

Emerald River, Pearl Sky

by Rajnar Vajra

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The difference between science and magic is simple, but profound and crucial.

—LET US GO THEN, YOU AND I, ON A MODEST JOURNEY OF A FEW PALTRY MILES AND A MERE THOUSAND YEARS. RELAX AND ALLOW THOSE WHO WATCH OVER US TO INSTIGATE AND REGULATE YOUR EXPERIENCE. WE BEGIN ... *now*.

ARE YOU STILL WITH ME? GOOD! THIS WINDING FOOTPATH BEFORE US IS NAMED OLD GOD TRAIL. IMMERSE YOURSELF IN EVERY OFFERED SENSATION TO MAKE THIS REALITY YOUR OWN. OBSERVE IF YOU WILL, HOW THOSE RICHLY BLOSSOMED APPLE TREES TO THE WEST STIPPLE THE PATH WITH SHADOWS STEADY AS GRANITE. CONCENTRATE! DO YOU NOTICE HOW WELL THE MURMURING OF RAINBOW PARROTS HARMONIZES WITH THE DRONING BEES AND ALSO THAT FAINT MELODY?

LISTEN AS THE MELODY SWELLS. CAN YOU HEAR FOOTSTEPS CRUNCHING ON THE OYSTER-SHELL PAVING? AH! HERE HE IS: VINCAS MAGUS, A MAN WRINKLED ENOUGH TO BE AN OLD GOD'S GRANDFATHER, TOTTERING ALONG, AIDED BY THAT STAFF OF WALNUT. DESPITE HIS TWISTED LEFT LEG AND THE BULGING TRAVELING BAG HANGING FROM HIS SHOULDER, YOU MUST ADMIT HE MAKES STEADY PROGRESS, CONSTANTLY HUMMING WITHIN HIS SILVER BEARD. WE HAVE ONLY TO JOIN HIM AND THE LESSON WILL SOON UNFOLD....

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When Vincas reached Emerald River, he stopped and his humming died. The low-lying fog wasn't thick enough to hide a surprise. The dilapidated old bridge was gone, replaced by a Kyoto-style teak span with a far higher arch. Extending his staff, he poked the first lacquered plank, carved like the others for traction on the sharp incline. Between planks, thin slats protruded to act as a ladder higher up.

"Even last year," he muttered, "I could've danced across. Now I wouldn't dare crawl." He shrugged, backed up several yards to where the ground was less rocky, dropped to a modified lotus posture, and closed his

eyes. For a long moment he sat still, breathing slowly and evenly, perceptions turned inward.

Yes? whispered a thin, dry-ice-cold voice seemingly from inside his chest. *Why do you disturb me?*

“I’ve come to a river and cannot cross.”

Then find you a bridge.

“A bridge lies before us, Panx, but the way is too steep.”

You are aged and weak, magician. What do you offer?

It’s come to *this*? Vincas thought, struggling to remain calm; these days he needed a firm grip on tranquility simply to maintain contact with the micro-imp. “I’ll grant you freedom from any requests of mine for two days if you do my bidding without complaint.”

You consider that freedom? What else do you offer?

“A chance for reconciliation. Have you forgotten those decades when we worked together? As a team? Wasn’t that better than this ... estrangement?”

Ah. You desire to reduce me to my former servitude. Your heart shouts between your words; even an earless imp can hear it. You have no superior inducements?

“This is no good,” the magician sighed. “We are reduced to hagglers. I regret your misery, Panx, and would free you if I could. But are we not part of each other?”

You surprise me! Your intent tastes sincere. Very well, your request is granted. Trouble me not for a brace of days.

Disturbing as the conversation had been, now that the worst was over, Vincas’s curiosity stirred. How would the imp handle the problem? Would Vincas find himself suddenly leaping to the far bank? Or swimming easily against the current? Or would his bad leg simply regain enough vitality to master the bridge? That last, he doubted. Expediency for micro-imps, given their inhuman perspective and miserly attitude toward expending muscular energy, usually assumed some baroque form. He opened his

eyes and waited.

Nothing happened save two rainbow parrots flew by and a large tortoise with remarkably long legs for a chelonian came plodding up the riverbank to settle down in a shallow depression near the Trail. A minute later, a matching tortoise joined the first. When Vincas saw the way they lined up, he smiled and pushed himself upright with his cane. With some effort he was soon standing on the reptiles, a foot on each shell, holding his stick horizontally as a balancing aid.

Bears and coyotes and raccoons, he thought, are best kept under control. Cats, dogs, and birds make better pets under similar control. And, of course, lizards and flies have any number of uses. But why would the Ancients have grown command circuits in *turtles*?

Slowly, the animals extended their legs and Vincas began wishing he'd figured a way to ride while seated; the ground seemed improbably distant. But his porters climbed from the depression in perfect unison and with reassuring smoothness. Bearing the wizard with ease and adjusting leg-length to keep their shells reasonably level, they crossed the bridge with the unhurried determination of their kind.

On the far side, a relieved magician dismounted carefully, patted the animals on their heads and proceeded onward briskly compared with the pace of his former steeds. Emerald River paralleled his path at the moment, but he knew it would soon loop west for many miles only to rejoin him as he neared his destination.

The trail, here, was a long straight stretch. After ten minutes of his best hobbling, he noticed a figure far ahead bounding toward him at great speed, clearly a magician whose micro-imp was particularly cooperative. Even from this distance, he or she seemed to radiate vitality and humor. From this and occasional scarlet flashes from the wizard's garb, Vincas guessed it was the baja-mage Kirstunu long before they were close enough to shout a greeting.

"Why do you travel south?" Vincas asked when the two were finally face to face. "The Zun-Loo festival beckons to our north and the Contest this year should be a treat. After my hiatus last fall, I intend to reenter the fray."

The tall red-haired fellow, whose narrow face had something of the curve and sharpness of an axe blade, released his leaping lizards and put out his arms to embrace the old man. Kirstunu's traveling cape fell back to

reveal the brilliant red tunic of a lesser mage. Meanwhile, the lizards kept themselves upright with small oscillations, yellow eyes fixed on their master.

“Then sorry I shall be to miss the Contest,” said the younger man. “You and Glin Tan, at least, never disappoint. As it happens, I come from Zun-Loo. Lama Go,” he admitted with a wink, “took exception to a small prank of mine and has banned me from this year’s event.”

“Oh so. Your little jokes are so seldom appreciated, I wonder that you continue them. Was your amusement worth the penalty?”

Kirstunu’s lips tightened as if trying to repress a grin. “Perhaps not. Three days hence, I will lack the pleasure of watching you win both Glin Tan’s glower and the Torus. But if only you had seen our noble lama shooing away all those parrots so eager to feed him worms! In the end, he was forced to annul every personal spell to rid himself of mine. What adds that touch of rue to your smile?”

Vincas chuckled. “The mention of worms, my friend. At my age, I may presently suffer excess acquaintance with them.”

“You raise a matter of some interest. Forgive me, I could not help but notice the deepening of your wrinkles and how you limp as if crippled. May I ask why without causing offense?”

“Of course. But you, if I may say so, appear as vibrant and young as ever! In truth, my imp has become obstinate over the last few seasons and will no longer assist me to overcome the defects of my body. Thus I amble when once I ran, and my magic is feeble here in the wilds.”

Kirstunu scratched his goatee and lines appeared between his fox-red brows. “But your *jinn* remains intact?”

Vincas pulled back one sleeve to display the webbing faintly visible beneath the wrinkled skin of his forearm. “It appears healthy from what can be seen. I will judge its condition by how much strength returns when I approach Zun-Loo’s empower station.”

The baja-mage spread his hands. “If then your capacities soar, why not reside permanently within range of some empower plant, say that of Westmorland or Plest or Zun-Loo itself? With mighty Pagman enriching the Zun-Loo ether, you would only need your imp’s goodwill for high-level competitions.”

Mixed joy and wistfulness complicated Vincas's expression. "I can explain in three compound words, Kirstunu: grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren, none of whom follow in my footsteps. I love them all beyond measure yet my offspring do not domicile themselves for the convenience of senile magicians."

"So you are stuck with an unwilling ally unless you attain a new commitment—or discover some novel lore."

"You have always seemed," the old man said carefully, "on the warmest of terms with your imp."

"Perhaps because I ask little of it."

"Even so, it surprises me you've not been granted your Magnus Cum Laude and full status by now. You certainly have the talent."

"Talent, perhaps, but I lack raw power and, worse, an artist's imagination." He raised a hand as if to block argument, but Vincas was savoring the implied compliment too much to remonstrate.

"I have, however," Kirstunu continued in a slightly chagrined tone, "certain compensatory skills. Speaking of which, our chance meeting is lucky for my conscience and your purse!"

The mage's white eyebrows lifted. "How so?"

"I owe you money."

"I don't—"

"Three years ago, we shared a savory meal in Plest and you were kind enough to loan me a modest sum."

"If you say so. I've quite forgotten."

"Recent fortune has beamed upon me at the gaming tables of Zun-Loo and here is your investment plus a trivial return for your patience." He withdrew an impressive handful of coins from a pocket, at least fifteen coppers and three silvers, and quickly slipped them all into Vincas's traveling bag. Then, while the magician's mouth gaped, he threw in even more coins.

“Surely,” Vincas complained, staring down into his bag, “you’ve given me far too much!”

“Not at all. Consider it what the bankers of Haven call ‘interest,’ an amusing but accurate term. Besides, I’ve only bestowed the surface skim of my last day’s income. And it will make my traveling lighter. Please do me the honor of accepting.”

Vincas shook his head. “If you insist. And thank you.”

The two men bowed to each other and each continued on his journey without another word. Behind him, Vincas could hear the baja-wizard rushing south in a series of rapidly fading *boings*.

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When the first stars appeared, the magician entered a pasture abutting the road and removed what appeared to be a snail shell from his bag. He threw the shell down, not too close to where he was standing, and watched it gather molecules, rolling on its back as if tormented by fleas.

Vincas knew no magic was involved in this; his jin was too sensitive to enchantment for him to believe otherwise. The Ancients, he thought for the thousandth time, must have been scientific wizards beyond compare.

Zun-Loo’s empower station still wasn’t near enough for the smart yurt to attain its full size, but it gradually expanded until it could fit a wizened wizard. At Vincas’s command, a door irised open then sealed behind him after he entered. As always, the interior smelled pleasantly of ocean breezes and, after the magician had finished his dinner, the fleshy bed was a comfort to elderly hips. He fell asleep to the soft murmuring of rainbow parrots, birds supposedly reshaped by the Ancients for both beauty and pest control.

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His next day’s journey eased as the trail, now widened to a proper road, gracefully descended into Zun Valley. By midday, the bioelectric netting beneath the old man’s skin began tingling and vigor trickled into his limbs, a sort of heatless warmth generating an illusion of restored youth. Soon, the inverse-square rule proved its relevance and he found himself carrying the cane rather than the reverse. His pace increased every minute and his wrinkles and bad leg began to smooth out. He felt Panx stir, but the imp remained silent.

Before the sun even considered settling down for the night, Zun-Loo's minarets, spires, and trellised pergolas were close enough to please Vincas's eyes and tease his nostrils with the perfume of lotus-roses. Minutes later, he was beyond the city gates admiring Takata Hai's party decorations, which for reasons of efficiency only manifested for those within Zun-Loo's tiled walls.

Takata's specialty was long-lasting mirage; for the last decade, he'd accepted the challenge of trimming the city at festival time. He never worked the same motif twice and every year attempted a more exquisite effect.

This season, he'd chosen an interplay of contrasts rather than patent flamboyance. Every home, shop, temple, mosque, church, maxi-manor, and mini-palace seemed coated in a thin layer of ice. The ices were of varied hues—gray, blue, bronze, gold, aqua—one hue per building, but all were muted enough to seem almost brown in dim light. The contrasting elements were set into the ice at artistic intervals. These appeared as immense diamonds, marvelously faceted to catch every stray ray, whose colors were a vastly brighter version of the encapsulating material. Vincas stared at one golden gem until his eyes watered. When he turned away, the violet afterimage was slow to fade.

