

# BLACK MAGIC FOR DUMMIES RON GOULART

THE FIELD REPRESENTATIVE of the demon showed up exactly thirty days before Pete Whitlock's fifty-fifth birthday. He assumed human form for the visit, appearing as a handsome, tanned young man in his late twenties.

"How you doing, Pete?" he inquired just after materializing in the doorway of Pete's den at a few minutes after two on an overcast afternoon in late October.

Pete had been hunched at his computer keyboard, trying to beef up his resume.

"I've decided not to sell," he told the young man, looking up. "So if you're with one of the Realtors who still has the house listed, you can just—"

"Name's Chip Willis." The demon's rep held out a completely believable hand.

"I'm not in real estate."

Getting up, Pete shook hands. "From the bank? They mentioned they were going to send somebody over about the equity loan," he said. "See, I've decided to keep the house for a while, borrow on it and hold on until I get the new advertising job I'm waiting for."

"Good plan, Pete." Willis settled into the big brown armchair. "Won't make much difference in the long haul, but you may as well go out hopefully."

Frowning, Pete asked, "You aren't from the bank?"

"Nope, but it's a natural mistake." Willis smiled broadly. "I've got myself rigged to suggest something like that—sincerity, financial stability. Could be a lawyer, maybe an accountant. You know, someone people will trust, respect and believe in."

"Who in the hell are you then? Why did you walk right into my house?"

"Didn't walk in, sport," corrected the smiling Willis. "I materialized. You must've heard the faint popping sound. It's caused by the displacement of—"

"Great, wonderful. I don't have enough problems. Now I have a lunatic prowling my—"

"Keep cool, there's no problem. I'm not a loon, a serial killer or any other common suburban bugaboo."

“Go away,” suggested Pete. “If you’re a burglar, I have to tell you right off that—“

“Not a burglar either, no.” His smile broadened. “Well, what say we get down to business?”

“What business? I don’t, far as I know, have any impending business at all with a lunatic.”

“Hey, Pete, you’re not paying close enough attention here. Didn’t I just assure you I wasn’t a nutcake? Relax, listen to me now.” A briefcase appeared suddenly on his lap, a brand new one made of real black leather. “Sorry, I forgot this.”

Pete dropped down into his desk chair, turning to face Willis. “How’d you do that?”

“Impressive, huh? It’s black magic.” He unfastened the black case, reached inside. “But you ought to know all about that.”

“All about black magic? Listen, Mr. Willis, I think maybe you—“

“Call me Chip.”

“Chip, I’m commencing to think that you’ve got the wrong Peter Whitlock,” he told him. “Maybe, you know, you want some other Peter Whitlock. Peter J.

Whitlock, say, or Peter F. Whitlock or maybe—“

“No, you’re my boy, Pete.” He extracted a rolled sheet of parchment. It was tied with a faded twist of red ribbon. “You remember this, don’t you?”

“No, I can’t say I do. What is it?”

Willis tapped his knee with the rolled parchment. “Let me refresh your memory,” he offered. “Frisco. Thirty years ago. Well, thirty years less thirty days ago actually.”

“Thirty years ago I was living out in San Francisco, yeah,” he admitted, becoming aware of some twisting pains beginning deep in his stomach. “That was my first advertising job, with Arnold & Maxwell. I started there as a copywriter just before my twenty-fifth birthday. But I don’t see what that has to do with --“

“It was there you began your impressive meteoric rise to success in your chosen profession.”

“Meteoric?” Pete laughed ruefully. “I’ve been out of work for nearly five months. I never rose above copywriter with any of the five agencies I’ve worked with over the years. I’m living here in New Beckford, Connecticut, in a house that’s dropped in value from \$450,000 to maybe \$375,000. I’m paying two vicious and vindictive former wives alimony and the last award I won was for some HoundDog Puppy Treat trade ads back in 1988.” He shook his head slowly. “Success? You’ve definitely got the wrong Peter Whitlock, Chip.”

“Let me clarify something,” offered Willis, a trace of impatience sounding in his voice. “Because, see, lots of people I come to collect from try similar dodges. But, the point is, success is relative and everybody can’t become a flapping billionaire. Even the most powerful demon in the netherworld can’t go around turning everybody into a millionaire. Hell, that’d futz up the economy worse than it is already.”

“Collect? What did you come to collect?”

“We’ll get to that in a minute.”

“And what was that reference to demons?”

“Oh, c’mon—are you pretending you never heard of Shug Nrgyzb?”

Pete scowled at his visitor. “What is it?”

“Shug Nrgyzb is who I work for.”

“Not a very catchy name for a company.”

