her, she _had_ to be straight. Yet Steffan remembered her, wandering in the corridors of their complex, pretending to be lost, when Moose had found her. It was Doc who had discovered she was a paid assassin, and it was Doc
who had cured her. Yet...

Steffan shook his head. And despite all his feelings to the contrary, forced himself to call the secret number of Doc's laboratory. Two rings, and nothing. Three, four, five, still nothing. What was going on? Six rings, seven, eight. Damn it, where was the girl? Give her a few minutes. She could be out. Somehow Steffan doubted that.

She promised to stay at the complex. She couldn't leave the machinery while Doc was still inside Patricia's mind. She couldn't leave unless she wasn't working for Doc after all. No! Steffan forced that from his mind. She was with them all the way. She was a trusted member of Doc Phoenix's braintrust.

Steffan hung up the phone on the sixteenth ring. Give her a few minutes, he thought. Call again then. She had to be there. She simply had to be there.

He paced the room like an expectant father, and he felt just as useless. Moose was in emergency, perhaps dying. Doc was someplace in a land beyond reality, and the person monitoring his dangerous journey was gone.

Five minutes had passed and Steffan was at the phone again. He dialed the special number and waited. Four rings, five rings. Steffan cursed the phone, there was nothing else he could do. Eight rings. He pounded the metal tray under the phone. Damn it, damn it, dammmmmmmmmmmmmn! Where was she?

She didn't answer, not even after another twelve rings. Steffan swore at Linda, cursed himself, and felt very, very frustrated.

Linda Monteleone sat heavy in her chair listening to the phone plead to her: Come on, pick me up, pick me up, damn you. She stayed in her chair though she desperately wished she could get up, walk over to the special red phone, and answer it. But she knew she couldn't, not without getting the slug from the magnum exploding her face into a thousand separate fragments.
“Just sit there,” the short man said to her, touching the dials on Doc’s delicate machinery. “It will stop ringing shortly.”

Linda sighed and did what she was told. She had grown up knowing how to accept reality. She had been thrust into the world of espionage by the age of fifteen, and she’d learned several important things during her thirteen-year tenure: First: one cannot outrun a bullet. If a gun is pointed at you, cooperate with the gunman. Second: a magnum .44 is powerful enough to scatter your bones into several states. Third: when a tall, balding man who looks like he could tear down the walls of Jericho singlehandedly holds the gun on you, play no games with him. Just learn to play yourself. And when you are Linda Monteleone, and you look like an innocent teenager despite your true years, capitalize on your looks. You can smile and disarm most people with your apparent innocence.

In the short run, it usually means their guns will not be aimed directly at you. They feel you cannot outrun or outfight them, and they usually place their weapons at their sides, or in their lap. Unfortunately, in this particular instance, Linda’s smile did nothing. The bald man held his gun very steadily pointing at her face. His finger wished to squeeze inward, pull the trigger, and watch the results.

The shorter man completed his search and sat down, chuckling to himself. “The boss said you looked like a kid, but you were really one of the top spies around. Funny, but I didn’t believe him. Still find it hard, looking at you, lady, but the boss knows what he’s talking about, so don’t try nothing funny. You got a cute face, and I’d hate to see it with a hole right through it, if you know what I mean!”

Linda started to say something in return when the shorter man stopped her. “I told you to say nothing, lady, not even one word. If you’re dyin’ to go to the john,
you say nothing. If you’re having a heart attack, you say nothing. That way there’s no arguing, and my friend here doesn’t do nothing rash. So, just be quiet and relax. This won’t last forever.”

This was one time Linda played out her plans in silence. She was playing very, very hard.

“After all, it won’t be long before the boss gets here, and he pulls out the plugs and kills Doc Phoenix. Won’t be long at all.”
The palace lay in ruin, tumbled to the ground by some unseen hand. Fountains that a short time before had sprayed multicolored water high into the sky lay overthrown, and the spouts of water splashed through devastated streets that circled Quadling Country. Phoenix was horrified as he stepped over a body lying face down, dead in the water. The dream world was becoming even more of a nightmare, and whatever was turning Patricia Wentworth’s fantasy into a dark-shrouded horror was gaining more and more strength.

Doc moved through the streets, the Tin Woodsman following incomprehendingly. Nothing like this had ever happened in Oz before. What could be done? Phoenix said nothing as he stepped carefully over the broken bodies, checking each one for signs of life; there was none.
He stared ahead toward the palace, crumbled to the ground, like bombed-out Dresden. So useless, such complete waste.

Doc walked through the courtyard. The Tin Woodsman, following close behind, was silent; this was far beyond his comprehension. Yet he did know fear, and he felt fear greater than any he had ever felt before. He looked up at Doc and said only one word:

"Why?"

Doc stared blankly back at him. "No reason. There never is any purpose in death, certainly not death in this fashion."

They moved on, worming their way through crumbled stone and mortar to the inside of the palace. How lovely the palace must have looked, Doc thought. What had happened to it? What would happen to it now?

They continued exploring the demolished chambers. Paintings that had once hung proudly on the castle walls now lay crushed beneath toppled columns. Large, weighty sculptures lay devastated upon the ground, trampled over by some unknown force.

The Shaggy Man? Perhaps. But the Shaggy Man was just a reprepresentation. Of what? OF WHAT?

No answer.

There was a slight whimpering sound off in the distance, and Doc’s incredible hearing picked it out, against the flapping of buzzard wings. A life? Perhaps. Doc ran now, leaping over gutted and mutilated corpses. The Tin Woodsman followed as best he could, sickened by worse sights at every turn.

They raced past the dining hall, plates of food scattered over the tile floor. Bodies lay dead on the ground, their faces wide in horror. God! What happened here? WHAT?

Then they came at last to the large chamber, and what Doc saw there sickened even him. The room was immense, columns lay crushed to the ground, the balcony
half-tumbled from its perch. White marble was stained with blood. In the center of the room, dead upon the floor, was Glinda the Good.

Doc had never seen her before, but she could be no other person. It was Glinda. Blood streamed down from her lips; her eyes stared blankly at the tumbled ceiling above. Her white gown was in tatters.

The Tin Woodsman stared at Glinda’s body for a moment then fell to his knees crying. So useless. So meaningless.

“She was such a good person, so just. Why?”

Doc shook his head. No words yet—but then—a memory. Phoenix spoke.

They ran to the room where Glinda kept the Great Book, and there, in the center of the antechamber, was the large marble table, the five chains used to secure the Great Book cracked open and scattered on the ground: the immense volume was gone, stolen from the palace. Whoever had come here, whoever had destroyed the palace and killed its people, had come solely to steal the book. But why?

Doc strained to remember. Baum said the book magically reported everything that happened in Oz as it happened. The pages would turn by themselves, the words would suddenly appear as if written by an invisible hand. And every event that occurred within the land of Oz would be inscribed on its pages.

Whoever was after the book was afraid someone would learn something important. Still no clues, and this time even Doc was feeling the utter frustration. Damn!

Then, again, he heard the low whimpering, stronger now than he had heard it before. Doc searched the room carefully, missing nothing as his steel-gray eyes examined every section of the palace wall. The crying seemed to come from within the wall.

With three large strides Doc reached the far corner of the antechamber, and he tapped at the paneling. It was
hollow. A trapdoor was here someplace.

Doc looked for hidden studs but could find none. Perhaps it was tripped by a light beam, or even a magic word, but he didn’t have the time to investigate everything. He pressed his legs against the wall, and grabbed an area of the paneling in his powerful hands. His fingers dug into the soft plaster, making small pinpoint handholds. Then, straining, Doc pulled.

The wall was strong and resisted. It groaned as Doc applied more strength, his face turning beet-red, the veins in his arms throbbing near the surface. Doc gritted his teeth, then straining more. He could feel the wall beginning to crack. He could feel it . . . could sense it . . . at any moment—

THERE! Doc braced himself quickly so as not to fall back, and then the wall came tumbling down. Doc looked inside; the front was false, a large two-foot gap existed between it and the true wall. Two feet, enough for a man to walk through.

The whimpering was louder now, coming not far from where he stood. But in the ebony darkness, Doc saw nothing. He reached for his backpack, and pulled from it a pair of glasses, then put them on. There was a small knob on the frame behind the ear, and Doc pressed it. The passageway suddenly was lit up—to his eyes alone—the infrared glow from the lenses permeating through the small area. And there, no less than ten feet from him, was Dorothy lying on the ground, crying.

“Dorothy, it’s me, Doc Phoenix. I’ve found you.”

She was startled by the voice and looked up, but could see nothing. “No, get away from me whoever you are. You’re not my friend. You’re the Shaggy Man. Get away from me. Please leave me alone.”

“You can’t see me, but I’m here, in front of you. Please trust me, Dorothy, I’m your friend. I only want to help you. You’ve got to trust me. Do you recognize my voice?”

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"I—I think so, but I’m scared. That—Shaggy Man. I thought he was my friend, too, but he isn’t. He came after me. He tried to kill me."

"I’m only here to help you, Dorothy. I’m not the Shaggy Man. I’m Doc Phoenix, your friend. You can trust your friend, Dorothy. Please trust me." Phoenix edged closer to the girl as she spoke.

"Well, I—I don’t know. You were nice to me before, but the Shaggy Man was also nice to me once."

Doc studied the girl through his infragoggles. She was still crying, hugging the ground for comfort. Doc was angry; whatever happened here was important. It’s making this Dorothy hide as her other self—as Patricia Wentworth—has done. Now there wasn’t any paradise for Patricia to hide in. Now the horror in Oz was as terrifying as the horror in Patricia’s real world.

He had to try again, calm the young girl with his voice; logic would not work with a frightened five-year-old.

"Dorothy, remember the cottage we were in? You were gone after I came back there. Where did you go?"

The girl looked up toward the direction of Doc’s voice.

"I thought maybe you went on to Glinda’s Palace yourself. I thought maybe you were angry at me for some reason. I don’t know. I’m so confused."

"Well, you don’t have to be confused any longer, Dorothy. I’m here now with you, and I won’t leave you again. Please come out with me, and I’ll be with you forever." Doc knew that wouldn’t be true, but Dorothy had to come out on her own.

"You were nice to me, and you are big, maybe the only one big enough to find the Shaggy Man and make him bring Glinda back. But, I’m not sure. I just don’t know."

She strained to see Doc in the blackness. "Gosh, why isn’t everything nice again? I remember the party we had here once, a long time ago. And do you remember Polychrome and the Skeezers and the Flatheads? Why, there was real trouble then, but it all worked out for the
best."

"And this will work out for the best, too, Dorothy. Come out. Come to me."

"Well, I guess it is dark in here, and maybe it would be better not to be in the dark all the time, and best to be with you. I'll come out, but only if you promise never to leave me."

"I'll be with you, Dorothy, as long as you need me. I promise you that."

The girl picked herself up and stepped toward Doc's voice; when she felt his hand, she grabbed it and together they walked from the small space between the walls, back into the Palace itself.

"Dorothy!"

The girl spun at the familiar voice, and saw the Tin Woodsman standing there. She broke out into a wide smile, and ran toward her old friend.

"Tin Man, I haven't seen you in so long! I'm so happy, and you're looking so good."

"So are you, Dorothy," the Tin Woodsman responded, but his voice betrayed his feelings. He could not be so happy knowing that in the next room, Glinda was dead on the cold, marble floor.

"What's wrong? You're not happy to see me?" Dorothy questioned, sensing his attitude.

"No, Dorothy, I'm very happy to see you again. It's just that . . ." He turned towards the outer chamber, and let his eyes fall to the ground.

Dorothy ran out toward the other room, then stopped in the doorway. "What's out there, anyway, Tin Man? The palace is beautiful like it's always been."

Doc raced toward the doorway, the Tin Woodsman on his heels. They peered through the arch, expecting to find Glinda's body lying in a pool of blood, but there was nothing there. The palace was as always, save for the empty, marble tabletop, and the five chains dangling from empty shackles. The Great Book of Records was
gone, but everything else was normal.

Another question, and still no answers.

Across Quadling Country toward the northeast, deep in the land of the Munchkins, beyond the rim where life suddenly comes to an end, within the heart of the Iron Castle, the Shaggy Man sat on a tall throne, gazing upon the life-miniature of Oz. He smiled, looking at the new additions to his growing toyland. Yes, Glinda looked quite real, quite lifelike indeed, he thought. He rose, placing her back in the demolished castle on his board, and left the room, chuckling to himself, proud of his handiwork.

The palace was empty, though Doc knew that before they set out to check each room carefully. Yet he felt compelled to make the search, perhaps to prove to himself that the confusion wasn't only in his mind.

The left the palace after an exhaustive two-hour search, and headed in a northwesterly direction. Glinda was gone—perhaps dead. Perhaps not. Doc had to remind himself constantly that all physical laws were meaningless here, within Patricia Wentworth's mind.

What she wanted to happen would happen, whether or not based on logic. Oz was a land of magic in more ways than one, and Phoenix would have to accept that and, although his mind and memory were based on systems of logic, understand it the best he could.

Doc was, if anything, a logical person. He had spent four years of nonstop research working every conceivable system of logic into the design of his parapsychological research units and computer complex.
Eight million hard-earned dollars had been spent also. But Doc had no regard for money other than as a tool with which to purchase what he needed for research.

On his own Doc could survive penniless, living off the land, doing whatever would be necessary with his own hands. But he had long ago decided to create his special complex of computers to help mankind, and to accomplish that goal he needed money.

In a most logical way Doc had begun amassing his fortune, working with the stock market. Before investing any money, he had examined all variables, all possibilities, then programmed the information into his first hand-built computer. Within one year Doc had earned more than two million dollars. He’d been called the new Wall Street boy-wonder, and rightfully so.

Doc had then realized the stock market would not increase his fortune fast enough. There was only one other legal way to make the money he desperately needed for his research, and that was gambling.

For two months, Doc had read every book he could find on gambling and oddsmaking. Because he had refused to use his computer to work out a system for him (the computer would create an unfair advantage between him and other people), he had devised his own system for playing poker, craps, and even the horses.

Within four weeks, he had acquired another three million dollars. He had also been told not to return to any operating U.S. casino. His system was figured at 99.869 percent foolproof.

He had accumulated five million dollars, but still needed seven million more to pay his taxes and to build his complex. He had sold three inventions to major companies for two million dollars plus royalties. One device was a cheap method of extracting gas from corn by converting the corn to corn liquor which fueled a specially designed combustion engine that would fit in any
American-make car built after 1974. One gallon of his corn gasoline would cost eight cents, the car itself would cost no more than twenty-two hundred dollars, and most of that cost would go to strong steel safety framing.

Another invention was a circuit used in the miniaturization of computers, while the third was an antipollution filter that would cut factory pollution 72 percent.

The final five million needed had been gained through other ventures, including land speculation, additional profits from the stock market, and his inventions, plus an expedition to a Mayan village where he’d discovered a city built within a mountain.

An incredible archaeological discovery on its own merits, it also proved to be a financial windfall when an entire underground cavern had been unearthed leading to a huge temple whose walls were built with solid gold blocks. The majority of the gold found had gone to the government in whose country the cavern had been discovered. Doc only removed a miniscule amount—the final three million dollars he needed.

Once his computer complex and offices had been built, Doc had brought other specialists to his Phoenix-lab for consultation. Most of them had refused at first to accept Doc’s methods until he’d demonstrated his mind-entry program on a murderer whose crimes had been well known to everyone present. It had taken three days for Doc to enter that mind and find the reason for the man’s behavior. Then, from within, he’d corrected the improper brain patterns.

There had been the expected controversy over Doc’s technique. One faction called it brainwashing; another, a new development in the field of psychology.

Doc had answered questions at a special conference assembled to judge the computer-programming method. Doc felt, of course, that it was not brainwashing. He did not tamper with the mind or alter any set pattern. The patient simply had the mental block within him removed.
Whatever his behavior pattern would be later, Doc had no way of knowing. He was like a surgeon, but instead of removing a diseased organ, he removed a malfunction in the mind.

The bottom line of the conference had been deadlock. No decision could be made on the validity of Doc’s approach, but no restrictions had been imposed upon it, either. Doc had hoped his methods could be adopted throughout the world, but, for the present at least, they would have to remain with him.

Further experimentation had proved that to be a wise choice. Because of Doc’s unique mental abilities, he’d quickly discovered that anyone other than he, attempting to enter a mind, would instantly accept the patient’s illusions. They would be sucked into the patient’s thought patterns. Only Doc was able to resist and move freely in another’s mind. Only Doc could perform his technique.

For that reason, and to prevent anyone from deliberately attempting the method or from accidentally becoming involved with the use of his equipment, Doc had relocated his complex in that almost inaccessible section of West Virginia. And it was from there that he’d continued to work.

Until now, that is, for there were several major problems here. First the mind of his target was a child’s, and that mind had not mastered a logical grasp of reality. Second, the mind had fabricated a land of pure magic with rules other than those of logic. Third, there was still the double problem of the Shaggy Man. How could he exist in two separate realities—the external as well as the internal? And how had Doc brought the subjective toyman into his objective world? That defied reason altogether; Doc was at a loss for an answer.

And an answer was what he desperately needed now. An answer he was hoping to find on the road to the Emerald City. It was the only place to go now.

Doc was off to see the Wizard.
But he wondered whether he would still be alive when the Yellow Brick Road came to an end.
The Shaggy Man said nothing to Linda as he entered the room and examined the computer complex. Quite advanced, he thought, yet he knew it would have to be if Phoenix had mastered the ability to enter people's minds. He picked up a remote-control retriever and smiled. This would have to be locked away for safekeeping. It would not be good if Phoenix were called from the girl's mind before the Shaggy Man was ready for him.

He turned to see Linda glaring at him, and he smiled. The girl was brave—he had to give her that—but bravery here meant nothing. She would die, as Phoenix would die, and Moose would die, and Fingers would die. Phoenix's laboratory would be blown off the face of the earth, after his records had all been taken away.

The Shaggy Man scratched himself; the costume was getting hot, yet he would continue wearing it as long as
necessary. He would only suffer a while, and then, when it was all over, he would emerge victorious, a leader of people. He slowly stepped toward Linda and raised his hand up to her eye level.

"You will answer a few questions," he said, his voice cracking, as if it were coming through an electronic filter. "I want to know where the designs for this complex are kept. I want to know where the main circuit-breakers are, and where the emergency bypass systems are hidden."

He looked at her blank expression, then continued. "Show me where any emergency generators are located and where Phoenix's records are kept. Show me all that, and perhaps I will not kill you." He would kill her, of course, but she needn't know that.

Linda said nothing; she studied the man carefully with trained eyes. He was six feet-two inches, and the scraggily hair he supposedly had was definitely a wig. The clothing was new, though roughed-up to appear old. The shine on his shoes indicated a well-groomed man; he could dress sloppily, but he could not walk about in unpolished shoes. A dead giveaway.

His voice was definitely filtered to give an eerie sound, yet the pronunciation and selection of each word indicated a man taught to enunciate clearly. The man could be a performer, or possibly a voice-trained politician.

From the way he moved about the room, Linda knew he had good posture and was forcing the bent-over quality the Shaggy Man seemed to walk with. He picked up only specific instruments, and looked them over carefully, obviously a well-educated man, familiar with science.

The man was, of course, James Wentworth. Linda had spent the past two days running computer checks on him, analyzing his background, behavior patterns, past associations, education. In short, the works. Through Doc's incredible link-up with all existing computers on earth, it was possible to learn everything necessary about anyone.
Naturally, Doc only used the information for his psychological work, relying on documented facts rather than biased views. The doctor-patient discussions were helpful, but Doc felt he had to know more about his patients than they were willing to tell if their treatment was to mean anything.

Yes, this man was Wentworth. This forced Linda to wonder why he was purposely sabotaging the cure for his daughter when he was the man who hired Doc Phoenix in the first place. She knew somehow she had to free herself and call Doc back from Patricia’s mind. Knowing neither where Moose or Fingers were nor when they would come back to West Virginia, she could only count on Phoenix to save the complex, and ultimately his own life.