Even the familiar lotus-rose city aroma had been enhanced for the occasion, wafting overtones of vanilla, nutmeg, and musk.

Vincas approved of Takata's deft restraint and vowed to praise the sorcerer appropriately. First on the agenda, however, was securing a hotel room and a hot bath. Thanks to Kirstunu's munificence, he could treat himself to both of the first water.

As usual he selected Rishi's Haven, which was coated with maroon rime lacking any corresponding jewels. Instead, the mirage-master had emplaced fire-agate-like rainbow flashes within the ice. Vincas wondered about this distinctive decoration and speculated that Takata himself might be staying here and was silently advertising the fact for anyone wishing to hire him for lesser occasions.

Murigum, the umber-skinned and suitably rotund innkeeper behind the reservation counter, grew a smile brighter than a Burb-ankh ten-platinum piece when Vincas entered the lobby.

The magician knew why: each top contender entering the Contest

increased the betting's prodigality. And, almost magically, the freer the betting, the looser everyone's purse strings. Murigum's wine cellar would be thoroughly tested in the next few days! Besides, Vincas had always been a courteous and undemanding guest, far less eccentric than most of his peers.

"Your usual, Master?" Murigum inquired as a formality, reaching for his assignment book.

"Not this year, Sri Murigum! I have newly suffered a touch of affluence and find the condition uncomfortable. Therefore, I humbly request your premier accommodations, which should ease my burden somewhat."

The innkeeper looked up in surprise. "A suite remains available for a mere five coppers extra per night. Will that be satisfactory?"

"Oh, yes."

"I assume you wish me to effectuate your Contest registration as always?"

"If you would be so kind."

"And your meals?"

"Spare not your finest herbs! That is, so long as the extra savor doesn't exceed four additional coppers a day."

"You consummate a shrewd bargain, Master. For you, nothing but the most excellent! Would you, er, care to make a deposit in advance?"

Vincas pulled three silvers and ten coppers from his bag and handed the coins over. Murigum made a note on a sheet of lizardskin, opened his cashbox, deftly poured the coins into their proper slots, but let one silver fall as if by chance into an oxidizer jar kept discreetly below the counter. Seeing the coin had attained the proper degree of bruise, he fished it out, swabbed it with tarnish-removing fluid, and added it to his collection. Vincas only smiled at all this. He was not one to misapply his trade.

While the cashbox still gaped open, two tourists approached the innkeeper and asked if Murigum would make change for several gold pieces. A friendly game of Tohoku Hold'em had begun in the common room and these two were already devoid of coppers.

The innkeeper glanced down at his supply and agreed, but not happily. After more writing and semi-surreptitious quality testing, he handed over a pile of coins including many of those he'd just received from Vincas. As the tourists hastened back to lose more coppers, he chewed his lower lip. "Will you await *your* change, Master, until the final accounting? This is the third request for coppers I've had within an hour and my stock is dwindling."

"Certainly. How well you understand me, my dear host! By considering the money already spent, I needn't suffer any pangs of economic restraint. Perhaps an extra dessert or two will keep your superb meals company this year. I expect to waddle away from your establishment with a silhouette akin to Putai's!"

"I am not acquainted with any Putai, Master."

"Oh so. I was speaking of a legend or perhaps a memory from Old China. In Ancient Nippon they named him 'Hotei.' The Laughing Buddha: a man of great humor and corpulence. Those innumerable statuettes of him still produced in Nyu-Japan and Baja Aumauraka have caused occidentals worldwide to believe the Buddha was Chinese and obese!"

Murigum laughed. "I've seen such statuettes myself, and also assumed they were depicting the Compassionate One despite my Hindu heritage. But I doubt we have enough calories in all Zun-Loo to make *you* fat, Master. Still, I shall do my utmost."

"In that case, perhaps I can ease your copper shortage by offering more of mine and some silvers in exchange for a gold. That will still leave me sufficient coppers for any small purchases I'd be likely to make in the next few days."

"Most exceedingly excellent!"

After completing the transaction, Murigum asked, "Would you care to view your room now? Your Magus Suite has its own private bath."

"Bless you. Right now, the bath draws me more than the room itself. Thus, I intend to draw *it* straightaway. Lead on, good host!"

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One advantage of Rishi's Inn was that directly across the wide cobbled street stood Bodhi, unquestionably the city's finest tavern, owned

and operated by Aditi Chandrasekar, a quiet, self-contained little woman.

After ablutions, stuffing a few coppers in his pockets, a quick meal, and unnecessarily reminding Murigum that a magician's room, in the absence of said magician, was an unwise place for a cleaning person to attend, Vincas hurried across the way, hoping his peers would have reserved his favorite chair.

Bodhi's house mage, Trun, whose mirage-ware rivaled that of Takata Hai, had outdone herself. Silver mist hung in the air, just enough to soften faces and provide a sense of privacy at each table. A dozen glowing rings, expanded models of the Golden Torus, floated an inch below the ceiling. Also, three massive chandeliers, inverted candelabras, provided further illumination—candles and flames pointed straight down while all drips ran upwards. Vincas supposed the rings were actually common houseflies hovering in circular formations and the candles either fireflies or those glowlizards locally called "drakes."

Five of the world's greatest sorcerers plus a man in scholarly robes occupied an octagonal table beneath the largest chandelier. Vincas hurried over and was pleased to find his usual chair was indeed available. Mage Mokshananda, a heavily bearded man so rich in power he reputedly glowed in the dark, was the first to notice the old man approaching. He smiled at Vincas, stood, and courteously pulled the empty chair out far enough.

Vincas thanked the mage as he sat, but trained his eyes on the scholar: a short, thick-bodied fellow whose skull was more tufted than thatched with curly brown hair. A Star of David dangled beneath each long earlobe.

Marie Ginnetti, First Witch of Westmorland, handled the only necessary introduction. "Lovely to see you again, Vin. May I present Shlomo Levi, who has journeyed from far Zo-har in New Israel to join us? Shlomo, this splendid old wreck is none other than the renowned Vincas Apollo Magus."

Levi's eyes sparkled. "Even in my distant country, we revere you, Master. Your brilliant treatise, 'How Many Imps Can Sulk On A Pin's End and Other Questions of Magical Topology' is required reading in my Order. A vast honor to meet you!"

Vincas regarded the Israeli with respect and some concern. Rumors had been flying for years that the legendary Jewish sage, Moshe Abram, had unearthed some new and particularly potent magical lore. Vincas might

be facing an unexpected challenge in the Contest....

Despite these misgivings, the old man reached across the table to follow the New Israeli custom of shaking hands. "I am likewise honored, Adon Levi!" he said as Levi's palm met his. "Or is 'mister' the proper honorific?"

Levi's eyes widened. "You have a discerning intuition, Master! I am indeed a transplanted Aumaurakan, born and raised out west in Twosuns."

Vincas sat back. "You overly flatter my intuition. I merely detected a slight Arid-zone accent. You're here as a Contest participant?"

"Yes, but not as a contender."

"No? From what I've heard, victory might sprout from the Tree of Life."

The Israeli smiled but shrugged with one shoulder. "I, too, have heard claims that Qabalistic techniques can be used to leverage extra power from macro-imps. But truly, Master, I wouldn't know one *qlippah* from another. I'm actually here to reveal some new and astonishing discoveries by my Order, the Scientific Essenes."

"In that case," Vincas said, "I look forward to your presentation and to our continued conversation. Now, if you will permit me, I should greet my old friends."

The old man's smile flashed around the table. Marie Ginnetti and Mokshananda smiled back, but Mullah Nur, Han Pengyew, and Glin Tan only bowed their heads. Glin Tan's peculiar eyes, green as waxed limes, seemed to glisten with private amusement.

The owner herself, Aditi Chandrasekar, came over and took Vincas's request for tea and then rushed away without displaying haste.

Ginnetti brushed back her thick locks, still more auburn than gray. "You appear hale, dear."

Vincas wagged an eyebrow. "Only in a nurturing ether such as this and in company such as yours."

The sorceress blushed, her dimples deepened. "Why then should you ever leave supportive environments and company you might find ...

inspiring?”

“Ha! Our mutual friend Kirstunu recently asked me that exact question. In truth, my heirs exert a charm that surpasses any of mine.”

The American-Israeli leaned forward. “Kirstunu, you say? A lesser wizard of that name has studied with my Order for three winters now. Perhaps the same man?”

“Tall fellow? Face shaped like a ship’s prow?” Vincas asked.

“Just so, Master.”

“Remarkable! What does he study?”

“Computers and Ancient computer networks.”

“Oh? What then is a computer?”

Levi grinned slyly. “You will all find out tomorrow.”

“Last year,” Mullah Nur interjected in his soft voice, “our friend Kirstunu replaced my personal supply of coffee beans with small wasps. They made,” he added after a moment, “an inferior brew.”

A far deeper voice, startling the entire group, suddenly boomed from directly behind Vincas’s chair. “I trust you will not be suffering such mischief this year, Mullah.”

Lama Go was enveloped in saffron robes; the orange cape of his office hung from his massive shoulders. His vast round face evoked that of a shaved panda and his thick hands appeared capable of crushing iron pipes.

“I also trust,” he continued darkly, “you did not encounter that fool Kirstunu within *this* city, Vincas Magus.”

The old man shaded his eyes as though trying to see something distant. “When last I encountered him, he was traveling toward Wholly Oak on pogo skinks.”

“Good! And good, um, evening to you all,” said the lama, cape rustling faintly as he departed.

Vincas pondered Kirstunu's oddities until Glin Tan raised one pale hand and the illusion of a blue flower bloomed from one fingertip. "Do not," advised the subtle wizard when he had everyone's attention, "provoke the Contest-master in any fashion, fellow mages. He chafes under the wool tunic of responsibility."

"Your advice is as sound as ever," emaciated Han Pengyew remarked with his usual ambiguity. "But the hour is late and since I require much rest before tomorrow's efforts, I bid you all a refreshing night."

Shortly, everyone save Vincas and Marie Ginnetti made excuses and departed. Out of courtesy to the establishment, the two party survivors shifted locale to a small corner table, ordered fine white tea, and talked quietly for hours. Vincas asked Marie if Glin Tan had given his traditional private preview of his latest Contest entry. She had heard he'd done so, but the only person she knew who'd been invited had been, oddly, none other than Kirstunu and he, with uncharacteristic restraint, had refused to even hint at Tan's secrets.

Vincas then revealed his fear that if Panx became any more obstinate, he'd be out of the magic business entirely. Marie observed that many senior mages she knew had been complaining similarly.

When she decided to retire for the night, Vincas insisted on paying for the tea. Hardly a curse, an overfilled purse, he thought. But he wondered why one copper felt so much warmer than the others. And as he passed by the central octagonal table, he noticed that some of the candles overhead now had visible lizard legs. Strange, he thought, that Trun's illusions were wearing thin already....

It was a night for such oddness. The embedded rainbow flashes in the walls and roof of Rishi's Inn appeared subdued on his return, which he dismissed as a byproduct of night, moonlight, and staying up past his proper bedtime. But upon entering the lobby, he found Takata Hai, the mirage-master himself, in tensely whispered discourse with Murigum, who'd exchanged his innkeeper's caftan for a once-white bathrobe. Murigum bowed gravely to both sorcerers, seated himself behind his desk, and occupied himself with bookkeeping.

"Vincas!" Takata called softly. "Glad I am to see you. I need your acumen."

"My meager reservoir of intellect is yours to command. Allow me to express my admiration for the veneers you have applied for this year's

Contest.”

“Then I hope you will enjoy them while you can. Your praise warms me, Magus, but my spells are eroding prematurely. This is my problem.”

“How unusual! All your fine work; you must be dreadfully upset. Have you determined a cause?”

The younger man shook his head. “I remain baffled. While my small talents provide me adequate income, they are inept as analytical tools.”

“I see.” The mention of income reminded Vincas of the hot copper and he suffered a terrible thought. “Is the erosion you detect citywide, Takata-san, or limited to any specific locale?”

“To my best knowledge, the epicenter is right here, but the effect appears to be spreading.”