“Shug Nrgyzb isn’t a company or a product, Pete. He’s a demon,” explained Willis, waving the parchment. “A truly powerful one.”

“You’re claiming you work for a demon?”

“I do work for a demon.”

“You really are a loon. You’d just better leave my—“

“Whoa, whoa. Pete, I don’t have all that much time to waste.” Untying the ribbon, he unfurled the parchment. “The bottom line here is that you made a deal

with Shug Nrgyzb thirty years back and now the time has come to settle the—“

“I never heard of him until just this minute,” insisted Pete as he stood up again. “It’s not the sort of name you’d forget. And, trust me, if I’d made any deal with a demon, granting that I’d ever believe in such a half-wit notion, I would sure as hell remember it.”

Willis shook his head. “Been tried, pal.”

“What’s been tried?”

“Stupidity defense. ‘I was too dense to know what I was doing.’ Never works, not ever,” the rep assured him. “Possibly in a court of law you could pull something like that and have a chance. But, hey, none of that cuts any ice with a demon.”

Pete sat. “You’re claiming that thirty years ago out in San Francisco I made some kind of deal with this Shug Nrgyzb?”

“You aren’t pronouncing Nrgyzb right, Pete. It’s Nrgyzb.”

“Be that as it may, Chip—What was this deal I allegedly made?”

“In exchange for thirty years of uninterrupted success, you agree to—“

“You call what I’ve lived through for the past thirty years uninterrupted success? Do you have anything in your files on Mary Jo?”

“Your first wife, sure.”

“How can any man who was married to Mary Jo for ten long, bleak years be considered a success?”

“You continue to miss the point, Pete. If you hadn’t, see, made the deal things would’ve been even worse,” the rep told him. “Success for a schlep like you doesn’t involve sitting on top of the world for three decades. Nope, it means rather that you—“

“And then there was Mary Jane, my second wife.”

“Were you aware that you have a tendency to marry women with similar names?”

“Yeah. But tell me what could have been worse than seven years with Mary Jane?”

“Seven more with Mary Jo. It’s all, I keep trying to convince you, relative.

Believe me—you’ve had a much better life than you deserved.”

“Do you know what my current bank balance is?”

“Checking or savings?”

“Savings.”

“You have \$11,49.6.”

“Chip, we’re in Fairfield County. People hereabouts give \$11,426 to their cleaning ladies as a Christmas bonus, they often drop \$11,426 into a homeless beggar’s Styrofoam cup, they toss \$11,49.6 to their kids for pocket money. \$11,426, believe me, is not a fortune. It sure as hell is not an impressive amount to have to show for thirty damn years of wild success.”

“For a born loser like you, Pete, it’s about \$10,000 more than you deserve.” He rattled the parchment, at the same time making an impatient noise. “Back to the business at hand. It’s our policy, as you know, to call on our clients thirty days in advance of the collection date. That way, Pete, you have time to put your affairs in order, maybe arrange a farewell party, do those things you’ve always been meaning to do and, being such a schlep, never got around to doing.”

“Wait now.” He was on his feet again. “This isn’t the old hokey business where you come to collect my soul?”

“No, it is not, nope.” Willis grinned. “All Shug Nrgyzb wants is your life.”

“Life?”

“On your fifty-fifth birthday he’ll appear and devour you.”

Pete sank, slowly, back into his desk chair. “What exactly does being devoured by Shug Nrgyzb involve?”

“Painless really. Being as how he’s on the large side, he can devour the average person in two bites. Three tops,” promised Willis. “Some folks get panicky when they witness the flames and smoke that accompany a manifestation of Shug Nrgyzb, but that’s all for show. You might, possibly, experience a few first degree burns, but you’ll only be alive for a few seconds after that anyway.”

“Listen, Chip, I never made any deal with this guy,” insisted Pete. “So it really doesn’t seem fair, particularly since I never actually got the thirty years of dazzling success, for him to come and devour me. I’m sure that if you point out the mistake to him, he’ll be only too glad to—“

“Actually, Shug Nrgyzb has a reputation for being a real shit, Pete,” Willis pointed out. “He could drop by and devour you merely for the fun of it. Yet that’s a moot point, since you did actually sign this document.” He paused, scanning the parchment. “Oops.”

“Ha! It isn’t me you want at all, is it?”

“Oh, it’s you sure enough. No doubt about that, Pete.” He held out the parchment. “You see, the way this works is that the party who enjoys the success is the one who has to pay the piper. In this particular instance, however, you didn’t personally sign yourself up for the thirty year success package. That was --“

“Jennifer Windmiller.” He’d grabbed the illuminated agreement and was frowning at the signature at the bottom.