Wentworth smashed his fist across Linda’s face when she refused to speak. She let herself roll off the chair onto the floor. It would make it harder for him to hit her again, and it made it easier for her to crawl, even with her arms tied behind her and her legs bound together. Mobility was essential now.

Wentworth kicked her in the stomach, but Linda didn’t give him the satisfaction of groaning in pain. She remembered her year in China, the three months of torture by experts. They’d learned nothing from her; Wentworth would get the same results. Only he didn’t know that.

That gave Linda the upper hand. In China they had known she was a professional spy, trained in yoga and the martial arts, able to accept enormous amounts of pain. The Shaggy Man—James Wentworth—knew some of her background, and he obviously knew she was dangerous, but he did not know, nor could not realize, how she had learned to accept almost any abuse and pain.

The monastery had taught her well; she had been perhaps the best pupil they had ever brought into their way of life.

Two more kicks: one to her face, the other to her
breast. This time Linda allowed a groan to come. He would have to think she was weakening.

"Talk, damn you. I want to know all of Phoenix's secrets. Talk, or I'll kick your damn head into the garbage." Wentworth's voice was rising, even through the filter. He was becoming impatient, and Linda allowed herself an invisible smile.

All at once the Shaggy Man stopped, and moved back, turning toward his henchman. "Gaut, break her. Force the information from her." The tall, bald man smiled. He was waiting for his turn. He would love to break her. He would love to get his fingers on her body, and to squeeze her flesh until the ribs beneath it cracked, and the bones shattered, and her blood spurted freely through his fingerholes.

Linda panicked for a moment, then her training returned. The bald man was a maniac. She could survive pain, but he would try for worse. He would try to kill her. A professional brings his victims to the edge of death, then retreats. Gaut, the bald man, would not stop. He would kill her, and Linda, tied the way she was, would be helpless to stop him.

Alive, she would be valuable to herself and to Doc. Dead, she was totally useless. She had to live, even if it meant giving some of Doc's vital secrets away. Wentworth would know if she were lying or feeding him only a partial truth. She would have to tell something and convince Wentworth she knew nothing more.

"All right," she pleaded. "Don't let that ape get near me. I'll tell you what I know, but it isn't much."

The Shaggy Man laughed. "I'll be the judge of that, dear lady. Gaut, move back. Leave her be." Gaut responded slowly, but said nothing. He knew Wentworth would eventually give the girl to him. He could wait. He had nothing else to do. Gaut smiled, and even the Shaggy Man trembled.
“They tell me I’m gonna live, but I somehow doubt it.” Those were Moose’s first words as Steffan entered his hospital ward. And to look at him would be to agree with his sentiments. He was bandaged virtually from head to foot, his face was swollen, the color of an overripe sweet potato, darker than his normal swarthiness. His eyes were ringed with puffed-up black-and-blue streaks, and his front three teeth were missing.

“I wouldn’t know about that, you dumb aborigine. You look better now than you did the last time I saw you,” Fingers replied, smiling at his friend. If the two of them didn’t argue with each other, Doc would think they were feuding. However, the doctors, not knowing their penchant for verbal warfare, looked at the two men, puzzled. Ah, well . . .

“What’s the verdict? The doc wouldn’t say anything to me.”

“Your physician was last seen chuckling as he was making out your bill. I’d check him out before paying, Moose. He may have accidentally loosened what few remaining brains you have in your head. He did, however, say that he thought your species perished before the invention of stone axes, but I confirmed the fact that you were not a semi-advanced simian, but merely a rather low vulgar display of *Homo sapiens*.

“Fingers, you sharp-tongued serpent. If you would like to keep on wearing those ridiculously cuffed pants you feel you must wear, I suggest you limit your talking to my condition. Did the doc say anything about me?”

“Ah, Moose, what he didn’t say could fill a library. However, he did let drop that you are somehow in remarkable condition for a man of your small intellect, and that you actually suffered only three broken bones, which will mend in a few weeks. There is no reason for the bandages, for you see, I told one of the nurses I was
Doctor Frelman and that I ordered you so dressed.” Steffan waited for Moose to stop cursing him before continuing.

“You could leave the hospital now, if you’d really like to, though, I would imagine that it would be better to remain here than return to your cage at the zoo.”

That was all Moose could take.

“You long-nosed, fee-baiting, skinflint excuse for a hyster, these bandages were your idea? I woke up seeing ’em and thought I was remaking an old Boris Karloff Mummy movie. When I get up, you slippery-fingered creep, I’m gonna take one of my longer test tubes and shove it where the sun don’t shine—right up your nose into that pinprick you laughingly call a brain!”

“Ah, where’s your sense of humor, Moose? The image of you in these bandages is so ludicrous, it was worth everything.”

“Don’t worry, pal, you’ll be able to see yourself dressed like this pretty soon, only it’ll be for real. And by the time they let you out of your Johnson & Johnson bandages, you’ll be ready to receive Social Security, only in your case, no one will want to socialize with you. Your idea? Sheesh!”

The drive back to the motel was long, with Steffan saying little. Moose recounted his experience with the secretary, his leaving the office, and his meeting with Mount Vesuvius about to erupt. “And the next thing I remember clearly is waking up in the hospital. Period. Don’t even remember you coming to find me.”

Moose looked at Steffan, saw he was thinking of something other than Moose. “All right, happy-boy, what’s the problem? You have a look on your mug even Dear Abby couldn’t help. But me, I’m too stupid to know any better. Lay it on.”
"It's nothing, Moose. At least I hope not. But, I can't be sure. Hell, right now, I can't be sure of anything, especially something I've been suspicious about for a while."

"Linda?" the chemist asked.

"Linda!" was the reply.

"I've called the complex a dozen times, let the special hot-line number buzz for a minute each time. Nothing. No response. She has to be there, unless she's gone. If she's gone, then she's a traitor. If she's a traitor, Doc was wrong about her. And since she was trying to murder Doc the last time, and since she was left alone with his life-support machinery, she just may have killed him this time. God, Moose, Doc may have given the gun to his murderer, and helped her to pull the trigger."

"You've got to realize," Linda began, "Doc hasn't taken me into his full confidence, yet. He trusts me because he's been inside my mind, but knowing I'm honest doesn't mean he knows if he should tell me everything. There are many secrets in his complex I know nothing about." That much was all true, and Linda breathed in easily after getting it all out.

Now, for the parts that were not true. She breathed in again, this time sharper.

"I don't know where the plans for the complex are kept. I don't even know if they're kept here. I always felt Doc would probably have them hidden somewhere else, in case anything happened to this place." That sounded reasonable enough, she hoped. The Shaggy Man said nothing. He accepted what she said, then unbound her.

They walked through the corridors between the first and second levels of the multistoried building. There were doors lining the hallways, all simply marked with identification numbers. Supposedly no one was permitted in-
side the complex who did not know where his or her section was located and the rooms to which he or she was assigned, so there was no reason for labels on the doors. Besides, Doc reasoned the system made it more difficult for intruders to find what they wanted, if they managed to break through the security system. Linda counted on that confusion to work for her now. They would have to trust her; it would simply take too long for them to find what they needed alone.

"In that room, the one at the end of the corridor to the right, Doc keeps his records. I saw him marking up a journal one night. He was recording my first day’s arrival here."

"We’ll see if you are playing games with us. It’s foolish to lie. Come on, now."

Linda listened to Wentworth; he sounded completely insane. His voice rose in the middle of a sentence, then became shrill with excitement at his own thoughts. The man was having problems.

They opened the door to the record room, and the Shaggy Man smiled. "Good. You haven’t lied to me, girl. Gaut, find the file on the Wentworth case. I want it destroyed." The tall man nodded, then proceeded on his task.

"No, don’t destroy it. If you do, Doc won’t be able to follow through on the assignment." She had to catch herself quickly. She was going to say the assignment you sent him on. "It’s possible, without those papers Patricia Wentworth will never recuperate."

She hoped that hearing his daughter’s name would force some sense back into Wentworth. She was crushed though, when the Shaggy Man simply replied: "The little bitch deserves death. She should never recuperate. She should die, and what she knows should die with her."

A clue! Patricia knew something Wentworth didn’t want exposed. He was crazy, a case of split personality. One half wanted his daughter back with him, the other—totally demented—wanted her silenced. Linda
had to get the information to Doc.

“You want the girl to die?” she asked, moving closer to the large desk in the back of the office. “How could you? She’s innocent. She’s never done anything to you.”

The Shaggy Man’s head jerked up suddenly, angrily. His eyes were blazing with madness. “Innocent? She’s a damn bitch. She deserves to die! She knows too much! She must die before she kills me!” Wentworth began shouting, and Linda pretended fright, crawling back toward the desk, away from the raging figure. She fell to the floor, then lifted herself up, pressing the button on the side of the desk as she did. The tape recorder clicked on.

“But why do you want Patricia Wentworth dead? She’s only ten years old. How could a little girl destroy the Shaggy Man? How?”

Wentworth’s eyes were blazing with fire now. “You ask me how, you little idiot? That damn girl saw me do something years ago. I—I don’t mind telling you this, because, you stinking bitch, I’m going to kill you anyway when I’m done here.” Wentworth was raving now. “She saw me do something, but I’m not going to tell you what she saw. Oh, no, I’ll let you wonder about that as you die.” He laughed as he continued. “Oh, you’ll die, don’t worry about that. And I’m going to have Gaut kill you, too. I saw the look in your eyes as he came to you. You fear him, don’t you? Well, there’s good reason to fear him. He’s crazy, you know. He loves to kill. He loves to pull the legs off dogs, and he’s always wanted to try the same with humans.

“I think I might let him experiment with you. I think I’ll let him play with you. He’d like that, don’t you think? Yes, he likes you because you look like a little girl, a defenseless child, and he likes hurting little defenseless children.”

*God,* Linda thought to herself, *they’re all crazy.* But this wasn’t doing any good. She had to get him to talk about Patricia, give Doc more information, because, Lin-
da felt deep within her, she would not survive to tell Doc himself.

"Are you going to let him take care of Patricia, too? Are you going to let him pull her arms off of her?" She backed away from the desk as the Shaggy Man came at her.

"Oh, no, I'm just going to let Patricia remain in her fantasy world. She can't hurt me from there. No, I'm going to let her stay there with her Oz friends. Say, where are you going? You can't get away from me, woman. You know you can't." Linda dashed toward the far end of the room, knowing that it was now or never.

"I don't have to escape from you," she cried out toward the stalking Shaggy Man. "Not when I know who you really are. You can't fool me. You're not the Shaggy Man at all. You're James Wentworth, and you want to kill your very own daughter. Isn't that correct, Wentworth?"

The Shaggy Man started to roar. "Wentworth? Bah! That fool is unimportant now. The only thing important is killing you and getting Phoenix's machines. Then I can't be stopped. Gaut! Get her. Crush her!"

Linda turned to see Gaut smiling, moving slowly toward her. Damn that smile, she thought. Damn that hideous, grinning smile.

The bald man was thirty feet from her now, and his hands were outstretched toward her, beckoning her to come to him. *Come here, my dear, let me caress the life from your limbs,* they said. *Come here, come to Gaut.*

He was twenty feet from her now. She had to time this perfectly. Even one second off, and she might as well begin reciting her prayers. Funny she would think about prayers now. She never learned any as a child, not until she found her way to the monastery.

Ten feet away now, and his hands still spoke softly to her, and his smile beckoned toward her. As he came within five feet of her, Linda whirled, grabbed the fire ex-
tinguisher latched to the wall, and ripped it off, spraying Gaut with a coat of carbon dioxide.

The big man gasped as if suddenly hit in the face with a sledgehammer. He grabbed his throat, and fell to the ground, choking. With its spray still on, Linda darted toward the far door. The Shaggy Man and his small partner stood between her and freedom, but both moved as she aimed the nozzle at them.

Linda ran for the door and out into the corridor where she dropped the empty extinguisher.

And she kept on running.

Right into the man standing in the shadows who looked down at her and shouted, "I've come to get you, Linda Monteleone. I've come to get you."
Between Phoenix-and-company and the Emerald City there were at least three days of constant traveling to be done. And with the traveling, there would also be constant danger, for Oz was changing now, and Phoenix knew that the fairyland splendor he had first encountered here was crumbling while the horror of Patricia Wentworth's nightmare increased. Something was aggravating the situation on the prime world, and Phoenix could only hope that Moose, Steffan, and Linda had the situation, if not well, at least reasonably in hand.

Dorothy stayed amazingly fresh for the long trip, never complaining, and never slowing the party down. The Tin Woodsman was welcome company for Phoenix, his opinions and range of knowledge were surprising. The man was well educated.

As they walked Phoenix noted how the countryside
was changing with almost every step they took. The lush
greenery he had seen in Munchkin Country was replaced
here in Quadling Country with sparse weeds and craggy
rocks. The land was beginning to look like the grounds
surrounding the Iron Castle; the Shaggy Man’s power
was extending itself throughout all of Oz, and Phoenix
wondered how long it would be before the countryside
was as dead, stripped of all life, human and otherwise.
Doc knew the answer to Oz’s problem rested with the
curing of Patricia Wentworth, for, as she grew more ill,
as her mind became more entangled with her fantasy
creation, Oz would quite literally be eaten away.

The trip from Glinda’s Palace to the Emerald City was
shorter than Doc expected: another sign that this Oz-
world was not conforming to the size and perimeters of
Baum’s creation. Emerald City was still off in the dis-
tance, but its spires could be seen. Another hour’s walk
and the trio would be there, provided they could make
their way through the field of sleep-inducing poppies that
loomed before them and stretched far into the distance.

If Phoenix remembered correctly, the poppies had put
Dorothy and the Cowardly Lion to sleep, and only Tin
Man and the Scarecrow, both unliving creatures, sur-
vived the flower’s powers. In the novel the poppies were
destroyed by the Mouse King, while in the movie it was
Glinda’s snowstorm that ended their menace.

Doc handed an extra set of nose filters to Dorothy,
helped her place them into her nostrils, and showed her
how to breathe through them. The Tin Man, Phoenix
hoped, would still be impervious to the poppies’ enchant-
ment.

“Gosh, you mean,” Dorothy said excitedly, “that if I
had these the first time I came to Emerald City with the
Tin Man and the Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion, I
wouldn’t have fallen asleep?”

Phoenix smiled and urged her on. “The filters keep out
the sleep-gas the poppies emit, Dorothy. We’ll be able to
get through here and force our way to see the Wizard."

Phoenix considered the Wizard for a moment. He was supposedly a simple magician from Kansas, but in Oz he possessed a degree of actual magical powers. Not as powerful as Glinda, he was still considered the number-three man in Oz, directly behind Ozma for sheer magic abilities.

Originally, Baum created the Wizard of Oz for his one and only Oz book. After he was persuaded to write a second Oz story, *The Land of Oz*, without Dorothy or the Wizard, he found he was inundated with requests to bring back his first two popular characters. Perhaps the reason was that they were human beings, allowing the Oz readers to identify with them while they read the novel. Whatever the reasons, Dorothy and the Wizard remained in Oz in the fourth book of the series, *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz*, which most readers confused with the first book, *The Wizard of Oz*.

They made their way safely through the poppy field and to the large wall surrounding the Emerald City. Like everything in the city, the wall was green in color. In the first novel, Baum said everyone entering the Emerald City was given green-tinted glasses and was told he had to wear them for the duration of his stay. The green tint made everything appear green, but Phoenix could see the city actually was emerald in color. The glasses were not needed.

They circled the tall wall around to the gate, expecting the watchman to permit them entrance. However, there was no one there. Phoenix was on his guard now and pushed the green gate in. It creaked open just enough for him to check inside quickly.

There was no one in the street before him; in fact, the entire city was absolutely silent. Phoenix moved through the gate cautiously, his eyes carefully probing every dark shadow for any sign of life. There was none.

The entered the city and began a systematic building-
by-building search: Dorothy and the Tin Woodsman took the east and north quadrants; Phoenix, the south and west. They met again after a full hour, each with the same results: no one was in Oz; it was as if the city had been evacuated. No bodies remained behind: there were no signs of any life. No animals. The people had simply vanished. Nothing.

Doc was puzzled. Was this the work of the Shaggy Man? Perhaps Patricia Wentworth simply hadn’t bothered to visualize the Emerald City. But if she hadn’t created it within her mind, it wouldn’t exist for Phoenix to walk through.

“I don’t understand this,” Dorothy finally said. “Where is the Wizard or the Horse of Another Color or anyone? And usually there is always a party somewhere, but there’s no one here now. Do you think they all went away, maybe on a big picnic?”

The Tin Man responded before Phoenix could say anything. “I don’t think so, Dorothy. There’s something evil happening here, and I think the Shaggy Man is behind it.”

“The Shaggy Man?” Dorothy exclaimed. “But he’s my friend. He wouldn’t do anything like this. He couldn’t. I’m sure of that.”

The Tin Man turned toward Doc. “Please tell her what happened in the Iron Castle. I think she has a right to know.”

Phoenix explained everything. The girl sat dumb-founded, unsure of what to say, yet understood everything Doc told her.

“That sure doesn’t sound like my Shaggy Man,” she said after a long pause. “But I believe you, and I think I may have an answer. You see, the Shaggy Man’s been acting strangely of late. Why, the last time I saw him, he actually wanted to kill me.

“I think he’s been under some strain.” Dorothy was sad. “You know, they say the Shaggy Man wanted to
become a powerful man so he wouldn’t have to be shaggy anymore. He wanted to be the new Wizard here in the Emerald City when the old Wizard went back to Kansas a while back, but then the Wizard returned and the Shaggy Man had to go back to his home. I think that’s it. I think the Shaggy Man is just jealous.”

Phoenix smiled as the girl finished, her hands posed on her hips in frustration. Phoenix saw the connection now: the Shaggy Man represented her father. James Wentworth was seeking political power, power he felt should be his, yet was always denied him. The Shaggy Man sought power. Wentworth lived in Crystal City; the Wizard, in Emerald City. Answers were beginning to tumble into place. Yet one important answer still eluded Doc: What had forced Patricia Wentworth into this fantasy?

The Tin Man interrupted Doc’s thoughts: “Do you think we should go to the Wizard’s palace? Maybe there’s something there that could help us.” Doc agreed, and the three made their way through the silent streets toward the Wizard’s castle.

Striking fast and furiously, almost as if from nowhere, an iron mallet shattered the yellow path the trio walked on. Phoenix jerked his head with sudden surprise, staring straight up toward a huge metal robot, towering some fifty feet into the air. The robot’s iron arms rose once again, its hands twisted about a huge iron mallet measuring no less than ten feet long and four feet across at the flat end. For a second time the robot swung down at Doc, this time missing him by inches. Doc spun, pushing Dorothy into a nearby building, then ran between the robot’s legs.

The robot sensed Doc’s movement and turned, raising its huge shanks, then stamping down at Doc with machine precision. Phoenix leaped at the last moment, his left side grazed by the leg. A fraction of a second slower, and he would have been as flat as the Yellow Brick Road.
The Tin Woodsman watched in horror as Doc dove into a small pool to the side of the Wizard’s palace. The iron foot descended a third time, cracking the concrete on the pool’s base. Water flooded through the streets at dizzying speed.

Doc ran, and the robot gave chase. For every twenty steps he took, the robot needed only one, even with Doc’s stride, greater than four feet.

The mallet came crashing down again, leveling a tall dome-shaped building to Doc’s side. Concrete fragments flew in all directions with the force of shrapnel. One piece struck Doc in the shoulder and sent him headlong into a short, squat building.

Tumbling, Doc somersaulted, recovered, grabbed onto the robot’s leg and climbed the huge iron column with great speed. The robot twisted around on heavy ball bearings, while huge, snake-like arms darted out to pick the annoying insect off its leg. Doc avoided the probing fingers with agility, making his way up to the hinged hips.