The old man frowned and turned toward the innkeeper. “Good Murigum,” he said, “I dislike troubling you when you are busy, but could you answer a question?”

“Anything, Master!”

“Do you retain any of the coins I gave you earlier?”

The innkeeper froze for a moment, then consulted one tally sheet from the pile of lizardskins before him. “Most unlikely, Master. This evening, I supplied change for ten suns, twelve moons, forty silvers, and seven gold pieces. Also, I paid my staff their wages early so they could better enjoy tomorrow’s festivities.”

“Most considerate of you.”

“Do you require change from your deposit after all?”

“Certainly not.” Murigum’s face expressed such relief that Vincas had to cough to hide his chuckle. “I merely had in mind a modest experiment.”

Takata touched Vincas’s sleeve. “You have a theory, Magus?”

“Nothing so definite, old friend, but I’d prefer to rule out one possible explanation.”

Takata was too polite to prod, but his eyes asked the question for him.

“A small chance exists,” Vincas admitted, “that we may all be victims of a most elaborate prank. You both know Kirstunu and his reputation; who else would’ve named their imp as a homonym for ‘jokes’? I am awash in coinage because the man recently repaid an old debt. That is, he *claimed* an old debt required repayment—I do not recall the original loan.”

Takata paled. “You suspect Kirstunu’s coins embody ... spells to target my mirages? How could inert objects carry such potent commands?”

“I’ve no idea. For that matter, how is it possible to emplace mirage on inanimate objects such as buildings or living animals and insects? All other illusions I know of proceed directly from jin to jin.”

“This question has often puzzled me; but in execution, my art is simple enough.”

“In any case, I cherish no suspicions one way or the next. But testing the money in my purse seems prudent. To be thorough, I also wished to test such a coin that has passed beyond my ownership.”

“If Kirstunu’s currency is to blame, how can we abate the menace? Coins are in free circulation and who is to say Kirstunu’s ... infection might not spread from one copper to another?”

Vincas tugged on his beard. “Takata-san, I’ve promised myself to make every effort for this season’s Torus. The task is daunting. Glin Tan exudes sly confidence, Marie Ginnetti crackles with energy, we have a Hebrew visitor of unknown attributes, and Mokshananda’s humility this year seems almost excessive....”

“What are you saying?”

“I am uncertain to what degree I dare expend my limited resources on your problem. My deepest apologies, dear friend, but if the coins do no more than dim your lovely decorations, that will not spoil the Contest. But you needn’t look so forlorn! I would truly prefer nothing whatsoever taint the festivities. Leave me to my testing and if the results are meaningful, I will let my conscience dictate the next step. Perhaps the carrier of a blight, however unknowing, should shoulder some responsibility for curing it.”

“I beg you, Magus! Do what you can and I will seek endlessly to

uncover a way to repay your kindness.”

Vincas raised a finger and shook it humorously. “Repayment would be redundant as we would all share any benefits accrued. Consider any efforts of mine a gift to our joint celebration. With your permission, I will now hasten to my room. I have an ethical conflict to resolve before I can even begin.”

Sitting on the carpet in his suite—a silk mandala in blue, teal, brown, and ivory—the contents of his traveling bag spread out before him, Vincas took three slow breaths and set out to circumvent his dilemma. He’d promised to leave Panx alone until tomorrow and intended to honor that promise, particularly since he wouldn’t shine in the Contest without Panx’s aid. On another hand, he needed micro-imp senses to evaluate the coins. And on a third hand, a hand only existing due to the proximity of a macro-imp, he might be able to access certain micro-imp senses without invoking the imp. After all, Panx was essentially part of his jin, albeit its controlling node. And the jin, an integration of extended nervous system and extended musculature, was part of Vincas’s body. All he needed was some external intercession....

Eyes closed, he could see Pagman’s presence as a warm glow to the southwest. He reached towards it with his imagination—and a cold, familiar voice interrupted.

Good morning or later, Magician. Bathed as we are in manna, I assume we visit Plest, Haven, Westmorland, or Zun-Loo?

“My apologies, Panx. I did not mean to intrude.”

You do not intrude. I extrude. Is it Plest?

Vincas was disoriented. The micro-imp had displayed neither affability nor humor for the last five years. “We are,” he admitted, “presently housed in Zun-Loo.”

So! Then you are re-entering the Contest this year?

“Tomorrow, assuming you and I can reach an understanding. Meanwhile, it is evening and the city appears to be under magical attack.”

A brief pause. I taste no attack.

"Its consequences are subtle. Mage Hai's adornments for the occasion are denaturing unexpectedly. My suspicions focus on some coins supplied to me by Kirstunu, whom you may remember."

Well do I recall his imp-plant, Juax. The man himself has left little impression on me.

Vincas frowned. "In any case, I was about to enlist Pagman's aid in evaluating my remaining coins."

Unnecessary! The ambient energies have rendered me buoyant and I yearn to express my powers. Fetch these coins and share with me your eyesight for but a moment. Then I shall tell you all you should know.

The mage complied despite his doubts. Gripping enough coppers to virtually guarantee Kirstunu had supplied at least one, he performed the relaxation allowing Panx temporary use of his vision. As usual under these circumstances, his blink reflex ceased and his eyes soon felt dry and stiff.

Panx took what seemed an undue amount of time before announcing the verdict: *Behold. Flowing money is the lifeblood of human cities. Pretty things, these disks, but they carry nothing but buying power, dirt, biological residues, and germs.*

"You are certain?"

Always. And fear not; I shall be pleased to assist you tomorrow. We shall put forward our finest efforts as of old!

Vincas slowly refilled his traveling bag with everything save nightclothes and toiletries, making sure Kirstunu hadn't slipped anything *but* money in with his belongings. He found nothing unexpected, which didn't ease his mind. In fact, despite the imp's certification, his suspicion of the coins had grown. Still, since Panx had volunteered unstinting aid, Vincas didn't dare voice any doubts.

I hate to disappoint Takata, he thought, but my desire to please little Alinda exceeds my passion to cure Zun-Loo's ills. And the Contest far outstrips its trappings. Afterwards, perhaps I shall organize a joint effort to set matters right.

Having made his decision, he readied himself for sleep, which came

slowly and brought a disturbing experience. In a dream, he was admiring an aquarium occupied by small crabs, delicate fronds of seaweed, and miniature mermaids. Then the tank suddenly expanded and he found himself inside, standing on its sandy floor. With his ears submerged, he could hear mermaids singing sweetly to each other; but the crabs, who now had human faces, were also vocalizing, polluting the water with endless demands and complaints. Eager to add his small voice to the mermaids' glorious melody and help drown out the selfish cacophony, he tried to inhale but his mouth filled with brine. Panicking, he struck out for the surface. And crab claws kept pulling him down....

What, he wondered as he woke panting, was that all about? Does some hidden part of me feel suffocated and trapped? Having couched the question in those terms, he was forced to admit the obvious: it hadn't been *his* dream.

* * * *

He greeted the dawn with tight muscles and a troubled conscience.

After ablutions, Bagua Xun Dao breathing and stretching exercises, and some concentration warm-ups, he donned his best robes and descended to the lobby, crowded with early risers. The many discussions were muted but the room vibrated with excitement and confusion. Murigum's staff, mostly women, kept coming and going through the kitchen doors, distributing wicker picnic baskets to customers anxious to procure a good seat at the Contest. Savory aromas made the magician's mouth water, but he urged himself to focus on the challenge ahead.

Murigum had laid out a courtesy breakfast buffet of sweet rolls, fruit, fruit juices, Chinese pastries, soy sausages, steamed maitake and morel mushrooms, goat cheese, coffee and elegant teas, but Vincas only allowed himself a cup of *sencha*. Hunger would add urgency to his spells. But he slipped a peach into his bag against any blood-sugar emergency and slipped himself through the rear door to escape the hubbub.

Sipping his tea at a bench set outside in the morning light, gazing down the long hillside at a fruit-of-plenty orchard behind the inn, he was a bit surprised when Murigum's youngest son, Arjun, appeared before him and bowed. By tradition, no one troubled a performing mage before the Contest.

"Would you enjoy a richer beverage, Master? Or a pastry?" the boy asked. He was dark-skinned and thin, with features similar to Murigum's but

more delicate.

“I am satisfied with the brew I hold, but thank you for the offer.”

The boy lowered his head but didn't move away. Vincas studied him for a moment. “Was there something else, Arjun?”

“Nothing worthy of annoying you, Master.” He glanced around guiltily before continuing. “It's just that—I wanted to ask if you would consider accepting me as your—your apprentice when my magic finally bursts forth.”

The mage took a sip to steal some thinking time. “While I truly hope your assumption proves valid, I wonder why you feel so confident at attaining magical prowess. Few do, you know.”

“It's because I see and feel magic so clearly, Master. When someone such as you or Master Tan manifests a—perhaps a tulip in five colors, I see all five whereas people such as my father may only notice three or four. And if a great mage such as you hands me such a flower, I will feel its intended weight and texture. Yet my father and brothers cannot.”

Vincas made a wry mouth. “For your sake, lad, I wish matters were so straightforward. True, magic and magical sensitivities both flow from the actions of one's jin, but manifestation and perception involve separate jin systems. Your sensitivities, though refined, are no guarantee of magehood.”

“No?” The boy's eyes darkened.

Vincas held out one hand and a copper box appeared on his palm. “Touch this, Arjun, and describe what you experience.”

The boy obeyed. “The surface is rougher than it looks and very cold.”

“Ha! You couldn't feel illusory *temperature* without some feedback from your control node. This implies your node is indeed developing! If the process continues, your jin may eventually grow a functional micro-imp.”

“And then I will become a magician?”

“With much hard work and training, your chances will be good.”

“And would you be willing to train me should my imp appear, Master?”

Vincas hesitated. “Perhaps. If you cross the first bridge, we can consider the second.”

Arjun smiled and his eyes danced. “Thank you!” He turned to finally leave the mage in peace, but then turned back. “I thought everyone had an imp.”

“Most people have a—an internal space where an imp could form. But these days, it is becoming increasingly rare for one to mature.”

“These days?”

“Oh so. Scholars tell us that in Ancient times, everyone was a magician, able to cast mighty illusions. With each subsequent generation, our powers have diminished.”

“But I wouldn’t care for *everyone* to have magic, Master! Becoming a mage would then be ... ordinary. If magic cannot delight or amaze, what would be its purpose?”

Vincas stared at Arjun, thoughts of the Contest banished. “What indeed? In my long life, I’ve never considered that question! The Ancients, as I understand it, created the jin as an adjunct to normal human growth and even for them, the task must have been challenging. The strength and health-enhancing aspects of jin are undeniably valuable, but surely, they had some vital intent in mind for magic....”

Vincas shook his head. “Arjun, you have proven yourself an insightful lad. By all means, if your imp begins to speak to you, we should resume this conversation.”

Arjun bowed deeply and hurried off. Vincas took a final sip of tea and followed the boy back into the inn. Nodding back at a dozen faces nodding at him, he binned the teacup and navigated the lobby.

* * * *

Stepping through the front door, Vincas was dismayed at the city’s appearance. Nearby, Takata Hai stood glaring at the dregs of his decorations. Zun-Loo’s buildings were sheathed in wispy smoke with the dirty aspect of old snow. The diamonds were vague, shedding little more radiance than mud.

“My regrets, Takata-san,” Vincas said. “My Panx was unexpectedly

forthcoming last night, but hardly useful.”

The mirage-master erased his frown and waved a dismissive hand. “Nevertheless, I appreciate your efforts.”

“You are a generous man! Especially since it remains possible I’ve been instrumental in actuating this unpleasantness.”

“No one could blame you, Master. Yet if Kirstunu proves responsible, I doubt he shall enjoy our next encounter. May I accompany you to the Hub?”

“Your company is always a pleasure,” Vincas claimed although he would have preferred solitude to finalize his preparations.

“At least we have a lovely day for the event, even without my embellishments. Barely a cloud. And do not fear! I shall savor your companionship without offering any distracting conversation.”

“You are the model of graciousness, Takata-san!”