“Old girlfriend of yours, as I understand it.”

“Jennifer Windmiller,” Pete repeated softly as he let the parchment drop to the carpet. “I haven’t thought of her for years.”

Willis rose up, smoothing his trousers. “Well, you owe all the great things that have happened to you during your adult life to that little lady,” he said, smiling. “We won’t see each other again, but it’s been nice meeting you. Oh, and don’t try to run when Shug Nrgyzb shows up to collect. That would only make him madder and he’d probably devour you in smaller bites.”

There was a faint popping noise as Willis, his briefcase and the parchment all vanished.

ZORINA TASHLIN reached across the desk to brush at his left coat sleeve. “Lint,” the thin dark woman mentioned. “Perhaps your long stretch of unemployment, Peter, is due as much to your slovenly appearance as it—“

“One speck of fuzz doesn’t qualify me as a slob,” he countered. “But let’s get back to my latest problem.”

She picked up her pencil, set it down an inch to the right of where it had been.

“I’m a career consultant, not a therapist.”

“No, no, I’m not cracking up,” he assured her. “It’s simply that I seem to be mixed up, through no fault of my own, with a vindictive demon.”

“Perhaps if you accepted responsibility for your problems, you’d—“

“The reason I came by this afternoon, Zorina, is that I need some advice about how to—“

“If you honestly believe that this old sweetheart of yours has put a curse on you, then she’s the one you must talk to.”

“It’s not exactly a curse, it was supposed to be a boon. Thirty years of ongoing achievement, except it didn’t turn out quite that way. But then what can you expect from a nitwit like Jennifer Windmiller?”

“Why don’t you simply contact her, Peter?”

“I tried that, soon as the demon’s advance man vanished,” he answered. “Trouble is, she’s not listed anywhere in the San Francisco Bay Area, not according to phone information. And I used the Net every way I could think of and didn’t find one damn trace of her.”

“Probably she’s married.”

“Maybe, more than once. I don’t have any idea, however, what her name is these days.”

“Finding lost loves is not part of my service. But a good private investigator might be able to—“

“That will take too long,” he cut in. “But you advise a lot of people on career changes, help them find new jobs. Do you know anybody who specializes in occult stuff? I want to approach the problem from the demon angle, but unfortunately there’s nothing like an occult investigator listed in the yellow pages.”

Turning, Zorina gazed out the office window at the gray late afternoon parking lot. “Well, I suppose there is Batsford.”

“What does he do?”

“Mostly Batsford fouls up the job interviews I send him out on,” she said, picking up the pencil again.

“He maintains that, in addition to being a second rate accountant, he’s an investigator of the supernatural. Mind you, Peter, I can’t vouch for the validity of such a claim.”

“Basically I need someone who’s knowledgeable about warding off demons. Or at least stalling them for a while.”

“Check with Batsford.” She wrote an address on a memo slip. “His phone’s not in service at the moment. And don’t, by the way, give him any cash in advance. He has a tendency to go off on sprees.” Taking the slip, Pete studied the address before folding it and inserting it in his shirt pocket. “Long as I’m here—have you got anything new for me in the way of a job?”

“I hesitate to send you out on any more interviews, Peter, if you plan to be eaten by a demon in a month’s time.”

“If Batsford is any good at all, I’ll have longer than that.”

“You’ll have to guarantee me you’re going to be alive for at least a year.”

“C’mon, that’s not fair, Zorina. Nobody can guarantee you that they’ll live another year.”

“That’s true, yes, but none of my other clients has a fiend from the netherworld breathing down his or her neck.”

“What about that copywriting job for Help-A-Tot? You mentioned there might be an opening there about now.”

“It’s beneath you, Peter.”

“Five months I’ve been out of work.”

“I wasn’t aware of the exact nature of the position when I brought it up the other day.” She tapped the eraser end of the pencil on the desk. “Help-A-Tot collects money for underprivileged children around the world. Each child is supposed to write a letter to his or her individual sponsor every three months. Alas, Help-A-Tot isn’t as aboveboard about those letters as I was originally led to believe. It turns out they’re faked, all written by the same person and then mailed by stringers across the globe. The Help-A-Tot copywriter is the person who has to crank out those fraudulent missives. It’s disgusting.”

“Disgusting,” he agreed. “But what does it pay?”

She rose up, carefully, frowning. “Clean up this demon mess first,” she advised.

“Then we can talk jobs again, Peter.”

“That’s not a crystal ball,” observed Pete.

“Yes, it is.”

“Looks like a fishbowl to me.”