He breathed in sharply, taking in as much of the giant as he could with one quick glance. The robot was fifty feet tall, of that there was no doubt. Its face was square with large, bulbous eyes and a grinning, leering mouth. Atop its head a crown was riveted. Perhaps ornamentation, perhaps the guidance system. Then Doc remembered this land was ruled not with science, but with magic. Possibly there were no guidance mechanisms at all in the thing.

The body was a huge cylinder made up of three connected segments. Attached to simple pulleys were two iron bands that acted as the forearms. Each leg was a flexible band that bent midway where knees would be. By any logic, this thing could not work—but then, Oz itself was a contradiction of logic.

Doc recalled this creature; it appeared in the book *Ozma of Oz* and was guardian of the Nome King’s underground palace. The thing was built by Smith and
Tinker, the same people who had rebuilt the Tin Man. Doc remembered a speech by Tiktok, another of Smith and Tinker’s creations, that stated that the Iron Giant, as he was called, could not think. He was simply built to pound the road, to keep intruders out. Yet something had obviously happened between the third Oz book and now. The creature had enough intelligence to follow Phoenix and attempt to kill him.

Doc clawed his way up the Iron giant, grabbing whatever small handholds he could find in the iron side. He leaped up to the shoulders, then dove toward the mouth. He entered and quickly searched the head unit. No special machinery. Nothing but the gears necessary to permit the mouth to open and close.

Below, the Tin Woodsman and Dorothy peeked from their concealment in time to see the huge mallet swing down in their direction. The Tin Man grabbed Dorothy’s arm and ran, pulling her with him as he leaped from the small apartment out into the streets of Emerald City.

Doc jumped from the head section to the arms, sliding to the bottom of the mallet. As the mallet swung down, he somersaulted off the iron hammer and landed feet first before his two friends.

“Come on, follow me,” he commanded. The two obeyed without complaint.

They ran through the empty streets of the Emerald City at breakneck speed. Doc led them as they circled the livery stable where the Horse of a Different Color had once been kept. Unable to keep up with their pace, Dorothy clutched her chest. Scooping her up, the Tin Man continued running.

Doc circled another building, pointing to a small alcove not far in the distance. However, by the time the Tin Man rounded the same building, Phoenix was gone. He had disappeared off the face of Oz.

Searching for Doc, the Tin Man turned, but all he saw was the Iron Giant standing before him, its mallet raised
over its head. The robot grinned sadistically, and then the mallet came down—hard.

Oz had vanished, and Phoenix was in his West Virginia computer complex. He noted Linda’s absence from her post and, scanning the small room, saw the definite signs of tampering! The timer dial had been changed. Had he not been called back to reality, he would have been stuck in Oz for as long as the timer was set to infinity. Someone had sabotaged his complex. But who?

Linda was nowhere to be seen, and that might be a clue. She couldn’t be elsewhere in the giant complex, for she would never have left the computer section without someone else being present, unless there was trouble. But was the trouble here in Phoenix’s private complex, or was it in Crystal City? Phoenix didn’t know, but he damn well intended to find out.

"Linda, I’ve come to get you."

That was all the voice said. Linda looked up, shocked; then relief spread over her face.

"God, Daniel! I—I need you now. Boy, do I need you now. I’m being—"

Steffan cut her off. "Why didn’t you answer the phone? You were instructed never to let it go beyond the third ring."

Linda was nervous, her words spilled from her with intensity. "That was you calling? Thank God you came back to check. There’s someone else here with us, Daniel. It’s Wentworth, dressed as the Shaggy Man. And he’s got these other two men. One of them is short, kind of stout, but the other—Lord, Daniel—the other’s taller than Doc, and he’s strong... damn, is he strong."
“Tall, bald man? With a smile that could slaughter a bull elephant?” The new voice belonged to Moose.

“Moose?” Linda ran to hug the large scientist.

Steffan looked on with seeming disgust, then interrupted. “There will be time for a cheery reunion between you two later, Linda. For now, please answer his question. Was one of the men, the strong one, bald and uncommonly tall?”

“Yes to both. Head smooth as egg shell. And that smile of his could curdle fresh milk. He’s not a good man, Moose. Not a good man at all.”

“And you say he’s somewhere in here? With Wentworth?”

Linda breathed rapidly, exhausted.

“He was following me a moment ago, but maybe he saw you two and hid. I don’t know, Moose. I just don’t know much of anything anymore.”

“And you have not fabricated the entire story to avoid taking the blame for leaving your post?” Fingers was using his best attorney’s voice now.

“Are you outta your bird, you penny-chiseling ambulance chaser? Linda’s on our side!” Moose was mad, and he let the lawyer know it.

“I’m telling the truth, Mister Steffan. If you choose not to believe me, that is your problem, not mine.”

“It is our problem, Linda. All of us together.”

The three turned to the sound of the new voice. And, as one, they all exclaimed, “Doc!”

“Oh, thank God, it worked. I got you back here.” Linda was ecstatic.

Steffan remained calm. “What did you mean by ‘our problem’ Doc? You know something we don’t?”

“Only that Linda is definitely telling the truth. There was someone here dressed as the Shaggy Man. I found this on the floor. Take a look.”

Doc extended a small patch of tattered cloth. “It’s from the Shaggy Man’s vest. No doubt about it.” Doc
then turned to Linda. "But did I hear you correctly when you said the Shaggy Man was definitely Wentworth?"

"They're one and the same," Linda replied. "No doubt, Doc. And Wentworth's crazy. He wants his daughter to die—even though you told us he was totally concerned about her when you first took on the assignment. It just doesn't follow."

"Perhaps it does, Linda. I'm sure I've found the cause of Patricia's illness." Doc smiled broadly, then went on. "Interesting that in her mind she projected the Shaggy Man for her father, while in reality her father became the Shaggy Man."

"That's gotta be coincidence, Doc." Moose said.

"Perhaps," Doc began, "But I feel there may actually be a link between the two incidents. We're dealing with something that is out of the ordinary. The appearances of the twin Shaggy Men and the toy-man I somehow brought here from Oz proves that. What the link is, I don't know, but I'm sure the solution to this case rests on my learning the answer."

Doc crossed the room, then turned back. "However, what is more puzzling right now is where our three intruder friends vanished to. It seems we not only have a leak in our security that permitted them to enter here undetected, but there must also be a gaping hole in the complex for them to come and go as they please."

"Doc," Steffan started, "I've been thinking. I'll assume Linda is correct, and no, I'm not accusing her of lying, just perhaps misinterpreting what she saw. It is possible those three men never were here, just that somehow Linda thought she saw them. Perhaps through some mind-manipulation?"

Linda glared at Steffan. "I was not being manipulated, Steffan. I've been relying on my senses while you were still wet-nursing traffic tickets. I know what I saw, and I am sure they were here. Besides, Doc found the tattered cloth. It proves my story."
"And the man Linda described was the one who boxed me into the hospital. I'll never forget what he looked like, not until I get a return match—on my terms." Moose turned from Doc as he finished.

Doc thought for a moment. "You're letting your suspicions of Linda color your thoughts, Daniel. She saw what she described, and I don't have to check the hidden cameras to prove it. I trust her. And, Moose, the man you battled with would probably put you in traction in less than ten seconds if he felt like it. I've a sneaking suspicion we're talking about a hired body guard named Anton Gaut. I ran across him a few years back, and I can vouch for his incredible strength."

Doc paused for a moment, the continued. "There's no question about what we do next. We've got to take the complex apart stone by stone to find the entrance they used to get in and out of here. We've got to run a computer check on Gaut and his appearances in the U.S., and also run a second name through the sorter: Sammy Detroit. I think he is your other intruder, Linda. His description fits your man. Detroit is a weapons expert with infallible aim."

Doc waited until Linda finished writing down her instructions.

"And, finally, we've got to find out why James Wentworth hired these two men."

"Wouldn't it make sense," Steffan asked, "simply to accept the idea he has gone insane? He hires you to save his daughter's life, then he tries to kill you. He knows Moose works for you, and he sends a full-fledged gorilla after our pedigreed chimp here."

"Hey! I resent that, beanpole!" Moose sputtered back.

Doc interrupted. "What we don't need now is bickering, real or otherwise. We are dealing with a man who is—yes, Daniel, he is emotionally unstable. But discovering his motives is vital to the assignment I've already accepted."
Doc was silent for a few minutes, but his aides said nothing as he stared out the window of his complex. "I'm not sure, my friends, but I believe that in order to save Patricia Wentworth, I'm going to have to enter the mind of James Wentworth—whether he wants me to, or not."
Crystal City was a three-hour car trip from Doc’s headquarters. Since Wentworth had a head start of at least one-and-one-half hours, Doc gunned the engine of his Ferrari to ninety. That would cut the trip in half. They would make up the rest of the time in Crystal City.

The countryside was a blur as Doc raced through the West Virginia hills. Lush greenery blended like runny paint on a canvas; jagged rock formations took on the appearance of a long brown and gray streak. Doc checked his chronometer: twenty minutes to go, and Crystal City was still a distance off. Damn! He had to beat Wentworth to his home.

With one hand still on the wheel, Doc dialed his car-telephone. Miss O’Brien, Wentworth’s nurse, answered.

“This is Doc Phoenix, and it is very important that you follow my instructions to the letter.”
“But, I don’t understand. I thought you were still... inside.”

“I was recalled to my complex. Now, are you ready?”

“Yes, of course. What do you want me to do?” the nurse asked.

“Mr. Wentworth will be arriving home shortly. Tell him there is an important package for him to pick up at the post office. His signature is needed. You cannot sign for him. Is that clear?”

“I understand, but I don’t know why you want me to do that, Mr. Phoenix. Is there something wrong?” The nurse was concerned.

“There is, and I have no time for explanations now. All will be made clear later. Just do as I say.” Doc was curt, but he knew the harsh tone of his voice would provide results.

“I—I guess so. I’m not sure, but if you say it’s important.” Her voice was unsteady.

“Crucially so, and you can help me greatly, if you are concerned with Patricia’s well-being, that is.”

She quickly defended herself, her voice sure now, based on firmer ground. “Of course I am, sir. I care for her.”

“Good, I will see you in half an hour, then. Good-bye, Miss O’Brien.”

Doc hung up the phone, then gunned the gas pedal harder. The speedometer needle brushed past ninety-five.

Twenty-three minutes later, he brought the Ferrari to a halt in Wentworth’s driveway. No other car was there. Obviously the nurse had done her job well. And that meant Doc had ten minutes to set up his trap.

A trap James Wentworth had to enter.

Miss O’Brien ushered Doc into Wentworth’s study. “I still don’t know why you had me tell Mr. Wentworth that thing about the post office. Are you sure it was okay?”

Phoenix turned to speak with her, and his tone was softer now. He had to comfort the woman quickly, then
get back to what he was doing. “Miss O’Brien, I can assure you that Mr. Wentworth will take no action against you.

“However, I do have one further favor to ask of you. Mr. Wentworth will be coming home soon. Please, go to Patricia’s room, and stay there. No matter what you hear, do not leave Patricia’s side. As I said, this is crucial to her recovery. Will you do that for me?

The nurse seemed puzzled. She shook her head, confused. “I don’t know why I have to make the decision. I prefer leaving that sort of thing to others. Just let me take care of the child, that’s all I want to do.” Doc sensed the confusion in her eyes and spoke with her a few moments longer. He was careful with his words, and by the time he was done, Miss O’Brien agreed with his wishes.

As soon as Linda left, Steffan spoke: “Are you sure Linda can help us, Doc? There’s going to be some sort of fight, and, well, she’s a—she’s a woman.”

Doc smiled. “That is an understatement, Daniel. And yes, I’d say we need her. Or would you like to test her for yourself in hand-to-hand combat? I have a hunch you’ll quickly gain more respect for her when you’re lying face up on the floor. And I guarantee that is where you will be. Linda may be small, but she’s a hellcat when it comes to fighting. Believe me.”

Wentworth entered his house alone. Where was O’Brien, he wanted to know. There was no package for him at the post office. He was angry as he entered the main dining room.

“Good to see you again, Wentworth.” Wentworth spun, shocked.

“Phoenix?” he exclaimed. “What the hell are you doing here? You’re supposed to be... you know where.”

“I’m here to speak with you, Wentworth. To find out why you entered my complex. To find out why your man nearly killed Moose. Why another tried to torture Linda. Why you’ve been impersonating the Shaggy Man. I want
to know why you’re sabotaging your daughter’s life, Wentworth.” Phoenix rose from the recliner and stared at the suddenly very frightened man.

“I—I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve done nothing. You’re insane, Phoenix. I’m firing you, right now.” Wentworth’s voice started to rise to a squeal now. “You’re through with this case, Phoenix. Get out! Get out!”

“I’m sorry Wentworth, but I’m not done, yet. In order to save your daughter, I’ve got to save you, first.” Phoenix stepped closer to the man. “I’m going to enter your mind, Wentworth. It’s the only way.”

Wentworth turned to run, but Moose stood in the doorway behind him. He ran toward the kitchen, but Steffan waited there, his face grim. Linda stood before the third door. There was no escape. There was nothing. And Wentworth fell to the floor, crying.

“God! GOD! You can’t do that to me. You can’t! Oh my Lord, you can’t come into my mind.” Wentworth struggled up, his hands grabbing at Phoenix. “Don’t you understand? I’m running for office next November. I can’t let you see what I really am. I can’t risk that.” Wentworth was in tears, each word came crying out. “I—I wanted to be good for Patricia, but I—I had commitments, Phoenix. I made promises. Oh, damn it, Phoenix. Don’t you see? I was weak. I sold out. But you can’t take me, Phoenix. I can’t allow that. I’ll kill myself first.” He was babbling now, talking not to Phoenix, but to himself.

“I wanted to help Patricia, but I couldn’t. She saw me, Phoenix. She saw what I did, and she couldn’t forgive me, Phoenix.”

Doc moved closer, but Wentworth backed away, eyes wide open in fear. “She saw me, and she knew. She knew it all, Phoenix. She knew. God, she saw me. She, my daughter had to see me!”

He turned again and began running. Right into a
strong right cross from Moose. And James Wentworth fell to the floor, unconscious.

Phoenix turned to his assistants. "All right, we've got work to do, and no time for any preparations. I'm entering his mind immediately."

"Isn't that rather dangerous, Doc?" Linda asked, concerned.

"There isn't any choice, is there? Come on."

The portable console in Patricia's room was wheeled into the main living room. Electrodes were quickly placed on Wentworth's forehead and nerve centers. Doc handled the instruments himself, analyzing the proper data at record speed. It normally took Doc a minimum of one week of preparations for the entrance procedure, but he would have to do it now in less than one hour. Doc was worried: he didn't know whether he could survive the extra strain on his cortex, but he said nothing to his three friends.

Linda was the first ready. "Doc, blood alignment finished. There shouldn't be any resistance on that factor level."

Moose spoke up five minutes later. "His cranial structure has been programmed into the console, Doc. Link-up with main computer is holding."

Fifteen minutes later, Steffan added his results. "I think I've got your two cerebral systems coordinated, Doc. Relation factor can't be increased from 99.78. That gives you an 0.22 percent failure built in. I'm sorry."

Doc looked up from his final checking of Moose's work. "I've worked under worse percentages, Steffan. If that's the best you can do, I'll have to go with it."

His three aides moved to the opposite side of the room as Doc walked slowly over to Wentworth. He placed his hand on the unconscious man's forehead, touching the copper electrodes, then reached down to the special stud on his belt.

"Luck, Doc." Linda said. There was definite anxiety in
her voice.

Doc smiled. "Thanks. I think I'll need it on this one."
And, in a twinkling, he was gone.

Interphase.

Doc swam through murk, a mixture of liquid taffy and plasma. Movement was difficult, but he saw a light glistening somewhere ahead. That would be target arrival, he hoped.

The substance changed then, into a stream of fire flowing toward the ever-beckoning glow. Doc rode the current, keeping his head over the ice-cold flames. The stream thrust ahead in a torrent of fire, then suddenly stopped, crashing down into a firefall. Doc tensed as he pushed off a small hold in the stream, then dived into the water at the bottom of the falls.

The shoreline was far in the distance, but Doc swam quickly, pulling himself over the hot sand.

He looked about and there was nothing but desolation. An orange sun hung like a beacon in the sky, and the world seemed to stretch onward for infinity.

Doc had arrived, but there seemed to be nothing there.
The world was long and narrow, stretching far into eternity. It was flat and hot—approximately 84 degrees. The world was bright: the constant sun bathed the gravel in perpetual orange. The world was all around Doc Phoenix, but he had nowhere to go. It was all the same everywhere.

"Lookin' for someone, stranger?" A voice popped up behind him, startling Doc. He turned suddenly to see a dwarf dressed in a scarlet robe, hunched over a walking stick. The dwarf smiled, and his mouth grinned toothlessly. "If you're lookin' for someone, sonny, there's no one here. They've all gone elsewhere. I'm the last survivor on this world. Shame, too, this old mudball was kinda wild in the old days." The dwarf coughed and wheezed. "But then, you wouldn't remember the old days, would you, sonny? You're much too young. Ah, well, this here place
is dead now, and me, I’m gonna be pretty soon, possibly next week, that’s when the tentative reservation’s for. Hell, sonny, took me quite a while to wrangle an invite, but I guess it’ll be worth it. Not too often you get to be the last survivor of your race.”

Phoenix watched the old man cough again.

“Say, what would you be doin’ here, young one? You look kinda lost. You wouldn’t by any chance be one of them Aggravators? Nah, you’re not dressed like them maniacs. Hell, I ran across one of them once, three years ago, I think, just before the abandonment started. Hell, sonny, there they were rapin’ this here young thing. Kinda pretty girl, too. Blond fluffy hair. Not a natural blond, though, if’n you know what I mean.

“Gotta admit, I bought a ticket for the rapin’. Not much else to do. I mean, I knew I’d be here three more years. Account of my reservation. Did I tell you it’s for next week? Yeah, I think I did. The old memory’s slippin’. Then again, I shouldn’t complain.”

“Where am I?” Doc asked. The direct approach was needed now. There was no time to lose.

“Hah! You don’t know where you are, sonny? Hell, maybe you are an Aggravator. They don’t know where they are, either. Most of them are in Newark, only they don’t know it. Couple are in Trenton, three or four in Cleveland. I hear tell—if you promise not to say nothin’—that the big Aggravator is down in Washington these days. Hear tell he’s runnin’ for some office or somethin’. Not for the Emperor, of course, nothin’ that big. Somethin’ small, most likely, somethin’ like Imperial Rat-catcher.

“Hey, I ain’t got the time talkin’ to you, sonny. I gotta run. My time’s comin’ up pretty soon. Did I tell ya my reservation’s for . . . ? Hell, I think I did. Damn that old memory of mine. Look kid, I’ll be seein’ ya, and I hope ya find your way outta here. Ain’t a nice place to be, specially with them Aggravators roamin’ ’round.”
The dwarf bent down to pick a stone off the ground which he then threw away. "Before I leave, let me give ya one word of advice, sonny. Don't squeal on your friends, specially when you know they kin kill ya for talkin' behind their backs. Know what I mean, sonny? Good for ya!

"Take it easy, fella. And don't forget what I said."

With that, he vanished, leaving Doc alone once again.

Phoenix stopped walking after seven hours, yet the sun was still directly overhead, as it was when he first landed here. The desert still stretched on forever, giving no clues to where Wentworth's secret lay.

The dwarf had helped somewhat, but Doc needed more information. It would be too difficult to make a diagnosis from one off-handed comment. Too difficult, and, unfortunately, too easy.

The dwarf had mentioned a rape. Perhaps Patricia had seen Wentworth with a woman. Possible, something to go on, but not enough. Doc's files proved Wentworth was a known ladies' man. Patricia would have seen dozens of women come and go in the house. Possibly she had accidentally caught her father in bed with one of the women. No, the rape might be a clue, but it was only one small part of the whole.