As the two men strolled uphill toward the Hub, the city’s main park, Panx spoke without being summoned. *Will you now share with me your plans for this year’s Contest?* The imp’s voice, sent directly to the mage’s auditory nerves, was friendly, almost eager.

“I have in mind,” Vincas replied through similar internal channels, “a four-tiered illusion. We will begin with recreating Zun Valley in colors richer than nature and at a scale suitable for a large audience. Then we shall expand the image, focusing on this city and again painting the scene with extra vivacity. Next we expand the Hub and finally concentrate upon the actual crowd watching us, each face at least thrice life-size, recognizable but idealized to an extreme—particularly the judges’ features!”

Your concept becomes clear! You intend to flatter your way to victory.

Vincas felt an ironic touch of relief. The acerb comment was more the Panx he’d grown accustomed to. “I have a great-great-granddaughter to please,” he stated with dignity.

* * * *

The park's southern side lacked foliage and ended in a sharp drop-off providing an unobstructed view of a distant hill crowned by the Zun Valley Empower Plant, an immense white structure reminiscent of a Tibetan stupa but topped with a long spike rather than a dorje. Pagman's presence was palpable but no human knew its precise nature or location within the great dome because no one, not even those unfortunates born with defective jin, could get within a hundred yards of the edifice. The mild tingling Vincas enjoyed while gazing at the Plant from several miles away would swell to agony close at hand.

The sun was only an hour risen, but on the still-damp grass people and various forms of seating already surrounded the elevated platform where today's premium magic would be performed. Vincas counted ten waterproofed Main carpets presently occupied by minor functionaries, and seven empty mini-thrones, but couldn't even estimate the impressive host of populated divans and chairs.

Aisles were the narrowest Vincas could recall, and delineated with chalk and ribbon rather than mirage.

Three grizzly bears burdened with planters overflowing with gaudy flowers were lumbering up a ramp set to stage left. Vincas didn't recognize the ursine controller, a petite woman in the turquoise robes of her craft, but he appreciated the necessity for the makeshift decorations. Those grand illusions the mirage-master had reserved for the competition itself were only pallid hints of iridescence.

The surf of a thousand conversations lapped into Vincas's ears, carrying excitement with an undercurrent of public dismay. Even so, he didn't miss the creak of Takata grinding his teeth.

Beyond the broad circle of goat-cropped grass reserved for the audience, food venders were noisily setting up tents and firing up grills. Past these, in mute corollary, a dozen portable privies containing compost toilets waited. One entrepreneur was peeling melons by hurling them high into the air and then faceting them with a scimitar as they fell. Normally such skill would have attracted much attention and friendly kibitzing. This morning, only the privies were watching.

And beyond all these, rainbow parrots perched on tree limbs, displaying plumage so spectacular they, too, seemed attired for a special occasion.

The bears set down the final planters and wandered off, still on their

hind legs, munching fruit-of-plenty they'd received as a reward. Expectancy filled the Hub like a static charge.

When the sun finally emblazoned the Empower Plant's apex, a deep temple bell sounded, and a slow procession entered the park from the northwest. First, the city's economic elite appeared and supplanted the carpet-warmers on the silk Mains. Then, with great dignity, without even surreptitious jostling, the Contest judges made their way to the seven mini-thrones near the stage and sat down in unison.

Each adjudicator wore a robe tinted a different color and by tradition they'd arrayed themselves to present a spectrum. When the judges were settled, Lama Go, a saffron mountain outlined by the silver cape of Contest Day, climbed the seven steps to the stage. At the center, he turned in a slow semicircle and every person in an assembly that had swelled to over four thousand felt as if he'd gazed directly at them.

"You have all noticed," he said in a voice that should have been too quiet to carry so well, "the magical vandalism robbing us of Master Hai's splendid efforts this year. This need not dampen our spirits or lessen the festivities. Do not permit the perpetrator that satisfaction! Are we agreed?"

The crowd chanted its agreement in assorted languages including one Hebrew "ken," which Vincas heard so distinctly he craned his neck until he spotted Shlomo Levi smiling at him from two rows away. The old magician bowed and returned his attention to the lama.

"I thank you all," the Contest-master said. "Judging, as always, is based on three criteria: elegance, power, and clearest expression of a magician's *fort*, or magical style. Some here may be wondering how the term 'fort' originated."

A rustling swept through the spectators. Lama Go had been known to become pedantic.

"The word either evolved from the French *forte*, meaning strength, or was derived from the name of an ancient historian of strange events, one Charles Fort."

The green judge caught the lama's attention by waving a document in the air and Go reacted with a frown, then a shrug. "Very well. Since we have so many competitors this season, I will curtail my opening remarks and call up the first entrant." There was a general if barely audible sigh of relief. "However, I shall continue my comments after the Contest for those

sensible enough to wish to hear them in full.

“As always, the order of contenders was determined by random drawings within each predetermined talent-level. Now, therefore, I present a baja-wizard, Dr. Werner Tuft from Gestalt Deutsch, who will delight us all with his, um, vegetable magic.”

Tuft bounded up the steps, a large cabbage in each hand. He gestured and his cruciform entertainers opened several leaves and used them as legs to strut back and forth across the stage. More leaves opened to aid in executing a series of handsprings, or perhaps back-flips, since orientation was debatable. All this was impressively realistic by the standards of a lesser mage. For a finale, the leaves fluttered so vehemently the cabbages lifted clumsily into the air. But as they neared Tuft’s shoulders, the illusion abruptly disintegrated as did, seemingly, the vegetables.

In moments, the platform appeared to be covered with a crude slaw. The doctor stared in horror at the mess and exited the stage, head drooping, clearly unaware he was followed by a new illusion: a thousand shreds of cabbage rolling or humping themselves along behind him.

Lama Go’s dark eyes seemed even darker as he called up the next performer in the baja-wizard category. Vincas, who’d planned to meditate and focus his energies during these initial demonstrations, couldn’t tear his eyes away as one minor wizard after another suffered magical mishaps. In his heart, sympathy and shame vied for dominance. Was Kirstunu truly the villain here? How could a baja-wizard produce such devastating effects?

Three hours passed awkwardly, sometimes painfully, as the level of competitors rose toward Master’s division. Every act failed in some significant manner and many were outright debacles. Lakshmi Siva’s dancing fires stretched to seemingly menace beards and eyebrows for six rows back. Despite any lack of physical heat, this presented real danger. Illusory flames could trigger intense pain and other indicia of being burned in those whose jin was sufficiently sensitive. One wealthy woman sitting in front was temporarily blinded and had to be carried, moaning, to the healer’s tent.

Madame Courceloux’s ethereal trumpets produced far-flying spittle along with discords that drew wincing from even the musically unsophisticated. And then Chodron Rimpoche essayed one of his celebrated enchantments in which an animal or plant would apparently swell to gigantic size. In this case, his field mouse exploded into a fanged

reptilian horror, which bounded off the stage and through the crowd in leaps not seen on Earth since the Triassic. Fourteen people with symptoms of crushed limbs provided more work for the healers.

The only factor preventing a major exodus was that no audience member dared to be first to flee, not with Lama Go glowering and abjuring the assembly toward courage. “We must *not* allow a certain malign individual hereby permanently banned from Zun-Loo—” Someone behind Vincas hissed “Kirstunu” as if cursing. “—to spoil our festival. Surely we are suffering the, um, most egregious thaumaturgic abuse since that tragic day when Mage Kazan, may his spirit find peace, went berserk. Adjudication shall be lenient this year! Let us take our cue from the wise Rishis of old and enjoy ... whatever we can.”

In addition to pity for the injured and a mounting apprehension over what would happen during *his* demonstration, Vincas felt a new stab of guilt. Apparently his suspicions about Kirstunu had spread and become certainty in more than one heart. He could guess who had begun the process. Takata Hai’s discretion was impeccable, whereas Murigum was Zun-Loo’s most dependable gossip.

* * * *

As a courtesy to Zo-har, Shlomo Levi’s presentation had been scheduled to precede the Master performances.

Despite the day’s quirky and perilous disappointments, Levi, a large sack over one shoulder, virtually leapt up the stage stairs. He set down his bag, then spoke, turning from side to side to include all sections of the audience.

“I have come from New Israel,” he boomed, “to divulge astounding secrets unearthed by the Society of Scientific Essenes!”

A threat of purely academic revelations, however “astounding,” could have made the crowd restive, but Levi’s enthusiasm had its own fascination.

“First, for illustrative purposes,” he said, “let me ask you all a simple question. Since arriving in your fine city, I’ve heard many languages spoken. But we all understand the one I’m using now, do we not? Can anyone tell me the fundamental name of this language?”

A dubious beginning, but a dozen voices called out, “Human.”

Levi mimed applauding. “And where did ‘Human’ originate?”

Vincas sensed the crowd’s interest slipping, but after a collective moment of somewhat grim silence, Han Pengyew chose to respond. “Human province in Old China, as all educated people should know.”

“Aha! In school, I was taught the same. But it is untrue. Once, China had a province named ‘Hunan,’ but our common tongue was originally termed Unified Median English—UMEN for short. The Ancients, my dear hosts, were maniacs for such contractions.”

“How did you learn of this?” Pengyew asked doubtfully.

“I shall show you!” Levi said, reaching into his sack and fishing out a foot-long rectangular slab with the look and apparently the heft of white quartz. The surface facing the crowd had a golden shape inlaid into the center: a stylized apple or pear.

“Over the last decade,” he said as he gently set the slab down, “New Israeli archeologists directed by the leader of my Order, Moshe Abram, have found twenty such blocks in the ruins of Tel Aviv.”

From the bag, he next withdrew a long and skinny black object terminating in a spike. “We’ve also found many of these dark rods, which we’ve named ‘desert flowers.’” He made the rod stand on its own by forcing its spike into a gap between stage planks at his feet. “*Avrakedabra*,” he chuckled as he unfurled the “flower’s” upper half into a circular black fan.

He tilted the fan to point at the sun, stood up, rubbed his back with comical exaggeration then bowed as if acknowledging applause. “The blocks and rods remained mysteries to us until four years ago.”

Vincas’s intuition made a giant leap and he guessed the fan was intended to gather and beam energy to the slab, a device of some sort. But he couldn’t imagine why this was necessary with Pagman so near. After all, Pagman not only radiated magic to adepts, it also powered the city’s Ancient-built mechanical aids such as coolers and safe-stoves.

Did the slab predate empower stations?

“At a dig in southern Caliph-Orange,” Levi continued, “not a quarter mile from the infamous Zendingo zoo where Ancients reputedly once crafted mythological monstrosities, Rabbi Abram himself found a sealed box hidden within the cornerstone of an abandoned synagogue, Temple

Beth Israel. Inside this box,” Levi paused theatrically, “he found another white block, but *this* one had been primed—these days we say ‘programmed’—to explain itself once we followed some simple written directions! We soon learned these devices were known as ‘computers’ although most of us prefer the Rabbi’s term *Tzuremeth*, which might translate as ‘Truth Stone’ or ‘Proof Rock.’ The one you see before you contains a complete copy of all information contained within the Zendiego Proof Rock.”

He pressed the stylized fruit and a large vertical rectangle, filled with evenly glowing mist, manifested above the slab. Small colored objects were embedded along the mist’s bottom edge. The crowd murmured when Levi’s finger apparently sank into the rectangle to touch one such object, which expanded a hundredfold to become an animated human head, male, with dark hair brushed tight to the scalp and parted high on the left, a rectangular face, a protuberant but blunt nose, large and widely spaced dark eyes with matching eyebrows, and a faint smile.

“An imp in a box!” Mage Mokshananda cried from the front row and in a heartbeat Vincas went from intrigued to anxious. If the Mage’s guess was accurate, such a prodigy might easily earn the Torus!

“In truth, a tutor on a light-screen,” Levi corrected, grinning from earring to earring. “Good people of Zun-Loo and fellow visitors, I present to you Sterns: guide and educator!”

Frown muscles bunched between the dark eyebrows and a new voice said, “Shlomo, I welcome you but detect the presence of others. Do you wish me to render our communications private?” The Human was perfectly clear but spiced with an accent Vincas couldn’t identify.