“If it were a fishbowl, my skeptical chum, there’d be a myriad of colorful little fish flitting around inside it,” said Batsford.

“You’ve got it upside down, so all the fish would’ve dribbled out long since.”

“Who’s the occult expert, my boy—you or I?”

“Well, Zorina claims that you are, though I’m starting to have—“

“And how much am I charging you for this entire lengthy session?”

“Fifty dollars.”

“That’s an incredibly low fee, my boy, considering that you’re getting my exclusive and undivided services.” He was a small, rumped man in his middle forties, wearing a double-breasted blue suit and a white sweatshirt.

The questionable crystal ball rested on a card table in the center of the small, cluttered living room of his second-floor apartment.

“I’m skeptical that any of this,” admitted Pete, who was sitting opposite the mystic, “is going to work.”

“I must have silence while I’m trying to tune in on the supernatural real ms.”

“Is that what you’re supposed to be doing? What exactly will that have to do with warding off a demon?”

Batsford scratched at his left armpit. “I may go off into a trance any time now,” he warned. “Should I say

nothing for a full five minutes, my boy, reach across and give me a hearty nudge. Trances sometimes, unfortunately, segue into naps.” He placed his stubby hands, fingers spread wide, on each side of the upended fishbowl. “Om mani padme hum.”

A loud thumping sounded in the dimly lit room.

“Is that,” inquired Pete, “something mystical?”

“Merely the young marrieds upstairs wrestling with each other. Ignore it.”

Batsford shut his eyes. “Om mani padme hum.”

The crystal ball began to glow with a pale yellow light. A tiny figure appeared within it.

Leaning forward, squinting at the image, Pete exclaimed, “Hey, that’s Jenny Windmiller. Except she looks exactly as she did when I was dating her out in San Francisco thirty some years ago. I remember those tacky lovebeads.”

“There’s sometimes a little fine tuning that has to be done,” said Batsford in a gruffer voice. “Let’s fast forward to the present.”

Jennifer went through a series of changes, her slim figure growing gradually plumper and her dark hair undergoing various style changes and ending up short-cropped and gray. Her clothes changed, too, and finally she appeared within the globe clad in a full-length fur coat.

“That can’t be her.”

“Time has a tendency to blur the—“

“No, I mean She’s a vegetarian. A fur coat—looks like mink, doesn’t it? -- is something Jenny’d never put on.”

“Ah—ah.” Batsford suddenly slumped in his folding chair. His voice shifted again and he began talking in a piping falsetto. “Her name now is Jennifer Sanson. She resides in Santa Morgana, California.”

“That’s over in Marin County, across the Bay from San Francisco.” He leaned closer to the crystal. “Can you give me an address and a phone number?”

“Look it up in the directory, schmuck,” the piping voice advised him. “It’s possible she can re-negotiate the contract with Shug Nrgyzb, although she hasn’t practiced any black magic for many a...” Sighing, Batsford came toppling forward. His head whacked the fish bowl, sending it hopping off the table.

Pete lunged, caught it before it smacked the bare hardwood. It felt extremely hot in his hands.

“Nice catch.” Batsford had his own voice once more. He was sitting up, rubbing at his eyes. “Did we find out anything?”

“Don’t you know?”

He shook his shaggy head. “I was in a trance during the best parts. Did we?”

“According to you, Jennifer is now—“

“Not according to me, my boy. According, rather, to one of my valuable controls.

Was it a kindly Southern gent who—“

“Sounded more like Mick ey Mouse.”

“Ah, that’s Little Eva. A sweet child, though a mite salty.”

“Is she reliable?”

“Almost always, yes.”

“Well, she claims Jenny is now a Mrs. Sanson and residing in Northern California.”

“You can put your faith in Little Eva, bless her.”

“Okay, I’ll check with information and get Jennifer’s phone number,” said Pete, getting up. “I’ll phone her and tell her to do something to call off Shug Nrgyzb.”

“You must go out there in person.” Standing, Batsford scratched at his backside.

“What do you mean?”

“Eh?”

“You told me I have to go out there to California.”

When Batsford frowned, new wrinkles joined those already crowding together on his pale forehead.

“What sort of voice did I use?”

“Sounded like your own.”

“Ah, that must be Mr. Dennison. I’m told he sounds a great deal like me.” He rubbed at his stubbly chin

several times, slowly. “I’d heed Dennison were I you. He has an impressive track record in this sort of thing.”

“Look, if Jennifer is still capable of calling off this demon, she doesn’t need me out there. With my finances the way they are, a trip West would be—“

“It’s essential that you confront her face to face,” cried Batsford in Little Eva’s voice. “And, please, take nice Mr. Batsford along for occult protection.” He blinked, shook his head. “Who spoke to you this time?”