Another comment centered on Washington. Wentworth was going to run for office, as was the head "Aggravator." There was probably a connection there. As for the Aggravators, themselves, they could represent almost anything, from back business deals to Wentworth's brief working with the Syndicate.

Doc noted the clues in his small log book. Although he still couldn't make deductions at this point, Phoenix trusted that an adult mind—even a demented one—would prove more familiar territory than the unconventionalized mental events of a child.

Doc heard a rumbling sound beneath his feet. It was

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the grinding of machinery, of gears, of vibrating engines. Perhaps the people, providing there were any, were underground. The dwarf had said they’d all died. Or had that been Doc’s interpretation? He’d said they’d gone elsewhere. Possibly to the stars? Doc thought not. There was eternal daylight here. Stars would not show through the endless sunshine. Perhaps they went underground. It was a possibility.

“You have your reservation, mister?”

Doc whirled in surprise.

To his left there suddenly appeared a young boy, no more than fifteen years old, standing behind a small ticket counter.

“Did you hear me, mister? If you need a reservation, I can get you one. But you’d better hurry. I’m almost all out of tickets. There’s been a rush on them, as you well know. I’m surprised I even have this one, but its owner died before she could use it. Well?” The boy urged Doc to move fast.

“How much is the ticket?” Doc asked.

“I’m not selling tickets, mister. Sheesh, where have you been, anyway? Washington? Sheesh. You can’t buy your reservation. You can’t buy your way outta here. Gosh, you’d think you’d know the ropes by now. Sheesh! Where do you come from, anyway?

“Come to think of it, you’re not an Aggravator, are you? I mean, I can’t sell tickets to Aggravators.” The boy leaned over the counter, then whispered to Doc, “I mean, they’re not allowed inside, but, if you’re an Aggravator, maybe I can, say, get you in for a . . . price? You got a sister?”

Doc shook his head. “No, I’m not an Aggravator. How do I get inside?”

“Actually, I didn’t think you were. I mean, you don’t look like one of them. Then again, I’ve never seen a real Aggravator before. I’ve only heard about them and their stocks and bonds and tax shelters. I’ll tell you, mister,”
his voice lowering again to a whisper, “sometimes, when I’m almost asleep, I actually ask myself if the Aggravators are real. I mean, have you heard of them?

“Oh, well, did you want that ticket or not? I mean, I’ve got to get out of here. There’s only enough room in this mind for one of us, and you’re the one, I suppose. Look, here’s a ticket. Take it, and go inside.”

Doc took the plastic card handed him. “Where do I go now?” he asked.

“Sheesh! Do you have to tell adults everything? What do you think I am, anyway? A complete baby? Gosh, I tell you, the older you get these days, the dumber you become. But, I shouldn’t complain. I’m not as smart as I used to be, either. I’m getting up there in age, you know. Fact is, in just a couple more years, I’ll be twenty, then I’ll be senile like you.

“But, since you must be at least thirty, if not older, just turn around and you’ll be inside. But please don’t tell them I gave you someone else’s reservation. They kinda frown on favoritism, you know. Bye now.”

Doc watched as the boy and his counter faded from view, then he turned around and saw a tunnel leading deep into the earth. Before the tunnel stood a guard tower. A man was asleep inside.


“Where’s your ticket, mister?”

Doc turned around. The guard was up, his rifle ready in his hands. “Right here, I thought you were asleep,” he said, handing the plastic card to the guard.

“A ruse, sir, to catch Aggravators trying to sneak in.” The guard handed the ticket back to Doc. “I guess you’re square. Go in, and good riddance.”
The tunnel continued for more than two miles underground. There were no lights, and the walls vanished into the darkness. It was only the infrared lenses on Doc's goggles that lit the path before him.

After twenty-five minutes, the pathway came to an end. There was a door ahead of Doc, but to reach it, he had to climb a short hill. The door was less than eight feet away. Yet as Doc climbed, the distance never seemed to shorten. The door always remained eight feet away.

This world was also a bit bizarre. Perhaps one could only reach the door by approaching it indirectly. Doc turned, his back to the door, and stepped backward. When he hit the steel frame, he placed his hand on the doorknob, then turned and opened it.

Phoenix was startled at what was before him.

For there, sitting on a small rock, were two figures. One was Dorothy, and the other was the Shaggy Man.

Dorothy beamed as Doc walked through the doorway. "Hi, friend," she said. "Welcome back to Oz."
Doc stared at the familiar yellow orb hanging in the sky. The orange globe of the Aggravators' world was gone. The desert had been replaced, too, by the fabulous Emerald City. Dorothy rose from the stone and yawned.

"Gee, I was wondering where you went to, Doc. I thought maybe the Iron Giant killed you like he did the poor Tin Man, but I know the Tin Man will be back because we brought him to Smith and Tinker and they’ll fix him up like new."

"This is the Emerald City?" Doc asked.

"Of course it is. Did you think we were back at Glinda's Palace? Gee, don’t you remember anything anymore? I heard adults don’t remember things when they become adults, but I didn’t really believe that till now." Those were the same words Phoenix had heard from the youth on the desert. But that had been in
Wentworth’s nightmare. This Dorothy evoked the memory of Patricia Wentworth’s fantasy. Doc turned from Dorothy to gaze upon the Shaggy Man.

“What are you doing here? I thought you’d be in your Iron Castle."

“Oh, no,” the Shaggy Man said happily. “I wanted to be here with Dorothy, so we could both watch Oz crumble.” The Shaggy Man seemed joyous at the prospect.

“Oh, yes,” Dorothy interrupted. “We’re waiting for everything to die and the world to become like it is on the Aggravators’ world.”

The Aggravators? Another reference to Wentworth’s mind-play. Were their two minds somehow psychically linked? Doc reached for his belt stud to return him to his West Virginia complex, then decided against it. What was happening here had to be fully explored.

“The Aggravators?” Doc asked. He wanted to see how similar the two dreams were.

“Oh, you know. Those big bad guys who come to destroy everything. You saw what they did on the other world, Doc.” Dorothy appeared totally innocent as she spoke.

The Shaggy Man grinned. “Confused? I’m sure you are, Phoenix. You see, I know why you’re here. You want to find out who is sick and who needs help. But I’ll tell you, Phoenix, you’ll never learn the truth this way. Oh, no. You should either be in Wentworth’s head or in Patricia’s. You can’t go on sailing between the two. Isn’t that right, Dorothy?”

Dorothy smiled. “You better believe it, Shaggy Man. Doc, if you want to cure Patricia, you’d better get back in her head. You know, I’m not feeling too well, and maybe if you get inside me fast, I’ll get better sooner.”

Phoenix was confused. The minds seemed to take on their own personality. They were not acting out the dream sequences any longer. This had never happened
before.

“You know something, Doc,” Dorothy said, “I think the only way you’re going to get anywhere is to fly over there.” Dorothy pointed toward the Wizard’s castle. “There’s no one inside, because the Wizard’s on vacation today, but he does have magical tools and such on his desk. C’mon, will you fly with me?”

Dorothy smiled, then snapped her fingers. Two small gossamer wings appeared on her back, and she rose into the sky. “C’mon, Doc. The Wizard will help you.”

Phoenix started to speak, but as he did he found himself surrounded by an amber glow, then two large wings suddenly appeared on his own back. As he reached for them, he began to float skyward. What was happening?

For the first time in many years, Phoenix was not able to control his own senses. Never in the past had the dreams been able to affect his physical appearance. But he had never in the past performed instantaneous shifting between minds, either.

This was not the time to let the fantasy take control of his senses. Doc reached for his belt stud and vanished.

He appeared a moment later, not inside his West Virginia complex, nor inside Wentworth’s huge living room, but on an endless track of desert, with a huge orange ball hanging in the sky overhead. He was back in Wentworth’s nightmare.

“Lookin’ for someone, stranger?” The voice startled Phoenix. Behind him was the same dwarf from before, wearing the same scarlet robe. “If you’re lookin’ for someone, sonny, there’s no one here. I’m the last survivor on this world.”

The fantasy was repeating itself, and Doc feared an
endless repetition if something was not done immediately to break the pattern.

Before the dwarf could finish his thoughts, Doc pushed past him and sprinted across the desert. He passed by the same rocks, the same ticket seller, then entered the same tunnel to open the same door which had entered into Oz. Only this time it did not open into the fantasy world populated by Dorothy and the Shaggy Man; this time it opened directly into Wentworth's living room. Moose, Linda, and Steffan were pacing the room. Wentworth was still unconscious on the sofa.

Moose turned, surprised. "Doc? What are you doing here? You're supposed to be inside." He pointed toward the sleeping figure.

"I was—at least I thought so. But I have to run a quick check on the instrumentation. I seemed to be winking back and forth uncontrollably."

Doc knelt before the small console by Wentworth's sofa. Moose handed him a screwdriver, then sat back in the loveseat. Doc hadn't recalled it being there before, but he had been preoccupied. The steel protection plate was removed, and the color-coded wires checked. All circuits were correctly connected, all wiring totally functional.

Doc removed his belt buckle and opened the plate on the back of his remote unit disk. Everything checked out functionally. "Damn it, nothing's wrong, yet everything went wrong!"

"What happened, Doc? Maybe if you tell us, we'll be able to help." Linda seemed concerned. Doc smiled at her, noticing how childlike, how innocent she was. Her face resembled his image of an angel. She was lovely, desirable, she needed his love. Linda sensed Doc's thoughts and quietly took his hand. "Come with me, Doc." Her voice was soft and melodic, and Doc followed her without question.

Moose and Steffan watched as Doc and Linda entered
the bedroom to the far left of the hallway. The door closed, and the world suddenly became Doc and Linda. No one else mattered. To Doc, no one existed but this madly desirous woman.

Silently, Linda’s hands unbuttoned Doc’s shirt, her long fingernails tenderly scratching his massive chest. Without a word he removed her thin blouse, then drew her to him. His powerful arms lifted her off the floor and whirled her wildly around him.

They were love-sick teenagers exploring each other, touching, kissing, caressing. It was a wild party, each feasting on the other. And it was all done without a single word. There was complete silence as they smothered each other in passionate abandon.

Linda’s lips quivered expectantly. “It was never like this before, Doc. Never. I’ve never known anyone like you. How could I? God, Doc, I—”

Phoenix pushed Linda away from him. His head aching with pain, he rose and staggered to the opposite corner of the room. He spun around, searching.

“Where was it? Where was Patricia’s bed? This was her room. I remember it. I’m sure of it.”

Linda called for Doc. “Come to me, Doc. Please. I’m here for you. I’m yours, Doc.” Phoenix ignored her. She wasn’t real. She couldn’t be real. Linda’s hand stretched to touch Doc. Her long fingers tore at his pants.

“Get away from me!” Doc snapped. His voice was harsh, cold. “I don’t know who you are, but you’re not Linda. This isn’t where I think it is. I’m still in the fantasy world, aren’t I. Aren’t I?”

Doc grabbed Linda by the throat and pulled her up to him.

“Aren’t I, damn you? I’m still in this damn dream world? But which one? Damn it, girl. Which one?”

Frightened, Linda reached for her blouse to cover herself. “What does it matter, Doc? You have me here with you. Isn’t that what you’ve wanted since I came to
work with you? Haven't you always wanted me?"

Linda moved closer to him, more confident now. She let her blouse drop, forcing Doc to stare at her small, firm breasts. "Face it, Doc, you've always wanted me, and I've wanted you, even when I wanted to kill you. What does it matter if this is real or not? You've always said the experiences you feel in the fantasy world are real. And what could be better than to love a woman you've created."

Linda's hand stroked Doc's chest. He backed away, nervously. "Our every moment will be perfect because it's you manipulating it all. We can be with each other for as long as you wish. You'll never have it better, Doc. Why not relax, enjoy it while you can?"

"Perhaps there's something about me that bothers you. Is it the color of my hair? If so, how would you prefer it? Blond? Auburn? Longer? Shorter? Would you prefer me with larger hips, larger breasts? A more sensual mouth?"

"I can change myself to anything you want, Doc. Just name it, or even think what you want. As long as I'm your creation, let me be the woman you've always wanted. I'll be perfect, Doc. Absolutely perfect."

Phoenix was backed into the corner of the room. He could take this woman, and he knew he would enjoy it, more than he had any woman in his past, but he forced himself to look away from her as she caressed him, kissed him, as her warm, moist lips moved over him.

He pushed her away. "I don't want you. Get away from me. I never want to see you again!" He shouted at Linda, more to keep her soft voice from enticing him than to curse her.

Thoughts raced wildly through his mind. He was somehow trapped between three minds. The lack of preparation before entering Wentworth's fantasy had taken its toll now. He knew he was phasing between Wentworth, Patricia, and his own thoughts. Each world
took domination, then vanished. It was like an ocean
tide, ebbing, rising, falling. This was a side effect he had
never experienced before, and it was this thought that
frightened Doc the most.

The one risk in thought-transfusion was of being
catched up with the subject’s fantasy. Doc was somehow
catched up not only with Patricia’s Oz-world, but with
Wentworth’s planet of harsh desolation, and with his own
fantasy as well. He was shuttling between all these un-
realities instantaneously.

He had to escape. There had to be a way back to objec-
tive reality before his own mind was destroyed.

The likelihood of which was becoming a greater
possibility with every passing moment.

Doc shut his eyes, forcing this world to vanish. He had
to control his own senses, his own reality before he could
battle the other two visions. He was in a netherworld. He
had to return to Wentworth’s desolation. He had traveled
there. He had entered Wentworth’s mind. He had to
return there. He could not remain here. He could not
become part of his own fantasy. He had to return.
Return. Return.

Return!

Patricia Wentworth was comatose in objective reality.
James Wentworth was unconscious in objective reality.
Doc had to force himself into Wentworth’s subjective
world. He could not remain where he was.

He repeated the pattern. Return. James Wentworth’s
subjective world. He had to leave this world. Doc’s mind
had to travel again.

He opened his eyes and the world was orange. The
desert stretched on toward the horizon. Possible success.
He began walking across the hot sands. No dwarf, yet.

The landscape changed drastically after three hours.
The flat desert vanished and was replaced with a stretch
of jagged peaks, ranging in height from three feet to more
than eighty feet, and from no less than four inches in cir-
cumference to the wider peaks, measuring more than twelve feet. The peaks were clustered together like trees in a dense forest; there was hardly room to negotiate without difficulty, let alone walk through.

The area of peaks lasted for two miles. Still no dwarf, no ticket seller, no cave, and no tunnel. Perhaps he’d forced himself from the treadmill. Doc pressed on, still grim. There could be danger at any moment; he could not afford to let himself relax.

It was 7:58 P.M. on his chronometer. He had been on this world six hours and fifteen minutes and there were no signs of the phasing effect—yet. He emphasized that for his own good. He could not allow himself to return to interphase. Not until he’d found the clue to Wentworth’s insanity.

Doc took an hour break at 11:38 P.M., chronometer time. The sun still hung overhead in this world of perpetual day. Awaking, he removed a small boxed meal from his knapsack; he hadn’t eaten for twenty-one hours, and hunger was beginning to set in.

The land was swampy now. Patches of slime-covered earth were everywhere, and Phoenix tried to avoid stepping in the deeper pools. There was no place here to grab a quick change of socks and shoes, he thought. He allowed himself a smile.

His chronometer now read 8:18 A.M., and the land was sandy again, but this time he could see tall spires stretching skyward off in the distance. Houses? Perhaps. Phoenix pushed on, faster than before. He wished to reach the towers before noon.

It was 11:21 A.M., objective time. Phoenix stood before the first of the tall spires. It was one of four towers, all of which were connected by an immense sand castle, itself more than one hundred feet high by four hundred feet long. The castle was built without windows or stones, and seemed to be flat save for the distinctly sandy texture Doc felt when he brushed his hand against the nearest wall.
He used a knife to pick at the wall, but the thin blade shattered. The sand was fused together, harder than diamond.

The castle was an impenetrable fort.
An impossible prison to break out of.
Or into.

But Doc had no choice. He had to get inside. Somehow, he sensed, the clue to Wentworth’s sickness rested within the sandy walls.

And with Wentworth cured, Patricia’s illness could be diagnosed and cured as well.

Doc’s only problem was finding entrance into a fortress with no doors, no windows, and a totally indestructible frame.

Doc grinned: *simple* assignment.
“This is always the worst part of these capers,” Moose said, pacing Wentworth’s living room. “Waiting, always waiting, and feeling totally helpless.”

Steffan sat in the recliner correcting legal briefs while Linda watched the dials on the console.

Moose continued: “Doc’s inside that creep’s mind, and we can do nothing but pace this ridiculous room. I tell you, I’m coming apart.”

Steffan looked up from his papers and deadpanned, “Proceed! No matter how we reassemble you, the results are sure to be a distinct improvement.”

Moose was ready for this: a verbal battle with Daniel Steffan always made the scientist happy. “Why, you overrated Perry Mason, we’d have to use Krazy Glue to put you in one piece, and even then your skinny head would still be cracked.”
"Enough, the two of you! I'm getting a very bizarre reading on the computer." Linda looked up toward Moose, worried. "I don't know what's wrong."

"Move over," Moose said, pushing his way to the control unit. "Let me take a look. Oh, boy, the constant is fluctuating. Doc must be going crazy in there."

Steffan peered over Moose's shoulder. "Why? What's happening in there?"

"Not sure, Fingers, but it looks like an electrical convolution of some sort. Doc's shifting between the two programs. I've never seen anything like it before."

"Anything I can do, Moose?"

"No, Linda, just keep clear of me, and check in on Patricia. Doc is somewhere overriding both channels, fluctuating between her mind and Wentworth's. Hell, he's living two fantasies almost at once. I don't know how he's doing it, but he is."

"Should we unplug one of the connectors?" Steffan asked.

"We can't, not at this point. We can't even call Doc back to us. If we don't set the coordinates exactly, we could lose him forever. And with the way he's jumping back and forth between two minds, we can't be sure of any coordinate functions."

"We've got to do something. Anything. Doc's trapped in there."

"Believe me, Daniel, I know, but I can't do a thing, not until there's a measure of stability achieved. The problem seems to come from the fact that we have both Wentworth and Patricia hooked into the computer. We've never had Doc linked with two minds like that before. We've also never had such a short preparation period. And there's no one monitoring the main computer terminal, no one there to slowly regulate the input. Hell, I don't know if we could even help him if someone were there. I've just never seen anything like this before."

Moose shook his head. "Doc's trying to fight the
effect. God, the guy’s one in a million. He’s caught up within two fantasies, yet he’s forcing some kind of stability. Look at Doc’s own monitor. Brain function stress is skyrocketing upward; he’s being mentally ripped apart. Who knows what he’s experiencing with this overlapping of minds, yet he’s fighting the stress, forcing an overcharge reduction. I’ll be honest, friends, I don’t think another man in a billion could do what he’s doing.”

Linda looked at Moose grimly. “And all we do is watch as he dies? No, Moose, I can’t buy that. We’ve got to try something.”

“You try nothing.” A voice came from behind the trio.

The short man was standing there, Magnum in hand, while the tall, bald man stood next to him, smiling. Linda felt shivers race up her spine while Moose’s eyes bulged for a moment, again feeling the beating he had taken only days before.

“Had a hunch you did something to him,” the short man said, indicating the sleeping form of Wentworth on the sofa. “He didn’t show up at the office on time. Is he dead?”

Linda reported instantly. “No, he’s unconscious. Doc Phoenix entered his mind. If you do anything, you can jeopardize his existence.”

The short man grinned, revealing a large gap between his two front teeth. The gap somehow made him even more menacing than he appeared before. “Wentworth has been judged useless as it is. The bosses think he’s proven more of a liability than he’s worth.” He stroked the Magnum, continuing. “We don’t need him anymore, and we don’t give a damn about Phoenix or the rest of you. You’re all expendable, and if we can get rid of Wentworth by pulling the plug on that thing of yours, and take Phoenix along with him, so much the better.” The man turned to Gaut and nodded. “Dismantle the computer, Gaut.”
Gaut looked at the small box, confused. It didn’t seem to him worth destroying, but he had been given an order, and he would carry it out. That had been the way it always was, ever since he’d joined the Syndicate.