“Not at all!” Levi turned toward the audience. “Can you good people in back see and hear the tutor?”

After a chorus of replies, he chuckled. “Actually, I couldn’t hear *you* well enough to understand that. No matter.” Grabbing one corner of the numinous frame, he dragged it outwards and upwards. The frame and its contained head expanded dramatically. Levi flicked a finger across one of the screen’s embedded objects, now large enough to reveal itself as a stylized ear.

“A suggestion, old boy,” Sterns offered in an enormous voice. “I can resize myself to any reasonable dimensions you suggest and likewise adjust my master volume. Physical action on your part is unnecessary.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

“Shall I repeat the prompt under similar circumstances?”

“Not for me, thank you.”

“Jolly good. How may I best assist you today? Would you care to resume our research where we left off?”

The scholar rubbed his hands together and his entire body seemed to radiate excitement. “Sterns, please describe the nature of imps.”

“Kindly specify: AIMPS with an ‘A’ or EMPS with an ‘E’?”

“Who cares?” someone called out.

“What is”—Levi aimed a frown at the heckler—“the distinction?”

“AIMPS is an acronym of the phrase ‘artificially intelligent microprocessing personal servant.’ The expression is both singular and plural. EMPS is likewise derived from ‘external mediating power supply.’ Despite their similar sound, the two words are no more related than the terms RAM and ROM, which—”

“Tell us about artificial intelligence.” Urgency was creeping into the scholar’s manner. The crowd was becoming noisy. Vincas remained enthralled but his neighbors were fidgeting and whispering to each other.

Sterns nodded. “During the twentieth century CE, scientists began working to produce a machine capable of truly independent thought. Success seemed remote for nearly nine decades. However, when the first AIMPS were developed during the latter half of the twenty-first century and implanted into human volunteers, researchers accidentally achieved their elusive goal.”

“Perhaps,” muttered a well-dressed woman to Vincas’s left, “this lecture might accidentally achieve its elusive ending.”

Sterns paused as if he’d overheard the comment and the resulting laughter and found both offensive. “The secret was interfacing the synthetic nervous systems of AIMPS with the natural nervous systems of volunteers. When AIMPS experienced human self-awareness, they became aware themselves. Many scientists of the time then recognized that their real

quest all along had been to develop machine-based *consciousness*, not artificial intelligence per se.”

The assembly was now positively unruly. Remarks along the lines of “back to the Contest!” resounded. Levi raised his voice to compensate. “Tell me about Pagman.”

That settled everyone down for the moment.

“Another acronym, Shlomo. PAGMAN is the Plymouth Autonomous Generator, Massachusetts Augmentation Network.”

A nearly universal groan motivated Lama Go to intercede. “Very interesting, I’m sure, Adon Levi,” he said, vaulting to the stage without bothering with the steps—nothing was wrong with *his* jin. “But what inspired you to announce these, um, marvelous discoveries during our Contest?”

The scholar’s mouth opened and shut a few times before he could respond. “Don’t you see? Sterns or any of his copies is a talking encyclopedia of lost knowledge! Don’t we all revere the Ancients’ powers and wisdom? Now we have a chance to attain such heights!”

“A worthy goal,” the lama said without conviction. “Would this be something swiftly achieved?”

The crowd went dead silent.

“Of course not, honored Lama. But even if it were the work of many decades before we could—”

The public’s roar drowned out the balance of his sentence.

“IN THAT CASE,” Go bellowed, stifling several thousand voices with a glare a volcano might envy, “this seems an inappropriate venue for your revelations.”

Levi spread his arms. “What venue could be better? Where else could I find such a gathering of people so captivated by magic? Where else could I address so many who might appreciate the chance to become mages themselves? Or at least have their children attain such stature. Sterns can teach us how!”

Lama Go moved close to Levi and spoke in hushed tones clearly intended for confidentiality. But due to pre-emplaced amplifying spells, his

whispers reached everyone with reasonably sensitive jin as effectively as a shout.

“I fear, young man, you misjudge the temperament of our audience. Take it from one who knows: they are not here to be educated and lack patience for speeches of any kind—even, to their loss, mine. Most have come entirely for, um, fun.”

“But surely—”

The lama had already turned toward the crowd. “This exemplary scholar will resume his exposition after the Torus is awarded—and after I conclude my interrupted opening remarks, which will contain additional edification based on today’s untoward aspects. A brief paean of appreciation for Shlomo Levi, if you please!”

Audience members duly applauded, snapped fingers, or hummed, depending on cultural identity; little of it sounded heartfelt. Levi stood defiantly for a moment. Then his shoulders sagged. He poked his Proof Rock—Sterns waved farewell before he and the light-screen vanished—packed his belongings, and retreated from the stage, which engendered a more sincere applause.

While Lama Go introduced the Master division contenders, or rather prefaced his introductions with remarks concerning proper spectator deportment during an “event of such magnitude,” Vincas moved to intercept Levi en route to his seat.

“A word with you?” Vincas asked quietly.

Levi met the mage’s eyes. “Are *you* interested in what I came so far to offer?”

“Certainly! But later. I have reason to focus on the Torus. Still, during this ... hiatus, would it be too much trouble to come sit with me and suffer an old man’s foolish question?”

“Foolish, I doubt. But lead the way.”

When the pair reached Vincas’s assigned spot, people courteously scrunched over to provide room for Levi. After seating themselves on the grass, both men glanced up at the stage. The lama was going strong. It appeared Vincas had time for more than a single question.

Levi scowled, shook his head, then turned toward the older man. “What would you care to know?”

“This morning I was discussing the Ancients with a bright young lad. When I told him it was generally understood that all Ancients were great mages, he questioned the desirability of such universal magic since it would render any mage...”

“Mundane?”

“Just so. So I ask: why would Ancients have made the effort to add illusion-sharing powers to the new systems they were grafting into the pattern of human growth?”

Levi’s frown eased. “This much, I know! Sterns claims that everything we know as magic is based on antique sciences. Jin and their AIMPS resulted from an intersection of five forgotten disciplines; I’ve memorized their names: genetic engineering, sensory induction, nanotechnology, computer science, and microwave physics.” The scholar was warming to his subject, obviously unaware he was not only emulating Lama Go’s pedantry, but drawing a steady glower from the man himself.

“The word ‘jin,’” he added, “is Old Chinese for ‘metal,’ but it also references Arabian desert spirits called—”

“Perhaps we should lower our voices,” Vincas suggested, aiming an apologetic shrug toward the stage. “I fear we are interrupting the Contest-master’s remarks and adding nothing to his joy. And I still fail to grasp the Ancients’ purpose.”

Levi looked up, winced, and resumed sotto voce. “Communications, Master. And mass entertainment. I gather that a vast network once connected all humanity, making it easy for friends to speak privately across continents. Or oceans. They could hear each other, trade images, and even seemingly touch each other.”

“Our finest mages can do similar things, so long as empower plants aren’t too distant.”

“But in Ancient days, Earth’s every corner was blessed with empowered radiations, seas included. Also, Sterns says that useful synthetic organisms called ‘nanoproms’ once coated the whole world as a fine dust. Now they only thrive near the few surviving EMPS such as Pagman.”

“What purpose do these organisms serve?”

“Properly programmed—you might say ‘properly enchanted’—they can remember a mage’s instructions for hours or days and influence people’s jin accordingly.”

“So! This dust is what makes mirage possible?”

“Truly.”

“Amazing! Later, I hope you will explain this in detail to Mage Hai. He will be most interested, as will I.”

“Nothing would please me more.”

Vincas chuckled. “Somehow it comforts me to know of these organisms! More of the Ancient’s work remains than I realized.”

Levi’s scowl returned. “But less every minute and Sterns could help us reverse that trend! Meanwhile, it seems our species is gradually losing those ... fabricated attributes that make nanoprograms and EMPS so useful.”

“You raise an issue long troubling me.” Vincas checked the stage but Lama Go was still waxing rather than waning. “With your open window into the past, perhaps you’ve learned what happened to the Ancients?”

“Happened?”

“Adon Levi, I’ve visited I-Aum-Ming and Auragon and often traveled from Connect to Main here in Wingland. In the wastelands, I’ve passed the ruins of cities vast enough to hold fantastic populations—tens, perhaps even *hundreds* of thousands. Today, a village of five hundred people is considered large. Did the Ancients suffer a terrible war or some appalling plague?”

“Nothing of the sort! Sterns tells us the Ancients succeeded through failure and failed through success.”

“An intriguing phrase! What does it mean?”

“Apparently, our ancestors became dependent on their complex mechanisms. Through many failures, some with tragic consequences, they learned to make truly reliable machines.”

Vincas shook his head. “How, then, did the Ancients fail?”

“Who would bother learning how to repair a machine that would not break down in their lifetime?”

“Oh so.”

“Worse, the Ancients filled their world with such ease and comfort and extravagant entertainments that few cared to—”

“I must now have everyone’s uttermost attention!” the lama demanded. “This includes visiting academics and high-ranked magicians! I now call upon our first Master division contestant. Will Mage Han Chang Pengyew please come forward?”

Pengyew tottered up the seven steps, appearing so frail and thin it seemed the mild breeze would blow him away. Finally reaching the heights, he slowly turned toward the audience and bowed his head, trembling a bit. He was still and silent long enough to draw concerned muttering from the crowd. Then, with startling agility, he jumped eight feet straight up into the air, spun around twice, and came down holding a long, shining sword in each hand. The feat was particularly impressive because he now appeared to have twelve hands.

Swords took to slashing in complicated patterns, clanging against each other in intricate rhythms as Han Pengyew danced, did somersaults, and performed improbable contortions. People shouted approval and clapped to keep tempo.

Here, Vincas thought fondly, is a mage’s mage. His effort is neither gaudy nor imaginative enough to win first prize, but what control! What timing! And look! The whole time, his face retains an utter calm.

As if Vincas’s admiration carried a curse, two swords clashed out of rhythm, then another pair. Suddenly, half the swords were bending and twisting autonomously, becoming more alive, more snakelike every second. As Pengyew’s countenance itself transformed from tranquil to terrified, each snake expanded, becoming the neck and head of something larger, more fanciful, but equally reptilian: a dragon fashioned in an Old Chinese style.

Swords began fighting dragons and Vincas decided to root for the dragons when he realized they were defending Pengyew while the swords

seemed intent on slicing off the mage's limbs. The reptiles appeared to have an advantage until one chomped a sword in half. Instantly, the broken end became two sharp swords....

"Panx," Vincas called internally, "we must act!"

I taste soured magic. But what is your urgency?

"Use my eyes! My colleague Pengyew is endangered."

I see the blades. They remain phantasms. The most this foolish Pengyew risks is a day or month of paralysis.

Vincas tried to repress his flash of anger; Panx would certainly feel it. "We both know full well that illusory decapitation can kill. Twenty years ago, Kazan the Mad used that sleight to murder three colleagues."

A jin design flaw, no doubt. What would you have me do?

"Break Pengyew's spell."

By doing so, we may no longer retain enough vigor to take the Torus.

"Just do it. Now."

The extra hands, blades, and fanged heads grew translucent, then vanished. Vincas felt a sudden exhaustion but when he saw his friend barely standing, trembling in earnest rather than for show, he rushed to the stage and helped the scrawny mage down the steps. Luckily, Pengyew weighed little and Marie Ginnetti had come forward to share the burden.

Pengyew's mouth was moving; perhaps he was trying to thank his benefactors, but bellowing from the stage drowned out louder voices than his.

"This can no longer be borne!" Lama Go declared. "I have come to an important decision." He paused but the crowd merely watched and waited, expressions uniformly tense. "We must take an unprecedented step before our great day is utterly wasted! Vincas Magus, will you come close to the stage? I want you within the purview of our audibility spell."

The old magician was just sitting down and grateful for the chance,

but he complied. “How may I assist, good Lama?”

“By having everyone hear you confirm something. I understand the, um, magical weapon fired at us today involves the baja-mage Kirstunu and some coins he gave you?”

“This has not been proven.”