Pete eyed him. “Have you been wishing for a vacation out in California?”

“No, absolutely not. I loathe the place. Far too much sunshine and the whole state is due to fall into the sea any day now. Hate California, my boy.”

Pete shook his head. “Never mind, thanks for your help.” He moved toward the door. “I’ll get in touch with Jennifer and—Hey!” Several drops of warm water had smacked him on the head. He glanced upwards. “Couple upstairs?”

“After they grapple, they take a shower together.” He shuffled across the room to open the door. “Let me know when we’re leaving for the Coast.”

Three nights later Pete was getting wet on a rainswept hillside in Santa Morgana, California. Far below, beyond the houses and the wooded acres, the San Francisco Bay showed blurred and black. The lights of the restaurants and the docked boats of this little bayside town glowed fuzzily.

Pete was standing beside their rented car, shining a flashlight at the silent engine. “Why am I doing this?” he asked. “I don’t know a damn thing about automobiles.”

“Doesn’t look too complicated, my boy,” observed Batsford, who was hunched next to him and using a steeped copy of the San Francisco Chronicle as a rain shield.

“And you—what kind of mystic are you? Couldn’t you or one of those pixies you claim you’re in communication with have foreseen this?”

“Spirits,” corrected the occult consultant. “I get most of my psychic help from the ghosts of the departed who—nertz to you, kiddo.” The last phrase came out in a falsetto. “Now, now, Little Eva.”

“Why in the hell didn’t somebody like Little Eva predict that this car we rented was going to break down?”

“I did mention at the time,” reminded Batsford, “that a firm calling itself the Rockbottom Cheap Car Rental Agency might not deal in the most reliable of vehicles.”

“We’re on a very tight budget,” Pete told him as he probed with the beam of the flash. “Having to pay your way out here means I can’t go first cabin on everything. Is that red wire supposed to be dangling there?”

“That looks more like a strand of spaghetti. Perhaps the last mechanic to service this rattletrap was snacking whilst he—“

“Jinxed. This whole venture is jinxed,” lamented Pete. “If only I’d been able to talk to Jennifer on the phone I could’ve avoided this entire trip—and the cost.”

“It occurs to me that her husband’s refusal to allow you telephone access to the lady is highly suspicious.”

“He said she was down with the flu. Not a very cordial guy from the sound of him.”

“Contractors are usually aggressive burly types. Besides, you called the house something like a dozen times demanding to speak to her.”

“Listen, Batsford, I’m going to be devoured by this demon in twenty-seven days.

That would make anybody anxious and uneasy.”

“Whap the carburetor,” advised the mystic in a vaguely Germanic voice. “We’ll fix der dodgosted thing dot way.”

“Hum?”

Batsford blinked. “Did I speak?”

“You told me to hit the carburetor—in a lousy Dutch accent.”

“Oh, that was Mr. O’Riley. For some reason, it amuses him to pretend he’s a Nordic type,” explained Batsford as the rain pelted down on his newspaper. “During his lifetime, he worked in a garage in Minneapolis. It wouldn’t hurt to heed his advice.”

Sighing, Pete leaned further under the raised hood and fisted something he was nearly certain was the carburetor. The engine returned to life.

Pete waited for a few seconds, grinned, shut the hood and jumped back in the driver's seat. "C'mon, let's go."

WHEN PETE stepped into the second-floor bedroom off the rainswept balcony, Jennifer said, "You're getting mud all over the carpet, Peter."

"Same old Jenny," he said. "Your husband's locked you in here and I, after coming westward from distant Connecticut at considerable expense, have just climbed up a very rickety drain pipe to rescue you and all you can say by way of greeting is—"

"Is Connecticut where you live now? I was thinking of trying to get in touch with you." She looked even plumper than she had in the mystic's low-grade crystal ball. Wearing a loose flowered dress, she was sitting on the edge of a large spool bed. "You wouldn't happen to have anything like a fig newton or a granola bar with you, I suppose?"

"No, nope."

"Oliver— that's Oliver Sanson, my present husband—has been keeping me on a terribly skimpy diet," she explained. "How, by the way, did you know I was locked up here in my bedroom?"

He moved nearer the bed. "Little Eva."

"That's your wife, is it?"

"No, she's one of Batsford's contacts in the spirit world and she—"

"Oh, you're not messing with mediums and sorcerers, are you?" She shook her head. "That's a terrible hobby. I wouldn't have anything to do with that sort of --"

"Too bad you didn't feel that way in your wild youth, Jenny—when you made your damned deal with Shug Nrgyzb."