But Gaut didn’t mind following orders blindly. It was good for someone else to tell him what to do; it hurt so much for Gaut to think on his own. It had always been a painful experience when Gaut did anything but react to a stimulus.

Even as a child, Gaut had found he could not work in class. After school, when the other children had taunted him for his stupidity, it had been so easy and gratifying for Gaut to lash out at them, to pound them against walls, to crush them into the ground.

When Gaut had finally been thrown out of school, he’d wandered the streets for days on end. He hadn’t been able to get a job. But if you’re fifteen years old, and already seven feet tall, it is not a problem to use your strength and imposing figure to get anything you want from people. He hardly ever had to smash someone; they would always give him their money when he demanded it. And he would never have to wave a gun. He didn’t own one, for one thing; Gaut was not smart enough to take care of a pistol, let alone to learn how to fire it. But Gaut had his incredible strength, and that was enough for him.

By the age of twenty-four, Gaut had shaved his head. It made him seem even tougher, he had thought. For Gaut had been trying to impress Little Anthony Segretti, the Syndicate boss for Crystal City. Gaut had heard Little Anthony was looking for a new bodyguard. The old one had more devotedly guarded Little Anthony’s money than Little Anthony’s body. Police had found his body at the wheel of a 1973 Chevy Vega. Actually, they’d found what was left of his body and the car; the majority of both had been blown all over the street by a small, almost insignificant bomb placed under a faulty brake pedal. It had been assumed that when the bodyguard had found
the brake no longer to be operational, he’d begun pounding the pedal. The explosion had stopped the car for him, though. At the moment the bomb had wiped out any trace of his late bodyguard, Little Anthony had been sipping a pink lemonade at Congressman Will Hutchinson’s birthday party. Little Anthony had been, of course, shocked when he’d heard the news, and he’d immediately sent flowers to the chapel. No one had ever commented that they had been plastic spray-painted roses.

Gaut had become Little Anthony’s bodyguard two days later, and he’d worked loyally for the small mobster for the next three years, until Little Anthony had found himself driving in a rigged-up car.

Eddie Marcaro, the new boss for Crystal City, had taken on Gaut as his own bodyguard, until the big bosses had told him to reassign the silent giant to Wentworth. Sammy Detroit, the small man, had gone along to work with Wentworth as well. The two had been sent to watch Wentworth, to make sure he followed the Syndicate line after he’d supposedly quit as head council attorney. Wentworth had never quit, no one ever quit the Syndicate.

Instead, Wentworth had worked to establish himself politically as a man behind the scenes, then as a coordinator for the local machine, and finally as a possible contender for office himself. And all the while his campaigns, his work, and his future had been paid for and guided by his former bosses.

But then things had begun to go wrong for Wentworth. His daughter had lapsed into a coma; his business dealings had begun to flounder; he’d begun to weaken. At the same time another Syndicate-controlled candidate had started to move up along the political ladder, making Wentworth an additional burden, and the Syndicate didn’t believe in carrying excess baggage.

Therefore, as Wentworth lay unconscious on the sofa in his own home, he was declared removable, and his
former coworkers were assigned the role of assassins.

Moose, Linda, and Steffan separated as Gaut moved slowly toward the computer console. If they wanted to take on the large man, they would have to come at him from all sides, and they would have to keep him off balance and confused. But even more than that, they would have to be sure that they could keep him away from the console; all he needed was one fast smash through the thin steel plating, and Doc Phoenix would die.

Variable time-displacement factors between objective and subjective reality had long been known to Phoenix and his brain trust. Thus, as twenty-four hours passed within the mind of the sleeping James Wentworth, minutes flew by on objective Earth.

**TIME LAPSE:**
**THREE MINUTES**

The three moved as one: Moose circled Gaut to his left, Fingers to his right, Linda to his rear. Gaut turned quickly to keep all three in his sight, but as soon as he moved to watch one of the three, the other two would shift, forcing him to turn to see where they'd vanished to.

Moose stepped back to the long silk curtains that covered the living room picture window. With a

**TIME LAPSE:**
**TWELVE HOURS**

Doc returned to the small swamp and the forest of trees off to the side of the marsh. There was a cornucopia blossoming there: from bristlecone pines, perhaps the oldest trees known to man, to the exotic varieties of Chinese parasol, Italian cypress, Norwegian spruce, and the more commonly known oak, fir, and willows. No two pair
small pocketknife, he tore loose a patch large enough to pull around Gaut’s eyes and blind him, if only for a few very important moments.

Linda grabbed a long kitchen knife from the nearby table they had been eating at. She didn’t need the knife, but it would distract Gaut while she used her quite formidable skills on him.

Steffan moved between Gaut and the console; he knew he would be taking the brunt of Gaut’s fury, but he also knew someone had to be there, and as the other two were better fighters than he, Steffan resigned himself to play the guard position.

The short man stood back, enjoying the play as it unfolded for him. He would wait for Gaut to stop them; he knew they were absolutely no match for the mute giant.

Moose was the first to act. Holding the long cloth strip before him, he leaped atop the giant’s

should have existed in the same region, but here, in and around this swamp, they clustered together like a bizarre museum display.

But the tree Doc was interested in was the Indian banyan, a huge multitrunked tree with a canopy spreading more than two acres. There were more than two hundred smaller trunks branching off the main limb, each complete with roots and branches of its own.

It was these hanging vines that had caught Doc’s attention when he’d first walked through the swamp, and it was these branches that interested him now. From his backpack, Doc removed a small penknife, which he proceeded to use in stripping the bark from the soft branches, then carefully cutting and slicing the wood into thin, pliable fibers that he grafted together.

After three hours, Doc
shoulders, looping the makeshift mask over Gaut's eyes. Gaut tensed his back, then snapped his elbows behind him. Moose fell to the ground in pain, his sides throbbing as if they had caved in.

Linda grasped the knife and jumped at Gaut's legs while Moose still clung to his chest. She plunged the knife into the calf, then rolled back quickly out of the way of Moose as he fell groundward. Gaut stared in shock at the knife imbedded in his leg, but silently he grabbed the dark handle and yanked the blade out. His leg bled for a moment, then the bleeding ceased. He held the knife in his right hand, showed it to Linda, then closed his fingers over the knife. Gaut smiled as he opened his palm a moment later to show the crushed remnants of the knife. Linda shook her head in disbelief. This was not going to be an

had a reinforced heavy-duty rope strong enough to hold his 220 pounds, plus the weight of the anchor.

It was this that he began working on next. With no way to forge a metal grappling hook, Doc searched for and found a long, flat slab of granite. With two other rocks doubling for a hammer and chisel, Phoenix carved a crude but functional hook. Now he needed but one more item.

The walk back towards the sand castle took more than 3 hours. Doc checked his chronometer: it was now 11:30 P.M., and to begin his entry at this point would be folly. However, Doc had to start operations now, despite his fatigue. He wished he could rest, but that would have to come later, after he'd broken through the castle and made his way inside to the core of Wentworth's psyche.
easy victory. Hell, it would be hard enough to just live through this.

Steffan watched in fear as Gaut stepped in his direction, his giant hand reaching out toward him. Gaut’s fingers grabbed at Steffan’s shirt and suddenly his collar came tight around his neck; with ease he was lifted off the ground by Gaut, then flung across the room into the far wall.

Moose knew it would be ridiculous to attack the giant again; he was stronger than the scientist had remembered, and more than amply powered to squeeze Moose, Linda, and Steffan compact enough to fit into plastic sandwich bags if he wished to. To stop Gaut, they had to stop the short man, and to that end, Moose leaped at Sammy Detroit. Linda had the same idea at the same time, and together they grabbed at the short man, they called out to Gaut. Gaut

Doc stood before the imposing wall of the huge monolith, the grappling hook held firmly in hand. In his other hand was a large longbow he had made after he’d finished with the hook and rope. A moment later Doc smiled as the hook flew through the orange sky on the end of the arrow, the long rope trailing behind.

The hook caught the edge of the castle’s roof, and Doc grabbed the rope firmly and yanked. The hook was secure.

Doc tied the other end of the rope to a large boulder a short distance away, then proceeded to climb the rope, pulling hand over hand. It took fifteen minutes, but he finally reached the top, unscathed.

The roof of the castle was flat, save for one small glass window that let in the light from the burning orange sun. Phoenix peered through the clear glass and saw a
THREE MINUTES

turned to see the two standing over Detroit. Detroit was smiling even as the two swore to break his back unless Gaut moved away from the computer.

Gaut knew what the smile meant, knew what he had to do, and as Moose, Linda, and Stefan watched, Gaut shot his hand through the metal casing of the computer, and ripped out the wiring from within.

The small box sparked for a moment, then Gaut lifted it down onto the Chinese rug.

It was over; the computer was destroyed . . .

And Sammy Detroit simply laughed.

TWELVE HOURS

huge, empty expanse beneath him; there was only one room beneath this sandshell, and that room had only one, small figure within.

It was James Wentworth, and he was tied to a burning cross.

Wentworth was in the center of the huge room, writhing in agony upon the cross. His hands were nailed to the crossbar, his feet to the long stake. Wentworth saw Phoenix approach, and cried out to him. "Help me, please. You must help me. I can't take the pain any longer. You've got to help."

As Doc moved closer, he realized there was no heat radiating from the fire. A quick look at Wentworth confirmed the fact that though the flames licked about him, he was not being burnt.

A self-martyr? Doc wondered. Was there any other reason Wentworth would have a fantasy/nightmare consist-
ing of his own everlasting burning?

Doc reached to lower Wentworth off the stake, but the man resisted, pulled back, refusing to be moved.

At that moment, Phoenix disappeared.

Sammy Detroit wanted to run from this house, return to Alexandria, and report to his bosses that he wanted out of the Syndicate, but he knew he would not get a chance to finish such a request, so he plopped down in a wooden folding chair and observed the war.

Miss O'Brien couldn't take her eyes off the two large men circling each other in the living room. She had always been a fight fan, and she knew a championship battle when she saw one. And this was definitely some sort of fight of the century.

Gaut moved first, shooting out a massive hand that grabbed Doc around the neck. His fingers quickly closed in around the fragile fleshy part; his thumb gouged into Doc's Adam's apple. Doc fell back, weakly, his eyes saw black spots spinning madly across his vision. Smiling, Gaut threw Doc back into the wall. The room groaned as the huge man fell through the plasterboard.

Picking himself up, Doc circled Gaut again, jabbing his face with a series of small but powerful punches. He then fainted back and came in low to Gaut's chin with a hard left hook. Gaut stood his ground and grabbed Doc's hand with his own, forcing Phoenix back into the corner. Doc smiled.
Phoenix acknowledged his opponent’s superior strength, knowing the key to hold his own would be with a more scientific, better conceived approach. He had learned to defend himself by reading books on the subject, then by applying that knowledge to his workouts. At first, the only problem had been that the textbook moves were not the same as street brawling; the books Phoenix favored laid out their procedures as exercises, while street fighting was more of an “anything goes” proposition. It took Doc many years to break himself from the scientific, sterile modes of defense and to develop strategies that could keep him on his feet without sinking to his nemesis’ level.

Doc took a fast smash to his right eye and shrugged it off; Gaut was good, much better than he was, but Gaut was also almost mindless in his fighting. For a second time, Doc fainted back towards the wall, then came in low to Gaut’s chin. As before, Gaut grabbed Doc’s hand and threw Phoenix back into the wall. Doc smiled.

Linda grimaced in sympathetic pain at the sound of Doc’s impact then leaped up with blazing eyes to help Phoenix, but Moose held her back.

“Better not,” he cautioned. “Doc has enough problems without worrying about you. You move in and his mind will become engrossed in protecting you rather than in fighting his own battle.”

But Linda was frantic. “Then what do we do while he’s having his brains battered against the wall, Moose? We can’t just sit here and watch.”

Moose was grim, very much unlike the usual outgoing scientist. “We can and we will. But, if the time comes and it looks as if Doc is definitely going to lose, then I’ll do what has to be done. You don’t move. Fingers doesn’t join in. I go alone.” His voice lowered to a whisper. “It’s something Doc and I worked out years ago in college. It may not be totally fair, but what the hell. Doc’s life will be on the line, then. But I don’t move until I get his
signal. No sooner, no later. You understand?"

Linda sighed. "If that's what Doc wants, I'll go with it. I don't want him hurt, but I care for him, Moose, more than I thought I could."

Moose swallowed. Knowing the words which would come.

"I didn't think it was right to feel about him the way I do, Moose, especially since he probably knows more about me than even I do. He's been inside my mind, he's seen what I am deep down inside, and he cured me of my major problems. I can't remember what I once was; he knows it. He's seen my weaknesses, he's seen it all, and I've revealed more to him than seems possible.

Linda paused a moment, groping for the right words. "Moose, I've never been in love before... You know the kind of work I did precluded such things. I'm not even sure I know what being in love is all about, but, I think I love him... despite, or maybe because he's seen inside me and can still care for what I am. I—I don't want anything to happen to him, Moose!"

"Nothing will happen, Linda. Believe me." Moose put his arm around Linda's shoulder and drew the young woman close to him for comfort. Damn it, he wished, why couldn't she feel that way about him?

Doc circled Gaut, trying to keep the bald giant off-balance, jabbing at him every so often with small, quick punches. Then, for a third time, Doc fell back and came in low to Gaut's jaw. Almost instinctively, the giant grabbed for Doc's hand and threw him back. The fool, Gaut thought to himself, he comes at me the same way each time. But then the next time he tries that, I will come down on him. I will smash him.

Sammy Detroit was getting nervous now and squirmed in his chair; if Gaut didn't finish Phoenix soon, he would have to help. His hand fell to his side, lightly touching a small pencil-thin gun strapped to his right ankle. One way or another, Phoenix would die. Detroit let himself
relax for a moment.

Only Steffan saw the grin spread quietly across Detroit’s face and then fade. Steffan shuddered. When someone like Sammy Detroit was smiling, you had better quickly count your fingers; one of them might be missing.

Doc sidestepped a powerful uppercut then spun quickly out of the way. It was now or never, he knew. His lips were cut and bleeding, his left shoulder was weak and throbbing. He could not stand much more of the beating Gaut was forcing him to take. Doc breathed in sharply.

Doc fainted once again, waiting for Gaut’s hand to reach. A moment passed and nothing. “C’mon, you fool,” Doc’s mind screamed angrily—“Take the bait, damn you. Take the bait.”

Gaut’s mind took a moment more, then his right hand reached out to grab Doc’s hand. Phoenix did not move in low for another left uppercut. Instead, as Gaut bent, Doc came in high, preparing himself for his final thrust. Then his fingers reached for twin pressure points behind Gaut’s neck. Gripping tightly, Doc forced the gasping giant to his knees. Gaut screamed silently, the pressure to the back of his neck was excruciating. How could two fingers give him so much pain? How?

Sammy Detroit knew the time had come. If Gaut lost, then Phoenix would come after him. Detroit reached down to his ankle and clasped the small weapon between his fingers. Steffan was watching. Remembering Doc’s warning about Detroit’s marksmanship, he shot up from his seat and shouted, “Watch it!” Linda was out of her chair before Steffan finished his cry, and assumed aikido position, then let loose with a series of moves to Detroit’s stomach, and groin. The short man didn’t know what had hit him, but his fingers closed on the firing stud of his small weapon, and a poison dart shot out at Linda. Linda whirled and ducked, prepared, then put an elephant kick to Detroit’s midsection.
The woman moved back a moment, assuming cat stance, her eyes piercing Detroit’s. The short man fell, gasping and frightened. He was no fighter, but this girl came at him, stalked him. Detroit lunged for the fireplace and grabbed an iron. A locking block thrust the blade from Detroit’s hand; then a bear thrust knocked him down. Detroit clutched his chest in time for a lightning kick which put him out unconscious upon the floor.

Linda stepped over Detroit’s body, then turned to Doc. She wanted to join the fight, prove that her martial arts skills would be of help to him, but she knew better, and, despite her own judgment, moved back to Moose.

“Hell, I didn’t know you could do that,” he said.

“I know most of the ways a man can fight. It isn’t something one brags about, but the knowledge does come in handy at times.” Linda was somber as she turned her gaze back to Gaut and Phoenix.

Gaut was on the floor, writhing in pain, but Doc kept with him, increasing his pressure to the bald man’s neck. Gaut’s head swayed trying to push Doc away from him, but it was of little use. The fight was over, and it just took another two minutes for the information to reach Gaut’s almost insignificant brain.

Phoenix glanced distastefully at his exultant braintrust and said quietly, “Tie the two up. We’ve got to move our base back to the Complex.”

With that, Phoenix slumped into an easy chair and sighed. He could do without this dirty confrontation.
“I’m glad you’re willing to put up with my coming here,” Miss O’Brien said, staring with interest at the chrome and glass interior of Doc’s operating room.

Doc looked up from the large computer monitor and smiled wearily at the woman. “I think it would be a good idea for you to stay with Patricia. You know her better than my friends do, and you’ll know if she makes any unusual movements, sounds, or whatever. They’ll be here with you, checking the equipment, but I think we need the personal touch.”

Moose peered out from the control room. “I think I’ve got a working patch with the main console unit, Doc. The override will keep working even without the first three functions.”

“First three functions?” Miss O’Brien asked. “Is there something wrong I should know about? After all, I am supposed to take care of Patricia.”

Doc continued checking the various functions as he spoke. “No problem, Miss O’Brien. We’re just cautious. We had a rather nasty explosion in here a few days
back.” Phoenix did not mention Wentworth’s connection with the sabotage. “It blew out the main computer bank, but we were able to go to override. With the small portable console destroyed, we have to set up a minor patch. There shouldn’t be any problems I can’t handle, once I’m inside.”

“But who are you entering? I thought I heard you say something about going into Mr. Wentworth again, but you also said something about Patricia. I’m sorry to be such a bother, Doctor Phoenix, but I just don’t understand this sort of thing.”

Doc grinned. “Don’t worry, I doubt if one in ten million would understand the network we’ve developed here, or the programming needed to keep all my biological functions operating. But to answer your question, I’m going to return to Mr. Wentworth’s mind, and hopefully pinpoint my arrival to the moment I left him. I was on the verge of a discovery.

“Then, without returning here, I’ll transfer to Patricia’s mind in Oz. Hopefully, by the time you see me next, both my patients will be cured.”

Doc glanced at Moose questioningly. Moose nodded. “I’m ready if you are, Doc.”

Doc then turned to Steffan: “What about our two prisoners?”

Steffan looked at Gaut and Detroit, their hands tied behind them, their feet tied to unshatterable steel poles. “I think they’ll stay put, Doc.”

Linda moved across the room to Doc and held out her hands. Doc clasped them in his for a moment as she spoke.

“Good luck.”

Doc smiled. “Thanks, I think I’ll be needing it.”

Then Linda leaned over and kissed Doc gently on the lips and whispered, too softly for anyone other than Phoenix to hear, “I want you to hurry back to me, Doc. I don’t want to be without you any more than I have to be.”
Doc made no reply as he reached for his belt-stud and disappeared.

As soon as the expected sense of vertigo had vanished, Phoenix realized he was once again within the four walls of the sand castle, and before him was James Wentworth, still nailed to the flaming cross.

Flames without heat licked at the writhing figure. Self-destruction. Phoenix reached out to pull Wentworth from the cross, and the man resisted as he had before, but this time Doc continued to yank at the steel nails that were driven through Wentworth’s palms. Doc grabbed the right one and braced his leg against the cross, but instead of pulling the spike free, he cracked the wood, and Wentworth and the cross fell back.

Wentworth screamed, but Phoenix stood braced over the fallen body and pulled at the stake again. This time there was a creaking sound and the nail slowly tore from the wooden bar and passed through Wentworth’s palm. Doc looked, but there wasn’t any wound where there should have been a massive hole.