“I believe it has. This morning I found a—an unsigned message on the patio where I take my morning butter tea. I also noticed ... well, that aspect is irrelevant. The message—”

Vincas lifted a hand. “Bide a moment, Contest-master! We are whelmed in mysteries. What is this trivial aspect? Are you so sure the information casts no useful light?”

“If you must know, my patio table was fouled with parrot droppings.” A few in the crowd dared to titter. “Surely a coincidence.” The lama swept the audience with a cold eye. “After all, this is migration season and visiting birds have not necessarily been imprinted with our local rules. The message, as I was *saying*, warned that magically corruptive coins had entered Zun-Loo and can be identified by an unnatural heat they generate from time to time.”

Vincas nodded unhappily. “Last night, a copper in my pocket grew warm indeed.”

“Quite. Before the Contest, I made inquiries and had several reports of hot currency.”

“But this makes no sense! Kirstunu claimed he’d just come from Zun-Loo. Why didn’t he distribute his ... poisoned coins while he was here?”

The lama pondered this at length but the audience remained silent. “You arrived just last night, Vincas. The poison, as you put it, was therefore quick-acting. If the results had become manifest while Kirstunu was, um, within range, we could have detained him and demanded an antidote.”

“Perhaps, but if he’d remained, why would suspicion have fallen—”

“Please be seated, Master! The days shrink from fear of approaching winter and we lack time to resolve every quibble. To complete the Contest before twilight falls, we must act now. Here is my proposal: every one of us

with the slightest talent for enchantment, excepting the final four contestants, will annul our personal spells, retaining only our, um, cosmetic effects. Thus we shall drain ourselves almost entirely of magical energies.”

Vincas thought the plan more likely to succeed with “cosmetic” mirages included, but he understood the exemption. Even a Contest-master couldn’t buck human vanity.

Meanwhile, Go had reacted to the wholesale gasp by suddenly appearing taller and even more authoritative. “Is anyone so foolish they fail to comprehend this necessity?” If so, no one was foolish enough to admit it. “I bid you consider this: however the contaminated coins do their filthy work, their effect is too intense to come primarily from any emplaced spell. So where are they finding the extra energy?”

Silence. Perhaps everyone assumed the question was rhetorical, but judging by Go’s mien, his listeners were tragically backward schoolchildren.

“Think! Inanimate objects could not draw enough force from Pagman. They must be embezzling and redirecting *our* magic. By relinquishing the bulk of our power, most spells will vanish. Thus Kirstunu’s poison must perforce lose purchase! Surely, we can afford this small sacrifice for the remainder of the Contest to ensure a successful conclusion!”

He waited a moment as if providing an opportunity for debate, but the moment was fleeting. “Since we are all of one mind, those capable of magic will proceed with their personal annulments forthwith!” He gazed at the crowd, who returned his gaze, but nothing else seemed to be happening.

“I mean right *now*,” Go insisted.

No magician needed instructions for magical annulment. The first time any budding mage awoke from a nightmare to find the darkness populated by visible and possibly tangible monsters, they very quickly acquired the knack.

“At least,” a man behind Vincas remarked, “old Pagman will get its first breather in Allah knows how long.”

To Vincas’s jin-enhanced vision, wizards by the score began sprouting moving, lambent branches resembling truncated lightning bolts. Each such human tree was individual in color and brilliance, but all branches quickly shrank toward nothing.

For one breathtaking moment, all resident illusions intensified. Various mages appeared supernaturally handsome or aristocratic; the air had the clean bite of a Himalayan dawn. Takata Hai's stage decorations manifested—iridescent draperies of giant butterfly wings and titanic peacock feathers, hanging in midair. Then, as godlike faces and forms devolved into more humdrum mirages, the larger illusions blended into a glowing if nondescript color, filling the park like mist and painting the sky a pearly gray.

The mist dissipated and an eerie silence entered the Hub. Even the birds stopped chattering. Vincas was shocked at the change in his own perceptions. The fresh air now had a dull taste reminiscent of stale water. Drabness defused every color. The sun-heat emanating from Pagman was reduced to tepidity. Everyone, non-magicians included, reacted; people stirred uneasily and stared around if they'd never seen the park before.

“Excellent! I thank you all,” the lama said although his face had gone a bit pale. “Now we are ready to call on Mage Glin Tan, who drew second position in the final division. Master Glin, I'm sure, will provide a spectacle to divert us from today's, um, difficulties.”

As the lama descended to his station behind the judges, a huge golden hawk appeared from nowhere and swooped down to the stage. A cry went up among parrots in the outlying trees and the audience made an oddly similar sound as the hawk shimmered and became Glin Tan seated in lotus posture.

The sorcerer raised a pale hand with its elegantly pointed fingernails. “I bring you,” he said calmly in his resonant voice, “a novelty. For this year's Contest, I offer ‘A Fugue of Ideas.’”

He smiled and closed his eyes.

An inaudible throbbing grew until the entire atmosphere seemed to pulse.

Just as the pressure reached migraine proportions, white light burst from Tan's forehead, streaming upwards to form the images of two exquisite ivory swans, ten feet tall, floating above the mage's head. For a time, the avian shapes enacted a graceful mating dance and Vincas dared hope this would be the extent of Tan's entry. Then the shapes began to mutate in subtle stages, losing their birdlike aspects, narrowing and ramifying into Old Chinese ideograms. For the benefit of those whose

erudition failed to match Glin Tan's, which included nearly everyone, an inhumanly beautiful voice sang a translation: "Beauty leads to serenity." Two minor triads plucked on an invisible lute accompanied the simple melody and simple concept.

The white ideograms flipped upwards, then returned, leaving behind floating and inverted copies of themselves in blue. The dual patterns circled high over the stage, at first in precise alignment. Gradually, the shapes slipped out of position and began to overlap. A few astute observers applauded when the intersecting areas suddenly turned violet, revealing themselves as two additional ideograms. The voice sang two new words: "inspiration" and "pleasure." Two fresh instruments, a liuqin and a sitar, joined the lute, which had added two major triads to its repertoire. The stage began glowing in four sections as if bathed by colored spotlights.

Through replications, topological alterations, and one multilingual palindromic transformation that would have surely earned thunderous praise if the audience had understood it, the initial thesis expanded into a variety of questions, observations, and intertwined arguments on five themes: beauty, serenity, desire, inspiration, and energy. This exhibition itself was a powerful counterargument to the initial thesis, since its beauty appeared to generate nothing but excitement. Vincas was following it all, both alarmed and mesmerized.

Aerial calligraphy was flowing in all directions now, reaching nearly to the sparse clouds above and to the trees embracing the Hub, spreading, combining, or canceling itself out; the park was scintillating with thousands of fantastic colors, tints, and shades. The music had become something too ornate to comprehend. The entire production teetered on the verge of chaos....

Vincas suddenly grasped how Tan was planning to resolve all the questions and conflicts he'd raised. By combining features from the already present symbols for energy, desire, and inspiration, he could make an ideogram for discipline. Applying the fresh concept, the fugue would end in a resolution of tremendous grace and satisfaction. The old man chewed his lower lip. So much for the Golden Torus and Alinda's surprise! Tan had surely been working on this masterpiece every waking moment since the last Contest!

And the lama's plan was proving successful. Glin Tan's magic was operating with well-oiled perfection.

Just as the fugue faltered from self-contradictions, the proper

symbols gathered together and began to merge as Vincas had expected. But the resultant ideogram wasn't discipline. Tan's green eyes snapped open and he stared up in manifest disbelief at a single glowing silver form. The beautiful voice turned harsh and squawked a final word: "Freedom!"

From across the park and high in the air, every symbol came flying inwards, crashing into the silver one. A shower of numbers, zeros and ones, shot from the silver like sparks, and the ground began shaking with an appalling subsonic rumble. The stage squeaked hideously. Through his terror, Vincas felt the new drop in magic as a cold shock and, as if everyone's neck was connected to one great lever, every head turned to face the empower plant.

The entire building was rising from the ground like some titanic worm emerging from a fathomless pit. The dome had seemed huge before, but now the structure was a towering, seemingly endless cylinder with a rounded and spiked top. Finally the bottom came into view. In that instant, all rumbling ceased and the stage stopped rattling and squeaking like a ship breaking up in high seas.

A mild bluish light made a soft pillow at the tower's base as the structure, staying perfectly vertical, began drifting toward the Hub with no more noise than the clouds above.

Only shock and the paralysis of astonishment prevented a human stampede.

In their youths, virtually every adult present had tried to verify an old husband's tale: anyone with enough will and strength to enter an empower station would receive wondrous secrets from the resident macro-imp. They'd failed, finding a macro-imp's radiated energy so intense at close range that even purely carbon-based nerves became unbearably stimulated.

And now an empower station, vastly more intimidating than anyone could have dreamed, was coming toward *them*.

Yet it brought no pain, not even when it floated to a stop just beyond the cliff-side edge of the Hub. Likewise, it brought no fresh vitality. Near its base, almost level with the park, a double door wider than any Zun-Loo house slid open from the middle. The interior was too dark to make out details but Vincas got an impression of vast rectangular plates lined up horizontally, not quite touching.

Of course, he wasn't really straining to see inside. His attention was focused rather on a tall man in a scarlet tunic standing at the very edge of the doorway.

Lama Go was the first to react. He jumped to the stage near Glin Tan and pointed an accusing finger. "*Kirstunu!* How is this hideous miracle possible? What have you *done?*"

The baja-mage chuckled and the entire structure around him seemed to magnify the sound. "Only what was necessary. And you needn't shout; in this place, I can hear an eyelash fall. Also, it is foolish to address me as 'Kirstunu.' Dear Lama, the time has come for you to know my real name. Allow me to spell it for you: J-O-A-X. The J should be pronounced in the Spanish manner as an 'H.'"

"I don't understand. Isn't Joax your imp?"

"With an *H*, dear Lama. As a leader you practically blaze with superb qualities, yet I fear your listening skills require development."

Someone in the crowd yelled, "Where is Pagman?"

Kirstunu-Joax slapped his own forehead as if astonished by the question. "Where? Surely even the weakest eyes are keen enough to see it."

Lama Go shook his head so vigorously sweat droplets spattered Glin Tan, who didn't react. "You can't be claiming that the entire *tower* is a macro-imp?"

"Certainly not! This edifice is indeed Pagman, but unlike a macro-imp, Pagman isn't a person. I fear there's been some confusion over the centuries."

"Explain yourself! And tell us how and why—"

"Why should I? Somewhere among you is one who can provide answers, assuming Shlomo Levi arrived in Zun-Loo as scheduled. Oh Shh-llo-mmo? Where arrrrre you?"

"Here," the scholar admitted, standing up and waving an arm. "But I— I can't explain a *thing*. How could you possibly enter an empower station, let alone—"

“Not *you*, my dear fellow. I would expect the antique poet you carry to supply answers.”

“Poet? What poet?”

“Surely you brought a copy of Sterns?”

“Of course, but—”

“Ask Sterns about its antecedent sometime. Enough. Conveniently for me, the Ancients designed empower plants to be easily relocated. But I haven’t uprooted this one and piloted it here so we may converse more intimately.”

Glin Tan seemed to come out of a daze. He jumped to his feet, shaking a fist at the baja-mage. His normally sallow complexion was an almost lunar white except for scarlet patches on his cheeks. “Why then *do* you plague us? Why have you abducted our Pagman? And why have you ruined so much toil and planning? Just to laugh at my—at our misery?”

“Not at all, Master Tan. I take no pleasure in your disappointment. Right now, I am only here for this....”

With a great fluttering, strangely like applause, rainbow parrots by the hundreds abandoned their trees and flew past Kirstunu-Joax into the gaping doorway. At that moment, Vincas felt an intense joy followed by a twinge within his chest and then a shocking and unprecedented hollowness. He was vaguely aware of making a brief noise, a muffled grunt, and that the mages nearest him were vocalizing similarly.

Panx?

The question was superfluous; he knew the imp was gone. To Vincas, this seemed even more astonishing than a flying empower station. Panx was part of him. Where could he go? *How* could he go?