"That's pronounced Nrgyzb," she corrected. "And, listen, Peter, I really do feel awfully bad about that. In fact, that's why I'm a sort of prisoner in my own home right now." She glanced down at his wet trousers and noticed that the knee was torn out of one leg. "I bet Rollo took a nip at you. Or was it Bosko?"

"The bigger of the two police dogs—he didn't introduce himself." He rubbed at his knee. "Batsford had both those beasts hypnotized and then Little Eva took over to tell us your husband was out and that you were locked up here."

"Yes, tonight's Oliver's poker night."

Dropping into a fat pink armchair facing the big bed, he said, "Get back to how my impending role as snack food for a demon from the netherworld inspired your husband to stow you away."

"You don't have anything of a sweet nature with you? Something with a peanut butter center would be especially welcome about—"

"In a little over three weeks, Jenny, Shug Nrgyzb is going to pop up amidst, as it's been explained to me, considerable fire and brimstone and snarl me down. So let's forget about other sorts of eating experiences for now."

"I'm truly sorry about this," the plump gray-haired woman assured him. "At the time I only thought how nice it would be if you had a rich, happy life."

"Rich, happy and short."

"Thirty years, my gosh, it seemed like a heck of a long time back then, Peter," she said. "And you have had a pretty happy and successful life, haven't you? I was disappointed that I've never seen anything about you in Time or Fame or even the National Intruder, but I told myself yours was probably a quieter sort of success, out of the limelight."

"We'll go into that later," he said, impatient. "Tell me how your husband fits into my problem."

"Well, I couldn't exactly remember when your birthday was," she said. "We lost touch an awfully long time ago. But, I don't know, I started to get the feeling that it was getting close and that thirty years had



gone by. I hadn't told you what I'd done then because I thought we'd be together forever and ever and I wanted it to be a surprise.' She sighed, looking up at the pink ceiling. "It occurred to me the other day that I should find out where you were and give you a ring."

"Hello, Pete, a big green monster's going to gobble you up on your birthday.

Bye."

"Anyway, Peter, I decided to talk the situation over with Oliver."

"Doesn't the guy know about your dabbling in black magic?"

"Oh, as I told you, I gave all that up years and years ago. Right after I quit smoking pot and a couple husbands before this one." She shook her head. "Oliver is a very successful contractor here in Northern California. Well, he's about \$900,000 in the hole right now, but that's not too bad. He's going to bid on building the new Marin County ArtPlex. That's that mall sort of thing where they'll have an opera house and a ballet stage and a theater-in-the-round and all sorts of gourmet restaurants and exotic souvenir shops and—"

"Why'd he lock you up?"

"Because I wouldn't go along with what he wanted," she replied. "He wasn't at all interested in your impending doom, Peter, but he was most anxious that I summon up this demon for him."

"He wanted to make a deal with Shug Nrgyzb to make sure he got the contract to build this thing?"

She nodded, sniffing some. "That's it exactly, yes," she said. "He hopes to get inside information on the bids and try to guarantee that he'll be the one chosen to build the ArtPlex."

"You refused."

She shuddered, hugging herself. "I told him it was much too dangerous," she said. "I simply don't want to mess with black magic ever again."

He left the chair and stood over her. "But you could summon up this demon?"

"I suppose," she said slowly, not looking at him. "I'd have to dig up my old magic books and—"

"Where are the books, Jenny?"

"That's exactly what Oliver wants to know." Sighing, she shuddered again. "He says he's going to keep me locked away until I give in, go get the books and arrange an interview with the demon."

"Are the books hidden here somewhere?"

"Course not. I'm pretty certain they're stored up in Aunty Bunny's attic someplace."

He frowned, thoughtful. "I remember her. That's the one who lives over in the Berkeley hills, isn't it, in that tumble-down Victorian place?"

"Poor Aunty Bunny's been dead nearly five years and the house's been locked up for the past two or three."

"You can get in?"

"I have a key, sure," she admitted. "But, really, I think it's too risky to try summoning up Shug Nrgyzb."

"Maybe, but we have to talk to him," he told her evenly. "You're going to convince him that I'm a dupe in this whole mess. And we'll persuade him to cancel the deal."

"He's not a very amiable demon."

"So I've been told. But we have to try to get him to be reasonable." He took hold of one of her plump arms and lifted her to her feet. "C'mon, Jenny, you owe me this."

After a moment she said, "Okay, all right. I'll make a try at it."

BATSFORD SNEEZED. "The dust lies thick upon these ancient tomes," he remarked and sneezed again.