Doc yanked at the left spike, and after a few moments, it, too, pulled free. Again there wasn’t any hole. Doc began to work on the legs while Wentworth pounded his fist against Phoenix’s back. The right foot was freed intact; then, a few moments after, the left was released. Doc braced his arm across Wentworth’s shoulder and lifted him. Wentworth was shaky at first, unable to stand on his legs, but after a few minutes of gentle massaging, he stumbled across the chamber, awed by the high walls around him.

“You know,” he started, “I never saw anything inside this place but flames. They blocked out everything. In fact you looked like some sort of bizarre monster through the haze, I tell you. Wearing that get-up of
yours, you’re not the most pleasant sight I’ve ever seen. That’s why I fought you off at first. I didn’t want to stop one torture only to begin another.”

Phoenix was grim as he spoke. “Do you have any memories of who put you here, or why?”

Wentworth shook his head. “No, I wish I did, but I have none. I was walking across this desert, and I don’t even know why I was doing that, but I was, and I felt tired. When I awoke, I was suddenly on that cross. That’s all I know. Hell!” Wentworth grinned, “I don’t think I’d want to know anything else.”

“How long were you up on the cross?” Phoenix asked.

“Don’t know that, either. Felt like I’ve been up there for years, but that couldn’t be true. Damn it, Phoenix, I don’t know anything. I feel like a goddam CHILD!

“Don’t know about you, Phoenix, but I’ve never had amnesia before this. And I tell you, it’s frightening, goddam awful frightening. I was doing something I don’t remember. I was walking on some desert for some reason I can’t recall. I was placed on a burning cross, but for what goddam reason I don’t know, and I sure as flaming hell don’t know by who.”

Wentworth’s eyes blazed with hatred. “But I’ll tell you this, Phoenix. I want to find out who put me there. And when I do, I’ll sure as hell get him. I owe myself that.”

The walls of the sand castle interested Phoenix and he went to examine them carefully. They were made only of sand, nothing more to hold them together. There were neither doors nor windows; the castle had probably been built around Wentworth.

“Tell me about your daughter, Patricia,” Phoenix demanded suddenly.

Wentworth was visibly shaken by the question. “What about her? What do you know? How do you know her? I didn’t say I had a daughter. Who are you, Phoenix?”

“You hired me to help your daughter, Wentworth. I’m a psychologist and you needed my special talents to enter
her subconscious."

"What the hell are you talking about? I never saw you before you pulled me down from that cross."

Phoenix considered his next words with extreme care. He had to push this fantasy-Wentworth to talk, but the wrong push could send him over the brink. "You never saw me because you are only a creation of your own mind. You are speaking to me in a fantasy dream. You exist within the real James Wentworth's mind. You have a body and substance. You breathe. You are real, but you are only a projection of reality." Phoenix watched Wentworth's startled expression. "You hired me in your other self. Your daughter fell into a coma and you wanted me to find out why she was trying to avoid reality, to bring her back from her dream world.

"But, for some reason, on a deeper level, you didn't want her back with you. You heard me mention that she'd created a villain in her mind-drama based on the Shaggy Man from the Oz stories. For some reason I still don't know, though I do have my guesses, you dressed up as the Shaggy Man and somehow entered my computer complex and destroyed my number-one computer. Then, with your two henchmen, you tried to intimidate and murder my staff."

Wentworth was visibly stunned as Phoenix continued.

"It was something you did that pushed Patricia into her fantasy. I have to know what it was, if I'm to save your daughter—and, I hope, cure you in the process.

"And, no less important, I have to learn how you entered my complex."

Wentworth said nothing, but he listened intently. Phoenix had spoken slowly, carefully choosing his words to avoid shocking this version of Wentworth any more than he had to. He'd told only the truth, although he had left out one small detail—namely, the toy man from the Shaggy Man's Iron Castle that had found its way into Doc's objective reality.
Phoenix was deathly afraid of the reason he might get.

Wentworth stared at Phoenix for more than a minute before he lost the glaze that covered his eyes. He ran to the opposite corner of the huge castle and tried to bury himself between the two walls, but Phoenix's eyes were all that he saw staring at him.

He ran alongside one wall, staring at Phoenix as he moved. He tripped for a moment, then righted himself, then continued to run, never moving more than two feet from the wall.

He needed shelter, but here, in this football stadium-sized castle, there was no place to hide. It was just one huge arena with four walls and a ceiling suspended one hundred feet above them.

He muttered now, cursing Doc with every step, almost a chant, as if the constant repetition of words would drive Phoenix away. But Doc's eyes followed him everywhere. He turned from Doc, but Doc was still before him. He whirled about, and Doc stood there, smiling. He ran, but there was always Doc . . . Doc . . . DOC!!!

Finally he fell weeping to the floor. Phoenix stepped slowly to Wentworth's side and placed a hand on his shoulder. Wentworth looked up and into Phoenix's eyes. "I—I didn't mean to do anything. You've got to understand that. But they forced me to—they forced me to—and I was weak, too weak for my own good, too weak for the good of my daughter.

"But, you see, they had that over me. They knew what I wanted, and they were willing to supply me with it. "Willing?" Hell! They pushed it on me. They forced me to take it. And when I couldn't give it up, I had to follow orders."

"They made you do what?" Phoenix asked.
And then Wentworth let it all spill out.

The Iron Castle was less than one mile away now, a ten-minute trek over the craggy terrain that was once Munchkinland. The wreckage of small blue-domed cottages was everywhere Phoenix could see, but there were no bodies, of course; they would all be found in miniature, beyond caring for any physical needs in the Shaggy Man’s growing display.

The skies suddenly became overcast with thick gray clouds, and the air was moist and heavy, hard to walk through. Off in the distance, over the Iron Castle, Phoenix saw sudden flashes of lightning followed moments later by rolling thunderclaps. Then the grayness turned to black, and the path leading to the castle grew more treacherous.

The Shaggy Man knew Phoenix was coming, and this was a battle he did not want to engage in.

Within the castle, the Shaggy Man cursed Phoenix, then turned to Dorothy who sat tied to a wooden armchair. “He’s coming for you, my little friend. He wants to rescue you, but the Shaggy Man won’t allow him that victory, now will he?”

Dorothy stared at her one-time friend. “Why are you doing this?” She asked. “You were my friend. Why do you want to hurt me and kill my other friend? I don’t understand you, Shaggy Man. But you’re not the same person I once knew. You’re even worse than the Wicked Witch of the West.”

The Shaggy Man slapped her with the back of his hand. “Silence, fool! You don’t understand—you can’t possibly realize what will happen if Phoenix succeeds. I’ll vanish, and you’ll disappear—return to your real home. Everything I’ve wanted here in Oz, the glory, the position, the power, it will all cease to be. I’ll be nothing,
Dorothy, nothing but a memory. But I will not accept that fate, my dear. I will not become a memory, fading year by year.

“I’ve desired power for many years, little one. I’ve sought it for as long as I can recall. You’ve seen what I can do. You’ve witnessed the imprisonment of all my foes, silenced, mastered. I’m their captor and master, and I’ve proven I deserve the glory I’ve won.”

The Shaggy Man returned to the window, but he could not see Phoenix now. The man had vanished while he was ranting to Dorothy. He cursed himself this time, then ran from the girl toward the castle’s entranceway. The door was open, but Phoenix was nowhere.

The Shaggy Man whirled about screaming for his flying monkeys. A dozen apes sped at his command.

He stared angrily at the winged simians, shouting his orders: “Phoenix has invaded my stronghold! Find him! Bring him to me! If need be—destroy him!” The apes flew off, leaving the Shaggy Man alone in the huge chamber.

“They went off on a fool’s mission, Shaggy Man.” Phoenix came out from the shadows. “They won’t find me, Shaggy Man, because they’re too afraid of returning here until they do. And now it’s just the two of us.”

The Shaggy Man stared at Phoenix. “Not quite, Phoenix, I’m not called the Wizard of this castle for naught.” The Shaggy Man’s hands glowed as he raised them high over his head. The space between the two shimmered for a moment, and then there was a sudden explosion.

“You see, Phoenix, if we must fight, Dorothy will be the prize. If you win, she’s yours to take back with you. If I win, she’s mine, and she will never revive on your world. You understand the rules, Phoenix?”

“I do.”

“Very good, then. Now let the battle begin!”
“He’s changed over to Patricia’s mind!” Linda excitedly exclaimed. “The double-link works! Doc said to unhook Wentworth once he made the change. You think he’s finished with him?”

Moose looked up. “Uh-huh! He wouldn’t’ve made the change if he weren’t. But damn it, I wish we were able to perfect some sort of visual hook-up with Doc. Something that would allow us to see what’s going on in there. Anyway, Linda, press that fifth button, will you? Fingers, you watch Wentworth. He’s gonna jump once the current’s turned off. Make sure he doesn’t leap off the table. Got that?”

Steffan snorted. “Of course I understand that! What do you take me for, anyway?” Steffan rued that obvious straight line the moment he made it.

“Just like you, Fingers,” Moose started. “You give me
a line like that when I'm too busy to come up with something clever. You really know how to hurt a guy, don't you?"

"The button's pressed, Moose. Now what?" Linda remained with the computer while Moose moved over to Wentworth. "Just sit back and watch, kid. The action takes place in here now. Fingers, grab Wentworth's legs. I'm going to remove the probe."

The first wire was attached to a copper electrode taped to Wentworth's forehead. With a tweezers-sized pair of scissors, Moose delicately snipped the wire at the copper base. He reached toward the cabinet and took what looked to be a small red oilcan from a drawer, then returned to Wentworth.

From the top of the can, Mose removed an eyedropper, then daubed the tape with its open end. He let one drop squeeze out, then he peeled the tape back, off the forehead. There was a small pinprick where the electrodes had been placed, and Moose daubed that with a cotton ball moistened in alcohol, then placed a Band-Aid over the small wound, not so much because it needed protection, but to remind Wentworth to keep off his feet for a day or two until the effects of Doc's visit to his mind wore off.

Repeating his procedure for the final three electrodes, each time taking the steps that were needed to insure as little pain as possible for the waking patient, Moose rubbed his tired eyes for a moment, then turned to Linda and smiled wearily. "This is the final move now. Please follow the sequence and turn off all computer functions as I give the word."

Moose held down Wentworth's chest while Steffan grabbed the man's legs. "In order, Linda—number one—NOW!" Linda flicked off the first switch, and Wentworth shook just a bit. "Number two, Linda, m'dear—NOW!" Wentworth's arms leaped up spasmodically. "All right, Linda, you've got to throw
three and four simultaneously. Get ready, set—NOW!" Wentworth’s body became rigid, rolling in agony. "This is it, Linda. Get ready, Fingers! Switch five. Four . . . three . . . two . . . one—NOW! Throw it!"

Linda’s hand slipped off the switch for just a moment. "Throw it, dammit!" Moose shouted. The girl regained herself, then grabbed the switch and forced it down. Then Wentworth went mad. He began rolling, turning, writhing. His arms and legs shot out in all directions without any order or purpose.

Steffan held Wentworth’s legs as best he could, but there was no way to control his mindless thrashing. Then, almost as suddenly as the movements began, they stopped, and Wentworth slumped on the table.

Moose turned to Linda. "Hey, I’m sorry for how I acted back there. I just got carried away. I apologize, Linda."

Linda smiled. "My fault, Moose. I was paying attention, but I wasn’t ready." She then turned back from Moose to look at Wentworth’s resting form. Moose said nothing, but he bit at his lip. Dammit, you overgrown ape, he thought. Any chance you may have had with her, you’ve blown! And it’s all your fault. You and that damn uncontrollable temper.

Nothing was said for half an hour while Moose worked the computers and Linda checked Doc’s progress with the aid of his respiratory monitor. Steffan found himself engaged in talk with Miss O’Brien, discussing, of all things, her little nephew who just happened to be attorney general of her home state. Then, when the room was quiet, Wentworth groaned.

Moose looked over at him as the man opened his eyes. He was obviously trying to focus them on Moose but was having trouble. "Don’t worry, Mr. Wentworth, you’ll be fine. It will just take a short while until you reorient yourself. I’m Michael Moynihan, Doc Phoenix’s assistant. We’re in Doc’s complex along with your daughter.
Your two bodyguards are here as well. Just take it easy, relax. In about an hour we’ll talk again. Until then, put your head back.”

It was ten minutes past three in the afternoon when Wentworth was finally able to sit up on the lab table and talk with Doc’s brain trust. Moose had the most questions. “Did you feel anything while Doc was inside? Any sensations at all?”

Wentworth thought for a moment, then said weakly, “I—I don’t think so. I remember the dream, and Phoenix was inside it, but that’s about all. Only right now, though, I still feel a bit nauseous, I don’t seem to have the constant hammering in my head. I don’t know what Doc did in there, but I’m better now. If he could do the same for Patricia, I couldn’t possibly ask for anything more.”

“Do you remember everything from before? Why you didn’t want Patricia to recover? Or how you managed to break through our defenses? We have to know that and more.”

Wentworth seemed genuinely pained at having to think back on that time. “God, I don’t want to think about it; it’s like something out of your past that’s over and done with, something you don’t want to plague you again. But Phoenix helped me and somehow I know that he’s still trying to help my daughter. And though I know that I’m probably a doomed man now, I have to talk. It’s been bottled up inside me so long I have to get it out and be done with it at last.”

Moose, Steffan, and Linda took seats around Wentworth. Miss O’Brien listened attentively at the door.

“It goes back quite a while,” Wentworth began. “Quite a while indeed, almost five years, I’d guess; Patricia was five then, a lovely, happy child. My wife,
Marie, my dear Marie was alive then, though for how much longer I didn’t know. We never told Marie, but she was dying, being eaten away by an osteochondroma, a bone tumor too advanced to cure. So I kept a smile on my face, all the way to the end.” Wentworth shook his head sadly. “You see, we didn’t know how long it would be. A month—three—maybe a year. Only it turned out to be six weeks from the time we first discovered it. Thank God, she died comfortably in her sleep. Then the nightmares began for me, and until now, they didn’t stop.”

Moose made sure Doc’s tape recorder picked up everything. It could be information needed later for follow-up.

All eyes were glued to Wentworth as he spoke of getting involved with the Syndicate, of his duties, his methods of altering books and records to jibe with Syndicate desires. All listened intently to Wentworth, and no one saw Gaut’s eyes open. No one saw him nod when he saw the signal given to him.

Gaut began to tear at his bonds. He knew they would shortly give. He knew he would be free. And he knew who he had to kill.

Two minutes later, Gaut was ready!

A great ball of fire erupted between Phoenix and the Shaggy Man. “When the fire clears, Phoenix, our fight commences. And when the smoke clears, you will be dead. That is the inevitable outcome of our battle, Phoenix. And then, with you gone, and Oz in wreckage beneath my feet, Dorothy will be mine, forever.”

The Shaggy Man was confident, but Phoenix would not accept an easy defeat. Besides, he knew if it were necessary, he could wink out of Oz, then return with whatever weapons he needed; Phoenix did not consider
this battle a test of strength; it was merely a way to cure Patricia Wentworth, and if it came down to that, Doc would do anything necessary to achieve a victory.

He would come back again and again until the Shaggy Man was revealed to Dorothy/Patricia, and he would not stop until her cure had been found. But because he was Doc Phoenix, he would try to complete this fight as fairly as he could.

Dorothy watched from her chair, struggling to break free as she sat there, eyes gaping in horror. But the bonds that held her were too strong for the young girl to break, and all she could do was sit as the Shaggy Man raised his left hand to the sky; his right jutted out, aimed at Phoenix. A scarlet bolt of lightning rippled through the sky, blasting its way toward Doc.

Phoenix jumped, leaping out of the way of the blood-red lightning bolt that shot past him, shattering the far wall of the castle to iron splinters.

Doc took in the large room with a glance; there were suits of iron armor lined against the walls, their gauntlets holding maces and shields. Possible weapons, Phoenix considered.

Above him was a huge crystal chandelier, strangely out of place in this starkly drab castle. Beneath it was a long wooden table with six high-backed wooden chairs on each side, two on each end.

To the right of the table was a large wooden cabinet, crystal dishes stacked behind the glass doors. Next to the cabinet was a sealed door leading to another hallway.

To the left of the table was a winding staircase leading up to a long, narrow balcony. And to the left of the staircase was an ornate polished mirror.

Doc jumped up on the table, then leaped over the chairs to the suits of armor. The Shaggy Man followed his movements with another bolt of lightning that abruptly melted the armor nearest Doc.

A third bolt was fired, this time directly at Phoenix,
but Doc jumped first onto the table. Then, using his own momentum, he leaped upward, catching the bottom of the chandelier. The Shaggy Man raised his hand, and the ceiling began to melt like molasses. Doc fell to the ground, breaking his fall on one of the wooden chairs, which shattered beneath his weight.

Doc grabbed for one of the wooden ribbings on the chair’s back and held it like a spear, moving in closer to the Shaggy Man. The Wizard’s eyes glowed, crackling with psychic energy, and twin beams shot out from them at Phoenix. Doc somersaulted over the table, away from the beams, then hefted his wooden spear at the Shaggy Man. The lance sliced through his shoulder and the Wizard screamed in pain.

He fell back against the wall staring at Phoenix; then the Shaggy Man raised his hands again, and the walls glowed, erupting in sudden flame. Phoenix jerked his head back and forth while the flames subsided as quickly as they’d started, and he noticed the walls slowly crawling in on him. Inch by inch they moved in tighter and tighter.

Then the Shaggy Man let loose with another lightning bolt that struck Doc in the arm above the left elbow. The arm fell useless to Doc’s side.

Phoenix felt under yet another blast from the Shaggy Man, then struggled to his feet. He wavered for a moment, desperately trying to regain balance, then as he seemed to fall, he actually lunged forward, directly at the Shaggy Man. Meanwhile, the walls continued to crawl closer toward Phoenix, but Doc put that threat from his mind; they would have to stop their movement soon, or the Shaggy Man would also be caught in their crunch.

Phoenix stumbled back as the Shaggy Man smashed him in the face with the back of his fist. Doc fell to the iron floor and shook his head to clear his mind. He put his hand on one of the corner chairs by the table as if to use it to help pick himself up, but as he stood straight, he
hurled the chair at the Wizard. The Shaggy Man merely chuckled: the chair became surrounded with an eerie glow and fell to the floor in a smoking ash.

The Wizard howled in delight; he had Phoenix where he wanted him—helpless, frustrated, and running scared. Phoenix backed away from him as the Shaggy Man stepped forward. He moved off to the left, backed up closer to the winding staircase.

Another scarlet bolt of lightning whizzed past Doc’s brow, missing him by inches and striking the stairwell behind him. There was a sudden explosion followed by clouds of bellowing smoke. The Shaggy Man raised his hand angrily and the smoke vanished as if it had never been there, but Doc was gone as well. He had literally disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Then the Shaggy Man laughed as he saw Doc leaping up the stairs three at a time. One by one they crumbled as his feet touched them. It was such a useless retreat, the Shaggy Man thought. But Phoenix was not retreating. He did not intend to run from the fight.

He was where he wished to be, next to the weapon he was about to use when the Shaggy Man called out to him: “The time has come, Phoenix. You have to die now!” The Shaggy Man moved in closer, his hands glowing, ready for the kill.

He let the psychic energy dance off his fingers as Doc backed to the wall. The Shaggy Man smiled. “Are you ready, Phoenix? These are your final moments alive.”

And then he unleashed his ultimate power bolt.

Phoenix was waiting for that moment; he had geared his final plan of action to it. As the Shaggy Man’s hands began glowing he shifted his weight from his left foot to his right. His hands were ready as the lightning bolt flew at him.

Doc tensed himself, whirled, and grabbed the mirror directly behind him, then spun around. The bolt flew at the mirror and ricocheted back at the Shaggy Man. Since
the beam was light, Phoenix had reasoned, it should be easily reflected. Doc had been fortunately, right.