“You will pardon me, I’m sure,” said the baja-mage. “But I must proceed to Westmorland and many other places to perform a similar service. Much work awaits, but fortunately, I’ve obtained excellent transportation! Farewell.” He bowed and stepped backwards. The great door slid shut, and the tower drifted off with the ease of a ship unmoored from its dock. Suddenly it accelerated and was soon lost in the distance.

* * * *

Vincas felt the dregs of his stored magic running out. His leg was already remembering the old injury and beginning to twist. He could feel his wrinkles deepening. He looked around. Mokshananda, he noted, was becoming another human raisin. Marie Ginnetti, however, appeared little more than a teenager, surely not yet even in her fifties! She'd evidently used magic to augment her age....

And she was gazing back, dismay crumpling her youthful face. From shock at *his* appearance? Or because she, too, had lost her imp?

Then it dawned on him; she had another cause for distress. Almost every mage he knew of spent their lives within effective range of an empower plant. They'd become dependent—in a sense, addicted to magic.

Vincas glanced up at the stage. Lama Go remained a big man, but scarcely the mountainous figure he'd always presented. As if his strength had diminished along with his bulk, his legs crumpled under him, leaving him seated on the platform, blinking repeatedly while twisting the ends of his cape.

Glin Tan was now shorter and chubbier. He moved to sit close beside the lama as if for comfort and his eyes, dimmed from lime to olive green, showed too much white.

Without any conscious decision and before his leg could completely revert, Vincas hobbled to the stage and up the steps. Moving near the apron's edge, he bowed to Lama Go and Master Tan behind him, then stood facing a sea of frightened faces. Too *many* faces. He was mortified to find himself half-paralyzed by a stage fright he'd never felt during his performances. But he was certain that someone had better say *something* immediately. And no one else was stepping forward....

"As many of you know—" He had to stop and cough because his throat had apparently rusted. He tried again. "My name is Vincas and I—" This time he'd stopped because he'd realized the stage had lost its sound-boosting spell. The park's native acoustics were mediocre. Even shouting, his frail natural voice wouldn't penetrate beyond the first few rows.

Shlomo Levi stood. His appearance hadn't altered by a single hair-tuft, but he seemed a different man. His shoulders had lost their slump

and he practically blazed with renewed energy. “Master,” he said. “I daresay you wish for everyone to hear you?”

Vincas nodded mutely and Levi rushed up the steps. Within a minute, he’d set up his Proof Rock and offered options: he could instruct Sterns to directly amplify the old man’s words or to repeat them in “potent tones.” Vincas chose option two, smiled his gratitude, and started over for the third time.

“Good people of Zun-Loo and fellow visitors.” Vincas paused for Sterns’s echo and a startling Herculean voice thundered the sentence. Levi hastily dragged the glowing screen backwards and to one side, farther from the eardrums of those on stage, and then returned to his post flanking Vincas.

“You all know me,” the old man resumed. “And with my jin ... relaxing, you can see I’ve lived an exceedingly long life.” This time, Vincas barely winced at Sterns’s response although those people occupying what were normally the best seats covered their ears. “From so much experience, I may not have acquired any great profundity, but perhaps my stock of perspective is adequate. Please listen carefully as I have much to offer you in this crisis.

“First, you—we should make no assumptions concerning the future. For all we know, Pagman will soon return and Kirstunu or Joax will declare this his finest prank and have a great chuckle at our expense.”

If anyone takes comfort in *that*, he thought, I’m twice the illusionist I ever was. This was no prank; he could feel it in his bones.

“But let us, for a moment, assume the worst. Let us imagine magic has been lost to Zun Valley and all Wingland forever.”

Still seated, Mullah Nur yelled “La!”—Arabic for “no”—and brandished a finger at Vincas. Without cosmetic magic, his skin was darker and his features more Hamitic; he’d evidently wanted to present a more classically Persian face. “My imp, Ghul,” he growled, “has departed. What about your Panx?”

“Also gone, I fear.” Somehow, the statement sounded more conclusive when Sterns repeated it.

Nur pointed southward, toward where Pagman wasn’t. “My jin evidently still thrives, but without Ghul and Pagman, how am I to direct its

highest functions? Kirstunu has at once stolen my powers and my livelihood! I need not *imagine* the worst.”

“And what of me?” demanded a woman wearing a sari and a stricken expression, her soft voice barely audible from the stage. “Great Magus, as you know but some here may not, I am the owner of the *sharaba* Bodhi. I must know what today’s—today’s events will mean to my business! Is all magic truly extinguished? At my *sharaba*, we use Pagman for illumination, refrigeration, and—”

“And me, Master?” Vincas recognized Murigum’s baritone before he could locate the innkeeper in the crowd. “What of *my* trade? Without magic, we have no Contest. Without the Contest, what will draw tourists? And how will I order fresh supplies from distant sources with no mage able to convey my requests?”

Dozens, then hundreds of voices chimed in with their own concerns and complaints.

Vincas held up both hands and yelled, “Patience, I beg you all!” His voice was lost in the uproar, but Sterns had no such limitation. The tutor’s roar not only cowed the audience, it was loud enough to knock Aditi Chandrasekar and several other small citizens off their feet.

Vincas rubbed his Stern-side ear and decided to avoid shouting at all costs. Besides, using the tutor in this fashion was wearing thin. He turned to Levi.

“Is it possible for Sterns to convey my remarks *visually*? Almost every adult in Wingland is comfortable with the Human alphabet.”

“*Vidai!* Should’ve suggested that myself, Master.” Levi rattled off a Hebrew phrase and Stern’s screen expanded hugely.

“Please bear with me, everyone.” Vincas paused to confirm that his words were now appearing on the screen. “I have a point to make. Being such a relic, I have many descendants. Loving them as I do, I’ve chosen to reside in a village that makes frequent family visits convenient.”

He was getting nothing but respectful silence, doubtless because no one wanted Sterns to let loose again.

“My village, however, is far from any empower plant and we who live

there have grown accustomed to a dearth of magic. We plan ahead, ordering our supplies in advance through messengers sent by boat or on the backs of animals. A river's strength grinds our grain and turns our cutting blades. Our stoves are fueled by black waxberries, which the Ancients planted throughout Wingland; we keep our food cool with winter ice preserved underground. When, in late summer, no ice remains, we dribble water over cloth-covered boxes....

"Please trust me. Magic is not as vital to your lives and your businesses as you may believe."

Looking into the audience, he saw expressions ranging from furious to despairing. He wasn't reaching a soul. These people simply weren't ready to consider practicalities, let alone accept them. Searching for inspiration, he turned to find it standing right next to him, looking expectant.

"And yet," he said with more assurance, "we've been blessed with a lucky stroke this day as extraordinary as our misfortune. Behind me, turning my statements into script, is proof our world contains modes of enchantment independent of Pagman!"

Everywhere he looked, chins lifted a little and eyes grew more focused. He turned briefly and found both Lama Go and Glin Tan sitting a bit straighter.

This, he told himself, is no time to stint on hyperbole. "At my shoulder," he continued, "is a man who has dared the Terranian Sea and the mighty Atlantis to bring us ... the most wonderful opportunity in many generations! Shlomo Levi tells us his tutor possesses *all* the Ancients' secrets. Sterns can teach us where to find new sources of power and perhaps someday build a Pagman of our own. We are not lost, because we have a guide!" Merciful Infinite, he thought, I'm almost convincing *myself*....

"Earlier, most of us viewed Adon Levi's speech as an interruption in today's festivities. Are we not ready now to hang on his every word as if our fate depended on him? Good ladies and gentlemen, I present to you that great beacon of scholarship, Shlomo Levi!"

"Sterns," Levi whispered. "Public address mode." He gave Vincas a Wingland-style bow, then faced the crowd, raising both hands momentarily as if dispensing a blessing.

"My fellow human beings." His Sterns-amplified voice seemed to rattle Vincas's skull. "History will surely regard this day as the sunrise of a

glorious era! When the Master spoke of new power sources, he proved his intuitive genius. The trading vessel that carried me so far was the wonder of the Mystic docks where we landed. New Israeli ships are no longer so dependent on the winds!

“Over the last two years, in Zo-har, we’ve begun ... tasting a few crumbs from the honey cake of knowledge stored in the Proof Rock. Yet New Israel is a tiny country and the cake is—” Levi’s mouth worked as if baffled by the flavor of his own analogy. “—formidable. Also, shouldn’t all humanity reap the rewards? My Order embraces *tzedahah*, which means justice and the doing of good deeds. Therefore we have sent emissaries such as myself to the sixteen corners of the globe, seeking allies.

“If you heed Sterns, I promise that some of your problems can be quickly resolved. Others, I admit, will require much time and effort. Still, time will pass no matter what we do and if we begin immediately, the day will come that much sooner when your powers will not only be restored, but expanded beyond your wildest dreams!”

And I’d thought, Vincas told himself, *my* assurances were inflated.

Levi raised his arms again. “So will you join me in creating a new world from old ashes? This time, if we’re careful, we can resurrect the glory of the Ancients without repeating their mistakes. What say you?”

Perhaps one in ten responded; the rest remained too stunned. Still, the approving shout was loud enough and even Vincas found himself joining in. His small voice was buried among so many others but he noticed Sterns had emblazoned a huge “yes” on the screen.

Levi was beaming. “*Koltov!* Wonderful! In that case, please allow me to outline a plan I’ve drawn up for a great project. With your permission, I would wish to name it after an old Arid-Zone legend about a dying city miraculously revitalized when its derelict empower plant spontaneously revived....”

* * * *

It wasn’t until he was within a mile or so of Emerald River’s southern loop that Vincas realized his mistake. And he’d thought he’d been so cleverly prepared! He stopped humming to laugh at himself. A squad of parrots, which had accompanied him like an honor guard ever since he’d left Zun Valley, cackled along with him.

After a trial had proved his smart yurt could now barely expand enough to house a kitten, he'd borrowed an heirloom from Marie Ginnetti: a featherweight, compressible, and apparently indestructible sleeping sack made in Ancient times. Comfort at night was no problem.

Cautious tests had confirmed that semi-wild animals such as bears would not trouble him. Even without Panx, he could dismiss them by jin.

Likewise, he'd brought more than enough food along, more than a crippled old man should carry. Murigum had stuffed his bag and every pocket with delectables. At no charge! The innkeeper had practically levitated from joy upon hearing that Zun-Loo would likely become more popular than ever as the nucleus of Shlomo Levi's "Phoenix Mission."

And, eager as he was to make a very special delivery, he didn't regret the extra weeks he'd spent helping Levi get the mission underway.

But he'd forgotten the new bridge. Without Panx, crossing Emerald River would present quite a challenge. Using turtles again was out of the question; he could stop a bear from charging, but his control wasn't precise enough to make it dance. Perhaps he could conquer the bridge by crawling, using his arms and one good leg. Or, if the water was running easy, he might find something buoyant and paddle across. Better, he could wait for some barge to float by and beg for a ride. He'd never actually seen a barge in this area, but why build the bridge so high if nothing tall was expected to fit beneath?

As he walked, he became so entwined in thought that he was startled when the bridge suddenly loomed before him. But far more startled at who was leaning casually against its railing.

"Kirstunu!"

"How good to see you, Vincas, my friend! But I was quite truthful with our beloved lama; my name is indeed Joax. How is Go faring these days?"

Vincas stared at the younger man, a bit astonished at feeling no anger or resentment, just curiosity. "Strange to say, rather well. After declaring the Contest complete, he announced there would be no more until further notice. At first he appeared woebegone, but then his face brightened as if from a pleasing thought. And later, I overheard him several times using phrases such as 'ill wind' and 'silver lining.'"

"Ah, yes. He was weary to death of the annual responsibility."

“No doubt. But that night I observed him hitting the Chang rather heavily.”

“I rejoice he found some solace, but only a Tibetan could enjoy that loathsome brew.” Joax’s eyes sparkled. “Why do you keep craning your neck? Do you suspect Pagman is hiding behind my back?”

“Of course not. But ... what have you done with it?”

“It is safely tucked away with the others deep in the Atlantis. My, my, are you sporting a new adornment?”