The three of them were up in the dim-lit attic of the three-story Victorian house high in the hills of Berkeley.

Thunder was rumbling outside and a chill night wind was rattling the shutters and trim that the old place was thick with.

Jennifer, squatting beside an open steamer trunk, was leafing through a thick volume bound in yellowish leather. With her other hand she was eating fig newtons from the big box they'd stopped to buy at a

24-hour supermarket en route.

“Could you, Jenny, maybe refrain from snacking and concentrate on this spell?” mentioned Pete.

“Relax, I’ve just now found it.” After wiping crumbs off her chin, she pointed to a foxed page midway through the hefty volume.

Batsford tilted his head so he could read the title on the spine. “The Compleat Eva Spells of the Infamous Count Monstrodamus.” He nodded, frowning. “A notorious sorcerer in his day.”

“And he wrote up some terrific spells.” Jennifer placed the open book on the dusty attic floor. “We might as well do the whole business right here. No use messing up any of the rooms.”

“How mess up?” asked Pete.

“When a fiery demon shows up, there’s often smoke damage,” she said. “Right now, I need some magic chalk.”

“Here you go, dear lady.” From a rumpled pocket in his rumpled jacket, Batsford produced a stub of bright yellow chalk and presented it to Jennifer.

“Thanks. Now, you guys, push enough boxes aside so that I can have a clear space about six feet across.”

Pete was leaning against a stack of large cardboard boxes. He straightened up and started hefting them out of the way.

Lightning crackled outside and the single window in the slant-ceilinged attic glowed an electric blue for a few seconds.

Jennifer ate another fig newton.

When sufficient space was available, she drew, on her hands and knees, a large pentagram on the raw wood flooring.

“Little lopsided,” observed Batsford, who was sitting in an old bentwood rocker against a wall.

“It’ll do.” Jennifer stood up, panting some. She bent and gathered up the book of Count Monstrodamus’s spells. “Maybe you better hunker down behind something at first, Peter. If he sees you right off N well, he may just devour you and the heck with waiting until your birthday.”

“That would be violating the halfwit agreement.”

“Even so.”

Pete moved behind a stack of old suitcases, a spot from which he couldn’t even see the pentagram.

He could hear Jennifer commence to read aloud from the magic book. It sounded as though it was in what he imagined was Middle English, interspersed with phrases in French.

She droned on for about three minutes and then sneezed several times. Next came an echoing thump. He risked a look.

Jennifer was squatting on the floor, picking up the fallen magic book.

“Was that part of the ritual—the sneezing?” he inquired.

“No, it’s all the damn dust up here. Now go hide again.” He complied.

“Rats,” muttered Jennifer. “I lost my place. Jeez, I guess I better start over again.”

Pete emerged again. “Won’t that screw things up?”

“Hush, quit heckling.”

“Can’t you just pick up where you left off? That would probably be less risky and involve less chance of—“

“Possibly, but I don’t remember where I left off. It’s safer, when summoning up fiends from the nether regions, to get in every word of the spell.”

“Okay, you’re the expert.” He hunkered down out of sight once more.

“I haven’t done any of this stuff for years, remember? Quit interrupting and I’ll give it another try,” she suggested. “You weren’t such a fussbudget when we were romantically involved.”

“I wasn’t on any demon’s menu back then.”

“Kids, quit this squabbling,” put in Batsford. “Let’s get on with the ritual.”

Pete sighed, shrugged, and hunched down further.

When Jennifer sneezed again, Pete didn’t peek again or say anything.

She got through the entire spell on the second try, stumbling on just one phrase -- which might’ve been in

Ancient Persian w and only sneezing twice.

Gradually all outside sounds started to fade and an immense silence filled the attic.

Then Pete became aware of an odd humming noise. It sounded like dozens of people having a violent argument, only very far away.

The room was growing increasingly hot, too.

“Well, rash mortal—now what?”

The voice sounded like the sort of voice a cement mixer would have if it developed the ability to speak.

And it seemed to be coming from several places at once.

Very slowly, and carefully, Pete started inching his head toward the edge of the barrier of suitcases.

Thick yellow smoke was billowing all around.

“I have summoned you,” began Jennifer in a pale, nervous voice, “I have summoned you, O Mighty Shug Nrgyzb, so that I might humbly—“

“I’m usually addressed,” the demon informed her, “as O Mighty Exalted and Incomparable Shug Nrgyzb. And you’re mispronouncing Nrgyzb.”

“I’m frightfully sorry and I offer an abject apology, O Mighty Exalted and

Incomparable Shug Nrgyzb,” she said, voice shaky. “I don’t know if you remember me, but—“

“You are Jennifer Windmiller. I never forget someone with whom I have made a binding and unbreakable contract.”