The Shaggy Man screamed as his own light-ray struck and shattered him. He fell to the floor, raging at Phoenix. And then the raging stopped, and the Shaggy Man died.

Doc limped over to Dorothy, who sat wide-eyed in fear. "It's all right, Dorothy, it's all over now. Everything will be fine now. Believe me."

Dorothy looked up at Phoenix, her eyes welling with tears. She could barely speak, but she stuttered out her words. "Why? W-Why did he d-do that? I-I thought he was my f-friend. B-but he was evil... evil."

"Not evil, Dorothy. You just saw him that way, made him into more than he was. Come here, look at him."

Dorothy was frightened as she stepped closer to the fallen Shaggy Man, but Doc's firm hand guided her over to her former friend. "Look at him as I clear off his coat, Dorothy. Look at his face as I remove the hat, comb the hair, and cover his beard. Look at him, Dorothy."

And the face which stared back at Dorothy was that of James Wentworth.

And Dorothy screamed before she cried.
Gaut moved ever so slowly as Wentworth began his tale. No one saw the big man's hands creep to the side of the table he was lying next to. No one noticed as his leg began to edge over to give him the balance he needed to leap.

The bald man stared intently as hands gave him his proper signals. Move slowly, go for the one called Moose and knock him down quickly. Then move over to the girl. Stop her before she can use her martial arts training. She is deceptive. Watch her at all times. I will take care of Wentworth. Gaut nodded. He understood his instructions.

Wentworth shook his head in disbelief. "It's hard to imagine some of the things that happened once I entered the Syndicate. They outfitted me with all my office and home personnel, they watched me, they told me what to
do, how to dress, what to say. If I was to run for office under their supervision, I had to follow their instructions to the letter. It was a prison—my home became a Bastille—three sets of eyes making sure I was always toeing the line—Syndicate style.

Gaut lifted his other hand and reached down toward the floor. *Count from five*, his instructions said. *Count, then leap up. Bring down your foes. I'll take care of my own target. I'll get Wentworth.* Gaut smiled, then began counting slowly. Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . .

He jumped at Moose, smashing the scientist to the floor with the suddenness of his attack. Moose was stunned as a second punch dislocated his left arm. Pain shot agonizingly through Moose as a fast and heavy kick rendered him mercifully unconscious. Gaut spun around to face Linda, but was greeted with a forward snap kick to his face, then a right finger jab to his eyes.

Linda danced back, righted herself into a horse stance, then snapped her foot out a second time to Gaut’s groin. She whirled and jabbed with her right hand across his neck, then resumed the primary position.

But Gaut stood his ground and smiled, unbothered by the attack. The woman was good, but she lacked strength. Her blows to his face smarted, but they did not have the effect that Phoenix’s had had. Linda spun again, jabbing her foot into Gaut’s stomach, but this time Gaut grabbed the lightning kick and twisted Linda’s ankle. She fell over and down, rolling with her tumble, but Gaut was on her, smashing her ribs with his powerful right cross.

Turning, Gaut saw Steffan back off into the corner. He was not prepared to fight the bald giant. He had never trained himself to the degree that Moose had, let alone that of Linda or Doc. He was more the cerebral, and had always had a disdain for physical combat, perhaps explaining why he instead mastered the use of words. He could always sway people with his strong yet compassionate voice. He didn’t have to use physical force.
Now, however, facing Gaut, Steffan wished he had taken the time to learn how to withstand pain. Because he knew when Gaut caught up to him, he would be on the receiving end of an endless barrage of murderous punches.

"Don't worry, Daniel," came a voice from behind him. Steffan didn't have to turn to know it was Doc. Gaut saw Phoenix appear from nowhere and panicked: Was the man a magician? Was that how he'd defeated Gaut the first time?

Phoenix stepped between Gaut and Steffan, and prepared himself for another battle. This time, however, he was weak from his fight with the Shaggy Man. This time Doc did not have an advantage and he knew it. But he had to keep Gaut from realizing his problem. If the bald man could be kept moving, Phoenix might have a chance with him.

But Gaut wanted to end the fight quickly, before Phoenix could use any further "magic" on him. He grabbed Doc around the neck, then thrust his knee into Phoenix's abdomen. Doc doubled over in pain as Wentworth watched the fight in shock; he knew Gaut's power; he knew what the giant was capable of doing, and he feared for Phoenix.

Miss O'Brien, watching from the other side of the room, by the door, beyond Wentworth's field of vision, gritted her teeth in anguish. She was helpless to intervene, yet she felt she should. She wanted to help, wanted to find a way to stop the fight before it got too far out of hand. But what could she do? She turned at a sound to see Patricia mumbling to herself, coming out of the coma she had been in for so long. Then her gaze returned to the action before her.

Moose, starting to rise again, saw Linda unconscious on the other side of the laboratory. Steffan was kneeling beside her. He then saw Wentworth sitting up in silent shock, watching the fight, and finally he noticed
Patricia's labored breathing. He had to remove the wiring now—before anything happened to the young girl. He had to work, despite the battle that was raging.

Moose hugged the wall, inching his way around the laboratory to Patricia. He looked down at Steffan and pointed to the girl. Steffan nodded knowingly. He would take care of Linda while Moose did his own work.

Gaut smashed a lab stool with his hand and snatched one of the steel legs for a weapon; he didn't want to fight the magician without some help. The steel leg smashed across Phoenix's back, sending him flying across the room into a bank of computers. The machinery sparked for a moment, then erupted into flame.

Doc saw Steffan with Linda, Moose with Patricia, and Gaut coming at him again. He ducked under another smashing blow, then clasped his hands together to come down on Gaut's neck. Gaut backed away while Doc yelled at Wentworth: "The fire extinguisher! Grab it! Put out the fire—FAST!" The extinguisher unit was next to him, clamped to the wall, and Wentworth obeyed without fully understanding what he was doing. He removed it and began spraying the blaze with carbon dioxide, when a bullet whizzed past his head.

Wentworth froze in terror and turned. He saw the face staring at him; he saw the gun in hand. The trigger finger pressed in, and another bullet shot out. Wentworth leaped behind a computer, barely avoiding a third bullet. His death had been ordered: his deepest fear had become a reality.

Gaut smashed at Doc, hitting his face and neck. Phoenix shuddered under the blow, then backed off. With his other hand around the steel leg, Gaut came down on Doc, but Phoenix moved out of the way, letting only his shoulder take the brunt of the blow, yet the impact was still powerful enough for Doc's entire side to throb with excruciating pain.

Linda was breathing easier now, but Steffan had to
move her out of the path of Doc’s battle. Bits and pieces of flying metal were being sprayed everywhere. Feet were running all about the confused lawyer. Steffan lifted Linda over his shoulder and made for a back room, then placed the girl down on the floor while he went off looking for the first-aid kit.

The first circuit was removed from Patricia’s forehead as Moose shielded the girl with his body from the flying shrapnel. He reached for the cabinet and took out the small eyedropper to remove the tape from the second copper circuit. It peeled off with ease. The third one followed a moment later.

Now the dangerous phase of the recovery program was taking place. Moose had to time and activate the computer connections himself, and all with pinpoint precision. There was no room for failure now, or Patricia’s life was forfeit.

Moose strapped the girl with the safety belts; with his throbbing shoulder he could not hold her down while operating the machinery at the same time. The scientist glanced over his shoulder, worry betraying his emotions. Doc was weak; he wouldn’t make it against Gaut, yet Moose could do nothing to help his friend without endangering Patricia’s life.

Doc would want him to remove the girl from her fantasy before turning to other matters—Phoenix’s own life included. The patient always came first, as Doc had reminded him time and time again.

Moose set the timer. Four . . . three . . . two . . . one—NOW!

The first switch was thrown.

There was no response from the girl. She remained quiet save for an occasional murmur. Moose checked the timer for the second switch. Two . . . one—NOW! Still no response. Damn it! What was wrong? Why wasn’t the girl responding?

Moose looked around the room. Where was
Wentworth? The fire was out; why hadn’t he returned? He turned again to see Sammy Detroit still unconscious on the floor, and the side door closed where Fingers was helping Linda.

Doc was falling under Gaut’s repeated blows, and Moose cursed himself for not being able to help his friend. The timer showed four seconds until the third and fourth switches had to be thrown. Moose counted silently: three . . . two . . . one—NOW! He pulled down the third and fourth switches, and this time Patricia reacted. Her feet shot out wildly, her hands clutched at the table. Her head shot up, jerking wildly.

Pulling her head back to the table, Moose counted off for the final switch. Three . . . two . . . one—NOW!! The switch was thrown, and Patricia’s body writhed wildly for a moment before it fell quietly back to the table. Respiration was normal; EEG checked out. In a few moments she would be fine; what was needed now was rest.

Having checked Patricia’s vital signs, Moose looked over his shoulder to see Gaut thrust his fist into Doc’s stomach. Phoenix fell dazed, then rolled under a small table. He watched Gaut move toward him as he stood up, backing away from the giant.

Gaut’s eyes were blinking uncontrollably as blood from the freshly reopened cut washed over his face. Doc braced himself, then lunged for the giant, smashing him across the eyes with the back of his fist.

Staggering back, the bald man fell to the ground under the impact of Phoenix’s blow, then shook his head wildly and faced Doc for a final desperate lunge.

He fell into Doc, his massive weight crushing Phoenix to the floor. Doc stared helpless as Gaut drove a knee into Doc’s chest, then shot it back up into the parapsychologist’s jaw. Phoenix spat blood as Gaut’s image seemed to shimmer and wave. Doc was losing consciousness when he heard what sounded like an explosion. And the next moment Gaut collapsed on top of
Doc.

He was dead, a bullet piercing his back and lodging itself right above his heart.

Wentworth was staring at his daughter. "Will she be all right, Doc?"

Phoenix was grim, but he nodded. "It will take time, Mr. Wentworth. She isn't quite old enough to understand everything she saw, and she took most of it personally. Frankly, I don't know whether she'll accept your explanations, either. However, I think the majority of her problems can be dealt with."

Phoenix watched as Patricia slept on the operating table. "You've got to understand that she saw you as a villain. She tried to run away from you, but inside her she knew she couldn't, which is why she created the Shaggy Man."

Wentworth was confused. "I don't follow you," he said at last.

Doc answered somberly. "Subconsciously she created the Shaggy Man in your image. When I proved that to her, when I showed her Dorothy-self that there was no reason for her to be in Oz if she was going to take her problems there with her, she was ready to return to our world and leave the fantasy behind.

"A fantasy world would be no good if it only echoed Patricia's real-world problems."

Linda piped in. "I still don't understand it, Doc. I know Linda resented her father because she saw him with women, but . . ."

"Because she saw me in bed with women." Wentworth was frank as he interrupted Linda. "My wife had been dead only three months. Patricia loved her and she couldn't understand my needs. I grant you, they were selfish ones, but I had needs."
Wentworth groped for words as he spoke. "You've got to understand the temptations were always there in front of me. As the Syndicate's attorney, I was supplied with all the women I wanted. Besides which, they had photos of me. Endless pictures of me with dozens of women. They planned to use it to force me to do what they need- ed, but I'd be a damn liar to say I didn't want the women. I did, and damn it, I enjoyed them, but Patricia thought I was forgetting her mother." Wentworth's voice lowered as he heard Patricia mumbling beside him.

"I don't know how much longer it was, but I finally asked to get out of the Syndicate, but they still had the pictures. They could have ruined my reputation, so I stayed with them, playing their stooge, doing what they wanted.

"You didn't resist them?" Linda asked.

"Only for a while. Then I stopped. You see, I grew to enjoy the power I was getting. I wanted the women. It was a strange feeling, thinking back on it now, but I went from woman to woman, using them all, while all the time I ignored Patricia."

Wentworth fumbled for a cigarette. "I guess I had to. She reminded me of what I once was, and I was trying to forget all that. I didn't want to be reminded of my wife or my responsibilities. It was too painful for me."

Taking a long drag on the cigarette, Wentworth continued. "Hell, it's not easy for me to be saying this now, but Phoenix did something to me while he was inside. I feel lighter, not bothered any longer. It's as if that part of me is gone now—or it was part of someone else. It's hard to explain this to you, but while I'm talking about me, I don't feel I have to be embarrassed by what I did. I guess, as corny as it may sound, I'm just not that guy anymore. I'm no longer the man I was, and I'm proud of that fact."

Wentworth paced the room, glancing back at Patricia every now and then. But the girl was still sleeping. "So Patricia needed me and I ignored her. But frankly, I
didn’t care by then. I belonged heart and soul to the Syndicate.

“Then Patricia saw me with women. At times she would break into my bedroom and stare at us, screaming at me, frightening the girls I was with. I hated her for that. I punished her. I locked her in her room, took away her privileges, but that didn’t stop her from watching me. Then . . . then she saw me with . . .” His voice faltered, growing weak.

“You sure you want to say this?” Doc asked. “You don’t have to. Not here, at least.”

Wentworth shook his head quietly. “No, I have to if I want to accept what I now am and reject what I was. One night there was a meeting in my home. A meeting followed by a heated argument. One member of our group, Lucky Lucerno, was arguing for a larger share of the profits.

“I was asked for my opinions, and since Lucerno’s section of the country was way too small to meet his take, I suggested he not be given a larger share. Lucerno drew a gun at me and fired. The bullet grazed my shoulder, and I still have the wound. But Sammy Detroit, who was at my side, fired back at Lucerno, killing him.”

“I heard about Lucerno’s death,” Moose said. “The police said there were no clues to who killed him.”

Wentworth nodded. “Amazing what you can get the police to say when you pay them enough, Moose. Well, Sammy Detroit killed him, and Patricia heard the gunshots and ran into the room to see me standing over Lucerno’s body. She didn’t say anything. She didn’t scream. She just left the room. But, Moose, from that day forth, she wasn’t the same girl she had been before.”

Another cigarette fell from Wentworth’s pocket. He reached for his lighter, lit it, and puffed to start it. “Right after that I grew disillusioned with the Syndicate. You see, I had never seen an actual murder before. Oh, I knew what the Syndicate was involved with. I’m no innocent,
but I was a lawyer. I adjusted the Syndicate’s records as they wanted. I knew what I was doing.

“So I wanted out for a second time, but I knew the Syndicate would get me if I said anything about them. Frankly, they might still come after me, but I hope it’s not before I turn my evidence over to the state. Damn the election; I want my conscience clean.

“I began to withdraw from the Syndicate slowly, hiding in my own little box. But I knew I couldn’t get away completely. The Syndicate kept their people with me wherever I went: my staff at work, at home, wherever I turned.

“There was no escape from them, no matter how I tried to hide. I wanted to build walls around me where I could withdraw from everyone. But I knew I couldn’t do that.”

Steffan remained silent, then spoke: “There was the police. If you didn’t trust them, the federal government was there. You could have been protected.”

Wentworth laughed weakly. “For how long? A month? A year? No, I would someday be removed from custody, and then I’d be dead. Or the Syndicate would buy a hitman, and then I’d be dead. Or they would get me through Patricia. You can’t possibly understand how it is unless you’ve worked with them. I’m sorry, but you can’t. It’s goddam... intimidating... to say the least.

“Meanwhile, as I began to hide within myself, Patricia grew more and more moody. I brought her to psychologists, but as long as I couldn’t tell them the entire truth of why she was as she was, they couldn’t help her, so she turned to her books and became more involved with her fantasies.”

Doc nodded: “Oz was a place she could hide in, but she knew it was a fantasy, so she created the Shaggy Man as her father’s counterpart. She loved you, yet she hated you. The Love Magnet drew her to you, but the Iron Castle, the turning of people into pawns, the desolation she
felt, drove her away from you. Her fantasy was destroy-
ing itself because she knew she couldn’t escape reality, but she still tried to.

"Her friends were killed before her eyes. Glinda was raped, then killed by the Shaggy Man. She saw you in bed with women, then she saw her mother dead. Glinda played both parts in her mind: the mother she loved, wise, beautiful, and the women she hated, the people she wanted dead."

Doc looked around the room as he spoke. "She’ll still need help, and depending on the authorities and your testimony, you may not always be there to help her, but I suggest you try your best while you can."

Wentworth agreed. "Believe me, I will. And the first thing I want to do when we’re both ready is to take a long vacation, just the two of us, where we can relearn who we both are; I think we both need that now."

Linda got up and walked across the room. "That covers most of it, but I still don’t understand two things. First, why did you try to stop Patricia’s recovery, and how did you and your friends get in here and out without our seeing you?"

Wentworth shook his head sadly. "By the time Patricia was in her own fantasy, I think I was too far gone to know what I was doing. I felt if she ever came out of her coma, she would tell everyone about the women, about the murder, about everything. I loved her, but I didn’t want her hurt either. I just didn’t want her better."

"God, if you understand what that feels like, knowing what I almost had done, you’d realize that that is probably the one thing in my past that I’ll never be able to forget. That will haunt me forever."

"As for getting inside the complex, I have to admit there was no big secret. You use electromagnetic passes to enter this place. I was given one when I first assigned Phoenix to the case. When I left, I pocketed mine, and when I returned to Crystal City, I had copies made. We
were able to come and go as we pleased."

Moose looked about the room, then exclaimed, "Hey, I think there's someone missing. Miss O'Brien. I haven't seen her since the trouble started."

Linda started up. "You think she was hit by a bullet?"

Wentworth began saying something, then stopped, but his eyes showed definite fear. Then Doc chimed in: "I thought you took her home; that's why I never asked about her. We'd better split up and take one building each. Be careful. There could be problems."

Doc turned to Wentworth and said, "You stay here with Patricia. She should be coming out of shock shortly. It would be best if you're with her."

Phoenix then turned to the others. "Move out and keep your eyes open. Any problems, press a security alarm immediately. Understand?" They all nodded, then moved off into the corridors between Doc's sprawling complex.

Wentworth was alone, nervously watching his daughter shiver in the slight breeze. He wanted to say something, but he couldn't. Damn them all! he thought. Goddam them all. They've got me trained like a seal and I can't break myself free from them.

He forced himself up and walked over to where his daughter lay. She was so angelic as she slept. Wentworth cursed himself for what he had done to her for the past five years. There's no way to make it up to you, he wanted to say, but, by God, I'll try my best, if only you'll forgive me.

"So there you are." The voice rang out behind Wentworth and he froze. "I've been looking for you. It wasn't very nice of you to tell that story to Phoenix. You know the Syndicate doesn't like that sort of thing. Turn around, please, I'd like to discuss this problem face-to-face. It's much more civilized, don't you agree?"

Wentworth turned nervously and he was staring down the barrel of a small Luger. "I said what I had to. You know I've been wanting out. They all know."
“Wanting out is one thing, Wentworth, telling everything you know, ratting on your buddies, well, that’s quite another thing entirely. It’s a shame, you know. You could have had a future with us, but now, well, you’ll have nothing but a free burial—in cement.”

Steffan checked out the fourth room in his section of the complex. No sign of Miss O’Brien. Where could she have gone to? Since there was gunfire, a stray bullet just may have hit her. She could have dragged herself down one corridor, then—

Where had she been, Steffan tried to recall. She had been standing by this path, and if a bullet did hit her, she could have crawled this way. But there was no blood on the ground. If she had been hit, she had not come this way.

Then Steffan’s mind jumped to another problem. Sammy Detroit was still inside the main computer room with Wentworth and Patricia. Gaut had managed to recover consciousness before, so Detroit might have as well now. If Wentworth was only faking a recovery, or still hiding part of the truth, he could free Detroit, and the two of them could escape. Or Detroit could have freed himself as Gaut had and come after Wentworth.

There were almost a dozen possibilities, and all of them meant Steffan had to return to the main complex room.

Moose already had gotten the same idea and was racing through the corridors toward the large computer room when he heard the sound of a gunshot. He put on extra speed and raced through the halls until they became a white blur. There were still two corridors to go before
Moose could make it back to the room. Then came another gunshot.