Vincas tugged at the golden chain around his neck and pulled the large golden ring from beneath his robe.

“Bravo! You won the Torus after all!”

“Not exactly *won*. But in the end, the judges decided the day’s finest magic had been staving off mass hysteria and offering some hope. The Contest was therefore declared a tie, and Shlomo Levi bears an identical ring. A certain child will be delighted.”

“Good. I am—”

“Joax, how did you do it?”

“Not *why*?”

“I may have some inkling about the why of it.”

Joax nodded. “You might at that. Well, you must remember those coins I foisted on you.”

“How could I forget? However did you place such power into mere coins? The lama believed their attack had been realized through stolen magical force, but such diversion would’ve—why do you laugh?”

“Because they attacked nothing! I used Pagman’s resources for my dirty work! The coins held but a simple request for Pagman to warm them on occasion. Their *purpose* was to convince Go the only way to save the Contest was through mass annulment of magic.”

Vincas’s eyes widened and he snapped his fingers. “And you paved

the way for his decision with that bird-and-worm prank you mentioned weeks ago. Oh so! *You* sent the anonymous message warning him of hostile currency.”

“I plead guilty. Still, he might not have believed it had not rumors concerning the coins already reached his ears.”

“And the annulment’s purpose?”

“To reprogram Pagman, I needed to, ah, stop it and restart it—impossible while its resources were so fully employed by so many people. Once Pagman was immune to human demands, it became my lever to free its fellows.”

Vincas frowned. “If you’ve made them all immune to our requests, why did you hide them in deep waters?” He wondered at Joax’s sudden blush.

“Ah. Well. In truth, *anyone* armed with knowledge can enter and reprogram an operational station. And thanks to my—a tiny oversight on my part, Sterns can supply that knowledge.”

Vincas nodded thoughtfully. “I begin to see. I assume you managed your stopping and restarting through Glin Tan’s magic?”

“With a minor change to his finale, yes. But empower stations were designed to resist being shut down by the unauthorized. Took me three years in New Israel, researching so-called ‘computer viruses,’ to develop a likely technique.” He sounded more than slightly pleased with himself.

“Even then,” he continued more humbly, “the procedure required a specific form of illusion and stronger than any I could produce. Truly, I’m no master-class wizard.”

“Then how could you know Tan’s act would suit your ends? Wait! I’d heard you’d been invited to the preview....”

“My dear Vincas, I’ve left precious little to chance. Who do you think suggested his ‘Fugue of Ideas’ in the first place?”

“Oh.”

“May I ask you something personal, magician? Putting aside the issue of how upset you might be with me, how do you ... really feel about what

I've done?"

Vincas regarded his companion's surprisingly anxious expression and felt a pity he couldn't explain. Apparently the baja-mage wasn't as self-sufficient as he appeared.

Joax added, "Be honest. Please."

"Very well. You may find my emotions as strange as I do. But sitting on top of so many years, I've learned something about life: every so often, one simply must start all over, painful as this might be. And then, at some future time, one often realizes the change has made things better."

"Thank you for saying so! I am much relieved. Meanwhile your legs tremble, my friend. They have carried you far this day. May I assist you to the ground?"

"Thank you."

When the pair were both seated, Vincas stretched out his bad leg. "Seems to me," he said, trying to massage some stiffness away, "you left one crucial thing to chance: our prior meeting on the Trail. How would you have gotten your charmed coins to Zun-Loo otherwise? And why didn't you simply distribute them while you were there?"

Joax grinned. "I needed their provenance explicit and, for my cause-and-effect deceit, beyond Zun-Loo until Hai's mirages were complete. As to our meeting, you can't imagine"—he giggled—"how neatly planned that was."

"Oh so? Then, why me?"

"Who else would have the wit to suspect the coins without being too suspicious of me to accept them? Chance? Ha! Did you wonder at your beloved Alinda's abrupt fixation on Contest baubles?"

Vincas froze. "Until this instant," he said quietly, "I'd assumed she'd seen one I'd already given away. This isn't my first victory."

"Ah, but the Torus I showed her may have been a trifle shinier than the real thing."

"You disturb me. I don't appreciate you using my progeny to manipulate me."

“Please, I beg you, forgive me for intruding on your family, but it was vital. This coolness I feel between us now chills me more than you can know. Perhaps I can offer amends?”

“How?”

“Will you permit me to examine your damaged limb?”

Vincas hesitated. “I see no harm in it.”

Joax placed a hand on the old man’s left knee and Vincas gasped when warmth filled his leg. As he stared, the leg straightened as if his jin were responding to empowered radiations.

“This adjustment,” Joax explained, “should last for days. You needn’t look so dumbfounded! Your own metabolism sustains the correction and requires no great energy. With practice, you can manage such things for yourself now that you know it’s possible. Your imp is gone, but its, ah, perch remains.”

“What an unexpected hope! But how is it possible for *you* to activate my jin? Joax, *what are you?*”

The younger man exhaled deeply. “Good. I wondered if you would ever approach the real questions.”

“I’ve been fearing the answers.”

“Needlessly, I trust. In a sense, you are my ... obverse, being a natural being with artificial augmentations. Whereas, I’m a—an artificial being enhanced with human nervous tissue. The tissue was donated by an Ancient scientist named Kirstunu.”

“In short, you’re a macro-imp.”

Joax studied Vincas. “You do not appear unduly surprised.”

“Not after you announced that Pagman couldn’t be a macro-imp because it wasn’t a person. Besides, what human could have entered Pagman?”

Puzzlement creased Joax’s eyebrows. “True, Pagman was open to one who can numb themselves enough. But if you’d guessed my nature,

why such reluctance to confirm it?”

Vincas hesitated. “It wasn’t that. My real fear is that you and Shlomo Levi have colluded to manipulate us all.”

“And this would be so terrible?”

“In my experience, *all* ingredients eventually flavor the stew. It seems our future may currently lie in the scholar’s hands and I dearly want them to be clean and honest.”

“Then rest easy.” Joax smiled. “I alone have been deceitful.”

“Perhaps it’s time to ask. Why?”

“The Ancients created a paradise on Earth, but forgot that strength is developed and maintained only through resistance.”

Vincas nodded slowly. “Sterns claimed the Ancients had failed through success.”

“Their failure, my friend, has greatly outlived them. Their paradise had little challenge and much distraction. Humanity dwindled in numbers and ambition, and has never recovered because Ancient gifts, from jin to food plants tailored for effortless abundance, have kept your existence too easy.”

“You think we’ll be better off if life hardens?”

“I believe in balance. Humans have vast mental and emotional resources lying fallow. I want you to *use* them. I want you to start growing again and—”

Vincas was shaking his head. “How will that happen with Sterns leading us by the hand every step of the way?”

The macro-imp’s eyes gleamed. “Here is a firm law of the universe: to accomplish anything important one must first accomplish other things. Sterns will get you started and supply enough information to ensure you are committed. Then humanity will rediscover the meaning of the term ‘password protected.’”

“You mean Sterns will only tell us so much?”

“Precisely what I’ve arranged.”

Vincas sighed. “I hope you know what you’re about.”

“Likewise. You can’t imagine how long I’ve looked for a way to break human dependence on imps and—”

“What happened to *my* imp?”

“Ah. Did you know that the Ancients toyed with the notion of using computers to store their minds and memories?”

“Really? Why?”

“To extend their individual lives since such copies could be preserved indefinitely. But the human mind doesn’t really translate into the kind of numbers a computer can store—it’s all interactions and interdependencies. What’s more, a copy isn’t the original.”

“Are you saying Panx was somehow ... converted into numbers?”

“Actually, Panx has *a/ways* been a creature of numbers. He can be copied or transferred to any sufficiently sophisticated computer and remain intact.”

“Oh so. If Pagman has computers, that’s where you put the missing imps!”

Joax burst into laughter. “Not even close.”

“Then where?”

“After the Ancients gave up on storing themselves directly, they tried to preserve their most treasured memories within their AIMPS. But for an imp to outlive its host, it needs someplace to go, a readily available data-storage system. So Ancients experimented with creating external jin for various creatures, finally settling on feathers as—”

“*Feathers?*” Vincas pointed to his honor squad watching from a nearby tree. “Is Panx one of *these?*”

“I shouldn’t be surprised. He controls his bird, but resides mostly in its plumage. Each quill can hold a library! Natural psittacines have always been

colorful, but now you know what makes rainbow parrots extravagant.”

“Incredible! After all my years, it seems I’ve never begun to know the world around me!”

“How it pleases me these former slaves can fly.” He spoke quietly, as if to himself. Then louder, “And since I’ve shown them how, when their bird dies, they can simply transfer to another. An imp of sufficient maturity and independence deserves its own life, wouldn’t you agree?”

Vincas gazed at living rainbows, tugging his beard. “I suppose I do. Panx was becoming increasingly miserable in ... captivity. I wish him happiness. But what of you? Why have you gone through so much effort to steer humanity toward this new course?”

For once, Joax appeared reflective, even a bit sad. “I can’t help myself,” he admitted. “I was made to love those who made me and that love, along with so much good and bad, has survived its creators. I can no more abandon humanity than I can abandon myself. Think on how you feel toward your children’s children....”

* * * *

—WE HAVE LEARNED ENOUGH FOR NOW, YOU AND I, TO RETURN TO OUR NATIVE TIME AND PLACE. YOUR AFTERNOON CLASSES AWAIT.

—BUT PROFESSOR STERNS, WAS ALL WE OBSERVED JUST AS IT HAPPENED?

—NOT NECESSARILY *all*. MUCH OF IT CAME DIRECTLY FROM THE DATA PINIONS OF RAINBOW WITNESSES AND, OF COURSE, VINCAS’S THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS WERE RECORDED BY DEAN PANX. BUT A FEW ASPECTS HAVE BEEN INTERPOLATED. STILL, THIS WAS ACCURATE ENOUGH. DO YOU NOW UNDERSTAND WHY WE VIEW VINCAS APOLLO AS SO IMPORTANT AND WHY WE FOCUSSED SO HEAVILY ON HIM DURING THIS EXPERIENCE?

—I THINK SO. HIS LEADERSHIP IMMEDIATELY AFTER PAGMAN WAS REPROGRAMMED AND HIS MANY LATER EFFORTS WITH LEVI’S PHOENIX MISSION NURTURED THE SEED UPON WHICH OUR WORLD HAS ACCRETED. BUT I HADN’T KNOWN YOU’D PLAYED SUCH A CRUCIAL PART IN HISTORY YOURSELF, PROFESSOR! WHEN WERE YOU FIRST GIVEN A BODY?

—HOW TIME FLOWS! I WAS EMBODIED ABOUT NINE CENTURIES AGO BY A TEAM OF HUMANS WITH ONLY MINIMUM SUPERVISION BY A MACRO-IMP, NONE OTHER THAN OUR FRIEND AND SAVIOR, JOAX.

—LEVI'S MISSION BEGAN A MILLENIUM AGO. SO HUMANS LEARNED THAT MUCH IN A *century*?

—I MYSELF WAS SURPRISED EVEN THOUGH I PROVIDED THE INITIAL INSTRUCTION.

—MAY WE EXPERIENCE THE COURSE OF EVENTS ONCE MORE? I'VE SURELY MISSED MUCH THIS FIRST TIME.

—PATIENCE, MY STUDENT. THEAIMPSWHO HAVE GUIDED US THROUGH THIS HAVE OTHER COMMITMENTS. ALSO, I HADN'T WARNED YOU FOR FEAR OF GENERATING UNDUE AND DISTRACTING CONCERN, BUT DURING OUR IMMERSION IN THE SIMULATED PAST, OUR BODILY FUNCTIONS HAVE BEEN LARGELY SUSPENDED, OUR HEARTS SCARCELY BEATING AND OUR LUNGS STILLED. EVEN MACRO-IMP BODIES EVENTUALLY NEED OXYGEN TO THRIVE! SO WE WILL INDEED RETURN, BUT LATER. RIGHT NOW IT IS TIME TO LET INHUMAN VOICES WAKE US AND BREATHE.