Pete risked a look from behind the suitcases.

The demon was quite tall and his head, or what passed for his head, was up near the beamed attic ceiling. He was a muddy shade of green and had lumps and knobs and scales and something that looked like mildew all over his huge body. Although it didn’t seem likely you could pick up mildew in a place that was as hot as the netherworld was rumored to be. Yellow smoke was fuming out of his mouth and nose and what might be his ears.

“It’s about that very contract,” said Jennifer, “that I want to have a chat.”

She shut the book but kept her plump finger in it as a bookmark. “You see, O Mighty and Incomparable Shug Nrgyzb, I—“

“You left out Exalted. Things like that really annoy me,” rumbled the green demon.

“Right. Well, the point is it was I who made the deal with you and not the person who reaped the benefits. So it isn’t exactly fair to make him now pay for—“

“Don’t I know that? You were merely the novice sorcerer who did the negotiating,” said the demon.

“Why don’t you come out and join us, Peter?”

Pete swallowed twice before stepping out from behind the stack of suitcases.

“Hi,” he said as he came into the open. “I sure hope we can work this out.”

“We have a saying in the netherworld,” Shug Nrgyzb told him. “A deal is a deal.”

“Just a moment,” put in Batsford.

The demon didn’t bother to look back at the rocking chair that the mystic was sitting in. “Don’t intrude,” he advised.

Pete said, “What we’re trying to get across to you, sir, is that I never personally had anything to do with—“

“What did I tell you people to call me?”

“O Mighty Exalted and Incomparable Shug Nrgyzb,” said Pete. “Okay, let’s get back to my—“

“So you can’t summon up a flapping demon to save your own husband from going down the toilet. No, but for this simp you whip up a big fat ugly green one.” A large tan man in a conservative gray business suit had come running up the stairs to the attic and he charged through the doorway now.

“Oliver, how’d you know I was at Auntie Bunny’s?”

“As fate would have it, Jen, I was driving home from my card game where I lost a flapping \$1200 -- just as you and these two schmucks were racing away,” said Oliver Sanson. “Assuming you were up to no

good, I followed.”

“Cease,” boomed the demon, producing an extra volume of smoke. “Who is this vile intruder?”

“Vile intruder my ass.” Oliver faced him, hands on hips. “I’ll get to you in a minute. First, though, I want to get something straight with my devoted wife here. Honey, you—“

“No one,” roared the demon, “speaks disrespectfully to Shug Nrgyzb.”

“Hey, hold on a minute,” said Sanson. He took a few more steps toward his wife.

“Is this the guy who can...what’s wrong, Jen?”

She was shaking her head vigorously and pointing at the demon.

Sanson started to turn around just as a large green paw scooped him up.

Peter sprinted to Jennifer’s side and took hold of her head. “Time to leave.”

“But he’s going to devour Oliver.”

“You can’t stop him.”

“True,” she acknowledged.

As they started down the wooden stairs to the landing, Pete heard a large chomping sound and then a scream.

Then a piping little voice said, “Hey, you big bozo, what do you think you’re doing?”

Pete and Jennifer kept running.

Returning to the red plastic seat next to Pete, Batsford said, “You really cannot, my boy, get a good cup of cappuccino in an airport.”

Pete was sitting with his hands resting on his knees, staring out at the gray day beyond the waiting room windows. A massive airliner went roaring up into the afternoon. “You’re sure everything is going to work out?”

“Thanks to Little Eva,” said the mystic. “She really has a knack for negotiating with demons.”

“She shouldn’t have talked him out of devouring Jennifer’s husband. Sanson deserved to be gobbled up, the bastard.”

“Think of the problems the dear lady would’ve had trying to explain what had happened to him if Shug Nrgyzb had eaten up the simp in his entirety.”

“I suppose.”

“And her hubby’s experiences with that fire-breathing critter drove all thoughts of making any sort of deal with a demon from his pea brain for good and all.”

Pete watched another plane go climbing up into the sky. “But listen, if Little Eva’s so terrific at networking with demons, how come she didn’t get him to cancel our deal?”

Batsford took a sip from his paper cup. “I think we made a pretty good deal, all things considered,” he said. “Instead of devouring you in the early hours of your birthday this year, he graciously extended your contract for another thirty years.”

“That’s going to be great when he shows up at the old folks home to collect.”

“Look on the bright side,” advised Batsford after another sip. “You also get thirty more years of fabulous success.”

Pete sighed. “Yeah, I’m really looking forward to that,” he said.