Linda was crouched over a small dent in one of the doors to the living quarters of Doc’s complex. There was a shred of clothing caught on a jutting metal shard. Perhaps Miss O’Brien came this way, Linda considered. Then she heard the first of the gunshots, and Linda turned and raced back to the main room.

"Get back, or the next shot will get you," the voice warned. "If you don’t want to die, just stay away from me."

Doc smiled as he edged forward. "I knew you’d be here, which is why I cleared the others from the room. I wanted to be alone with you, without my friends present. So I waited for you to come out, to threaten Wentworth, to see if I was right. And I was, but then I knew I had to be. You see, Wentworth told me all about you in his dream world."

"I don’t care what you know, Phoenix. I don’t want to know. All I want to do is get out of here. You can keep Wentworth alive for all I care."

"You’re not getting out, and I’m afraid to say you haven’t any bullets left in your pistol. You shot six of them during the fight. You just fired two more at me. That’s all eight rounds and that’s all your model holds."

Doc stretched his hand out for the gun.

But the figure began running.

"You won’t get out that way," Doc shouted. "Even at this moment, Moose should be responding to your first gunshot. He’ll be coming down that corridor any second.

"Don’t bother with that one, either. Linda went that
way, and I’ll tell you, she’s very quick. She should be here in a moment.

“Steffan was following that pathway, and he, too, should be coming back. As I said, there’s no escape. You’re trapped here. You may as well just give up, throw down your pistol.”

“Damn you, Phoenix! You always have all the answers, don’t you? You always think you’re better than anyone. But you’re not, Phoenix. You’re garbage, and we’ll get you. Maybe not me, but we’re big, and one of us will get you for this.”

“I don’t think so. Just like Wentworth, you’re expendable. You know that; that’s why you’re trying to get away. You want to hide, don’t you?” Doc’s voice was calm, reassuring.

Doc’s eyes were confident as he spoke. “You don’t want to run, but you’re afraid for your life. But then, you don’t want to die the way Gaut did. You don’t want to be cut down by an assassin’s bullet, do you. You’d prefer to live. But you won’t live if you run from the Syndicate. They’ll find you somewhere. Your only hope is to give up. Place yourself in protective custody. You’ll be watched; you’ll be taken care of. But more importantly, you’ll be safe. What do you say?”

The voice was less certain now. “I—I can’t give in, Phoenix. That isn’t the way. They’ll find me wherever I go, even behind bars. I know them, Phoenix. They’ll find someone to stick a knife in me when I’m sleeping. Or I’ll be in the shop, and there’ll be an ‘accident.’ If they want me, they’ll get me.”

Doc was firm. “Not if we provide you with a new identity, and we can, if you’ll talk. You’ll get a new face, a new voice, even a new past. And I guarantee to work with you personally. What do you say? Do you have anything to lose? You can trust me, or you can trust the Syndicate. What is your answer?”

“Hell, there’s no use. You know it, Phoenix. If I don’t
do it your way, I’m dead meat. You win, damn you.”
Steffan was the first to enter the main room. “Doc! You got here, too? I just thought about Detroit. He could be . . .”
Doc smiled. “He’s here. Safe and sound.”
Steffan nodded. “Yeah, I see. But I also see that you’ve fo—”
Moose entered at that moment, followed by Linda. “What in hell was that gunshot, Doc? I thought maybe Detroit got free.”
Doc shook his head. “No, he’s unarmed. I checked him myself.”
“Yeah, and sleeping like a babe in the corner. Still unconscious, eh?”
“Then who fired the gun? In fact, I never thought about it, but who killed Gaut, the giant?” Linda was puzzled.
Doc grimaced as he spoke. “The same person, Linda. Wentworth mentioned that the Syndicate had him watched, that they placed someone to be with Patricia constantly. Only he didn’t see that person once he awoke from his little sojourn.
“I knew about the person because while inside Wentworth’s mind, his ‘other’ self revealed everything to me.”
Phoenix stepped aside, revealing the attempted assassin.
“I knew Wentworth was the real target of the Syndicate. Bad aim got in the way, and Gaut died. Say hello to Wentworth’s other observer from the Syndicate. Say hello to Miss O’Brien.”

“Hard to believe it all, Doc,” Moose said, still perplexed. “She didn’t seem the type.”
“But she was, unfortunately. However, she will be turning state’s evidence,” said Doc, turning to Wentworth: “along with you, isn’t that correct?”
Wentworth nodded, then turned to Patricia, who was just beginning to stir. One eye opened, then the other, and for a minute or more, the girl tried to focus her vision.

As if a century had passed, she finally smiled and looked up at James Wentworth. Wentworth folded the little girl in his arms and covered her face with kisses. "My darling child, you’re back. You’re back!"

"And oh, Daddy, I’m so glad to be at home again!" she said. "There’s no place like home."

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The study was dark as Doc sat quietly in his chair. He looked at his notes and wrote down the final words that were intended to close the Oz Encounter forever, but as he did, he let the last sentence fade off, unconcluded, for Phoenix knew he had no logical ending.

He reread the words and they still chilled him:

*Patricia has recuperated quickly with the aid of her father, and it seems at this time that she should have a normal childhood. Her fantasy showed imagination and desire and her acceptance of reality has proven she can work and play in our world.*

*There is only one question in this case that has gone unanswered, and I fear that at this time the answer may never be known. As I entered my laboratory after the Wentworths returned home, I checked for the toy man I had somehow brought with me from Oz to the real world. How this miracle came about I cannot explain, but that is only the smallest part of what troubles me now. I had placed the toy figure in a locked box that was put into my*
safe. I am the only one who knows the combination of the safe. Yet, earlier this evening when I opened it and unlocked the box, the figure was gone.

In its place was an exact replica of the Shaggy Man with a strange, puzzling smile on its face . . .
Afterword

I grew up fascinated with the concept of heroes. First there was Superman, then Flash Gordon and Rocky Jones and Commander Cody and all the rest. They were on television, in the movies, and plastered over the four-colored pages of comic books. But wherever the hero appeared, and under whatever the name he performed his exploits, he was basically cut from the same mold: he would fight for what was right, fought because it was the right thing to do and triumphed because right made might—not the reverse as too often happened in the real world. He fought despite overwhelming odds, even at the risk of his own life. And somehow, either on the last pages of the story or in the final moments of the television show or movie, he would summon up his extraordinary abilities to extricate himself from his dire predicament to achieve victory.

When you’re not the mightiest kid on your block, when you can only hit the ball maybe one sewer and not two, when you can only punch the ball a fair distance—in short, when you’re not exactly the decathlon champion of your Brooklyn sidestreet, you grow up realizing that the odds are you will never become a hero, and so you start looking for one (or more) elsewhere. Kids need heroes; we all do.

Then I started to grow up. Oh, I was still reading about heroes in comic books, but there was something different now—I didn’t have the same overwhelming desire to partake in their adventures. Sad to say, invincible heroes were becoming a thing of the past.

Then John Kennedy was killed, then Martin Luther King, Jr., then Robert Kennedy. The good guys were losing. As the Vietnam conflict grew larger our leaders told us our involvement was justified—and then we learned differently. Nixon came in, dragging Agnew with him.
The good guys were definitely out.

Heroes exist to stimulate hope; but what hope was there during the late sixties and early seventies? Damn little, it seemed, and the idea that heroes actually existed, in that day and age, was becoming less and less believable.

I began selling stories to comic books in 1968, beginning with short mystery plots and branching out from there. However, there was one area of comic-scripting that always seemed to elude me: superheroes. I couldn’t grasp the knack of writing what were, till then, my favorite stories. In retrospect, the reason was I couldn’t believe in them.

Instead I spent my time writing mystery stories, comedy stories, love stories—any stories without heroes. And usually the stories were downers with Heavy-Message Endings. You could hear the music swelling with the typical ending: “Not the end.”

Then, after a few years, I suddenly became interested in heroes again. Perhaps knowing the bad guys were starting to lose for the first time in a while renewed that interest. Nixon was explaining away some misuse of power every day, and the explanations were becoming lamer.

Then the movies began to change. The “message” pictures became rarer, and old-time adventures began enjoying a revival: *The Three Musketeers, Flashman, Robin and Marion, Judge Roy Bean, The Wind and the Lion*, to mention just a few. There were admirable characters doing things again, fighting overwhelming odds—and winning. There were heroes again, even if they only existed for a few hours on the screen.

My own attitudes changed at that point. Still working in comics, now as Editor-in-Chief of Marvel, I created my own character in the guise of *Nova*. At the time I write this, the mail seems to bear me out that people are again interested in reading about heroes—weird or otherwise.

Which is where Byron Preiss came in.
I’d known Byron for several years, and one day he called to ask whether I’d be interested in taking over the writing of the first Doc Phoenix novel. Ted White had begun to work on the book, but for various reasons could not complete it. I said yes; then I wondered if I had made the right choice.

Phoenix had first appeared in Volume 2 of Pyramid Books’ *Weird Heroes*. The story was basically a framework to set up the character: the Superpsychologist who enters your mind to cure you from within.

The concept was interesting. Phoenix was conceived as a hero, in the same image as Doc Savage, perhaps the greatest pulp character of them all.

I believe the present story combines the best of both Ted and me: Ted’s Oz, filled with fantasy and wonderment, complements mine, complete with danger and evil; Ted’s Shaggy Man villain works well with my additional cast members, including Gaut, Detroit, and our mystery bad person.

Time will tell . . . if there’s another Doc Phoenix novel.

He is a classic hero, and these days we desperately need one.

Take care, and I hope we see each other again.

—M.W.
About the Contributors

Writer Marv Wolfman was born in Brooklyn, New York, at five o'clock in the afternoon, on a sunny Thursday, May 13, 1946. He lived most of his formative years playing stickball under the El on McDonald Avenue, until he was suddenly thrust into the high-stakes paradise of Flushing, New York, at the tender age of thirteen. From this point it was all downhill. He majored in art at the High School of Art and Design, and continued in that subject throughout his years at Queens College where he graduated from with a B.F.A. With a minor education, his future seemed set, and for one highly unforgettable year, he taught art until he could stand the classroom no longer, and returned to his first love: comic books.

From time to time during his college years, Marv sold scripts to National Comics, Marvel, Skywald, and others. Returning from teaching, Marv quickly got a job as assistant Editor for National Comics. A year later he moved on to being script editor for Warren Magazines, and finally to Marvel Comics where he started as Associate Editor for the color comics, became editor for the black-and-white comic magazines (including a stint creating and editing a satiric humor magazine called CRAZY virtually single-handedly), and finally to Editor-In-Chief of the entire Marvel Comics line.

Tiring of the nine-to-five drudgery after four years of Editing, Marv left that position to return to freelance writing and editing for Marvel Comics, which is where we leave him now.

Marv is married to the lovely Michele Wolfman, a top-notch colorist for comics in her own right, and together they reside in Flushing with their three cats; Bananas, Bosco, and Twinkle.

Phoenix series creator and scenarist Ted White is a native of Virginia. Ted's career in the fantasy field began in the 1950's, when he established a reputation as one of the foremost knowledgeable fans of the popular fiction genre. He contributed and edited for numerous fanzines on science fiction, comics and the pulps.

Fandom led way to professional works and Ted authored numerous fantasy novels for Lancer Books in the '60's, including Phoenix Prime and Sorceress of Qar. He also adapted Captain America, the Simon-Kirby superhero, into paperback form for Bantam Books.

Currently, he is the distinguished editor for the oldest science fiction magazine in America, Amazing Science Fiction, and its sister magazine, Fantastic Stories. Under his guidance, they remain two of the most vital markets for new work in both the fantasy and speculative fiction genres and serve as a regular showcase for new illustrators in these fields.

He is currently at work on a new novel for Popular Library.

Of Phoenix, Ted writes, "My sources of inspiration are several. The two that dominate are Roger Zelazny (especially his novel, The Dream Master) and Lester Dent's Doc Savage. Fans of either

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will find the influences and affectionate borrowings quite obvious, I'm sure....It was a pleasure to at last create a 'second generation' Doc Savage—and the fulfillment of a youthful dream.”

Byron Preiss, editor of Weird Heroes, is a native of Brooklyn, New York. He holds a BA in Liberal Arts from the University of Pennsylvania and an MA in Communications from Stanford University. His firm, Byron Preiss Visual Publications, specializes in the production of illustrated educational and fantasy material. Its clients have included the Model Cities Program and the Children’s Television Workshop. Preiss has developed educational comics programs for National Periodical Publications [EDUgraphics] and for CTW/Marvel. His work has been exhibited in the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Weird Heroes 5 is his twelfth book. A detective graphic novel, Son of Sherlock Holmes, illustrated by Ralph Reese, will be released by Pyramid Books in January '77.

Illustrator Stephen Fabian, is a native of Garfield, New Jersey. From 1953-1963, he lent his talents as an engineer to such electronics firms as Dumont Labs and Curtis Wright. In 1962 he began a ten-year association with Simmonds Prec. Prod., Inc., as an engineer in their aerospace facilities, specializing in the design of torque measuring systems. In 1963, he decided to move away from a field that had personally become boring, frustrating and economically insecure. In a daring move for a family man, Fabian began to devote his time to what had in the past been a semi-professional and amateur pursuit: science fiction illustration. Drawing his way up from a variety of fanzines [such as The Alien Critic], to limited edition presses [FAX, FICTIONEER], to professional magazines [Galaxy, Amazing] and finally to paperback cover work [Malzberg’s SCOP], Fabian gathered a snowballing core of fans among professionals and readers in the fantasy field.

He has released several popular art portfolios, including Fantastic Nudes. For Fiction Illustrated, he has illustrated a graphic novel, Starfawn.
Things to Come

Sometimes it doesn’t seem like three years, but that’s how long it has been since we embarked on Weird Heroes. Doc Phoenix signals the end of our first cycle of publishing; two anthologies and three novels. This coming April we begin a new cycle with another new anthology, the first of a two-book set which introduces an exciting collection of more new heroes, including Shin Bet, a interplanetary sleuth whose very appearance will take you by surprise, and Orion, a hero caught in the center of an epic fantasy struggle. A sample of Craig Russell’s work on this entertaining new series by award-winning writer/editor Ben Bova appears on page 217 and there’s more news on the book on page 4, up front.

If I may let my hair down for a moment, I’d like to take this opportunity to thank each of you who have been so thoughtful as to write down your thoughts on the series. Sometimes, when the art is late and the light at the end of the tunnel seems to be moving further and further away, it is such a rewarding thing to receive your letters, pro-or-con, on the books. Although we answer as many letters as we can, there are often times when replies must take the back seat to deadlines. All of our mail is read closely however, and we do hope that you continue to let us know your opinions. It helps.

Two questions have popped up frequently in your notes. The first unfortunately concerns an inability to locate our books in stores around the country:

Pyramid Books, our publisher, has recently merged with a larger publisher, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Together they are working hard to improve the distribution of the entire Pyramid line. Those of you who can aid us with information or complaints should write directly to: John Rutledge, Pyramid Books, 757 Third Avenue, New York City 10017.

On a brighter note, many have written to ask about the possibility of a Stalker novel. Archie Goodwin is working hard towards that goal and despite complications from his new role as Editor of Marvel Comics,
he hopes to have the FIRESTORM FILE finished for release in '77.

In the meantime, we look forward to hearing from you again.

Byron Preiss,
Editor

Addendum:
For those of you who wished to know—Nightshade was not responsible for the murder at the end of Vol. 4. The palace guards were responsible for shooting the man as they entered.

Re: Fabian, fans of his art may be interested in The Best of Stephen Fabian, $12.50, from Loompanics, Box 264, Mason, MI 48854 or Fantastic Nudes II, $8.00, from De la Ree 7 Cedarwood Lane, Saddle River, NJ. 07458.
The following titles are available at $1.50 + 25c postage from Pyramid Books Mail Order, 757 Third Avenue, New York City 10019.

**VOLUME 1:** Featuring *Greatheart Silver* by Philip Jose Farmer; *Quest of the Gypsy*, an s.f. thriller by Dan Goulart; *Stalker*, a Vietnam Vet turned sleuth and *Guts*, a 50's greaser from the future by Byron Preiss. Plus art and text from Fritz Lieber, Steranko, Sheridan, Tom Sutton, Alex Nino and Jones.

**VOLUME 2:** Featuring the debut of *Doc Phoenix*; the crazed writer-turned-superhero *Cordwainer Bird*, by Harlan Ellison; *SPV 166*, an underground sf/detective novella by Elliot Maggin and more Philip Jose Farmer. Art by Alex Nino, Neal Adams, Steranko, Esteban Maroto, Tom Sutton and Ralph Reese.

**VOLUME 3:** Featuring the first volume of an epic s.f. trilogy! *Quest of the Gypsy*, starring the hero from Volume 1, is a continent-spanning puzzle to challenge the reader. Illustrated by Alex Nino. Novel by Goulart.

**VOLUME 4:** *Nightshade*, a hero with a split-personality is the star of this novel-length thriller with an introduction by Walter B. (THE SHADOW) Gibson. Journey from a magic stage in New York to the backfields of Haiti this adventure of madness and illusion by Beth Meacham and Tappan King.

**VOLUME 6:** The next *Weird Heroes*, featuring the third Greatheart Silver story, art by Reese, Sutton, Russell and much more! April.
From Na and the Dreadspore of Gruagq, in Weird Heroes Volume 2, story and art by Alex Nino.
Fiction Illustrated is Weird Heroes' sister series, also produced by Byron Preiss Visual Publications. It exists as a home for the graphic story in its adult and experimental forms. All editions in full-color, 128 pages. Order from Pyramid Books, 757 Third Avenue, New York City 10017.

VOLUME 1: Schlomo Raven, a pair of satires on the private eyes of the forties, done in the style of the old Mad Magazine. Rosebug is the story of a murder behind the scenes at an all-black musical version of Citizen Kane. The Farx Job is a kidnapping tale, featuring Heepo, Choocho, Zeepo and Grippo Farx—the Farx Bros.!
Illustrated by Tom Sutton. 4-7/8 x 6-3/4 size. ...................... $1.00

VOLUME 2: Starfawn, an epic science fiction GRAPHIC STORY ILLUSTRATED BY Stephen Fabian and written by Byron Preiss. To the Nearest Qesars is adventurous s.f. in the Star Trek tradition, the story of a first contact with an alien race in another star system. Meet the crew of the Destiny, including Daystar Stern, who survives on an artificial kidney; Agatha Matterland, a survival systems expert from England; and Shalla Morn, head of the ship's exploratory team and the woman fated to become . . . Starfawn 4-7/8 x 6-3/4 size. ...................... $1.00

VOLUME 3: Chandler—an instant classic from the pen and typewriter of the legendary Steranko! Here is the first visual novel by the famed artist who vanished from the story-telling scene for five years now he returns with this epic tale of a private eye searching for a murderer in the night-world of New York. Chandler has been lauded by comics and mystery fans alike. A deluxe 8-1/2 x 11, heavy-paper, full color collector's version of the book is available from Pyramid . . . .................................. $4.95

VOLUME 4: Son of Sherlock Holmes, a tense and puzzling thriller from award-winning artist Ralph Reese and Byron Preiss. Meet Abraham Moth, the man believed to be the Son of Sherlock Holmes! Experience The Woman in Red, a thrilling graphic story spanning 68 years, three continents and the careers of two famous detectives. Available only in a deluxe collector's edition. ............................................. $4.95
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What if your dreams were real? What if your mind contained another world—one which could be explored—one in which your fantasies actually existed? That is the world of Dr. Raymond Phoenix and his aides—a world of dangers, both real and surreal.

In THE OZ ENCOUNTER, Phoenix enters the mind of a comatose girl and finds a strange land based on the famous fantasy stories. Yet it’s not the Oz we know, but a distortion—a world shaped by the girl’s own life.

What happens when a character from her mind seems to cross over to threaten the real world of Doc’s Virginia headquarters? As the danger builds, Phoenix plunges deeper and deeper into the perilous mystery of the girl’s coma. Two worlds collide in a startling and unexpected climax!

Graphics by
STEPHEN FABIAN

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